**LISTENING TO THE ECHO**

**ABSTRACT**

SBNR? What does it mean to be “Spiritual But Not Religious” today? More than 300 university students from across Canada and a variety of faith backgrounds have participated in a 3-year study of young adult spirituality. In their own way, they exhibit a new religious literacy; in their own words, they articulate new positions on the spiritual landscape.

**KEYWORDS** SBNR, campus ministry, millennials, spirituality, new reformation,

**PRESENTER**

Tom Sherwood is an ordained minister in The United Church of Canada and a sociology of religion professor at Carleton University, Ottawa. He is an experienced campus minister, having presented papers at Vancouver 2000, Brisbane 2004 and Tampere 2008. In 2009, he was appointed Senior Scholar in the United Church of Canada and commissioned to undertake a 3-year study of the spirituality and values of young adults NOT participating in organized religion. He is the author of “Religion and Spirituality in Student Life,” Chapter 3 in “International Perspectives on Higher Education: Changing Values and Practice,” published by Continuum Press in July 2012.

**INTRODUCTION and BACKGROUND**

More than 8 million Canadians were born between 1978 and 1999, more than 80 million Americans. In the United States, they are variously called Emerging Adults (Jeffrey Arnett), Adultolescents, the Millennial Generation, Generation Y, and the Net Generation – the first generation to use email, instant messaging and cell phones since childhood and early adolescence. In Canada, this cohort is often referred to as the Echo Generation. They are the children of the Baby Boomers, the Big Generation born after the Second World War, the Echo from The Boom. Sociologists speak of age cohorts:

Baby Boomers born 1945-1965 late 40s to mid 60s now

Generation X born 1965-1980 30s and 40s now

**Generation Y, \**

**Echo Generation > born 1980-1995 teens and 20s, turning 30 now**

**or Millennials /**

The culture of this age cohort is distinctly different in family life, school and the work place. Sociologists have coined new terms to describe new social phenomena: the tethered generation, boomerang kids, helicopter parents. High school teachers have needed to develop new strategies in order to be effective. Universities are adjusting. Marketers are using new techniques to reach them. Employers are beginning to experience their attitude toward work, and make adjustments. Political parties are wondering how to attract their support. What about the Church?

Members of the Echo Generation may be very different in their religious and spiritual expression. In Canada, the mainline denominations might call them The Lost Generation, because they are not visible in the community life of the church in the ways of their parents and grandparents. The story of the Echo Generation is being lived. We don’t know how The Echo will reverberate through the years of career, marriage, family, retirement and old age. And we don’t know what the future relationship may be between this generation and the church.

I have been listening to The Echo for about 30 years, since they were babies. My wife and I have four children who were born in 1978, 1980, 1982 and 1983. They have friends. I spent the 1990s driving van loads of soccer and basketball players to games and tournaments. And in 1984 I was called to a church-planting situation in the Ottawa suburbs. The congregation grew, we built a building, the congregation grew some more, and I stayed for 15 years. When I left they told me I had baptized 1000 babies in the 15 years – 1000 Echoes. In 1999, I went back to campus ministry at Carleton University in Ottawa just as The Echo was coming to campus. For the next 10 years I was the only full time, on-call religious professional for a student population of more than 20,000. These were the years of 9/11, the December Tsunamis, Virginia Tech, the Dawson College shootings in Canada, suicides, traffic accidents, sudden deaths. I was well known and trusted by a large population of students, who became a national and international population of graduates.

In November 1999 I started a blog, “Thursday Thoughts,” with weekly postings and Blind Copy emails. By 2004, several hundred were reading it; and a dozen or so would reply each week, telling me about their lives, especially about their spirituality, values, and social concerns. I had a bank of statements from young adults who were thinking seriously about their spirituality and about organized religion. I continued Thursday Thoughts until my sabbatical in 2009, reaching a population of about 1000.

In 2009, the United Church of Canada appointed me McGeachy Senior Scholar, commissioned me to “Listen to The Echo,” and announced that “the point of this project is essentially

\* to conduct an ethnography of this cohort in Canada, collating existent knowledge

and new research from the point of view of a church leader,

\* giving voice to The Echo’s perspective on church and society,

\* listening to the advice this generation might offer the church,

\* sharing that information through the structures of the church

and ministry networks in order to begin drawing the implications.”

**RESPONDENT POPULATION**

Not all young adults are leaving organized religion. Some are participating in traditional ways. Some are becoming more religious than their parents, more fervent, even fundamentalist. This is true in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism, at least. The young adults who stay in organized religion are accessible to religious leaders and researchers. Young adults who move toward fundamentalism can also be heard by media, researchers and the general public. The aggressive atheists and secularists also get “air time” in the media.

“Listening to The Echo” gives voice to a population whose thoughts and perspective are not widely published or broadcast, but could be an important resource to religious leaders if they will listen – spiritual, ethical young adults who are thoughtfully and intentionally choosing to avoid formal, traditional religious institutions.

The respondent population was developed out of the contact list I had developed after 1999 as Ecumenical Chaplain at Carleton University, Ottawa. In social science research, this is called convenience sampling, a nonprobability method that does not allow for statements of statistical significance, as in random sampling, but which can yield significant data. It is the technique of a cultural anthropologist conducting an ethnography by means of participant observation and unscripted conversations rather than that of a sociologist conducting survey research and quantitative analysis. Since the initial population and my national network of campus ministers in Canada referred other respondents into the study, the research technique is also properly called snowball sampling. The success and pragmatism of these techniques are obvious; but the weaknesses and limitations need to be identified.

Most of the statements are a page or two long if printed, about 300 to 800 words. The shortest is a paragraph, and there are a few of these 80-to-100-word statements. The longest ones are several pages, the transcripts of some kind of Chat over a social medium, a conversation that lasted perhaps two or three hours at the time, although it does not take that long to read the transcript.

I was the only researcher, based in Ottawa, doing research only in English, using email, GoogleTalk and similar media so that all statements were transcribed by the respondent. The population tended to be university students or graduates, urban, and interested in discussing religion and spirituality. Other characteristics of the respondent population:

N=378

62% female

English speaking

Canadian, but widespread and international

nearly 300 from Christian backgrounds

about 50 from Jewish or Muslim,

about 30 from Sikh, Hindu, Aboriginal backgrounds

about 15 mention MRP – multiple religious practice,

some are practicing Wicca, Buddhism or forms of meditation.

Who is missing? People who:

are traditionally religious, ultra conservative or fundamentalist,

 are aggressive atheists,

 practice Chinese religions,

were born before 1978,

were born after 1992,

don’t communicate in written English,

did not get in touch with me.

It is challenging for mature religious professionals to listen and learn from them; but knowledge does not flow only downhill in our society: children and youth help their parents and grandparents program their televisions and operate their computers. Neither does spirituality flow only from elder to younger. Jesus set a child at the centre of a circle of his followers. This research sets youth and young adults and their thoughts at the centre. Their ideas challenge ideas of tradition and history, congregation and community, ministry and the church.

**PUBLISHED REPORTS**

The original goal was to include 300 respondents in the study. By May 2012, N=378, and the research continues. (The November 2012 statistic is N=432.) There have been a number of “deliverables” already. In addition to print media, 20 items have been published and posted at

<http://campuschaplaincy.ca/category/listening-to-the-echo/>

Seven items are posted at

 <http://campuschaplaincy.ca/category/learning-from-listening/>

One of the print presentations may be of special interest to people attending Mosaics in Motion. In July 2012, Continuum Books (a British academic publisher) released “International Perspectives on Higher Education” edited by Trevor Kerry. I was commissioned to write Chapter 3 “Religion and Spirituality in Student Life” and it contains some Listening to The Echo data, references to professional campus ministry in Canada, and the story of the development of the International Association of Chaplains in Higher Education (IACHE).

**FINDINGS**

Some of the emerging themes are illustrated by the quotations below, each from a different person aged 18 to 24. Listen to The Echo in these voices:

**Individualism**

“I do believe in a higher power of some sort, but no one can say for sure what it is because for each person it is different. Attempting to label this higher power takes away from its uniqueness to each individual person.”

**Independence**

“I’ve always respected my family’s devotion to religion and God, but have no interest in being personally involved.”

**A sense of being empowered**

“I believe I am in control of my spirit and destiny.”

**A democratic, participatory attitude**

“The beauty of spirituality is that anybody can engage in it, and it can help everybody in their own unique ways.”

**The Self as the starting point and focus**

“Ultimately, I believe that everybody needs something to believe in to live a happy life, even if it is a belief in one’s own self.”

**A desire for control**

“Religion does not define you. You define it.”

**Parents should not determine their children’s religious lives**

“Religion should not be forced on another person, or assumed by parents for their children. It should be entered into freely, based on personal beliefs.”

**A negative view of institutional religion…**

“Religion is more harmful than helpful.”

**…at both the level of society**

“Although religion can bring people together, that does not outweigh all of the bad that has come from religion, including wars, death, and justification of horrible things.”

**… and the level of the individual…**

“Religion takes away personal choice and the will of a person.”

**Cynicism about institutional religion**

“Religion is a business. Parishioners have become commodities that each governing church body is vying for.”

**And an association of religion with a pre-modern, pre-scientific worldview**

“I don’t blame *ancient* humans for believing in God.”

**DISCUSSION**

1. Which statement(s) do you agree with or might you make yourself?

2. Which statement most challenges or upsets you? Why?

3. How would you respond to that individual if you had the opportunity?

**CHALLENGES**

For conferences in May-June 2012, I summarized the findings into three patterns of “Challenges for the Church,” produced videos of young adult actors expressing these challenges in the words of respondents, and suggested three areas of responding to the challenges in ministry.

The videos and scripts are all posted at [www.campuschaplaincy.ca](http://www.campuschaplaincy.ca). They represent patterns of responses. They are typical and representative of the 378 respondents. The scripts are comprised of the actual words of several dozen of the respondents, derived from emails, GoogleTalk and other social media. Sentences have not been edited, but they have been drawn from about 100 different respondents and have been collated into scripts for 12 actors. The videos were produced by Faith&Arts Ottawa, an innovative, creative, non-parish ministry with youth and young adults. To summarize:

**3 challenges** 1. rejection of history and tradition

2. individualism, new forms of community

3. rejection of institutions

**3 videos** 1. From Religion to Spirituality

2. Seeking Authentic Spiritual Community

3. Religionless Christianity

**3 responses** 1. From History to Story

2. Toward New Forms of Spiritual Community

3. Toward A New Reformation

**CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

The United Church research project was to culminate in Final Reports at conferences in May and June, 2012; and indeed reports were made at several Canadian conferences and Mosaics in Motion. But there is continuing interest in the project and the data, and respondents are still asking to be heard. In the six months after Mosaics in Motion, more than 50 additional statements have been collected. A script-development workshop is planned for January 2013 with a view to live performances and further videos of the statements. This project is called “The God Monologues.” Webinars are being scheduled for April 2013.

Further information will continue to be available at the Canadian Campus Chaplaincy Centre website.

**GLOSSARY**

Terms and Phrases used by Tom Sherwood in the IACHE presentation and on the website in “Listening to The Echo” and “Learning from the Listening”

 **“Columbus Daze”**

“It appeared to me that they have no religion.” On October 12, 1492, Christopher Columbus wrote this in his daily journal. The Spanish had made contact that day with the Taino people, and although they saw tattoos, body paint, and symbolic jewelry, the Europeans did not recognize the non-Christian spirituality. This ethnocentric blindness was repeated by Jacques Cartier and others. In the 1986 Native Apology, the United Church of Canada said, “We did not hear you when you shared your vision. In our zeal… we were closed to the value of your spirituality.” That is “Columbus Daze.” Is it part of the Church’s attitude toward young adults today?

**“Echo Generation”**

There are more than 8 million people in Canada who were born between 1978 and 1999. Their parents are the Baby Boomers, the Big Generation born after the World War Two, so they are often called the Echo Generation – the Echo from the Boom. American sociologists call them “Millennials.” They are sometimes called Generation Y. The Church might call them the Lost Generation: they are less visible in congregational life than their parents and grandparents.

**“the Future is our Promised Land… Stewardship of the Future”**

In the post-Christendom era, with churches wandering in wilderness imagery of new secular and multifaith realities, the theology and psychology resemble the Exodus story more than the history of the European Church from the fifth century to the twentieth century. The challenges of our present context for ministry call us to turn from concern for Stewardship of the Past to a faithful concern for Stewardship of the Future.

**“I’d rather be biblical than traditional.”**

My way of self-identifying as a Reformer, preferring to look for guidance in the timeless and eternal teaching of Scripture (using the historical-critical hermeneutic, of course), always critiquing practices that may be historically specific and culture-bound… and no longer faithful.

**“Knowledge does not flow only downhill in our society.** **Neither do wisdom and spirituality.”**

Grandparents ask grandchildren to program televisions.  Parents ask children for help with computers and websites. Traditional lines of deference are cultural, not theological.  Most societies prefer women to defer to men, children to adults, younger to older, less educated to more educated.  Unions value seniority.  These lines of deference were firmly in place in Jesus’ time.  He challenged them.  He said, “The first shall be last; the last first.”  He set a child as an example.  He listened to the Woman at the Well.  He made a Samaritan a Good Example.  He upset assumptions and attitudes with respect to ethnicity and social status. The Church has not honoured or expressed Jesus’ challenge to lines of social deference.  The “Listening to The Echo” project allows church leaders to listen to the wisdom, and spirituality of young adults.

**“Listening is the language of love.”**

The phrase originated in my Ottawa Citizen column for Mothers Day, 1990. I wrote: “Mothers are some of the people who listen to us as we grow and become. Listening is the language of love.” The phrase became the lyric for a song, co-written with Lorena Duncan, the Theme Song for the 2012 meeting of Montréal-Ottawa Conference of the United Church. Theologically, listening is spiritual hospitality. It is an expression of ἀγάπη, acceptance, and unconditional love.

**“the Maasai Mistake”**

The Roman Catholic mission to the Maasai people of East Africa, led by the Congregation of the Holy Ghost (“the Spiritans”) had trouble adapting its mission models for a nomadic population. They constructed permanent buildings, but the Maasai kept moving on. After Vatican II, a Spiritan leader, Fr. Vincent Donovan, suggested different ministry strategies. How do we avoid the “Maasai Mistake” today in ministry with the new urban nomads?

**“Maginot Imagination”**

It means being prepared for the past. After World War 1, France constructed the “Maginot Line” as a defense against the Germans, an expensive and extensive series of fortifications where they had been weak in 1914. In May 1940, the Nazis went around it in five days. Generals and The Church are prepared for the past. Is the Church pointing resources the wrong way?

**“nouveau-verload”**

The feeling that there is too much change happening too fast, too much new technology, always too much to learn.

**“Our Lady of the Perpetual Hyphen”**

When congregations merge and amalgamate, there is a temptation to honour tradition and history by preserving names and hyphenating. This emphasizes continuity with the past. A new name would express a new beginning and a theology of death and resurrection. I caricature this by imaging one downtown congregation in the future with 17 names and 16 hyphens. It might be called “Our Lady of the Perpetual Hyphen.” It might also be called “Nicodemus United Church” – because he had to go away and think about it when Jesus spoke to him about death and resurrection.

**“the River has Moved.”**

Google “Choluteca Bridge” and look for an image of the Choluteca Bridge in Honduras. In November 1998, Hurricane Mitch ravaged the Honduras. In addition to the loss of human life, 150 bridges were damaged or destroyed. The most modern of all the bridges, the Choluteca Bridge survived intact but suffered perhaps the greatest indignity: the storm diverted the river to another route. This bridge was left standing in an open field. It is a vivid picture. The “Bridge to Nowhere” stands as a metaphor for the traditional church of the Twentieth Century, and its ministries, standing, waiting, situated in the wrong places, offering the wrong programs for a population of young adults who have moved.

**Rowing and Paddling**

Contrasting metaphors for contrasting worldviews. The traditional ethos, in stable historical societies, is to continue past practices. Think of Tevye singing “Tradition” at the beginning of “Fiddler on the Roof.” Rowers look back at a fixed point on the horizon behind to guide them as they go ahead, backing into the future. The modern worldview looks ahead, either rejecting history or occasionally glancing at it over the shoulder. Paddlers look where they are going.

**“SBNR”**

“Spiritual But Not Religious.” In certain gospel passages (for example, Matthew 23 and parallels), Jesus seems to be saying, “Don’t be Religious (like that). Be Spiritual (like this).” In his disputes with the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus almost seems to be saying, “I’m SBNR.”

**“Vehicles of Faith”**

A guest from southeast Asia was trying to explain the very individualistic practices of his religion to students in the Carleton Chaplaincy. He used a “Vehicles of Faith” metaphor, saying that personal disciplines were like riding a bicycle, small groups were like vans or buses, congregations were like buses or train, etc. It is a useful image when considering the variety of ministries and group experiences in a congregational, camping or chaplaincy setting.

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