# Chapter 9

# Young people and spirituality: Negotiating the perils of adolescence

> Wellbeing, especially positive wellbeing, is strongly related to meaning in life … At the most fundamental, transcendent level, there is spiritual meaning: a sense of having a place in the universe. Spirituality represents the broadest and deepest form of connectedness. It is the only form of meaning that transcends people's personal circumstances, social situation and the material world, and so has a powerful capacity to sustain [youth] through adversity.
>
> Richard Eckersley et al., 2006[1]

The previous chapter explored spirituality as the diverse ways in which people identify a spiritual and moral dimension to life. There the focus was philosophical and theoretical. This chapter looks more specifically at the spirituality of youth, concentrating on a number of questions that adolescents have to negotiate in the construction of a personal spirituality.

We are aware of significant differences in the ways boys and girls approach spirituality. It has much to do with the generally stronger 'personal relationship' orientation in the social interactions between young women. Gender differences enter into a number of the categories explored in this chapter, but to attend to them is beyond our scope here. Nevertheless, the discussion provides a useful starting point for further research on this question.

While many young people do not readily identify with the word 'spirituality', they have a stronger affinity with 'spiritual'. In societies where there is much secularisation and lack of interest in religion, as well as ambivalence about what constitutes spirituality, it is important for those involved in the education and care of youth to take into account the areas where young people encounter the spiritual; these are the starting points for community efforts to support them in their spiritual quest.

It is also beyond our scope to survey the extensive writings about youth spirituality, much of which is written from a religious perspective.[2] And while acknowledging that a significant proportion of youth are religious, having a spirituality that is associated with a faith community and religious practice, our concern here is to address the situation of those whose spirituality is, for various reasons, out of sync with the more traditional spirituality of their religious traditions. Nevertheless, the questions examined are just as pertinent to the personal development of religious youth as they are for the non-religious, and they are therefore relevant to church youth ministry.

What follows is a diagnosis of a selection of problems and issues affecting youth spirituality, acknowledging the plurality of both religious and non-religious spiritual views. First, attention will be directed to the youth dimensions of the questions raised about spirituality in the previous chapter. Then we will address a

number of questions related to the psychological wellbeing of youth. The aim is to illustrate the complexity and problematic aspects of youth spirituality rather than provide a full account of it.

The discussion is organised under the following headings:

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## 9.1  Issues for youth spirituality (related to philosophical questions raised in Chapter 8)

### 9.1.1  How youth spirituality is structured

The distinctions made between the spiritual and the religious in the previous chapter are important when it comes to youth spirituality, because the extent to which young people's spirituality draws on traditional and organised religion varies considerably. Our focus here is on the various ways in which they look for and find meaning, purpose and value in life. For many, whether or not they attend church, synagogue, mosque or temple, there is a religious dimension to their spirituality, be this strong or marginal. It commonly involves belief in God and some religious thinking and practice. For some, their religious faith is central to their spirituality; while for others, they retain belief in God but do not draw much on the theology and spiritual practices of their religious tradition.

Youth spirituality also includes response to the natural environment and beautiful things, as well as personal concerns like fulfilment, happiness and community; if not a part of youth spirituality, these can at least be regarded as natural precursors or pathways to spirituality – avenues to the spiritual to which young people are attuned,

or areas to which spirituality can be applied. This is evident in abiding dispositions towards life and patterns of behaviour that are influenced by values. Increasingly, film and television are becoming their most prominent spiritual and moral reference points (see Chapter 15).

A transcendent dimension to youth spirituality, as well as relating to belief in God and a hoped for afterlife, can also be understood as experience that raises the consciousness beyond the everyday to the 'bigger picture' and 'larger meaning' of life that transcend the individual.

The 'beneath the surface', 'the interior' or the 'more than you see' dimension to life is another way of describing their spirituality; it is the meaning and value that lie beneath externals and perceptions. Youth spirituality is intimately linked with the emotional and the aesthetic, as well as with life goals and commitments. A significant overlap with meaning and identity, as considered in earlier chapters, is acknowledged.

For many young people, the spiritual and the religious are not always identical. The former is often the more important, all-inclusive construct; religion is regarded as instrumental to spirituality and not the reverse. Some of them feel that much of their spirituality is not particularly religious. Also, they may not readily use the word 'spirituality' to describe the interior, value-centred parts of their lives.

Looking into these matters should not be interpreted as substituting humanism for spirituality. Rather, we consider that an understanding of the 'human dimensions' to spirituality is important for professionals who wish to help young people become more aware of, and responsive to, the spiritual, transcendent, idealistic and altruistic elements in their experience. And this is just as important for a developing religious spirituality as it would be for a non-religious one.

### 9.1.2 Spiritual experience: A self-transcending dimension to youth spirituality

Many people feel they are close to a God, Creative Spirit or Life Force who knows and cares for them as individuals, and that they can talk to God in their thoughts. This is for them an abiding experience of the spiritual and transcendent. In addition, there are other spiritual experiences that are felt to be transcendent, but they are located primarily in human experience; sometimes this sort of experience points people towards the divine, sometimes it does not; but what it does give is a 'tangible sense' of the spiritual dimension to life.

In conversations about the spiritual, young people can identify moments when their attention was engaged by experiencing something that is beautiful in itself. It might be a scenic vista, or something entrancing like a flower, or being near a wild animal, or an artistic work or piece of music. They were caught up in admiring something *for its own sake* – it had no instrumental or monetary value. They forgot themselves and their own concerns while contemplating beauty; in this sense it was a self-transcending experience, one that was very personal.

It is not inappropriate to label these incidents as direct experiences of the spiritual. This is not all of spirituality, but it can be an important experiential starting point for young people in feeling connected with the physical world and non-human life, as well as with the human community and the divine; for them it is a compelling 'experience' of the spiritual. It may include aspects usually described as natural beauty, artistic, poetic and mythic – even mystical.

This very personal dimension is not as well represented in our analysis as other aspects of spirituality, partly because of its natural resistance to deconstruction and partly because it sounds vague when described. At times, religious people are dismissive of this sort of experience because they think young people are using it as a substitute for religious spirituality – for example, contemplating sunrise from your surfboard can be proposed as more spiritual than attending church.

The ability to commune with nature and beauty is as much a genetic capacity of the human person as is the construction of meaning and purpose in life. But the question arises, can this capacity be nurtured and enhanced, and is there a potential role for education here? This capacity in young people can be enhanced through the caring professions, particularly by helping them develop some understanding of such experience. If they can put words to the experience and see how it involves a form of self-transcendence, this can help them understand how 'feeling' the beauty of the other – be this nature or people – is an affirmation of their basic spiritual connection with the world. This is the 'connectedness' dimension that figures prominently in writings about spirituality.[3]

This being said, it seems important to acknowledge that a more mystical or artistic spirituality, strongly based on the sort of experience described above, is an adult spirituality. This does not mean that it is absent in children and adolescents, but that it has very concrete and sometimes mundane starting points for them; it can develop into a more mystical synthesis as they become adults with an enhanced capacity for mytho-poetic expression. While it is not unknown for young people to excel in mathematics and music at an early age, we rarely see evidence of great creative writing or poetry in children (while not disparaging their excellent efforts); their capacity for verbal and symbolic expression takes longer to mature. Efforts seeking to provide self-transcending spiritual experiences for children and adolescents therefore need to be wisely selected and planned; the purpose is to help them attend to the 'signals of transcendence' that are natural for the young at that age, while not expecting them to respond as adults would, and while not expecting them to feel fully comfortable with experiences that are more adult-oriented.

### 9.1.3  A social justice focus to youth spirituality

For young people there are different starting points or areas of special interest from which their spirituality seems to emerge. As already noted, this can come from religion, art, literature and nature. As will be considered later, a healthy spirituality could be expected to draw on a number of these sources.

For some, the driving force of their sense of the spiritual comes from a concern for social justice. It may start with an interest in local issues or in more global ones; increasingly, young people are taking a planetary perspective on environmental, economic and social issues, something that was not so evident some generations back.

Another spiritual starting point is strong identification with a particular group of marginalised people and a willingness to take up their cause; this can include responses to acknowledged leadership figures. Interest and participation in social action groups can energise and support idealism.

### 9.1.4  Generational differences in the emergence of youth spirituality

*Today's young people tend to acquire and form their spirituality in ways that are different from those of previous generations* (at least different enough to have important implications for education and care of youth). The focus of their spirituality is not the same, and they do not relate to traditions and traditional religion as did older generations. They have a different approach to understanding and forming identity, and religious identity in particular. They have grown up in a time of rapid social change, with television prominent in their lives since infancy.

It is not that a new human species has emerged which forms meaning in a fundamentally different way from adults. But the emphases in the ways young people look at tradition, the world and their own experience when forging their spirituality and identity may be so different from what older people think is appropriate for them that there is a breakdown in communication (**6.3.8**).[4]

Most older people were brought up under a different cultural regime and they have managed to *adapt* (or cope) with rapid social change. However, for the younger generations that have never experienced anything different from rapid change, there is a natural taken-for-grantedness about change and styles of living that are experienced differently by older people. This results in different perceptions, understandings and values; these in turn influence the way young people respond to the efforts of adults to hand on historical traditions – be they family, community, ethnic group or religion.

The very idea of 'handing on' a tradition and identity has now become problematic. For example, in response to adult concerns to foster a religious identity through religious practice and education, young people may not so much question the appropriateness of the experiences, methods and content as wonder why there is any need to be concerned about religious identity at all.

The last thirty years seem to have been a critical period for this change. In the 1960s and 1970s, questions about religion and traditions often provoked argumentative responses from young people; now such questions are hardly provocative. The response, or rather lack of response, gives an impression of apathy and lack of interest. But this is too simple an interpretation; it fails to acknowledge the complexity. Many young people are not apathetic about the spiritual, nor are they uninterested. But they can show a detached, almost clinical anthropological interest in organised religion and structured traditions. They find it interesting that people can believe in particular doctrines and are committed to expansive belief systems while they feel they can get by without such formal religious connections. They may be more interested in spiritual ideas and practices that have some immediate felt relevance or serve some pragmatic function. They seem more concerned about coping with, and succeeding in, their own existential *life-world*; the idea of a coherent and systematic religious *worldview* is not something they see a great need for. They may perceive aspects of their own religion as outmoded elements in the belief structure of an older generation – quaint and antiquarian, with little relevance for them or for today's society. They may see what the Church offers as just one of a number of spiritual contributions available to them from different religious and non-religious sources.

The characteristics of cultural postmodernity noted in the previous chapter are prominent in youth spirituality, even though many young people may not have heard those words used as descriptors of their spiritual orientation.

**9.1.5 Secularisation and secular youth spirituality**

Within most religious groups in industrialised countries, there is growing concern about an erosion of religious spirituality and identity in youth (also applicable to adults). Similarly, there is concern about the erosion of ethnicity, with its distinctive customs and traditions. But there remain strong expressions of nationalism and local ethnic tribalism, evident in sporting identification and other social groupings. As far as a decline in recognisable religious spirituality is concerned, it is related to the increasingly pervasive secular fashion in which many young people (as well as adults) form their spirituality in contact with an influential media-promoted popular culture. Some would go as far as questioning whether what remains in the absence of an identifiable religious spirituality is a spirituality at all; in some cases this negative judgment will be true, but not always.

While young people share the same source culture as adults, they have experienced a secularised, individualistic lifestyle since they first learned to speak. They interpret the same culture with different meanings and this leads to different assumptions about life, different priorities, attitudes and lifestyles. They are conditioned by both culture and school education to question, critically assess and evaluate information. They are at a high-water mark of secularisation and they have been affected by a global village mentality that colours their view of religion itself and offers many alternative sources of meaning and values that can be used for developing spirituality and identity.

Even where young people live in religious households and local communities that try to shield them from a secular environment, they will still be conscious that there are others in the wider society who are not so shielded, and who think about life and form values more from their own initiative, with less dependence on traditional religious guidance. For many youth, the Church no longer speaks with a voice they wish to hear, or a voice that is believable.

As noted in a recent Catholic book on youth spirituality: 'An important part of youth's dissatisfaction with the Church stems from the absence of a spiritually challenging and world-shaping vision that meets their hunger for the chance to participate in a worthy venture.'[5] However, while this may be true in some instances, it is not universal. Even if the Church were to create such challenging adventures, young people would not flock back to church on Sundays. Just how many young people have a 'real hunger for spirituality' needs more investigation. Some may be spiritual but not religious; some may be neither spiritual nor religious.

Many youth sense that, unlike the older generations, they have a 'real option' to be or not to be part of organised religion. It is not likely that they will drift into, and remain with regular religious practice through cultural inertia. A lot of older people were never really free to make that choice; their participation in organised Christianity was more culturally determined for a long time (even if that is now no longer the case). But young people know they can 'get by' spiritually without organised religion. They do not see any problem in having only tenuous connections with their religious tradition. If they are to be religious, it will be by *intention* rather than by *convention*. They know they have a choice as to what elements of religion they will believe and include in their spirituality – and consequently in their sense of religious identity. They know they are more selective than were previous generations that tended to accept the traditional religious identity in packaged form with little personal modification.

It is also significant that they can choose to keep away from religious practice (even where this is contrary to parental wishes) and can do this without feeling guilty or

uncomfortable (older people who have given up religious practice can have lingering guilt feelings). This is more than reacting against a religious upbringing; they are choosing to seek out a spirituality more independent of their traditional religion. It does not necessarily mean giving up identification with their religion; it is just that they see no need for much formal religious practice. It is consistent with their inclination not to see religion, including their own particular tradition, as likely to have a prominent place in the way they work out their values and purpose in life.

Many young people can comfortably dissociate their search for spirituality from their religion. Also, they do not see 'real' religion (that is, a personalised belief system) as separate from life; any secular/religious dichotomy tends to have little meaning for them. They react against a division that in their view 'straight-jackets religion into an exclusively Sunday morning affair', 'stifles the spiritual dimension of ordinary life' and 'allows people to take refuge from God in their local church'.

As a consequence, social action and involvements that formerly were associated with religion, and that were religiously motivated, now flow into secular commitments. If they have concerns about the environment, human rights, personal relationships and sexuality, there are organisations in society, unaffiliated with religion, that seem to be more attractive; perhaps this is part of the general drift from religion; perhaps these groups are perceived to have a more relevant and legitimate voice than religious organisations. Young people have nominated associations like Amnesty International and Greenpeace as action groups for which they have more affinity than church groups. The relatively more democratic style of membership in these organisations is also significant. Even when they recognise the contribution of church-related organisations to social causes, their perception is that these groups are not typical. The movement away from organised religion often seems to have more to do with their experience of the Church than with a disinclination to believe in God.

Given these trends, it is foreseeable that many young people will continue to develop a spirituality that is more *individualistic*, *eclectic* and *personal* than communal and formally religious in its expression. This does not mean that they no longer need any link with their religion or other spiritual reference group. But it suggests that in our type of society, most of the youth who seek religious affiliation will look for a community that supports spirituality that is personal and eclectic, and that focuses on both local and world issues (depending on age and level of social awareness) and makes room for their freedom and individuality.

### 9.1.6 Young people and the distinction between the spiritual and the religious

The distinctions made between the spiritual and the religious (Chapter 8) are significant for interpreting youth spirituality. The researcher Robert Coles noted that:

> I have worked with boys and girls who go rarely or never to church,
> to synagogue; who may not in any way consider themselves
> religious; indeed, who shun such a word as utterly inapplicable to
> themselves; and yet who ask all sorts of interesting, even stirring
> questions about the nature of this life, and who can be heard
> sweating over and playing with ideas that are clearly spiritual in
> nature – wondering about the meaning of life, expressing their own
> sense of what truly matters.[6]

Coles reported on thirty years of work interviewing children about their spirituality. He suggested that for children, spiritual/religious issues do not surface initially as

religious questions per se, but in the form of questions about life's meaning – questions asked even at an early age about death and the importance of life on earth, about animals and plants and the natural world.

It is mainly in the context of their family that these beliefs are formed. However, he considered that schools have an influential role in helping young children get into some perspective their relationships with parents and siblings, as well as with the wider natural world of animals and pets.

Adolescents are showing increased caution about organised religion; they are wary that religion might restrict their growing sense of autonomy, for religion is readily perceived as 'moral restriction'. There is probably a developmental anti-authority component operating here, as it does with respect to parental authority. But it is also affected by their negative perception of religion. All of this inclines them more favourably towards the spiritual than the religious. More research is needed to see how extensive is any tendency among youth to become relatively more spiritual but less formally religious.

### 9.1.7  Youth, relativism and the spirituality supermarket

Young people are potentially more prone to the perils of the spirituality supermarket than are adults. There is a great variety of spiritual offerings available and there is a prevailing sense of relativism that any way is as good as another – 'it's a matter of personal taste'. The relativism flows from the extraordinary capacity people now have to make multiple comparisons both locally and globally.

Young people do not always have much sense of historical or theological coherence to their personal belief system; 'system' may well not be a good word for describing their relatively eclectic beliefs that are often existentially and pragmatically oriented. They may see little problem in trying out different churches and religions to see what they are like and if they meet felt needs. As sociologist Gregory Baum described it, young people today are conscious that their society includes a type of religious-spiritual supermarket. They may be interested in buying, but they are discriminating; they feel that the product needs to be relevant and give them some sense of purpose and direction, or at least give them some sense of immediate wellbeing.

> The relativism that dominates our culture is drawn from the market economy. There are no abiding values. People choose their values as they do their goods at the supermarket. Some people like this, others like that. It is all a matter of taste. There are no abiding standards beyond personal predilection, and hence there are no norms in terms of which we can judge society as a whole. Relativism of this kind is ultimately cynical. The final position is, 'anything goes'.

> Since we live in a market society, we are profoundly influenced by this sort of relativism. Political scientists speak of the 'commodification of values'. Everything becomes a commodity; everything has a price, including human relations and happiness. If we find it on the shelf and have the money, we can purchase it. In our culture, we have witnessed the commodification of sexuality. Sex has become merchandised. Sex in advertising enhances sales, and sex in the entertainment industry increases profits.

> We are also witnessing the commodification of religion
> [and spirituality]. We turn to the spectrum of sects, cults and
> esoteric practices; choose our own religious style; pay for it with
> our own money; follow it as long as we like; and then move into
> another involvement. This market relativism is an ideology built
> into our mainstream culture. In my opinion, it is hostile to the great
> religious traditions.[7]

Some young people (as do some parents) show evidence of this eclectic and consumerist approach to spirituality. Many are not much interested in any formal religion or in informal spirituality. Others come from homes that try to shield them from what parents (and some educators) believe to be confusing comparisons and relativism, by opposing the study of other traditions at school (such as other Christian denominations and world religions). However, such shielding at school is not likely to be effective if students still have access to their regular sources of information – television, radio, newspapers and magazines – and to their own friends. The classroom should be one place where it might be expected that students could look at different traditions respectfully to become better informed. In practice, this broader focus seems to be in tune with the pluralism that young people take for granted as valuable in their society; such an approach may well stimulate more interest in their own tradition.

For some young people, their attitude to religion, and perhaps also to the spiritual, is more than relativism, and could better be described as a form of 'indifferentism'. Webster's Dictionary defined indifferentism as 'A state of indifference; a want of interest or earnestness, especially a systematic apathy regarding what is true or false in religion and philosophy'. Interestingly, two centuries back, indifferentism was condemned as heresy by some Christian church leaders; it was held that 'Indifferentism equalises all religions and gives equal rights to truth and error'.

Some young people, perhaps many in particular communities, show apathy towards what religions may say on contemporary spiritual and moral issues; they are not interested in what anyone has to say about such issues, as long as it does not interfere with their lifestyle. Nevertheless, these same young people may feel that religion is important because it gives solace and meaning in relation to ultimate questions like death and the afterlife; but they feel little need to have recourse to religion to solve the ordinary traumas that occur in their daily lives. So they tend to see religion as important but peripheral in the sense that it does not have much to do with their day-to-day living.

### 9.1.8 Privatisation of beliefs and subjectivity in youth spirituality

A research study of the beliefs of British youth in the 1970s summed up as follows:

> Freedom and individualism are values that strongly influence the
> pattern of beliefs of young people. A consequence is the
> 'privatisation' of belief. This trend is part of a general acceptance of
> the atomisation of our culture. A person's life seems to be
> increasingly split up between various parts … There was a time
> when the Church claimed to be the unifying influence standing over
> everything else that happened in life. Now it is seen as one among
> many institutions competing for attention.[8]

Privatisation of beliefs moves both religion and spirituality more into the subjective domain. Just as young people are supposed to respect the opinions of others, so it has become politically correct to put beliefs in this same category because they are personally constructed, just like having your own opinion. Religions are unhappy about this trend because it diminishes the importance of the communal expression of faith in local church communities. Some religious people think that one of the psychological ills of contemporary societies is the alienation of individuals from shared belief systems – a loss of corporate religious memory. In this sense, privatised religious beliefs are isolating because they play down any role for a local community of faith as a spiritual reference point. In addition, individualism and subjectivity, while prizing autonomy and personal freedom, can contribute to an alienating sense of spiritual aloneness, lack of meaning and anomie; this can arise from having to take too much responsibility for the construction of one's own spiritual meaning without supportive contact with some reference community for meaning and value (**2.10.2**, **4.2.1**).

### 9.1.9  Youth and pentecostal/charismatic spirituality

The fastest growing groups within Christianity are the pentecostal churches. They attract a number of young people through the style of spirituality they offer, particularly in their upbeat and euphoric church services, and follow-up community contact.

Demographers of religion noted that in 1900 there were about 3.7 million Pentecostal Christians worldwide. Today the number is estimated at above 500 million. If the current rate of growth is maintained, Pentecostals could soon account for more than a quarter of all Christians. There are some parallels in other world religions, notably in Judaism and Islam.

In his book *Fire from Heaven: The rise of pentecostal spirituality and the reshaping of religion in the twenty-first century*, Harvey Cox looked at the appealing qualities of the movement and how its influence may end up being comparable in scope to that of the Reformation.[9] Pentecostal spirituality involves people in lively, emotional prayer and worship orchestrated with pop music, where special emphasis is placed on the presence of God who can make a palpable difference to the way believers conduct their lives. Personal testimonies, healings and praying in tongues are also prominent. There is a strong sense of personal community that reinforces faith, forgives sinners and supports the needy. Pentecostal theology stresses the role of the Holy Spirit and it tends to take the Bible literally; it is interested in prophecies; it stresses the Kingdom of God and is strongly eschatological (interested in the 'last things' and the second coming of Christ). The prominence of testimony, songs and tongues appears to put theology more in the background; all members feel free personal access to religious experience and God – and this is not as dependent on church structures as it appeared to be in other Christian churches.

The apparent success of pentecostal churches at attracting youth membership is a matter of concern to mainline Christian denominations. Should they imitate the style of Pentecostal services to make their spirituality offerings more attractive to youth? Or is the Pentecostal style suited to particular personality types or those with particular spiritual needs?

Much of Sunday morning religious television is of the pentecostal type. It highlights the charismatic preacher, rousing worship in Bible and song, and often

features healing. It often links its style of religious faith with 'success' in life, and has interesting systems for generating revenue.

## 9.2 Aspects of youth wellbeing that have some bearing on spirituality

### 9.2.1 Concern for the wellbeing of young people

Now, perhaps more than at any time in history, the wellbeing of young people is under scrutiny. Ranging from surveys commissioned by advertising agencies targeting particular markets, to research projects undertaken by universities, government agencies, churches and institutions in the care of the young, research studies have investigated the lives of young people. Their habits, development, aspirations, beliefs, favourite movie or shampoo, have all have been examined and analysed.

With such a wealth of research findings available, one might wonder why the community has not been more effective in addressing the problems of youth, or why advocacy on behalf of young people has not brought about more change. Part of the reason has been the general inability of the community and its leaders to comprehend the *complexity* of the life situations confronting contemporary young people and to wisely address issues across a broad front. An emphasis on one particular finding – for example the high suicide rate – creates anxiety, but gives only a partial insight into the complex psychological world of young people and the intricate mosaic of influences on their spirituality and identity.

Hence the need for *making sense of the complex research findings about young people*, working towards a more holistic understanding of their life-world. Caution is needed with generalisations about young people's beliefs, attitudes and values. Ambiguity, changeability and contradiction are part of the mix. It is by holding a range of factors in creative tension and not trying to collapse the polarities that the most useful picture of youth spirituality is attained, helping one to understand influential trends while at the same time acknowledging the different responses of individuals. What is needed on the part of professionals working with youth is a capacity to join with them as fellow seekers for meaning and wisdom in a confusing world.

In March 2006, the Australia 21 Research Company and the Australian Youth Research Centre published a report on an extensive interdisciplinary research study on youth: *Flashpoints and Signposts: Pathways to success and wellbeing for Australia's young people*. It considered that 'questions about spirituality sit at the heart of understanding how individuals negotiate life, and how collectively as communities we negotiate uncertainty'.[10] The report gives a comprehensive picture of the social situation of Australian youth; it notes a number of the issues for youth spirituality (as well as meaning and identity) that are considered in this volume.

### 9.2.2 Making sense of apparently contradictory research findings

Youth researcher Richard Eckersley has shown that some surveys highlight young people's ability to cope phlegmatically with rapid change that has more disruptive effects on the lives of adults. Teenagers have been identified as 'kids … unfazed by the pace of change and the technologies that give adults anxiety attacks … these "screenagers" are flexible and adaptable. They have learned to thrive on chaos, uncertainty and insecurity in ways their parents never have.'[11]

However, he drew attention to a greater number of surveys that paint a bleaker picture. While it is true that youth are more accustomed to change and are more comfortable with new technology, there is evidence of a deep-seated malaise that seems to cut across the whole spectrum of youth.

> [Y]oung people are deeply cynical, alienated, pessimistic, disillusioned and disengaged. Many are confused, and angry, uncertain of what the future holds and what society expects of them. While they may continue to work within 'the system' they no longer believe in it [n]or are they willing to serve it. From this perspective, the suicidal, the depressed, the drug-addicted and the delinquent represent the tip of an iceberg of psychological pain and distress that includes a substantial proportion, perhaps even a majority of young people today.[12]

At first sight the findings seem to be contradictory: one view seems optimistic, the other more pessimistic. But these apparently opposite characteristics may hold true for some young people at different stages of their lives, depending on their life experience. The perspective of a young person living in rural Australia, or on the fringes of society, will be different from that of one from a comfortable, economically stable supportive background who sees that life offers a variety of favourable options.

### 9.2.3 The trauma of living in the 21st century

It is pertinent here to return to the assertions of surveys that report on the state of mind of youth as 'alienated, cynical, experimental and savvy'.

This orientation has a lot to do with learning how to survive in the cultural situation of Westernised countries in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Any change usually brings about some degree of trauma related to adaptation, making judgments and adjustments in orientation and behaviour. But these times are characterised by continual change, subjecting people to constant low to medium levels of trauma. There is a constant wear and tear on the individual's psyche that is just a part of survival in a rapidly changing culture characterised by ever increasing use of technology, globalisation in commerce, and threats of terrorism, racial tension and job insecurity. This makes the life prospects of young people more uncertain and it makes them feel they are living in harrowing times. This does not discount the traumas and difficulties faced by past generations, but it points towards a different cultural environment that envelops people today.

With the mass media saturation of images and information, most people, including the more vulnerable, impressionable young, are confronted, on a daily basis, by the darker side of humanity. No natural or human disaster or act of savagery is left undiscovered and unexplored – it is always newsworthy. Most people would like to believe in a world where goodness and right prevail. But the images that are pressed upon us are almost universally of the petty, nefarious side of people. The cumulative effect is to foster in many a sense of futility before insurmountable forces.

There is no easy answer to assuage the fears of young people as they encounter these ingrained, structural problems in society. The problems are unlikely to be ever solved. But education and the care of youth can at least be of some help – suggesting that they develop a reflective, realistic but hopeful orientation to life. This means acknowledging the proverb: 'The *problems* are not out there for us to solve. But they are there to solve *us*.'[13] Efforts to inform young people and help them develop their

own critical interpretation of cultural problems can be their first step in learning how to negotiate life's difficulties as constructively as possible.

This is not proposing the illusion that young people will change the world. They will not. But they may develop a healthy orientation to life that includes the belief that they can make small differences, within limits, to their own social environment. This is where young people's ideals and dreams are to be nurtured. Their dreams should not be dismissed as nothing more than the unrealistic 'dreams' all people have of a better world. Educators and those who work in the service of youth can reinforce the belief that young people themselves should strive to be enablers of change. Not all will be responsive to this challenge; perhaps many will be apathetic. But that is not the point; adults need to ensure that this belief is tangibly evident in the culture of schools and other youth agencies.

Eckersley considered that:

> We ignore [the] dreams [of youth] at our peril; young people's vision of a better, more equitable society puts less emphasis on individual competition, material wealth and enjoying 'the good life' and more on community, family cooperation and the environment. This is a vision young people might be prepared to sign on for and work toward.[14]

### 9.2.4 The do-it-yourself generation

A survey conducted some years back called this generation of young people the 'DIY generation' – meaning that they adopt a do-it-yourself approach to life (**8.5.9**).[15] They pick and choose their lifestyle, code of ethics and baseline of morality from a variety of sources. This reflects other findings showing that youth do not necessarily subscribe to a coherent set of values; rather they can pick up values that are implied in lifestyle choices according to need. If they do reflect on choice of beliefs to live by, they seem to like shopping around for a custom-made set that they feel may more closely fit their needs and interests.

At the heart of this need to 'do it yourself' is the importance young people place on being individuals. There is no quarrel with that as a laudable concept, but there are problems if the search for individuality is satisfied by something that is not authentic. In resisting particular conformities to authority or customs, some may merely substitute a new and not all that subtle form of conformism – for example, they can be influenced by group pressure or by media-orchestrated images of what it means to be an individual (see Chapter 7).

Student-centred learning in education is highly desirable; so too are the increasing social responsibilities given to youth, and getting them to become more actively aware of contemporary social and moral issues. All of this is good and can contribute to personal development. But there is some danger in the down side where so many aspects of modern life play up individuality and the DIY expectation for young people. This emphasis increases the pressure on young people to have to bear alone the responsibility for constructing a complete meaning and value system (**4.2.1**). They can at times feel alone and overwhelmed by trying to make sense of life all by themselves. Perhaps a more realistically human situation would be not to expect children to have so much to do themselves in constructing their own meaning; rather, they should feel encouraged to accept and use the meanings, beliefs and values of their immediate family (perhaps with community and religious support); then as they

grow towards adulthood, with increasing responsibility for their own spirituality and identity, they can affirm or modify the belief structure they inherited.

Hence, caution and wisdom are needed in interpreting the extent to which children and adolescents should be encouraged and challenged to 'negotiate' or 'construct' their own meanings, beliefs, values and identity (**8.4.7**). The key question is to balance concerns for their developing maturity and autonomy, and their vulnerability and immaturity, as well as for the integrity of the traditions that the community wishes to communicate to the next generation.

There is no question about the importance of affirming the values of individuality and personal autonomy. But it is just as important to understand the potential divisiveness and alienation that can flow from an excessive individualism not tempered by community, responsibility and a sense of the transcendent.

### 9.2.5  Seeking community, making choices, and having lifestyle options

If being 'individual' is central to the outlook of the young, there is equally a yearning for community and a sense of belonging.

In pre-1960s society, smaller, less fragmented, more structured communities, which had family and church as a common backdrop, fulfilled many of the needs for community and belonging. Since then there have been ever increasing economic and other pressures that erode family and community relationships. As personal contact with parents and extended families decreases, family and community bonds weaken. This can contribute to young people's feeling disconnected and alone. If in addition (for various reasons) they have difficulty in finding and staying in friendship groups both at and outside school, they can feel an isolation that is pathological.

The other complicating factor here is that many young people feel a need for different ways of connecting with community groups by comparison with those that were taken for granted by earlier generations. If youth needs for community meanings are different from the traditional, then different styles of community may be required if they are to be expected to participate (see later on SMS texting and instant community).

A feeling of belonging and being part of a community comes with sharing the values, likes and dislikes of a certain group. A defining feature of most groups or associations which offer community to the young is the *democratic and easy way in which they operate*. Despite what may appear as a manipulated uniformity that some groups require of members, it is most often a democratic and egalitarian spirit that is evident. One survey interpreted this as young people floating 'from tribe to tribe'.[16] Being in different groups is an experiment in personality development – trying the fit of individual to group identity. However self-evident the need for group endorsement of identity, young people may well resent being categorised. The survey went on to note: 'Don't dare call them generation X and don't even think about categorising them in a "tribe" such as doofs, goths or crusties. Today's young – those aged 18 to 30 – are universal in their rejection of what they see to be extreme, oversimplified pigeonholes.'

The fundamental human need to experience belonging to some groups is something that most of us experience, not just youth. Group belonging gives young people reference points for exploring their place in life and helps them develop and sustain a

sense of meaning and purpose. What they want are hospitable reference groups that are not manipulative.

Autonomy and individuality are all about freedom to make choices. Again, there is no problem in affirming the desirability of such a principle for promoting personal and spiritual development. But children and young adults (as well as adults) are under a lot of cultural pressure from advertising in Western societies to interpret personal freedom as *consumer choice* (Chapter 7). Some common phrases are like media mantras: 'You choose', 'Unlimited choice', 'Yours – on demand', 'Your call', 'For every mood', 'Entertainment at any time', 'You're in control', 'Just hit the remote – the symbol of freedom', 'Megamart – megachoice', 'All that you want to be'.

Reportedly, some shoppers suffer from what has been called 'retail choice overload' as they have to decide what to buy while trawling the supermarket aisles – ninety types of cereal, thirty types of yoghurt and so on. For young people, a similar problem seems to apply across their life-world. They have to engage in constant decision-making about consumer choices in clothing, food and entertainment, as well as with regard to the many school, university or TAFE courses and career options they might follow up, what health and medical treatment options to keep up with – let alone choosing which of the myriad cosmetics might improve a young woman's chances of being more attractive. They feel that if only they were able to be 'better' they would make the right choices and therefore be happier. This inevitably makes them vulnerable to a *retail identity* (Chapter 7). In an environment of hyper-consumerism, some young people feel a little overwhelmed and this can lead to inertia or a vague feeling of psychological discomfort they cannot understand or articulate.

As well as promoting a basically problematic, and eventually dissatisfying, notion of freedom, this situation can affect young people negatively in other ways. The social reality about what life should be like is seductively promoted in the imagery of media advertising. What is proposed is very attractive, but the gap between the ideal image and reality can be depressing.

What is also of concern is that the driving force behind this situation is commercial; it fuels a never-ending cycle of consumerism. For example, while there are hundreds of brands of cosmetics, these are manufactured and marketed by just a small group of cosmetic conglomerates who believe that considerable apparent product diversity caters to individual, distinctive needs – they want women to be able to identify 'my brand of cosmetics!' Young people are aware of this consumer/commercial dimension to some extent and of its potential for manipulation, but there is little they seem to be able to do to escape it or come to terms with it in a way that makes them feel wholesome. Lifestyle has great prominence in their priorities, making it a favourite and profitable target for marketers – as the mobile phone advertisement said, 'Get a phone that is in tune with your lifestyle.'

In addition, the advertising bombardment can subtly promote dispositions of *disposability* and *competitiveness*. These can become woven into young people's meaning for life in a relatively unconscious way, having negative consequences for personal relationships, work, individual's finances and other aspects of lifestyle.

Understanding youth spirituality requires holding a number of tendencies in tension. Young people's feelings range across all of the following, sometimes in apparently haphazard and contradictory ways. And the intensity of the feelings also varies over time and according to the situation.

- confidence – anxiety

- coping with chaos – despair over meaning

- individualism – need for group membership

- self-centredness – altruism and a sensitivity to justice issues

- not ready for commitment – a need for committed role models

- radically different from parents – similar values to parents

- apparently carefree lifestyle – insecurity about life

- materialistic lifestyle – maintaining a sense of the transcendent.

### 9.2.6  SMS texting, the Internet and 'instant community'

The need for relationships and community was evident in the traditional long phone conversations between teenagers. Now the phenomenon of your own mobile phone and SMS texting allows for the sharing of thoughts and ideas at any time with someone else, even during classes, and from one end of a dining table to the other. It feels like having constant companionship and immediate intimacy – the reassurance of friends and connectedness with them are only a few clicks away. In one instance, a young person received communion at mass, returned to her seat and then checked her SMS messages before continuing in prayer. Some of the young carry around their expensive mobile phones around like a baby, giving them constant attention. Also prominent is use of the Internet for chat and emails.

A number of young people retain a personal website, often with a diary of reflections on their ongoing experience. It is another way of affirming who they feel they are; it is an opportunity for affirmation by others who share similar experience, likes and dislikes and it gives a 'virtual' yet tangible sense of community. It is beyond our scope here to investigate the psychological and educational significance of young people's use of the Internet.

For individuals not wanted in friendship groups, their lack of participation in the SMS inner circle can be a sharp reminder of their lowly social status. These same communication technologies have been used for bullying and manipulation. It will be interesting to see how far down into childhood the SMS texting community reaches; and also to see how long it endures in young people's habits as they grow older.

Girls appear to be more frequent SMS users, in tune with their desire to spend a lot of time talking about relationships with intense interest – recalling and constantly analysing the dynamics of their social relationships. Their world seems to be interpreted through the prism of their powerful friendship groups, so to be on the negative end of friendship group pressure can be very upsetting. Boys do not engage in the analysis of their social interactions to the same extent; their relationships appear generally more 'action'-oriented. Their behaviour appears to be more affected by ego vulnerability, status and their notion of masculinity.

Given the impact of new technologies on lifestyle, a young Descartes, if he were around today, might have said: 'iPod therefore I am'.

### 9.2.7  The potential personal influence of video games

In 2003, the video gaming industry grossed AUD8 billion in Japan; in the United States, the projected level of sales by 2008 is AUD15 billion. The Australian market accounted for AUD800 million in 2003, with three-quarters of households now having video gaming facilities. Interactive Entertainment Australia claimed that the average age of players was 24.[17] This development is part of a cultural drift towards a narrower home-based focus for leisure and entertainment. While fun parlours and video game arcades remain prominent 'hang outs' for young people of school age (particularly boys), more of this sort of leisure entertainment is now taking place at home.

> Children as young as 10 are receiving counselling from psychologists after being bullied while playing popular Internet games. Bullying via the multiplayer games is done by players insulting other contestants or stealing their virtual property and credits. The attacks are often personal, with the bully continuing a schoolyard dispute …
>
> 'There can be sexual harassment and racial vilification' [Carr-Gregg, psychologist]
>
> 'The core of harassment is the classic name-calling and insults, just trying to debase the other person.' [Beetson, for Sulake web game company owning the Habbo Hotel program].
>
> One networked online game, the *World of Warcraft* has millions of global players or gamers interacting with each other via the Internet. Another popular game, Habbo Hotel received 271,000 visitors in April [2006] …
>
> Some game manufacturers have created comprehensive security programs in response to the growing incidence of bullying. On the company's Australian website [Habbo Hotel], players are warned that questionable behaviour will be reported to police.

### 9.2.8 Soundtrack to your life: Contemporary music and its relationship with youth spirituality

Contemporary music provides a vivid universal language and medium for the expression of youth needs, interests and aspirations. It is like a pervading atmospheric presence that keeps many ideas and life expectations on a 'low simmer'. This is particularly the case for sexuality, relationships, and the ideas of freedom, individuality, pleasure, and what is 'cool' (**7.3**). In a Canadian study, music rated second only to friendships as the element that gave teenagers most enjoyment. The researchers considered that music was for young people a 'major path to both happiness and freedom … Symbolising *energy* and *release* and *freedom*'.[18]

The way in which young people all over the world share a common language and interest in pop music is not without its significance. It supports an international approach to forming an outlook on life, which is relevant to youth spirituality. Music and its lyrics can trigger emotions and resonate with young people's moods, concerns, hopes and anguish. Along with film and television, it provides the backdrop to young people's perception of the world, and as such it is probably influencing moral decision-making.

In 2004, the documentary *Soundtrack to a war* was broadcast on television. Perhaps more than any recent analysis of popular music, this film showed poignantly how

central music was to the emotions of young people, especially in stressful situations. It showed how different styles of music accompanied the young men and women in the US armed forces during the war in Iraq, as well as the music of various Iraqi groups.

It recorded interviews with soldiers in Iraq who were asked how music may have helped them make sense of the conflict in which they were engaged. Heavy metal, punk, rock, rap, country and western, as well as traditional folk and religious music, articulated a great spectrum of emotions, hopes and fears. Music and singing evidently had significant psychological functions, not the least of which was helping the soldiers cope in their precarious, stressful situations. For some soldiers, heavy metal music helped pump up the adrenalin needed for battle. For others, folk or rock music expressed the conflicting emotions they felt about the war and about their desire to get away from it and go home. Some songs resonated patriotism while others protested the war. There were also traditional as well as new religious songs that helped soldiers cope with stress and express their hopes for peaceful outcomes.

Similarly, Iraqis both young and old showed how music and singing, either traditional or Western, helped express their feelings and hopes.

While often an element of youth culture from which many adults prefer to keep at a safe distance, the 'music video' is a key dimension to young people's love for music. With their wealth of evocative images, music videos increase the capacity of popular music to massage young people's emotions and moods.

The deconstruction of music videos has been a part of English studies for senior school students. The following extended quotation from an English teachers' journal illustrates the insights that such a study can generate.

> Music has long been recognised as a form of popular culture with certain potency for communicating rhetorically. For young people struggling to find a place in communities dotted with shopping malls but with few community centres, in an economy whose major product is information, music videos play to the search for identity and an impoverished community.
>
> Music, particularly rock, has always had a visual element … [but] viewers typically do not regard the music video as a commercial for an album or act. The videos cross the consumer's gaze as a series of mood states. They trigger nostalgia, regret, anxiety, confusion, dread, envy, admiration, pity, titillation – attitudes at one remove from the primal expression such as passion, ecstasy and rage. The moods often express a lack, an incompletion, an instability, a searching for location. In music videos, those feelings are carried on flights of whimsy, extended journeys into the arbitrary.
>
> That music videos present compelling mood states that may claim the attention of the viewer is not a matter of happenstance. In the struggle to establish and maintain a following, artists utilise any number of techniques in order to appear exotic, powerful, tough, sexy, cool, unique.
>
> Born of an amalgam of commercialism, television and film, for the purpose of selling rock albums, music videos frequently employed well-established verbal and visual symbols in telling a story or making a point. If no such symbol exists, music videos coin

their own which, given the ubiquity of the medium, quickly find their way into the vernacular.[19]

### 9.2.9 Youth spirituality and media images of violence and obscenity

To what extent does the constant diet of television violence, and to a lesser extent obscenity, have an influence on the outlook of the young people exposed to it? This is a contentious issue, with a polarised debate (**15.3**). Concerns expressed by churches and youth service agencies tend to be dismissed as cultural and moral authoritarianism, and as attempts to curb artistic expression and freedom of speech. It would seem more fruitful to widen the debate by taking into account how young people draw meaning and values from culture and from the television images that imply what it means to be human.

Some years back, Richard Eckersley addressed the question with particular reference to violence and obscenity in rock music and videos, films and literature.[20] He drew attention to the graphic images of sex, violence and misogyny in the lyrics of a song by American rock group Nine Inch Nails (now superseded by numerous other bands). He considered that where so-called 'democratic freedom' gave parity over the airwaves to opinions that were revolting to a significant number of people in the community, there was a danger that young people could similarly give such views more credibility and acceptance than they deserved, rather than judge them distasteful.

> The image of the world and ourselves that we see reflected in our culture including, and perhaps especially, in the mass media are of great significance to us. They shape who we are and what we become. These images should reflect important realities, but they should also reveal of what we are capable. They must combine realism and idealism, inspire as well as educate and entertain. They should never be so bleak that they demoralise and discourage us. Images of ourselves that dwell on human perfidy, violence greed and selfishness ultimately destroy us.[21]

We found it interesting that when discussing this same question with Year 12 students, there was resonance with the points Eckersley made. Some students' analyses of the place of violent images and obscenity were perceptively argued. Some verbal responses are included below:

> The lyrics of songs from groups and singers like Eminem, Tupac Shakur, Snoop Doggy Dogg, Marilyn Manson, Ice Cube and Niggers with Attitude, represent the outer mark of youth culture where adults should feel uncomfortable – it's a 'no go' zone where we define ourselves as opposed to you [meaning adults] … It's 'in your face' stuff; we expect parents and teachers to get upset.

> You might not like the lyrics and the ideas but they're more honest about the ugly side of people – at least we can say it; we don't pretend that it does not exist.

> We don't pay much attention to the words; it's just the music we like.

> They just say those things to get a reaction and sell records.

> It's only the weird kids who might take it seriously – I guess you'd worry about them.

> I like seeing how some of those people live … [rappers and
> lyrics about gang violence and culture]. I wouldn't want to be part
> of it though.

In the wake of violence in high schools, with the massacre at Columbine High School standing out as an extreme example, there was renewed debate about the potential influence of violence in the media – particularly the acceptability and popularity of violent themes in entertainment. In her book *Mayhem: Violence as public entertainment*, Sissela Bok noted that 'These sources bring into homes depictions of graphic violence … never available to children and young people in the past'.[22] Young multiple killer Kip Kinkel's favourite CD was by Nirvana. The lyrics included: 'Death / with violence / excitement right here / died / go to hell / take a chance / dead.'

> It's not completely clear what Kurt Cobain had in mind with these
> lyrics, but they are lush with nihilism … Luke Woodham, another
> young killer, listened to goth rocker Marilyn Manson; and Mitchell
> Johnston to rapper Tupac Shakur. One doesn't have to support
> censoring any of these artists to see that hurt, isolated kids may not
> understand any intended symbolism.[23]

Bok considered that media violence undermined children's resilience and self-control – psychological mechanisms that allow people to bounce back and to count to ten before they lash out. Some biologists think that there is a genetic component to these traits: that young men like Luke Woodham and Kip Kinkel possibly lack the DNA that keeps their fingers off the trigger.

Eckersley noted that where teachers and parents had fought against the influence of mass media, they mostly won. But he considered that 'many adults had given up, defeated by the relentlessness of the struggle, the media's power, the many other demands on their time and energy and their own moral confusion'.[24]

However, it is encouraging to see that when discussion about the spiritual and moral influence of media culture was initiated with young people, they saw that there was no agenda to decry or denigrate. Most were ready to deconstruct the media messages about violence and were equally prepared to try to work out the place of such violent imagery in the scheme of things; they tried to assess the extent to which these images might be harmful and to canvass ways in which that harm might be minimised. Rather than see themselves as opposing an 'oldie's' view, they were happy in the classroom context to become partners in attempting to understand the problem and find realistic solutions.

### 9.2.10  Youth spirituality and the New Age

The New Age is an extensive movement from the last half of the 20th century with considerable variety in philosophy, approach and activities, evident in the prominence of New Age sections in bookshops. It is difficult to define because it can be referenced to activities as diverse as meditation, aromatherapy, channelling, crystals, dowsing, therapeutic massage, healthy food and alternative lifestyle – while there is debate about what does or does not count as New Age.[25] Variety is also evident in the reasons individuals have for claiming to be New Agers.

There is a strong spiritual dimension to the New Age. It is not only interested in contemporary philosophies but in ancient wisdom, drawing in an eclectic way from

Eastern and Western spiritual-religious traditions, with a contemporary blend of psychology and ecology and a profound interest in such things as metaphysics and sacred geometry. Some New Age movements foster a mystical approach. It can fit within the category of non-religious spiritualities (**8.5.3**), and for some adherents it is like an alternative to religion. For others, New Age practices harmonise with their religious beliefs.

The New Age is particularly concerned with lifestyle and health. It meets a range of human needs from immediate wellbeing to a sense of connectedness with others and the world, and to meaning in life. It also has a commercial dimension catering to consumer spirituality; some practices at the market end of the New Age can be regarded as part of the self-help industry.

The literature on New Age highlights diversity and spirituality.[26] While beyond our scope here, an appraisal of the spiritual scope of New Age remains an important part of any critical exploration of the contemporary spirituality that affects young people.

The New Age is mainly an adult and young adult interest. Nevertheless, adolescents and children will be inquisitive about it when they encounter it in the culture. They may well try some practices as part of their experimentation in identity and spirituality. What is likely to appeal to young people is the fluid and non-institutional appearance of the New Age; it does not prescribe beliefs but is based on individuals piecing together their own spirituality to suit their needs and interests. Also attractive would be its existential and lifestyle focus, and its holistic notion of the integration of mind-body-spirit.

### 9.2.11 The potential influence of quasi-religious or spiritual movements: Sects and cults, heavy metal music, and the occult

Quasi-religious or spiritual movements like certain sects and cults, and phenomena like heavy metal music are part of the contemporary spiritual landscape and as such they make contributions to the spirituality of some young people. But the extent of their influence is difficult to determine.

Not a great number of youth in a country like Australia may be seriously interested in such movements, even though, for example, they may be fans of television programs like *Buffy the vampire slayer* and other programs and films that portray the occult. Those who do join such groups tend to be involved out of particular psychological need – wanting to experiment, wanting to be trendy, wanting to be noticed, wanting to react against parents and authorities.[27]

The relative numbers trying out new religious movements are often comparable to the numbers of young people who are distinctly conservative in religious outlook. The proportion of people like this in any religious denomination seems to have remained approximately the same for a long time, and this will probably continue to be the case.

Television programs and newspaper reports have associated some young people's spirituality with heavy metal music and exotic rock music. It appears that links between heavy metal music, satanism, and teenage suicide are significant for a very few, where it may be an indication of psychological problems that need specialist attention.

Youth interest in questions about the occult may be part of the general public's interest in the bizarre and the exotic. Also, for young people an interest in seances

may be a part of a process in which they are sorting out their ideas on the nature and extent of spirits, especially evil ones, in the world.

Young people's awareness of, and participation in, the movements noted in this and the preceding sections need further research. Our principal concern is to establish a perspective on spirituality that would be helpful in appraising the quality of what is offered as spirituality by these as well as more traditional sources of spirituality.

## 9.3  A spiritual profile of today's young people

This chapter concludes with a summary of some aspects of the spirituality of young people. While these generalisations do not apply to all, they provide a useful composite picture.

When looking at these characteristics, we do not imply that the search for a conspicuous spiritual dimension to life is uppermost in the minds of many young people – it is not. The major part of their psychological and emotional energy is often taken up with surviving the perils of adolescence and negotiating the tasks of school and the potential employment that, they hope, lies beyond it. They will be more concerned with what has an immediate bearing on their wellbeing: their looks and social acceptability, their friendships, entertainment, films, television, music, leisure and sport.

Nevertheless, a scheme like this highlights the various backgrounds that young people bring to their thinking about spirituality. They have complex patterns of belief and spirituality acquired through life experience and contact with religious and non-religious views of life.

*Nine prominent elements in the spirituality of contemporary young people*

[*heading inside box*]

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*1      Ideals:*  As regards direction for living, young people look for guidance in clear statements of ideas and ideals about life and its management. This does not mean that they are always ready to adopt these views. An ambivalence may appear in their reluctance to consider ideals proposed by authority; some may oscillate between being idealistic and not caring. For some, definite, black-and-white answers are needed; others can live comfortably with fuzzy ideas about life by focusing on the here and now and on pursuing a particular lifestyle.

*2      Varied sources of spirituality:*  Young people draw from varied sources in constructing their spirituality: family, friends, personal mentors, their own religion, other religions, secular movements. Their values can be modelled on prominent people, heroes/heroines and celebrities. Their eclectic spirituality can be affected by magazines, film, television and music. They tend not to see any so-called division between the secular and the religious. They see a spiritual dimension woven through life. Some actively search for meaning and are said to have a 'hunger' for spirituality. But the proportion that does this may be small; a much greater number are more concerned with lifestyle.

*3      Being part of a community of faith:*  If they are interested in religion, it will need to appear personalised, and not too prescriptive as regards morality and beliefs. The feeling of being accepted and comfortable within a local faith community is crucial; they need to feel that their needs and interests are being attended to, and they want to have a say in religious affairs. It is not inconsistent for some youth to want to

dismiss particular religious beliefs and rules, while at the same time wanting to be part of the community. Some identify with popular Pentecostal churches. Many youth have little or no interest in organised religion.

*4      Group membership:*  Social and friendship groups often provide a psychological 'home base' for adolescents that has a major influence on their thinking and behaviour, especially for girls; the 'group' is often their principal 'interface with the world'. Online 'chatting' and their inner circle of SMS have become prominent in group communication and identification. There is often some internal conflict between the desire to be an individual while paying the price of conformism for group acceptance. Some may see ethnicity as important while others will dismiss it as irrelevant. Group identification can underpin aggression and violence.

Rather than join specifically religious groups, they may prefer to participate in movements with social and environmental concerns such as Amnesty International or protest groups, especially those concerned with improvement of the quality of life. Yet there are a significant number of young people who do want to be part of a religious group. At universities, many but not all of those in religious groups tend to be active in evangelising activities.

*5      The prolongation of adolescence:*  While perhaps more individualistic, more aware of lifestyle options and with higher life expectations than their forebears, young people face an increasing period of dependence on family before becoming financially independent and fending for themselves. This situation generates various social and psychological frustrations that impact on personal relationships and group membership. It affects all of the following in complex ways: a pragmatic and existential approach to life; the urge to travel, often in backpacker format; sexual relationships, especially casual ones; partying, and the use of alcohol and recreational drugs; playing video games; career choice; sense of responsibility; capacity for commitment and long-term relationships; ambivalence about traditional goals such as settling down, marriage and raising a family. They see life like a 'degustation menu' – they can pick and choose from a variety of lifestyle options at will, trying them out. They have many more options than did the precocious 'baby boomers' and they are more ready to explore them. Tasting from an extensive range of sporting opportunities is also available for Australia's sport-hungry teenagers.

Some youth can appear to 'amble' along this path feeling reasonably self-centred and comfortable until something dramatic leads to a change in their circumstances or confronts their opportunistic approach to life – an experience that accelerates their development as adults as the world intrudes on their thinking.

The prolongation of adolescence tracks back to those of school age and affects their expectations. Some can adopt the extended adolescent lifestyle well before they leave school, regarding school attendance as an extension of their leisure time with some incidental learning.

*6      Cultural plurality:*  Young people value the global aspects of popular culture with which they identify, especially clothing styles and music. But at the same time they are ambivalent about the extensive cultural plurality they experience in Western countries. They are puzzled about how to understand the extraordinary range of belief systems and behaviours in the culture and they may take refuge in closed social groups.

*7        Social and political concerns:*  Compared with the politicised views of youth in the 1960s and 1970s, today's young people are generally wary of, and disillusioned with, political institutions and large corporations; authority is questioned and not respected. Yet they do little to challenge the status quo, realising that they do not have much political leverage in any case. Rebellion and dissent are expressed through violent and anarchic lyrics in rap and hip-hop. There is a level of acceptance of job insecurity; there is a pervading sense that they will have to be adaptable in employment. Some will be prepared to barter a 'good' job for lifestyle options. Still, there is concern about unemployment and exploitative business practices such as problems with economic rationalism and the globalisation of commerce – irresponsible economic activity on the part of the corporate world; 'fair' trade rather than 'free' trade that masks the production of goods by child labour or sweatshops; casualisation of employment and the deregulation of the Australian workplace. Some young people will not worry too much about these potential threats as long as they do not appear to affect their lifestyle. For others, the gap between hopes for career and a successful life and the reality of possible unemployment is an ongoing source of worry.

*8        Environmental concerns:*  In addition to the increased public acknowledgment of environmental issues, more awareness of these issues is fostered in school subjects such as Science, Geography, Economics, Society and Culture, and Religion – as well as in media awareness programs like Cleanup Australia. The young have an excellent environmental education but this does not readily translate into actual support by young people; for example, Cleanup Australian usually attracts only a small percentage of youth. But there is in spirit strong support for initiatives that are pro-environment. Some, but not too many, see the inconsistency between pursuing a consumerist lifestyle and being concerned about environmental and consumerist issues. Others are agitating in favour of ecological sustainability and in opposition to environmental degradation.

*9        Anxiety about a violent society:*  While earlier generations were anxious about a possible nuclear holocaust, since 9/11, Bali, and terrorist attacks in Britain and Spain, today's young people live with a backdrop of global terrorism that has almost daily reminders. As a result, in perceptibly higher numbers, there is a hardening in prejudice against minorities and those who do not appear to embrace lifestyle and belief systems similar to what they think is the Westernised norm; in turn, this generates contrary antagonism on the part of minority groups. A positive valuing of multiculturalism and a multi-faith community has been diminished as the hopes for a peaceful and tolerant society recede. Other concerns contributing to anxiety are levels of crime, more people in prison, increased evidence of security measures and surveillance, and tighter immigration and refugee controls.

## Notes

1   R Eckersley et al. 2006, *Flashpoints and signposts: Pathways to success and wellbeing for Australia's young people*, p. 37.

2   Two good example of these writings are M Strommen & R Hardel 2000, *Passing on the faith: A radical new model for youth and family ministry*, and S Reed 1991, *Spirituality: Access guides to youth ministry*. They illustrate the interest in youth spirituality within Christian religious circles, taking the standpoint of church ministry to youth. It is acknowledged that readers who work within such a framework may find that the material in this chapter, in terms of its basic aims and assumptions, does not addresses their particular context adequately. However, we consider that the issues considered here are just as pertinent to church youth as they are to those who are more secular in their spirituality. Hence this chapter should not be read as a litany of young people's lack of interest in the Church. While there are young people who are very religious and who identify strongly with their church, there are many others for whom the spiritual relevance of the Church is at a low ebb. Education in spirituality in any school context needs to take this into account.

3   D Hay & R Nye 1998, *The spirit of the child*.

4   Generational differences in spirituality have been explored through constructs: baby boomers; generation X; generation Y. These interpretations give useful insights, particularly if the trends are considered as states of mind rather than of set characteristics of particular age cohorts. They highlight the changing cultural contexts and identify distinctive trends in thinking and behaviour. See, for example, T Beaudoin 1998, *Virtual faith*; D Coupland 1991, *Generation X*; H Mackay 1997, *Generations;* M Mason et al. 2006, *The spirit of generation Y: Summary of the final report of a three year study*. See also section **6.3.8**.

5   Reed 1991, p. 3, quoting R Osmer 1989, Challenge to youth ministry in the mainline churches: Thought provokers.

6   R Coles 1992, *The spiritual life of children*, p. 278.

7   G Baum 1987, from a keynote address, 'Pluralism and Religious Identity', given at the Annual Conference of the Religious Education Association of the United States and Canada.

8   M Hare Duke & W Whitton 1977, *A Kind of Believing?* p. 19.

9   H Cox 1995, *Fire from Heaven: The rise of pentecostal spirituality and the reshaping of religion in the twenty-first century*.

10  Eckersley et al. 2006, p. 38.

11  R Eckersley 1997a. Portraits of youth, p. 243.

12  ibid., p. 244.

13  We attribute this wisdom to Professor Charles Birch. However, he insists that he cannot remember using this phrase in a lecture in 1965.

14 Eckersley 1997a, p. 247.

15 C Bye 1998, Generation X is 'dead'.

16 ibid.

17 D Cameron 2006, The dark side of the screen.

18 RW Bibby & DC Posterski 1985, *The emerging generation: An inside look at Canada's teenagers*, pp. 32–8.

19 KC Rybacki & DJ Rybacki 2006, Cultural approaches to the rhetorical analysis of selected music videos, *Metaphor* 1, p. 59. For a more detailed account of the deconstruction of music videos, see also Cultural approaches to the rhetorical analysis of selected music videos, http://www.sibetrans.com/trans/trans4/rybacki.htm.

20 R Eckersley,1997b. The culture of meaning, the meaning of culture.

21 ibid., p. 8.

22 S Bok 1998, Mayhem: Violence as public entertainment, quoted in J Cloud et al. 1998, Of arms and the boy.

23 Cloud et al 1998, p. 40.

24 Eckersley 1997b, p. 7.

25 M Ryan 1997, A New Age Dawning.

26 See the Bibliography under New Age spirituality.

27 See L Pastva 1986, Sects and cults, in *Great Religions of the World*, pp. 227–39. Pastva quotes a psychological profile of those most likely to join a sect or new religious movement. Saul Levine, a US psychologist, has researched the passage of young people through such movements; he concludes that psychological needs are a principal factor; most youth eventually leave the groups without suffering too much long-term psychological damage. See SV Levine 1984, *Radical Departures*, and Radical departures in psychology today.