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Generation X: The 'Lost' Generation?

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The term Generation X may well be unfamiliar to some readers. It became something of a Buzz word in the United States back in 1991 when Douglas Coupland published his first book, "Generation X : Tales for an accelerated culture". This went on to become a best-seller that many consider to be the 'Catcher in the Rye' for the 90's. However, it has really only been in the last few years that the term has become current in the UK and it now appears frequently in the media - in fact the Sunday Times was recently running a regular column called Generation X, written by a 17 year old girl.

What Does It Mean?

Well, apart from a somewhat overused cliché for today's youth, what exactly does it mean? Unfortunately, like all terms that apply to social groups, its meaning tends to be rather elastic. In fact it stretches from a demographic term at one end to a world-view term at the other end. As a demographic term it refers very simply to all those born in the West between 1961 and 1981 - an entire generation. These are the children of the so-called Baby Boomers and are sometimes referred to as the Baby Busters. The Baby Boomers were born, in very large numbers, after World War 11 and grew up during a period of unprecedented economic growth and social improvement. Good education led to good jobs, technology put man on the moon, the pill allowed sexual liberation. Boomers indulged their youth in sex, drugs, and Rock and Roll, and produced the Hippie. Later as they grew older they turned to more serious things. Those pursuing money and career gave birth to the Yuppie, whilst others pursuing more spiritual matters gave birth to the New Ager. They have been marked by affluence and optimism.

Their children, however, are very different. Baby Busters, as the name suggests, have grown up in a world of recession, divorce and global concern. They are anything but optimistic. Yet they are still relatively affluent, and hence they have attracted the attention of the commercial world. Coke recently launched a new drink called OK aimed specifically at Generation X. In fact it is as an advertiser's target market that they have been thoroughly researched and labelled, their likes and dislikes and psychological profile endlessly dissected. Being treated as consumerist fodder and being described as apathetic and introverted has clearly not gone down well with many Generation Xers, but it does raise the question as to what makes this new generation tick. It is in this respect that generation X can also describe a mentality or world-view. It is a general term for a group of people who have a certain common mindset and who share similar values and attitudes. This is why Generation Xers are sometimes referred to as Postmodernist youth or, the more derogatory, Slackers: Obviously then; with this meaning of the word, there would be many young

people today who would not identify themselves by the term. But many do - and it is this group that I want to look at. Who are they? What world do they inhabit? What can we as Christians say to them? And, where are they going?

Douglas Coupland

The best place to start in trying to understand the X generation is with Douglas Coupland himself. His first book introduces us to three people who, in their own words, “left our lives behind us and came to the desert - to tell stories and to make our own lives worthwhile tales in the process”. A cartoon inside has a young man saying to his father, “Hey, Dad - you can either have a house or a life ... I’m having a life.” As the blurb on the back of the book summarises, “Andy, Dag and Claire have been handed a society priced beyond their means. Twenty somethings, brought up with divorce, Watergate and Three Mile Island, and scarred by the 80s fall-out of yuppies, recession, crack and Ronald Reagan, they represent the new lost generation - Generation X. Fiercely suspicious of being lumped together as an advertiser’s target market, they have quit dreary careers and cut themselves adrift Unsure of their futures, they immerse themselves in a regime of heavy drinking and working at McJobs - ‘low-pay, low-prestige, low-benefit, no-future jobs in the service industry’. Underemployed, overeducated, intensely private and unpredictable, they have nowhere to direct their anger, no one to assuage their fears, and no culture to replace their anomie. So they tell stories: disturbingly funny tales that reveal their barricaded inner world”.

Life After God

Coupland’s descriptions and the stories his characters tell are clever, witty and sharply penetrating but at the same time he is deeply sympathetic. The reason for this sympathy is made clear in a later book “Life after God”, published in 1994. Here in a painfully honest autobiographical style he chronicles what appears to be his own journey, first into and then eventually out of the world of Generation X. A few extracts give us a glimpse of his pilgrimage.

I had lots of love to give - it’s just that no one was taking it then. I had thought I was finding consolation in solitude, but to be honest I think I was only acquiring a veneer of bitterness. (p30)

When I was younger I used to worry so much about being alone - of being unlovable or incapable of love. As the years went on, my worries changed. I worried that I had become incapable of having a relationship, of offering intimacy. I felt as though the world lived inside a warm house at night and I was outside, and I couldn’t be seen - because I was out there in the night. But now I am inside that house and it feels just the same.(p142)

... loneliness had of late become an emotion I had stopped feeling so intensely ... But I realized a capacity for not feeling lonely carried a very real price, which was the threat of feeling nothing at all.(p170)

I have always prided myself on my lack of accent - my lack of any discernable regional flavor. I used to think mine was a Pacific Northwest accent, from where I grew up, but then I realized my accent was simply the accent of nowhere - the accent of a person who has no fixed home in their mind. (p174)

Is feeling nothing the inevitable end result of believing in nothing? And then I got to feeling frightened - thinking that there might not actually be anything to believe in, in particular. I thought it would be such a sick joke to have to remain alive far decades and not believe in or feel any thing. (p 178)

I had been raised without religion by parents who had broken with their own pasts and moved to the West Coast - who had raised their children clean of any ideology in a cantilevered modern house over-looking the Pacific Ocean - at the end of history, or so they had wanted to believe. (178b)

Ours was a life lived in paradise and thus it rendered any discussion of transcendental ideas pointless. Politics, we supposed, existed elsewhere in a televised non-paradise; death was something similar to recycling. Life was charmed but without politics or religion. It was the life of children of the children of the pioneers - life after God - a life of earthly salvation on the edge of heaven. Perhaps this is the finest thing to which we may aspire, the life of peace, the blurring between dream life and real life - and yet I find myself speaking these words with a sense of doubt. I think there was a trade-off somewhere along the line. I think the price we paid for our golden life was an inability to fully believe in love; instead we gained an irony that scorched everything it touched. And I wonder if this irony is the price we paid for the loss of God.(p273)

The Social Context

Coupland movingly penetrates to the heart of Gen X, their inner world. But what of the surrounding context, the environment that has produced this dislocation? The generation X world can be defined both sociologically, ideologically and psychologically. Sociologically they are the first generation to feel the full impact of modernity's negative side effects. The bull markets of the 80s gave way to economic recession and unemployment, the global village has produced high mobility but also restlessness and alienation, High Tech has brought nuclear terror, productivity has brought pollution and environmental catastrophe, free love has brought Aids. There is a world of divorce, family breakdown, rising crime and cultural fragmentation. They are over-educated but under-employed, have endless choice but no direction, all dressed up but no place to go. Modernism has built them an artificial, over-stimulating, superficial and ultimately barren habitat. John Seel talks of the four M's of modernity - Malls, McDonalds, MTV and Madonna. This is their social context.

The Ideological Context

But Generation X has also been deeply influenced by the massive ideological shift taking place: the shift from Modernism to Postmodernism. Modernism, born at the Enlightenment, with its optimistic faith in progress, built on the foundations of human reason and scientific materialism and pursued through technology and humanistic endeavour, has finally fallen foul of its own arrogant assumptions. In its place we have Postmodernism, defined only by its lack of belief, its anti-ideological scepticism, its thinly veiled nihilism and its cynical use and abuse of arbitrary myths and images. Postmodernism is the product of a radical relativism - a deconstructed world with no fixed points, no absolutes, no givens - in which truth is simply defined by each individual and the 'community' of which they are a part. It is a 'playful indeterminacy' that embraces unrestrained freedom and pluralism, a limitless flux with no stability, an endless journey with no destination. A suitable outlook for a 'lost' generation.

For postmodern youth, the so-called "objective" world is merely an arbitrary construct and so in the final analysis you are left with just your own subjective world. Holding fixed beliefs or making firm commitments is then clearly naive, all authorities are inherently corrupt and must be subverted, everything - absolutely everything - is referred to ironically, held at a critical distance in inverted commas. The logical drift of such a mentality is to nihilism and ultimately to solipsism, - which brings me to the psychology of Generation X

The Psychological Impact

The Psychology of Generation Xers has largely been shaped by these sociological and ideological factors. Unsurprisingly their response to these enormous challenges has taken some predictable paths. Escapism is high on the list - whether in music, drugs, techno dancing, TV, video games, obsessive relationships or the more subtle retreat into isolated introspection. Despair is prevalent - a lack of hope, loss of identity, insecurity, confusion, apathy, pessimism about the future, a sense of meaninglessness. George Barna in his book on Baby Busters says they are “the most ignored, misunderstood, and disheartened generation our country has seen in a long time”. Above all, however, Generation X is cynical. Disillusioned with the world around them, deeply sceptical about anything making a claim for truth, feeling betrayed by their parents, victimised by their society, they trust nothing, they trust no one. They are unsurprised by scandal and corruption, they see through the ploys of advertisers and the media, they take nothing at face value.

With this rather bleak picture in mind we begin then to see how truly lost this generation is. With the collapse of Modernism, the old secular verities that appeared to give a meaningful framework to life have gone. Postmodernism simply confirms the non-existence of an overarching meaning to life. Social factors such as divorce and cultural fragmentation lend experiential validity to the loss of significance. Cynicism undermines any sense of purpose. Our generation X then, lives bereft of meaning, adrift in a sea of relativity, lost - in every sense of the word. As Bob Dylan sings - ‘people don’t Live or Die, people just float’ .

A Positive Word

But this is not the whole picture. Indeed to stop at this point would be to give a misleadingly negative appraisal of Generation X. At least three positive points must be made. Firstly it has to be said that Generation Xers are by no means responsible for the world they inhabit. -Their perception of being victims, a jilted generation, is largely correct, for much of their world has been inherited. They are paying the price of the Baby Boomers indulgence. Others sowed a wind, they are reaping the whirlwind. They have been raised on TV, educated with the lies of relativism, manipulated by media and business, abandoned by divorcing parents, betrayed by their leaders and saddled with a degenerating and fragmenting culture. Unlike the hippies and yuppies who consciously chose their lifestyle, Generation Xers, for want of an plausible alternative, have drifted or retreated into theirs.

Secondly, a number of the characteristics of Generation Xers are highly positive. They rightly see through so much of the superficiality and bankruptness of Modernity, they are deeply thoughtful and reflective and they are often refreshingly honest.

Finally, Generation Xers are by no means content with their situation. They see no way out but they desperately long for one. And therein is their dilemma and our opportunity. Whatever their ideology or lack of ideology, Generation Xers are still human beings, created in the image of God, and designed for meaningful existence and abundant life. They are cynical about meaning, but they are deeply hungry for it. They fear commitment and trust but they ache for it. They are on a journey but they dream of coming home. They may deny these things, hiding behind cool detachment or hardened cynicism but it is their secret dilemma. It is a secret that Douglas Coupland deftly exposes in the final chapter of ‘Life after God’. This is what he says -

“Now - here is my secret: I tell it to you with an openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray that you are in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is

that I need God - that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love". (p359)

Responding to Generation X

No Christian can hear these words without being deeply moved for this Generation. But how should we respond? What can we offer? Let me suggest four things.

1) Firstly, we must speak to the inner man. We must not be distracted by the Gen X, slacker, facade. We must not be put off by the cynicism. We must not pander to the superficial 'felt' needs. Rather we must address their true needs, speak to their deepest fears and hopes, touch them at the point of their despair and lostness.

2) Following from this, secondly, we must counter the prevailing Relativism with God's Absolute Truth. We have to show them the folly of irrationalism, of pluralism, of unrestrained freedom, and of subjectivism. We must not be intimidated by their scepticism, for while they may mock our claims, deep down they will hear us because deep down they are desperate for Truth, for stability, for meaning. They will hear us because no one knows better than them the bitter fruit of relativism; no one knows better than them the despair of solipsism. Wim Rietkerk called postmodernism 'Nihilism with a smile' - in Generation X we see the smile cracking. They know it, we must expose it.

3) But thirdly, we must show them a credible alternative. Modernism is dead, postmodernism is killing them, and we must point them to Life. Christianity must be presented as true and reasonable, not in an abstract way but in a relevant way. We must demonstrate that Christianity is true to reality, touches all of life, is relevant to them and gives hope, meaning and life. We must show that it answers their questions and meets their deepest needs. That Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

4) Fourthly we must model the reality of Christianity to them. The media and images may get their attention, but they will not buy anything that smacks of hype. Trying to package Christianity and sell it will backfire. We must show them that Christianity is real in our lives, that Christ lives in us; that the Truth has set us free. It is the strength of our own personal conviction that will penetrate their cynicism. As we demonstrate authentic commitment, the truth will be made credible to them ... "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." Mat. 5: 16