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Rejoicing in Adolescence: A Parable of God

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Rejoicing in Adolescence: a Parable of God

David F. White

Adolescence, as it is now commonly acknowledged, is a socially constructed institution barely over a hundred years old. Yet as suggested by historian Joseph Kett, is an institution that America “invented and then promptly forgot”--a condition crucial for its reification. Throughout its hundred plus year history, adolescence, as defined by its status as a holding environment prior to adulthood, has served various purposes: to relieve competition for adult industrial jobs; as a safety valve for social unrest; as a lucrative target for marketers; preparation for an educated electorate; an endless source of workers; a jobs program for educational bureaucrats; a convenient red herring for political propagandists; and much more. A recurring question in discussions of adolescence concerns whether adolescence constitutes an aesthetic or joyful stage in the life cycle. Aesthetics, in the modern era, has meant study of the arts, but in its original sense (*aisthesis*) involves the sensori-emotional aspects of knowing, closely tied to such concepts as delight, creativity, and joy. This paper will explore one possible genealogy--a way of conceiving the relationship of youth to joy that recognizes that adolescence has been subject to the logic of the aesthetic. We will trace relevant aesthetic themes through the work of the two great twentieth-century theorists of adolescence, and submit their conceptions to a Marxian analysis of the aesthetic. Finally, we will illumine this history in light of theologian John Milbank’s critique of the modern secular, including a theological aesthetic response by one of Milbank’s key influences, Hans Urs von Balthasar. Essentially, I argue that the fate of joy is bound up with the fate of beauty, especially as regards the experience and visage of youth.

Aestheticized adolescence

Over a hundred years ago, G. Stanley Hall characterized youth in vivid aesthetic terms, as a "golden stage" when life glistens and crepitates, a "vernal season of the heart"¹ uniquely open to experiencing and sharing joy and wonder. Hall's distinctly aesthetic view of youth involved several aspects: physical beauty and exuberance, creative energy, romance and solidarity with other creatures, sparked by a fundamental sense of wonder. Such adolescent wonder constitutes a state of readiness to be recruited by epiphanic encounters with the world and other people--encounters foundational for pursuits in art and science, but which also eventually give way to precision and generalization.²

Several decades later, Erik Erikson, himself subject to aesthetic sensibilities, perceived adolescence as playing an important role in the life cycle—a cycle synergistically and artistically conceived. The task of adolescence is to achieve ego identity—i.e., knowing one's self and having a meaningful place in society--which involves integrating one's experiences, sensibilities, and commitments, those that the community finds meaningful, into a unified self-image. According to Erikson, achieving identity is an integrative process much like producing a work of art. Not only do societies provide the resources for purpose and identity; youth likewise, in reciprocating fashion, is "a vital regenerator in the process of social evolution; for youth selectively offers its loyalties and energies to the conservation of that which feels true to them and to the correction or destruction of that which has lost its regenerative significance."³ Hence, we might characterize adolescence as involving a delicate homeostasis between the inner and

¹ G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence: Its Psychological and its Relation to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education*, vol 1 (New York: Appleton, 1922) 131.

² See Alfred North Whitehead. *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* (New York: Macmillan, 1929) for how he develops the threefold process of learning, which includes 1) romance, 2) precision, 3) generalization.

³ Erik Erikson. *Insight and Responsibility* (Norton, 1964), 126.

outer world, and between youth and the social world—a perichoretic dance, as it were. Erikson portrayed the process of identity formation as similar to creating an aesthetic artifact.

The existential possibilities for joy in adolescence abound--in the flowering of puberty as young people come to know the beauty of their own bodies and of others'; as they approach full cognitive powers, which allows them to imagine empathically the interiority of others; in the validation that comes as communities call forth newfound powers and charisms in youth; in the discovery of a wondrous world beyond the family; in playful encounter with social ideals and ever more sophisticated visions of the world; as they artistically craft a sense of self. While all of life's ages and stages represent distinct possibilities for joyful flourishing, Hall and Erikson see adolescence as a significant site for joy. This seems undeniable. Whether descriptive, prescriptive or projective, the portraits of youth constructed by Hall and Erikson are intensely aesthetic, and perhaps subject to the logic of aesthetics.

Aestheticized youth as oppositional spheres

Frankfurt school critical theorists Theodore Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Terry Eagleton, and famously, Walter Benjamin, have reflected on the status of the aesthetic in advancing capitalism with its rationalization of all things according to market values.⁴ They agree with Max Weber, who, in the early twentieth century, predicted that as capitalism accelerated bureaucratic rationalization would increasingly restrain human cultural possibilities according to the profit motives of employers and institutions, leaving us trapped in an 'Iron Cage' of market rationality.⁵

⁴ See Herbert Marcuse. *The Aesthetic Dimension: Towards a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Germany: Beacon Press, 1979); Herbert Marcuse. *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Germany: Beacon Press, 1964); Theodor Adorno. *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Athlone Press, 1997); Terry Eagleton. *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

⁵ Max Weber. "Bureaucracy" *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. 1946. Pp. 196-244

Whereas, in past centuries some activities were valuable in themselves, modernity and late-modernity have normalized 'instrumental rational action.' Prior to capitalistic rationalization art and beauty played a more expansive role, not limited to leisure or decorative artistic expression, but included in considerations of work, politics, and ethics. Marcuse, for example, insists that as capitalism normalized technical rationality, art and aesthetic values were either marginalized or commodified. As agricultural and craft societies gave way to industrial capitalism, the means of production came to suppress aesthetic values; no longer did workers naturally express creativity in and through their work and relationships. Aesthetic values such as beauty, creativity, freedom and joy were pushed to the margins of society where artists and outlaws learned to function. Unless their products were commodifiable they came to be devalued in the public sphere—by corporations, governments, educational institutions, and eventually, families.

Yet, in the view of especially Marcuse, not only were aesthetics relegated to the devalued and private margins; they also came to represent an “oppositional sphere”⁶ by refusing to play by the rules of the market; they served to remind bourgeois society that some things have intrinsic value—things such as beauty.⁷ Therefore art represents “dangerous memories” and holds the possibility of transformation. It is worth noting that Hall and Erikson theorized adolescence at a time when America was rapidly becoming rationalized by the market, but in which young people retained sufficient freedom and leisure to pursue interests that held intrinsic worth—delighting in nature, friendships, intellectual curiosity, the common good, and beauty. These were perspectives and activities that had been devalued by capitalist modes of production. The joy and wonder that

⁶ See Herbert Marcuse, “Some Remarks on Aragon: Art in Politics in the Totalitarian Era” published in the *Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse: Technology, War and Fascism, Volume One*.

⁷ *The Aesthetics Dimension*, 57ff.

young people experienced and expressed in their visage served to remind a joyless society of the possibilities for life, wonder and joy. Adolescents, in their liminality, bore the “dangerous memories” of a society rapidly forgetting how to perceive the inherent goodness of things apart from their commodification. Arguably, an aestheticized adolescence, like art, became a container for many of the freedoms marginalized by the growing dominance of the market.

Whether young people continue in this oppositional role or whether the aesthetic aspects of youth have been more completely commodified, controlled and rationalized is debatable. It may not be feasible, some may conclude, to embrace a naïve aestheticized view of adolescence as held by Hall or Erikson. Even if the task of adolescence was once a joyful affair as described by Hall and Erikson, it is now likely that adolescence is subject to market rationalization from top to bottom—especially as families and local authorities are fragmented; as schools focus increasingly on job training for commercial jobs, instead of teaching ideals; as ideals themselves have become de-centered and problematic; and as the very bodies and visages of youth are marketed to sell products. Is it accurate, in any sense, to now claim that adolescence is the “vernal season of the heart?” It seems more accurate to say that youth living under that conditions of industrial capitalism revealed human possibilities obscured by the conditions under that system. But what can we say about the essential nature of adolescents, especially regarding the possibilities of joy and beauty? Any response adequate to address the current nihilism must be theological in nature. If in God all things hold together, then we cannot think the world-- adolescence, beauty or joy--apart from God. But first, it is important that we understand more fully the problematics of the social world we and our youth have inherited.

The disenchantment of modernity

We live in a world that, if we are honest, has been disenchanting, flattened to bare scientific, economic or experiential facts, increasingly unable to elicit beauty or joy. According to theologian John Milbank, religion, along with art, has been relegated to the private margins while allowing secularized logics of science, economics, to dominate the public sphere. While celebrating such abstractions as “justice,” liberalism has failed to provide the myths and traditions for perceiving the infinite worth inherent in all things, necessary to enact reconciliation envisioned in the Bible. Such liberalism, since the eleventh century, has sought to carve out a secular sphere cut loose from the sacred, but in so doing has only served to devalue, make empty or nihil, those things it sought to free from religious constraints—things such as human identity and purpose, sexuality, respect for difference and even reason.

Nihilism, the attempt to perceive existence without the intervention of grace, has very real social consequences, arguably evident in the lives of adolescents and young adults. In his recent book, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood*, Christian Smith exposes some troubling aspects of emerging adulthood.⁸ According to his study, contemporary young adults are disproportionately subject to substance abuse, consumerism, sexual promiscuity, lacking moral language, withdrawn from civic and political engagement and as a result, suffer a host of emotional maladies, including lack of purpose.⁹ According to Smith’s research, sixty

⁸ Although the language of ‘emerging adulthood’ seems to signal a stage beyond adolescence, there is a growing body of research indicating that it is indeed only a prolonged adolescence. See James Côté and Anton Allahaar *Arrested Adulthood: The Changing Nature of Maturity and Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2000). According to Côté and Allahaar, today's adults are themselves more like adolescents, in their dress and personal tastes, than ever before; many seem to drift and avoid responsibilities such as work and family. Many in the industrial West are simply not "growing up" in the traditional sense. Instead, they pursue personal, individual fulfillment and emerge from a vague and prolonged youth into a vague and insecure adulthood. The transition to adulthood is becoming more hazardous, and the destination is becoming more difficult to reach, if it is reached at all. Côté claims that many adults allow the profit-driven industries of mass culture to provide the structure that is missing, as their lives become more individualistic and atomized. Others resist anomie by building their world around their sense of personal connectedness to others.

⁹ Christian Smith, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

percent of the young adults interviewed are identified as “moral individualists” who believe that every individual must be free to act on his or her personal values. Fully half of these Smith calls “strong moral relativists” who believe that “morality is whatever people think it is” and that “there are no definite rights and wrongs for everybody” (“Terrorists are doing what they think is the ultimate good,” said one interviewee).¹⁰

Because they lack moral language they lack resources to resist morally harmful behavior such as cheating, drug use, and uncommitted sex. Smith reveals that a majority of young adults today, thus appear quite positively disposed to materialism and consumerism...” and getting intoxicated “is a central part of emerging adult culture.”¹¹ Further, he states, “A lot, though not all, of emerging adults today are confused, hurting, and sometimes ashamed because of their sexual experiences played out in a culture that told them simply to go for it and feel good.” One young woman describes the prevailing sexual culture in this way: “I think obviously sex is no longer sacred, and people are just giving it away Men get what they want with women, which generally speaking is physical fulfillment, and women think they’re gonna get what they want, which is commitment. And people just go from one person to the next.”¹² For a great portion of young people sex holds little more than immediate and carnal significance. In addition, Smith observes that “almost all emerging adults today are apathetic, uninformed, distrustful, disempowered, or, at most, only marginally interested when it comes to politics and public life.”¹³

¹⁰ Ibid., 28.

¹¹ Ibid., 110.

¹² Ibid., 180.

¹³ Ibid., 225.

According to Stanford psychologist William Damon, adolescents and young adults seem to be stuck in a state of “aimless drift”—lacking commitment and direction for their lives, especially to pursue goods larger than themselves and their network of relationships. Damon defines purpose as “a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at the same time meaningful to the self and consequential for the world beyond the self.”¹⁴ According to Damon, we find ourselves in “a society in which purposefulness among young people is the exception rather than the rule.”¹⁵ In his view, young people who fail to discern their purposes and commitments risk being arrested in a permanent state of directionless drift. While a sense of purpose can enhance the well-being of young people, a loss of purpose causes a host of emotional and psychological problems—including psychological fragility, self-absorption, depression, or lethargy.¹⁶ In considering larger social causes, Smith wonders

Could it be that the triumph of liberal, democratic capitalism has erased from the common American imagination any higher, transcendent horizon? We came away from our 230 interviews with emerging adults thinking that, for most, their horizon is disappointingly parochial: Get a good job, become financially secure, have a nice family, buy what you want, enjoy a few of the finer things in life, avoid the troubles of the world, retire with ease. Nothing much bigger, higher, more meaningful, more transcendent, more shared, more difficult.¹⁷

For many young people the world has been disenchanting—drained of transcendence—leaving such things as sexuality, material consumption, drinking, politics or purpose lacking any sense of mystery or meaning? The flattening we are describing, even if not totalizing in its effects, serves to obscure the distinctive joy for which (I assert) youth were created. Moreover, if the world

¹⁴ William Damon, *The Path to Purpose: How Young People Find Their Calling in Life* (New York: Free Press, 2009), 33.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁷ Smith, 236.

young people encounter has been flattened of its intrinsic wonder by the distorting and disenchanting effects of the market and encroaching secularity, then we should inquire whether adults themselves and their social world are capable of perceiving beauty and joy in and through adolescents, including any regenerative social role.

Theological Aesthetics: a Response

If this analysis of the flattening secularization of youth is accurate, then our response should be theological for only theology can perceive what lies beyond mere facts of existence. If we limit ourselves to biblical sources, then joy comes into focus as a response to the glory of the Lord--glory made manifest in the Old Testament in God's mighty acts; and in the New Testament in the Christ event--the word lived, written and proclaimed; or as Genesis suggests, as manifested through God's creatures that God declared *kavod* (Gen 1:31, weighted with glory), creatures which hence may be seen as parables of God. In the biblical view, Christian life is lived in joyful response to God's glory as manifested decisively in Jesus Christ. Here is where we make clear the connection between beauty and joy.

According to Hans Urs von Balthasar, there is a deep "consonance" between beauty and glory. He based his theological aesthetics on the paradigmatic event of "seeing the form" of Christ, the glorious form which breaks out with unsurpassable splendor in every aspect of his life, death and resurrection. Beauty, as the Church fathers knew, is an aspect of God's nature (along with goodness and truth), and is manifest in creation as God's gracious donation. Beauty is not to be idolized, but is transparent to the Holy (as for example Barth supposed was the case for Mozart). He understood beauty as involving two aspects, *species* and *lumen*. *Species* denotes a thing's tangible form accessible to human senses--with a splendor (*lumen*) emanating from the

form. Splendor (*lumen*) is the attractive charm of the beautiful, the gravitational pull, the tractor beam pulling the beholder into it. When confronted with beauty, one encounters "the real presence of the depths, of the whole reality, and . . . a real pointing beyond itself to those depths" Splendor moves out from within the form, enraptures the person and transports him into its depths. Thus the visible form is the apparition of this mystery, and reveals it while... protecting and veiling it".¹⁸ The beholder is drawn out of himself or herself and pulled into the form by the attractive force of the beautiful thing, thereby encountering the beautiful thing in itself. All beauty delights us through its form, but also points beyond itself to the transcendent God.

For Balthasar, beauty is potentially present to everyone, but is enhanced when our spiritual eyes (spiritual senses)¹⁹ are opened by contemplation of the Incarnate Image. So, our joy is increased in the opening of our spiritual senses, so that we may perceive the light of God shining in all creatures, but joy is diminished as we fail to perceive God's light because our spiritual senses are closed. As noted earlier, John Milbank's argues that "the secular" sphere is a heretical invention, and the evacuation of God from the secular sphere fails to acknowledge the true status of the world as participating with God in whom all things hold together. One might conclude that in the century since Hall theorized adolescence our 'collective' spiritual senses, having grown dull, allow us to see youth only in technical rationalistic terms. For a growing number of theologians, reclaiming this sense of beauty is a means of re-enchanting the flattened and nihilistic world.

¹⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar. *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics: Seeing the Form* (The Glory of the Lord, #1) (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 18.

¹⁹ Mark McInroy. *Balthasar on the Spiritual Senses: Perceiving Splendour* (Oxford: Oxford Press, 2014). McInroy reveals the doctrine of spiritual senses is key for Balthasar. In this book, he reveals the doctrine's ancient origins and how Balthasar adapted it in response to Karl Barth's theological anthropology.

Regarding adolescence, we can confidently assert that as God's creatures, youth reveal and may perceive beauty, wonder and joy, as Hall seemed to glimpse. Perhaps in cultivating our spiritual eyes, we may perceive youth as parables of God. In this case, their physical beauty and energy points to, is a parable of, God's own beauty. The wonder with which youth see the world, the shimmering *kavod* they perceive, points to God's own glory. The camaraderie they feel provides a glimpse of God's own covenant of love that embraces all creation. Their eagerness to contribute their gifts to the adult community points to God's own gracious donation of life each new day. Perhaps they give glory to God by reflecting God in these ways; and before such beauty we can only rejoice. Moreover, the beauty and wonder Hall and Erikson perceived in youth more accurately reflects, as the Frankfurt School tells us, a beauty that rightly belongs to all humans. And maybe if the church reclaimed its spiritual senses to see adolescents as parables of God, we might redouble our efforts at providing the kind of care and nurture youth need in order to live into these possibilities. We can only wonder how such spiritual sight might re-enchant the moral, sexual, relational and spiritual lives of adolescents and young adults. We can be confident that the possibilities for joy and beauty lie in their and our participation with God, and in the opening of their spiritual eyes to see, their spiritual ears to hear, the beauty and wonder of all things.