

Generation X, Saint Francis and the Third Order

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Those of us who follow social trends will know about Generation X, where X stands for change. This is the cohort born between 1960 and 1985, now just approaching the ages of 25 to 50. I cannot claim much first hand experience of these folk. My own children and their spouses are well past this age, while three of my grandsons only just squeeze in at the bottom end. But many tertiaries belong in this age group and I trust that the Third Order will draw most of its recruits from here during the next decade or so. This paper presents a variety of views on the outlook and ethos of generation X with some thoughts on how these fit with the mind-set of Saint Francis and today's Third Order.

About ten years ago a senior army chaplain called David Tickner visited most of the forty-odd army recruit training centres in the UK and built up a picture of the young men and women he met there.¹ They represented the small percentage of Generation X in this country that was interested in joining the army, but their stories could have been echoed much more widely. He found that the proportion from broken homes was between 40 and 70 percent. Many had experienced multiple parenting (stepfathers etc.) Many 'fathers' were out of work and the mothers in part-time jobs, so there was pressure to send money home. Homesickness was common during training, with distress at losing privacy and home comforts. At home they all had TV, video and computer games, bought by their parents to keep them off the streets and out of the way of the grown-ups. Reading was rare; the world of soap opera seemed more real.

Many hadn't liked school, hadn't tried hard, played truant and ended with poor results, lacking confidence even in reading, writing and sums. Yet, perhaps surprisingly, there was a strong expectation of success in their careers. They were very interested in sport but not many had actually played. Peer group pressure was obviously a strong influence, often leading to mild experiments with drugs, pornography, shop-lifting and dare-devil stunts. The police were the 'enemy'. The greatest crime was to be caught. All figures of authority (teachers, parents, judges, politicians) were deeply suspect, as being too much concerned with their own comfort and power. These youngsters were very conscious of their 'rights'. Values like humility, honesty, honour and integrity were seen as weaknesses in a world of 'dog eats dog'. If you don't look after yourself, no one else will.

Sex was regarded as a human right. To have sex on a first date would be quite normal, whereas taking a girl out to a meal would be seen as a greater commitment because it cost money. AID was a concern, 'but only enough to pause to question before going on to full intercourse anyway'. Responsible sex meant using a condom, although they didn't really like it. Abortion was accepted without any moral connotation. Most expected to live with several people before marriage. They hoped for a life-long marriage, but few expected it. There was a feeling that marriage is something people do to

try and save a flagging relationship. Women recruits often saw it as a trap and a career obstacle. Being unfaithful to a permanent partner was regarded as quite wrong though many agreed that it often happens.

Because the world judges by appearances one has to wear the 'in' gear. Hence it is important to have money. Money isn't only power but it buys justice, in a world where there is one law for the rich and another for the poor. Savings were rare. Debt was accepted as normal often to a very high level. Opportunism, like shop lifting and not paying fares, was 'almost admired'. Taking from an open locker was seen as 50% the fault of the person who failed to secure it.

Any who had joined the army saw it as just a job. The first loyalty is to oneself and then to one's mates (the 'little platoon' that Edmund Burke described as the first principle - the germ as it were- of public affections.) Loyalty to a wider group such as a regiment has to be learned. Trust in NCOs and officers has to be earned. The natural response to discipline is 'why'? There is a belief in assertiveness, the value of personal ambition and consciousness of 'rights'.

Let's step back a bit and explore where these predispositions may have come from. John Mabry is a first-wave Xer who lives and works on the West Coast of the USA. He is a priest in the Old Catholic succession and is concerned with spiritual direction for Xers.ⁱⁱ He observed that generation X falls upon the cusp of what is called the 'demographic transition'. For all the established market economies of the world the Fertility Rate is below the figure (2.1 children per woman on average) needed to keep populations stable. Why? Once education becomes universal, children instead of being an asset become a cost. They have to be fed, housed and schooled for years; they prevent mothers from getting jobs and they no longer provide much of a guarantee against impoverished old age. Human beings, it seems, are the only creatures that have fewer babies when they are better fed.ⁱⁱⁱ Kids have become 'like headaches, things you take pills not to have'.^{iv} And following publication of the biologist Paul Ehrlich's book *The Population Bomb* in 1968 children were seen not just as inconvenient but as a menace to the ecosystem. These youngsters despaired over the fate of the earth, watching the statistics on environmental catastrophe worsen as they grew up. They were the first to be brought up under the threat of annihilation in a nuclear war. And they had seen the idealistic dreams of their parents dissolve in the 'Me-Decade 1980s'. As one of this generation put it 'Our parents had a pot of gold at the end of their rainbow. We just have pot'.

In academic terms this was the first generation fully to internalize a post-modern world view. While previous generations had faith that religion, and later science could determine universal truth, this was now much less self-evident. All things are relative and subject to interpretation according to one's gender, ethnicity and position in society. As a result the Xers feel suspicious of all authority; residing, it is said in a 'precarious existentialism'.

But this is not to say that Xers are unspiritual. It is just that this spirituality is expressed in forms that are not typically religious and may be difficult to identify. They search for truth in questions far more than in the answers. If you say to them 'Here is what I believe and you need to believe it too' they will instantly switch off. But if you say 'Here is what I believe and what it means to me' everyone will listen. Personal experience is very important. Since the bible is suspect as a source of revelation many of these people feel closer to God on the beach or in the forest. The intimacy they share with their friends can point to a deeply desired relationship with God.

Authenticity is another important facet. Xers developed a keen 'bullshit detector' in response to TV commercials, political speeches and, of course, sermons, since everyone is selling something. This is acceptable so long as people are up-front about what they want to sell, but a hidden agenda is a complete turn-off. They had no illusions about politicians giving a damn about them, any social security being around when they retired, any saviour coming down from heaven to save them. They could well be called the 'bootstrap generation' since the only way to succeed is by self-determination and hard work.

Another piece of the puzzle is relationship. Since so many come from families that were unstable, or where they were seen as a burden, they create families of their own by way of intimate friendships or sub-cultures. They often maintain strong emotional connections with members long after they have moved away. So, while Xers may be repelled by dogmatic requirements, they are likely to be attracted to communities in which relationships and authenticity are the defining factors. They thrive in groups but do not see themselves as 'joiners'. In other words, they do not join a group because they believe in what the group stands for, but will 'hang' with a group in which some very basic needs for intimacy, reciprocity and respect are met. 'They want to be God's friend, not a corporate shareholder'.

Finally, John Mabry found that Xers are born mystics. While they cannot intellectually invest in traditional dogma, they nonetheless have an abiding intuition that something is 'out there' larger than themselves, that there is indeed meaning in the universe even if they themselves cannot perceive it. 'The spiritual journey for many Xers is a slow crawl towards the ineffable'. While many of their opinions are heretical they are seldom held dogmatically. It is better therefore to encourage them to 'live the questions' rather than to offer pat answers.

The Australian sociologist Hugh Mackay has investigated the second half of Generation X, those born in the 1970s.^v Change – social, cultural, economic and technical – is the key to this generation. They have experienced this as 'impermanence and unpredictability' and from this learned one big lesson: 'keep your options open'. They have been left to develop their own moral codes and values. The response has been, in his view 'a good deal of moral *boundary riding* as they have sought experiences in sexual encounter, dance, drinking and the use of less legally and ritually regulated drugs.' This generation values the quality of relationships highly. Marriage is

a very secondary consideration and permanence is not a value to be placed above well-being. Concern for the environment is the other commonly shared value that Mackay found in this generation.

For those who are overwhelmed by change or have dropped out the world can be bleak and forbidding. Even those who learn to weave and duck on the breaking wave still experience its instability and have to work hard to maintain strength and flexibility. The responses range from the soaring rate of youth suicide at one extreme to religious fundamentalism at the other. In between there are a number with a quiet envy of the more distinctive and coherent style of earlier generations. In all these reactions there is a desire, Mackay says, to shift the metaphor of life from 'surfing' to 'navigating'.

The English sociologist Anthony Giddens has pointed out that post-modern thinking opposes the very idea of 'organising narratives' about history.^{vi} This creates a sense of 'epistemological weightlessness' in which all the contents of the intellectual cockpit are suddenly freed from the gravity of history or reality: ideas, images, and stories float freely about, with the cultural astronaut free to play with them as he pleases. This means, in ethical terms, that notions of what it is valuable to pursue in life become a matter of individual taste. People join up incompatible and often contradictory fragments of moral understanding – commonly a large piece of utilitarianism with a few conclusions about human rights based on the belief that acts are inherently good or evil regardless of consequences. They then believe, quite wrongly, that they are doing what was once called ethics!

Rufus Black, also Australian and a minister in the Uniting Church has summarised the upshot for Generation X as follows.^{vii} Given that the self is the centre we would expect the values to be played with to be those more intimately related to the self, like friendship, the body and sexuality. Freedom to play is the starting point. Where the playful self is the primary reference point, then the resulting visions of life are likely to be thought unique and flexible by the owners, even if they are less so in reality. This explains the lack of commitment to organisations, political or otherwise and to institutions in general, which is such an important feature of their life for Generation X. For those with means to travel the possibilities for pursuing a playful view of life are almost endless. In such a world the archetypes are the tourist and the vagabond – the person free to move and the person forced to move on. It is alarming that both are killing themselves in growing numbers. This suggests that the anxiety of the age has more to do with meaning than material well-being. The underlying dynamic of self is the threat of meaninglessness.

This study began with a suggestion made by Verena Tschudin, that we might look for Franciscan equivalents to the world-view of generation X.^{viii} It scarcely needs to be argued that Francis in his early years ticked almost all the boxes for affinity to that generation. He lived close to the moral boundaries as a rich young man-about-town, with nights given to revelry, drink and song – particularly in French and often, no doubt, bawdy – and, as the early lives suggest, sleeping with girls. He thrived in company, had a genius for friendship and natural gifts of leadership. Having been a keen soldier, he

turned his back on all thoughts of military glory at Spoleto in 1205. He lived in a time of enormous economic change, enjoying the profits of global trade in cloth at which the family was so successful, until the second turning point in 1206 when he renounced his father and thereafter rode light to family ties. He became a troubadour and itinerant preacher, exactly matching the Xer archetype of 'tourist and vagabond'. He went on to create 'families' (the three Orders) with their own network and sub-cultures. He felt great emotional repugnance towards the possession of money, buildings or books. He emphasised authenticity: it was a Friars duty to strive in the world and if necessary to die like the Christian paladins Roland and Oliver, rather than to seek honour simply by knowing and preaching about the courage and virtues of others.^{ix} He had had a great love of creatures and was a natural mystic.

In other ways Francis was the exact antithesis of Generation X. He felt a huge reverence for priests and hierarchy albeit for entirely practical reasons - otherwise his movement could never have been allowed to thrive. He was obsessed with rules, and almost all his extant writings consist of directions to the friars in more or less explicit terms. He required obedience even, it seems, in irrational detail like planting cabbages upside down - or was this a joke? He professed a masochistic delight in humiliation and rejection ('perfect joy') of a kind that any Xer might well have felt but could never embrace - sooner suicide than meaninglessness for them.

This discussion has been embarked upon because the Third Order must be, at least in part, *for* generation X. We need to have regard to Mabry's comment that Xers are likely to be attracted to communities in which relationships and authenticity are the defining factors. They do not join a group because they believe in what the group stands for, but will 'hang' with a group in which some very basic needs for intimacy, reciprocity and respect are met. 'They want to be God's friend, not a corporate shareholder'. We need to be sure that our local groups are like this, and that we 'live the questions' rather than offer pat answers.^x

Verena adds that many Franciscans will feel 'closer to God on the beach or in the forest'. The Franciscan families are not 'stable' in the Benedictine way; money is used when to hand and given away when there is too much. The questioning and 'sitting lightly' to dogmas, the deep concern for the environment rather than rules, and the whole ethos of 'let's see what happens' seems so typically Franciscan that maybe these elements need to be better understood at the time when the Third Order is indeed *for* Xers (because of their age). Maybe we can understand a lot about the direction of the Third Order better when studying Generation X more deeply (thinking here of the increasing demand by Tertiaries for going on their own spiritual journey than in community with others in an Order).

Which brings us to a final observation by Mabry that some of the Options Generation look wistfully to the distinctive or coherent style of earlier generations. In seeking to determine what it is for humans to live a fulfilled life, a circle of conservative catholic theologians are striving to define a contemporary structure of 'playful coherence'.^{xi} They argue that flourishing is

to be found in the pursuit of: our bodily well-being; knowledge; beauty; play; creative activity; harmony with others; our feelings; conscience and the more-than-human. In this list the post-modern values find their place. But there is no hierarchy of values. While a vision of a fulfilled life needs to incorporate each of these elements, the role, place and order is a matter for the individual to decide. Imagination, playfulness and history will be important resources for shaping a rich vision of the fulfilled life.

Verena has commented as follows. 'This seems to encompass much of what the Third Order is about. Indeed certain phrases sound just like the Principles. It is perhaps this imagination of how to use and apply Franciscan values in one's own life that makes the Third Order attractive today. This playfulness indicates a kind of liminality^{xii} - sitting loosely to the traditions of church and establishments - but letting history guide the present values that enable the Third Order to surf widely, and to help tertiaries to navigate their lives unafraid, but not necessarily in traditional relationships.'

Hugh Beach.

- ⁱ Rev D.A.Tickner, 'Changing Attitudes' *British Army Journal*, Dec. 1994, p. 34
- ⁱⁱ John Mabry, 'Homecoming: Helping Xers move from alienation to conversion', *The Way Supplement*, 2000/98, pp. 19-34.
- ⁱⁱⁱ 'Ears of Plenty'. *The Economist*, 24 December 2005, pp. 26-30.
- ^{iv} Neil Howe and Bill Strauss, *Generations: the History of America's Future 1584-2069*. William Morrow/Quill, New York, 1991, p. 328.
- ^v Hugh Mackay, *Generations*, Sydney 1997.
- ^{vi} Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Cambridge 1990
- ^{vii} Rufus Black, 'From Suicide to Surfing: Generation X and Visions of a Fulfilled Life', *The Way Supplement*, 2000/98 pp. 63-75
- ^{viii} Verena Tschudin, 'Generation X and Franciscanism: What the Postmodern Era and the Third Order have in Common'. *Private talk*, 1 October 2002
- ^{ix} Adrian House, *Francis of Assisi*, Pimlico Edition 2001, p. 197.
- ^x The latest 'Third Order Novice Notes' are particularly good in this respect.
www.tssf.org.uk/Members/Formation/Novice%20Notes.pdf
- ^{xi} Germain Grisez, Joseph.M.Boyle and John Finnis, 'Practical principles, moral truth and ultimate ends' *American Journal of Jurisprudence*, 32(1997) pp. 99-151.
- ^{xii} A conscious state of being on a 'threshold' leading to new perspectives, characterised by ambiguity, openness and indeterminacy, in which normal limits to thought , self-understanding and behaviour are relaxed.