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Book Review

Kelle Marshall
kelle.keating@pepperdine.edu

Mason Marshall
mason.marshall@pepperdine.edu

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Book Review

Kelle Marshall and Mason Marshall

Thomas E. Bergler, *The Juvenilization of American Christianity*
(Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2012).

The heart of this book is a historical account drawn from Bergler's dissertation, which he completed in 2000 under the historian George Marsden at Notre Dame. Surveying especially the 1930s through 1960s, Bergler tries to explain how American Christianity became juvenilized. He defines *juvenilization* as "the process by which the religious beliefs, practices, and developmental characteristics of adolescents become accepted as appropriate for Christians of all ages" (4). Bergler leaves some notable gaps, and some of his prose is unpolished, but the story he tells is well worth considering. Here is a brief summary of it.

In the 1930s, he says, white Christians in the United States poured their efforts into young people far more than in earlier years, and the campaign only intensified in the mid-1940s, when there emerged for the first time a distinct culture of so-called teenagers. (Even the term *teenager* was new.) Many adults at that point feared the corruptive effects of secular entertainment, among other things. They wanted to provide teenagers with a Christian alternative to it, and they were anxious to make the alternative attractive enough that teenagers would accept it.

In marketing Christianity to teenagers, white evangelical Protestants were far more aggressive and systematic than other Christians and were much more effective than white mainline Protestants. Even during the 1950s, African American congregations never catered to kids the way white evangelicals did; and to a large degree, neither did white Catholics. White mainline Protestants mounted a major effort to appeal to teenagers; but in the 1960s, especially, their attempts to win over young people were fairly clumsy and mostly backfired.

By contrast, white evangelicals in the 1950s were remarkably successful in creating for teenagers an alternative to secular entertainment that paralleled it in appealing ways. For many evangelical teenagers, Jesus became a substitute for Elvis and played the same role for them that Elvis played for other teens. Evangelical teenagers came to describe the Christian life "as falling in love with Jesus and experiencing the 'thrills' and 'happiness' of a romantic relationship with him." Bergler speculates that "perhaps because evangelicals believed so strongly in a personal relationship with Jesus as the center of Christianity, they didn't question what might be lost when that relationship was equated with an erotic, emotional attraction to a teen idol." (165)

Fearful both of secular entertainment and of communism and fascism, leaders of evangelical groups such as Youth for Christ and Young Life were less concerned about preserving the integrity of the gospel message than about converting young people right away. Accordingly, what they stressed is how exhilarating and emotionally fulfilling the Christian life is. To be sure, they insisted on moral purity. But in order to beat the world at its own game, they marketed Christianity as more *fun* than its competition, and they were eager to strip away whatever might seem dull.

In the 1960s, evangelical leaders continued to adapt to youth culture, in part by boiling down the gospel as much as possible. Youth meetings, even more than before, were geared to be relaxed, emotionally engaging,

and intimate, and they centered on joint discussions that had a simple takeaway and were tailored to teenage concerns. Starting in the 1960s, evangelicals also did marketing research, and they drew on techniques of business management to create environments that seemed warm and inviting. They gave birth to the Christian pop music industry, and they developed sophisticated ways of selecting charismatic leaders and of packaging the romance and pleasure of an emotional connection with Jesus. No less important, in the 1960s the emphasis on marketing that, in the 1950s, had characterized evangelical para-church organizations such as Youth for Christ spread more and more into churches themselves. In short, white Christendom in the 1960s headed only farther down a course that was set in the 1950s.

The trend has continued through the present day, Bergler says, so that adolescent forms of Christianity have become the dominant brands of faith in the United States. (Even many Catholics are starting to accept them, and African American congregations may not be far behind.) Simply put, churches have come to look more and more like youth groups. The upside is that American churches have remained about as full as they were fifty years ago, and most Americans still identify themselves with Christianity, in spite of various changes in the United States that were prone to put American Christianity on the decline. But the way evangelicals bucked the odds is by “dumbing down Christianity to the lowest common denominator of adolescent cognitive development and religious motivation” (220). A result is that many Americans’ faith is rather threadbare. A major recent study found, in part, that most Americans see religion as simply a means by which to feel good. (In interviews, in fact, the researchers who conducted the study heard the phrase *feel happy* well over two thousand times.)¹

Findings such as those are striking, and Bergler’s book is useful in putting some history behind them. If his account is correct, it helps to explain how American Christendom became what it is. His most important point, perhaps, is that, in the 1950s, far more than before, white evangelicals marketed to teenagers in particular and tried to compete with the likes of Elvis. Pop music and such is like sugar insofar as it gives you a quick, easy high. And that, more or less, is what the most popular evangelism of the 1950s gave teenagers, Bergler suggests. If he is right, it is easy to imagine how Americans came to measure the quality and even the authenticity of faith by its emotional payoff, and it is understandable if they think that “a well-articulated belief system is unimportant and might even become an obstacle to authentic faith” (220), since the process of achieving depth, of course, is not a quick, easy high, and it generates questions that make life complicated.

KELLE MARSHALL AND MASON MARSHALL TEACH AT PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY AND ARE MEMBERS OF THE UNIVERSITY CHURCH OF CHRIST THAT MEETS ON THE PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY CAMPUS (KELLE.KEATING@PEPPERDINE.EDU; MASON.MARSHALL@PEPPERDINE.EDU).

1. See Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), esp. 148, 168. Cf. Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).