

Nazarene Baby Boomer's in the 21st Century: Service and Self-fulfillment

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Introduction

This paper reflects on the ageing and retirement of the baby boom generation from the perspective of a cultural historian who is concerned, perhaps even anxious, about the future of the Church of the Nazarene. The retirement of the baby boom generation is a fact. Shortly, large numbers of baby boomers will be retiring and there will be an impact on the church. Before we can go beyond those facts, certain questions need to be asked. First, how valuable and reliable is the concept of the baby boom generation? Second, are there ways in which an understanding of the broader social context and particularly the social disruptions that have occurred since the 1960's can give us a clearer understanding of the baby boom generation? Third, given that social disruptions have been a cyclical feature in American history, are there lessons to be learned from the role played by evangelical religion in past disruptions? Finally, given the lessons of history, how should we approach the question of what to do when the baby boomers retire?

The Problem of Generations

The baby boom generation has been a matter of ongoing interest in both academic circles and popular culture for many years. Indeed, the impact of a generation constituting one-third of the population of the world wealthiest and most powerful nation would be difficult to ignore. In recent years, there has been a profusion of books and articles on the topic.¹ Much of that interest has focused on the ageing of the baby boomers and the impact of their coming retirement on the political and social systems of key modern industrial nations. It is certainly fitting that ANSR as a body dedicated to studying the interface between society and religion should turn its attention to the baby boom and its impact on the Church of the Nazarene.

Despite the fact that the concept of the baby boom has become common coinage in our public dialog, there are reasons, particularly from a historian's perspective, to proceed with caution. Obviously there are dangers in attributing too much determinative power to demography as much as to geography or economic forces. It would not do to construe demography as destiny.

The concept of a generation is in itself a vast generalization and Americans have long exhibited a weakness for generalizations, or "general

¹ A representative example of this type of literature is Marc Freedman, *Prime Time: How the Baby Boomers Will Revolutionize Retirement and Transform America* (New York: BBS Public Affairs, 1999).

ideas” as Alexis de Tocqueville called them.² The term “baby boom” describes a large demographic cohort, but it is not at all clear that such a cohort has any inherent cultural significance. The type of information provided by pollsters and social researchers on such a large group often obscures as much as it reveals, particularly about values and beliefs.

The concept of generation is also not necessarily meaningful in a historical sense. It is only since World War I that historians and sociologists have used the concept as a way of viewing history. The late Christopher Lasch saw that development as resulting from a nostalgia for the past, rooted in the incongruity between our ideals and our reality. In particular this was evident in the nostalgia of the World War I generation toward a simpler, purer life reflected in their memories of the late Victorian era.³ Henry May has written of the powerful impact of the war on the generation born at the turn of the century and the loss of “American innocence”.⁴ A more contemporary example of this type of nostalgia is reflected in recent books extolling the virtues of the World War II generation.⁵

In the ensuing years, historians and sociologists have not so much rejected the concept of generation as they have adopted it with reservations. Karl Mannheim writing in the 1920’s, suggested that a generation was simply a group of people of the same age group who are connected to a powerful historical event. However, he cautioned that the members of a generation may see that event from a different perspective and react differently.⁶ More recently in the United States, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. has written of a generational pattern evident in the cycles of reform and conservatism characteristic of American history.⁷

In reality, any generation has numerous cross-cutting cleavages which make generalization hazardous. Evident in the baby boom generation are deep and easily observable divisions rooted in regional subcultures, religion, ethnicity, economic conditions and as reflected in the last presidential election, political culture. One scholar has used the term “culture wars” to describe the intensity of the rifts in contemporary American society.⁸

Another weakness of the baby boom generation as a concept lies in its lack of universality. Post-war baby booms were largely a feature of the Anglo-American democracies: the U.S., Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Some Western European countries had much smaller and less sustained booms or boomlets, while Eastern European countries and Japan actually had declines.

² Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J.P. Mayer (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1969), 437.

³ Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: WW Norton, 1991), 107-110.

⁴ Henry May, *The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of Our Own Time, 1912-1917* (New York: Oxford, 1979).

⁵ See for instance, Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (New York: Random House, 1998).

⁶ Karl Mannheim, “The Problem of Generations” in P. Kecskemeti ed., *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge by Karl Mannheim* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952).

⁷ Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Cycles of American History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986).

⁸ James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

These weaknesses do not mean that the concept of the baby boom is without value or should be discarded. The graying of the baby boom generation will significantly affect the church in years to come, and it demands our attention. However, the concept must be used cautiously and its predictive value remains limited. Unfortunately, it seems that generations are much easier to see retrospectively than prospectively.

The Great Disruption

With those caveats in mind, we should give careful consideration to the coming retirement of baby boom generation. However, we must do that in the context of the major social changes that are characteristic of our time. If we are to believe those who subscribe to the theory of generational cycles or patterns, it is the circumstances experienced by a generation that are important. In other words the circumstance experienced by the baby boomers are a significant source of their values and beliefs. Since the 1960's the U.S. has undergone a period of radical social change. Increasing individualism and the consequent weakening of community, rising crime rates, increases in the divorce rate and the breakdown of the family have all weakened the fabric of our social order. Francis Fukuyama has referred to these developments as the "great disruption." He argues convincingly that, unlike the Anglo-American baby boom, the disruption is an international phenomenon characteristic of modern industrial societies.⁹ Fukuyama optimistically suggests that the social order can and is being reconstructed through a revitalization of social capital. The term social capital refers to a stock of shared values which allow us to cooperate in the interests of social order. Fukuyama views religion and politics as primary contributors to the accumulation of social capital and he makes frequent reference to the eighteenth and nineteenth century American revivals as important sources of social order in American history.¹⁰

American Revivalism

The pattern of American religious history, one largely mirrored in the other Anglo-American societies, is one of declension, crisis and revival. Historians and other scholars are quick to recognize the radical changes brought about by three major revivals between 1720 and 1920. A model borrowed from social anthropology is helpful in explaining the process. Students of folklore and ritual have suggested that societies go through stages of disaggregation (separation) or disruption followed by a liminal stage when new social norms are constituted and then a stage of reaggregation when social order is reassembled or restored.

⁹ Francis Fukuyama, *The Great Disruption: Human Nature and the Reconstitution of the Social Order* (Free Press, 1999); Robert Fogel offers a different perspective on the cycle of disruptions in *The Fourth Great Awakening and the Future of Egalitarianism*, (University of Chicago Press, 2000).

¹⁰ For a less optimistic view of the ability of societies to reconstitute the social order see Glen Tinder, "Can We Be Good Without God," *Atlantic Monthly* December, 1989.

Secular scholars see this as a purely natural social process while Christian scholars are more apt to make room for divine agency in the process.¹¹

An examination of the major American revivals seems to support the usefulness of such a model. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth century the fabric of Puritan Society in New England began to unravel as a result of religious declension, social stress caused by constant warfare among the European powers, various economic pressures, Indian attacks and increasing political tensions with England. Beginning in the 1720's and peaking in 1741 a series of revivals later known as the Great Awakening swept through the colonies.¹² The Awakening brought about major religious changes including new preaching styles, a more individualistic conception of salvation and a lessening of clergy influence. In addition, there were many church splits which added to the rampant sectarianism of the era. Several Christian liberal arts colleges were founded that would later become major American universities. Most importantly, the values of the American colonists underwent deep and permanent changes. The old deferential social ethic was replaced by substantially more egalitarian and individualistic values. Many historians view those cultural changes as a necessary precursor and a vital contribution to the American Revolution.¹³

In contrast, the period during and after the American Revolution was one marked by social and political disruption and declining interest in religion. In the early national period, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness turned out to be incredibly stressful for a people nurtured in the close knit hierarchical communities of the eighteenth century colonies. Immigration, economic disruptions, war, increased social and geographic mobility and a general air of uncertainty added to the chaos of the period. Beginning in the 1790's, and peaking in the 1830's and 40's, the churches responded with the greatest revival in American history. The country was swept by revivals that left few areas untouched. As a consequence, there were large increases in church attendance, radical changes in values and the rise of numerous voluntary organizations. Those organizations became part of a vast array of reform programs aimed at combating alcoholism, prostitution, crime, delinquency, and slavery. This amounted to the creation of a new civil society.¹⁴ The values produced by the Second Great Awakening became the basis of a Victorian middle class culture

¹¹ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, translated by Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle Caffé, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); and Victor Turner, "Variations of the theme of liminality," in *Secular Ritual*, ed. Sally F. Moore and Barbara Myerhoff, (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1977).

¹² The revivals moved slowly south from New England through the middle colonies, finally reaching the South in the 1750's and 60's.

¹³ Edwin S. Gaustad, *The Great Awakening in New England*, (Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith Publisher, 1965); For the Awakening in the South see Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: Published for The Institute for Early American History and Culture, University of North Carolina Press, 1982).

¹⁴ The term civil society refers to the existence of voluntary social and political institutions of a society that operate outside of the control of government. Such institutions are an essential element of democracy.

that came to dominate American society and that still represents a perceptible influence in American society.¹⁵

The Second Great Awakening began to lose its momentum in the 1850's by which time, the beginnings of a new revival movement were already visible. In the 1870's and 80's the Holiness Movement reached its full proportions. In some ways, this revival, which began as a renewal movement within the Methodist Church, was more counter cultural and subversive than the first two awakenings. It was partly a response to the lack of vitality in the mainline churches and also a reaction against liberal theology and the social gospel. The social, political and economic context of the Holiness Movement was the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, roughly 1877 to 1920. In addition to the upheaval caused by the Civil War and Reconstruction, the period was characterized by industrial revolution, urbanization, high rates of crime, two major wars, greatly increased immigration, political corruption, big business abuses, environmental destruction, vast disparities of wealth, and great social injustice. Savage economic disruptions in 1873 and 1893 added to the unrest of the period. Those conditions eventually provoked a multitude of political and social reform efforts including populism, progressivism and the Social Gospel movement.¹⁶

The Holiness Movement, operating outside the mainstream, sought to bring about spiritual renewal first within the mainline Methodist churches and a few smaller denominations. Eventually the movement followed the pattern of the other great revivals by splintering and producing numerous small Holiness groups, one of which was the Church of the Nazarene. Spiritual renewal aimed at revitalizing evangelism was paramount to the Holiness Movement. But in addition, a deeply felt social concern produced a strong commitment to foreign missions that included various types of foreign relief work and medical missions. Within the United States that same concern resulted in inner city missions, orphanages, homes for unwed mothers, training schools and many other social ministries. These efforts to ameliorate social injustice and poverty tapered off after the 1920's, but the overall social impact of the Holiness Movement was substantial.¹⁷

There have been revivals since the 1920's, but none as large or significant as these three. This may be due in part to the institutionalization of the revival process in evangelical churches, but it seems likely that there has also been a process of decline. It may well be that revival, in the traditional sense described here, is no longer practical and that new forms of spiritual renewal are needed for the twenty-first century.

Nevertheless, the tradition of American revivalism is important and instructive. These were large scale religious movements that arose in response

¹⁵ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); and Paul E. Johnson, *Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revival in Rochester, New York*, (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978).

¹⁶ M.E. Dieter, *The Holiness Revival of the Nineteenth Century* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1980).

¹⁷ Timothy L.. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957), and *Called Unto Holiness: The Story of the Nazarenes*, v.1 The Formative Years, (Kansas City, Mo.: Nazarene Publishing House, 1962).

to social, political and economic disruption and that resulted in far reaching transformations. Secular scholars typically recognize the significance of these movements but usually view revivals as purely social movements which made use of new techniques and methods of organization to address the problems of their day and bring about social change. Christian scholars view the transformation wrought by revivals as a product of the intervention of God in human history through the agency of the Holy Spirit.

These are quick and overly simplistic sketches of major American revivals, but they provide a way for us to begin thinking about how the church can bring social and cultural change. The story of these revivals and their tremendous impact on American society can serve to renew our confidence in the transforming power of the Gospel, not only for individuals but for societies. That confidence has the potential to energize us as we focus on spiritual renewal as a response to the Great Disruption.

This does not imply that the coming retirement of the baby boom generation is not important. However, we must view the aging baby boomers within the framework of American history as well as in the broader context of the social disruption of our times. Of particular concern are the breakdown of family and community and the resulting moral fallout. Eugene Peterson has pointed out that our wealthy secular society has been reduced to “function and thing” (activities and possessions).¹⁸ The church as God’s instrument can restore the missing element of relationship that provides a foundation for family and community. Family and community in turn provide for society a binding moral authority and a moral reference point.¹⁹

Baby Boomers and Retirement

It is particularly important for the North American Church of the Nazarene that we think in constructive ways about the coming retirement of the baby boomers. It represents a great challenge and at the same time a grand opportunity. As one author has pointed out, older people are perhaps our only increasing natural resource.²⁰ It is critical that we understand Nazarene baby boomers as well as the baby boomers whom we hope to evangelize. As we look to the future we need to recognize the distinctiveness of the baby boom generation in the sense that they are a product of a unique period of economic expansion and social disruption. However, viewed in the longer historical context the baby boomers are quintessentially American with all the good and bad that represents. Sharing the qualities of past generations they are individualistic, confident, energetic, innovative and optimistic. Americans are also self-interested, materialistic, acquisitive and have a strongly developed sense of entitlement.

¹⁸ Eugene H. Peterson, *Living The Message: Dailey Reflections* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996).

¹⁹ For two interesting perspectives on this issue see James Davison Hunter, *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age Without Good or Evil* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); and Scott Ehrenhalt, *The Lost City: The Forgotten Virtues of Community in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

²⁰ Freedman, 16.

We also know something about Nazarene baby boomers.²¹ While to some extent they share the characteristics of the general population, they are considerably more homogeneous. Despite this we need to acknowledge the diversity within the church. The essential American qualities noted above seem most evident in the middle and upper-middle classes; however, many Nazarene boomers are lower middle or working class. Christopher Lasch has noted that the lower middle class and working class have a substantially different social ethic than the upper middle class.²² Research presented at past sessions of ANSR suggests that socioeconomic status may be related to theological preference as well as to which side people find themselves on in the culture wars. While some influential elements of our constituency may belong the cultural middle or left, many of the people we serve are solidly in the cultural right. This should lead us to question such things as how socioeconomic status relates to voluntary behavior and attitudes toward service. Other distinctions that are apt to be important in the future of the Church of the Nazarene include ethnicity, gender, and regional distinctions. When we broaden our scope to include the international church all of these factors become much more important and more complex.

For the near future it is important that we learn all that we can about Nazarene baby boomers and the subject of aging and retirement. There is already a substantial literature on these topics. Much of it attempts to extrapolate from what we know about aging and retirement in the previous generation. More problematical is the fact that the research seems heavily skewed toward the middle and upper-middle class experience. What the baby boomers will do in retirement remains an open question. Changes in the political and economic environment could have a tremendous impact on the retirement plans of Nazarene boomers, particularly the less affluent. After September 11 the possibility of large scale disruptions caused by factors beyond our control seem much more plausible.

Should the retirement of baby boomers take place without disruption and in the way that some have anticipated, the Church of the Nazarene will need recognize the special qualities and skills that baby boomers bring to us. In addition to being the best educated generation in history, they are innovative and energetic. Cross polity surveys that compare American attitudes, values and skills to those of their contemporaries in other countries suggest that Americans have much higher sense of efficacy which translates into higher rates of participation and unique organizational skills.²³ It is, however, imperative that the church not simply adapt itself to the baby boomers and their unique qualities. That will inevitably result in the church becoming another service organization seeking to satisfy our inexhaustible self-interest and desire for self-fulfillment.

²¹ The research done by the Information, Technology and Research Division of Nazarene Headquarters as well as by various ANSR members over the years contains a great deal of information pertaining to the characteristics of Nazarene baby boomers.

²² See Lasch, 487-492, for a very interesting discussion which contrasts a lower middle class ethic of limits and humility against the limitless ambition of the upper middle class.

²³ Gabriel A. Almond et.al., *Comparative Politics Today: A World View* (New York: Longman, 2000), chaps. 2,3, 19.

Instead the church needs to utilize boomer skills for evangelism and service within the context of spiritual renewal.

The question of how that renewal can occur is a difficult one for me. Having grown up on one of the old nineteenth century Holiness Movement campgrounds, complete with an octagonal tabernacle and sawdust, I am well acquainted with the old revivalism, of never ending sermons and intense emotions. That will not be the shape of our future, and I am unable to envision what form our future will take. We certainly have the necessary organizational skills and technology. The question is, do we have a vision? Renewing our understanding of the tradition of American revivalism has the potential to give us the confidence and vision to create revivals which can become God's means of transforming the twenty-first century.

Certainly there are those among us who have thought seriously about how this might happen. George Hunter's address to us last year gave us some tantalizing insights into how even an ancient tradition, such as that of Celtic Christianity, may suggest new directions. Always we need to keep our eyes on the prize, constantly reminding ourselves that we as part of the fellowship of believers are God's instrument for the transformation of society. We are God's answer to the Great Disruption and we should take comfort from the meaning of prevenient grace. God is already there before us.²⁴

²⁴ George G. Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity can Reach the West Again* (Nashville, Tenn: Abingdon, 2000).

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