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**For All the Saints:
The Cult of Saints and Theological Imagination in the Art of Liberal
Protestant Youth Ministry**

Abstract: Liberal Protestants have historically neglected or avoided the cult of saints. However, many saints, such as St. Perpetua, present relevant and challenging stories. Engaging adolescents in these stories poses the possibility to contribute to their theological, religious and intellectual development. This article will propose a foundation for engaging the saints in liberal Protestant youth ministry.

While on a week-long high school mission trip last summer I noticed *The Walking Dead*, *The Avengers 2* and *Game of Thrones* were among the most common topics of conversation. The first is a show about a small nomadic community, in a world fraught with the “walking dead” struggling daily to maintain their humanity. The middle is a story of an artificial intelligence originally created to protect the earth, now bent on human genocide in the face of human evil as the only real way to fulfil its mission. The final a dizzying story of political positioning, betrayal and war as competing parties vie for total control of Westeros. All three narratives are composed of various communities, co-operating or competing for their own existence. The conversations of the high school youth, though often ominous, none the less were seeking imaginative sources of hope for the future in a challenging world. It led me to wonder what resources the Christian religion has in this climate to engage young people.

Into this yearning I wish to propose a 2000 year old resource as a new pedagogical approach to generating imagination in liberal Protestant youth ministry; namely the cult of saints. I will show that the saints and martyrs provide a rousing opportunity for the imaginative transformation of consciousness. They historically embodied an imaginative resistance to the powers and of their day through earthly lives.

In *The Violence of Organized Forgetting: Thinking Beyond America's Disimagination Machine*¹, Henry Giroux describes with dramatic clarity the public social crisis that has taken hold of the public consciousness in America. This crisis of consciousness results in the real dismantling of any shared vision of a good and flourishing society for all but a swiftly declining group of privileged elites. The result is masses of Americans, left an adrift in a commodified consciousness that “embraces a radical selfishness that celebrates a consumer-oriented person whose actions reflect mostly their material self-interests.”²

¹ Henry A. Giroux, *The Violence of Organized Forgetting: Thinking Beyond America's Disimagination Machine*, City Lights Open Media (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2014).

² Ibid., 922, Kindle.

These concerns are not out of step with the yearnings expressed in the aforementioned cinema. While the three films listed are all fantastically fictional narratives, the popular draw in all three is an imaginative response to a perceived need for leadership and action in the face of a dire human social crisis. I wish to specifically engage this call from my perspective working with young people in liberal Protestant Christian religious education. I suggest that because the loss of a shared civil good does such toxic and repressive damage to the earth, to the vulnerable and to the world's children, it should be generally understood as an urgent religious concern. It is no doubt a concern for Christian religious education because Jesus taught that whatever is done to the naked, the starving, the imprisoned and the homeless is done to Him (Matthew 25: 31-46). It is this witness that this paper hopes to reclaim for the sake of liberal Protestant young people in order to rouse imagination and invite young people to critically view the imprisoned conscious described above by Giroux.

Thought and Adolescent Development

The move from childhood to adolescence is marked by an increased comprehensive complexity in abstraction and conceptualization³. Lev Vygotsky theorized that a child's thought world consists of a complex of words and corresponding concepts that the child inherited from speaking with adults. These "pseudo-concepts...predetermine" the nature and content of the child's inner-world⁴. Children parrot rather than construct what they say and know, and thus their inner-worlds are deeply formed by the adults who scaffold their development.

In adolescence, youth begin the imaginative reconstruction of inherited thought complexes, thinking beyond words or groupings that they have been given, in order to conceptualize their own inner world in their own voice. In the earliest development of abstract and conceptual thinking, the adolescent can both correctly create and apply a novel concept in a "concrete situation". However, when asked to describe or define such a concept they "will find it strangely difficult to express that concept in words"⁵ and will often offer a thinner and less satisfying definition in comparison.

Developing theological abstraction and conceptual thinking involves separating the complex of received assumptions handed to them by their adult mentors, in order to distinctly analyze the pieces and re-conceptualize them⁶. In order for emerging adults to engage this imaginative process of reconstructing their religious and theological worlds, and to re-conceptualize them in their own voice, they must imaginatively play with the inherited ones. This requires an object that can imaginatively scaffold the deconstruction and reconstruction of inherited language complexes.

³ L. S. Vygotskii et al., *Thought and Language*, Rev. and expanded ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2012), 103-55.

⁴ Ibid., 129.

⁵ Ibid., 150.

⁶ Ibid., 144.

In order to reconstruct assumed inner-worlds through imagination, I propose that the adolescent educative process requires religious resources that have three characteristics. First, said resource must be concrete enough to scaffold concept formation and application among youth through imagination. Secondly, it must rouse the imagination such that it is able to separate and critique aspects of the worldview in order to abstract new concepts. Third, it must be able to directly address the world today in similarly concrete fashion in order to ensure that novel conceptualizations are connected with earthly need and reality. It is to this pedagogical challenge that I propose the cult of saints as a generative pedagogical resource in youth ministry.

The Cult of Saints and Theological Imagination

The cult of the saints arose from an “imaginative dialectic”⁷ that broke open the minds of ancient Mediterranean people⁸. The witness of the saints encouraged those struggling in the midst of a difficult time to believe that God was acting to raise up those who had overcome the world. Christians took comfort and strength in the saints who had given their entire existence to the love of God they encountered in Jesus. Together they imagined that the saints had truly overcome the world by praying to them, gathering in the places of their death and imitating their spiritual and vocational lives. A specific saint, and the communal honoring of that saint, became a way to concretely imagine what a life lived faithfully to God might look like.

I find in Joyce E. Salisbury’s study of St. Perpetua⁹ an example of a saint who engaged her own time in ways that honor the three criteria I have proposed above. Perpetua was a typical young woman of third century Carthage. Her story, including her martyrdom, is richly formed by her culture and family life and the social and political power struggles therein. At the time of her arrest Perpetua was engaged through the catechetical process of Christian community to live her life according to the Christian faith¹⁰. This process stressed living as a Christian first and foremost; to confess Christ as Lord was to live as such¹¹. Perpetua’s martyrdom is thus an extension of shared imagination of her community’s life in which “orthopraxis as well as orthodoxy were always a part and parcel of salvation”¹². The Roman society in which Perpetua and others would come to be celebrated and remembered as “saints” by those who would follow in their path was a society “formally and informally divided into hierarchical distinctions and

⁷ Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints : Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, Enlarged edition. Second edition. ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 109.

⁸ Ibid., 1-5.

⁹ Joyce E. Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion : The Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 2.

¹⁰ Ibid., 74.

¹¹ Ibid., 72.

¹² Helen Rhee, *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich : Wealth, Poverty, and Early Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 75.

categories”¹³. Before she demonstrated the martyr’s courage Perpetua was formed in a Christian community where she palpably experienced God at work¹⁴.

Perpetua’s specific witness serves as an exemplar of the saints in several ways. First Perpetua’s martyrdom was a religious and theological act of resistance. Roman hierarchy was directly supported by Rome’s polytheism. For every different space, season and action Rome held a different god in mind¹⁵. In order then to appease the gods, one needed to make sacrifice to that god. This understanding directly correlated with a Roman social-hierarchy enacted through patronage. As patron, wealthy Roman citizens could buy off the envy of the poor by throwing lavish feasts for the jealous, “ostentatiously flirting with bankruptcy in bouts of public giving.”¹⁶ This giving was never out of simple generosity. Rather, the wealthy always offered patronage to those who could help them out of the intent that favor would later be indebted back to them. Perpetua was formed by a community that passionately served the poor, the orphans, widows and the sick, because together they imagined an “alternative reality by which the present world would be judged”¹⁷. Perpetua’s radical resistance to the gods of Rome poses a challenge every bit as relevant to our youth today as in Perpetua’s time, to imagine ways they might daily embody resistance to cultural hierarchies that benefit a few while excluding the many; even when complicity may benefit them.

Secondly, the Roman cult of honor placed daughters under the authority of their father¹⁸. Perpetua writes of the anger of her father at her refusal to sacrifice to the gods, and more so her disobedience to him. Through her conversion Perpetua has re-conceptualized her own agency so that it was no longer subject to the will of the *pater familias*.¹⁹ Perpetua extends a relevant and empowering witness to young people to examine ways that contemporary society fails to honor the full humanity of women, and imagine ways they might live out of a different consciousness. Similarly, Perpetua speaks of the pain of having to give up her child²⁰. Within her own city of Carthage persisted the memories of a long history of infant sacrifice²¹. She invites young people to imagine living lives that value the most vulnerable, and to see the faces of those globally sacrificed for the gain of other. The saint’s witness evokes an imagined-cosmos where no god would ever request the sacrifice of her child, where all are true agents, and average lives can overcome the obstacle of empirical power.

Beyond Perpetua, imagine how Hildegard Von Bingen, who created great beauty in spite of struggling with migraines and feelings of being an outsider, might call young people to find beauty and meaning in their own uniqueness. St. Francis of Assisi was born into great privilege, yet he saw the danger of complicity with that privilege with surprising clarity. Francis’ witness, to leave

¹³ Salisbury P. 5

¹⁴ Ibid., 62-70

¹⁵ Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion : The Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman*, 10-12.

¹⁶ Brown, *The Cult of the Saints : Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, 40.

¹⁷ Rhee, *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich : Wealth, Poverty, and Early Christian Formation*, 51.

¹⁸ Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion : The Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman*, 89.

¹⁹ Ibid., 91.

²⁰ Ibid., 87.

²¹ Ibid., 51.

his privilege and live in mystical communion with all of nature is more relevant today than ever in the face of the destructive anti-environmental forces of global conspicuous consumption. The further inclusion of “protestant saints” can enhance these possibilities further. More familiar to many Protestants is how compelling many young people find the conspiratorial resistance of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the daring courage of Harriet Tubman and the dynamic public leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. So, why don’t liberal Protestants engage such a generative resource?

Section 3: The Reformers, the Saints and Liberal Protestantism

Walk into any Catholic or Orthodox Church in the world today, and you will be reminded that to many the saints are by no means an obsolete resource. However, many Protestant denominations have never known this resource. In fact, in my own writing of this paper I have been met by constant suspicion and protest. The Protestant faith inherited a legacy of suspicion of the saints that has historically prevented most of us from exploring the possible advantages of sharing these dynamic figures. The ground for Protestant rejection of the saints occurs fairly early in the Reformation. Luther, who expressed love for many saints and their stories, was expressing his concern about the saints as early as 1516.²² While Luther could be incredibly scathing in his critique and dismissal of the saints²³, behind the surface rhetoric was a simpler and more pointed critique. Namely, he protested against the saints for distracting from the true source of Christian encouragement, the word alone. He was further concerned that any practice that assigned supernatural, superstitious or perhaps worst of all salvific power to the saints distracted from trust in God and real care of neighbor.²⁴

Luther’s closest partner in German reform, Phillip Melancthon, in similar fashion sought to doggedly defend Christ as the sole mediator of divine human relations. He however, left space in the Augsburg Confession itself for its “adherents” to recognize the saints: in giving them honor, in edifying their own faith through their witness and in imitating them in good works and in faithfulness to vocation²⁵. Seemingly out of Melancthon’s more generous conserving of the saints, Ludwig Rabus, a student of Luther and Melancthon at Wittenberg, would offer one of the earliest Protestant martyrology books of the Reformation age. Rabus would re-construct the martyrs along Lutheran lines explicitly including those who professed pure doctrine, and even including early reformers such as Jan Hus and Jon Wycliffe as saints.

While this certainly requires a further examination than I can offer here, it does appear that Luther’s logic holds the lasting impact over emerging Protestant thought. John Calvin in *The Institutes* again stresses, though to a lesser degree, a concern over superstition and more so that stress be placed on Christ as the sole

²² Robert Kolb, *For All the Saints : Changing Perceptions of Martyrdom and Sainthood in the Lutheran Reformation* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), 12.

²³ See for example The Smalcald Articles of 1537.

²⁴ Kolb, *For All the Saints : Changing Perceptions of Martyrdom and Sainthood in the Lutheran Reformation*, 14.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

mediator²⁶. Calvin does grant that the saints pray “for us”²⁷ and that they “prayed as we ought”²⁸. With the exception of Melancthon we see a historical line of thought put in motion and passed on. It is my hope to encourage most liberal Protestants to claim a renewed, imaginative engagement with the saints.

Section 4: Methods for Engaging Protestant Emerging Adults with the Saints

I wish here to offer briefly some practical suggestions based on all that has been said for rousing theological imagination in youth ministry through the saints. Opening the saints to youth requires that the educator make intentional and careful connection between the dominant culture of the saints’ day and that of the young people in order to rightly draw out the saints’ stories in edifying ways. I suggest that creativity within multiple medium will enhance the imaginative learning that occurs. Art, photos of important sites and, where applicable, music will draw the saints closer to the learners in ways that can support theological imagination.

Many saints bear witness to their own spiritual disciplines, often producing beautiful and moving writings. Highlighting, for example, the spiritual practices of Julian of Norwich or the writings of Catherine of Siena in my experience can be surprisingly moving for young people. I would even suggest that liberal Protestant youth ministry could confidently encourage youth to pick a patron saint to live with by mimicking their spiritual practices²⁹, carrying a saint token or keeping a saint’s art in a key place. Ultimately, teaching the saints must be done with care and intentionality so as to stress the courage, risk and creativity of the saints, rather than encouraging religious fanaticism or even masochism. In its best practice this will be a communal experience of imagination.

Conclusion

In closing I wish to suggest a final overarching metaphor for the saints in liberal Protestant religious education. Friedrich Schleiermacher suggested that the perfect end of Christian faith is redemption; that is, perfectly potent and uninterrupted God consciousness³⁰. All religious practice ought in turn to rouse the religious affection in order to move toward this potent God consciousness³¹. Schleiermacher’s understanding of the Christian faith offer a systematic understanding for all that I have proposed here. The saints can be reclaimed as those who concretely embodied the reality of potent and uninterrupted God-

²⁶ Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., *The Library of Christian Classics*, (Philadelphia,: Westminster Press, 1960), 877, 80.

²⁷ Ibid., 883.

²⁸ Ibid., 885.

²⁹ Here care must certainly be taken, as some practices of the mystics would not at all be edifying. Julian of Norwich for example engaged in extreme fasting that could cause extreme religious damage in the life of those struggling with an eating disorder.

³⁰ Friedrich Schleiermacher, H. R. Mackintosh, and James Stuart Stewart, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh,: T. & T. Clark, 1928), 476.

³¹ Friedrich Schleiermacher and Terrence N. Tice, *Brief Outline of Theology as a Field of Study : Revised Translation of the 1811 and 1830 Editions*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 98-99.

consciousness; bearing external witness to this through their historical witness. As such the saints can be utilized as an educative resource that generates theological imagination as it rouses religious affections further contributing to redemptive community among young people.

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