

## Young People, Technoculture and Embodied Spirituality

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'I blog, therefore I am.'

Giles Turnbull<sup>1</sup>

'... if you want to account for a people, look at their young.'

Kenda Creasy Dean<sup>2</sup>

Any parent will tell you that the lives of their children have been seduced by technology, with endless texting, chatting, gaming, and surfing. Family households dedicate increasing hours and income to information and communication technologies (ICT). Although it is easy to think of technology as mechanical and therefore inhuman, increasingly, ICT is not only 'intelligent' but also inseparable from human behaviours and attitudes. A new study of 2000 US teenagers indicates that their media use is increasing (currently 7½ hours per day), along with their propensity to 'multi-task' (twenty-nine percent of their media time).<sup>3</sup> The daily existence of the vast majority of young people is enmeshed in technoculture.

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1. Giles Turnbull, 'I Blog, Therefore I Am', BBC News. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in\\_depth/sci\\_tech/2000/dot\\_life/1799998.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_depth/sci_tech/2000/dot_life/1799998.stm), 2002. Accessed 28 May, 2009
  2. Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 11.
  3. Victoria Rideout, Ulla Foehr, and Donald Roberts, *Generation M<sup>2</sup>: Media in the Lives of 8- to 18-Year Olds* (Menlo Park CA: Kaiser Foundation, 2010). <http://www.kff.org/>

This article suggests that current research regarding the spirituality of young people gives insufficient attention to the place of technology in their lives. Young peoples' innate desires for intimacy and self-transcendence are bound up in their daily use of technology. These spiritual yearnings are embodied insofar as they are located within, rather than in opposition to, adolescents' physiological and psycho-social development, and are further embodied in their personal media practices or habits.

The body has long been a significant theme in relation to the wellbeing of young people, both in practical theology and in the broader social sciences: indeed, it remains a lens through which their lives and loves are viewed and judged. Rather than seeing in teenagers' media use the desire for physical or psychological escape from the world, we might instead recognise their longings for connectedness and meaningful self-expression.

The promises and perils of technology mirror some of the perceived risks often associated with puberty. Within technoculture, both sexuality and spirituality co-exist as mediated dimensions of the lives of teenagers. The quests for bodily intimacy and self-transcendence find particular expression in technological practices. The suggestion here is that the negative views and concerns of church and society towards technology in the lives of young people parallel attitudes regarding adolescent sexuality. In this regard, 'cyber' is the new 'sex'. To understand this situation requires an examination of both current and historical views regarding teenage spirituality, sexuality and the body.

### 1. Studying the Spirituality of Generation Y

Recent studies of the spirituality of young people, both in Australia and overseas, recognise the social dimensions of spiritual experience, yet give little attention to the interplay between technology and spirituality. While acknowledging the significance of media use, researchers have not sufficiently examined the social uses of technology as possible arenas for spiritual experience.

The connection between spiritual development and social engagement is a recurring theme in studies of youth and young adults.<sup>4</sup> According to

entmedia/mh012010pkg.cfm. Accessed 31 January 2010.

4. While 'spirituality' and 'faith' are not synonymous, Fowler's universal notion of faith is seen here as having correspondence with an understanding that all human beings

the international, multi-faith research by the Search Institute's *Centre for Spiritual Development*, spiritual development has three dimensions:<sup>5</sup>

- connecting and belonging
- becoming aware of or awakened to self and life
- developing a way of living

In this schema, relational connectedness is a necessary aspect of healthy spirituality, both in terms of a sense of the transcendent or divine and of interdependence with other people. The outward capacity for mature relationship with others and the world correlates with the inward capacity to experience awe, wonder and mystery. Erik Erikson recognised decades ago that the capacity for mature intimacy requires growth beyond the egocentrism of adolescence.<sup>6</sup> James Fowler, building on Erikson, identified a similar developmental need for faith to grow beyond peer-influenced certainty.<sup>7</sup> His Stage Four in faith development described a more individualised, reflexive stance, able to see from another's perspective, and hence, more open to diverse viewpoints, while the aforementioned Search Institute study affirms that in terms of spirituality, healthy psychological development relates to relational wellbeing.

Australian research recognises the importance of the social world of young people, yet defines spirituality quite differently. The *Spirit of Generation Y* study constitutes the most comprehensive study of adolescent spirituality undertaken in Australia to date. Sponsored primarily by mainline churches and church schools, the study used multiple research methods across a range of audiences. The study's researchers differed over the method of interpreting the findings, the result being two reports, *Putting Life Together* by Hughes and *The Spirit of Generation Y* by Mason, Singleton and Webber.<sup>8</sup>

have spiritual awareness by virtue of being human. See James Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1995).

5. Eugene Roehlkepartain et al, *With Their Own Voices* (Minneapolis: Search Institute, 2008).

6. Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1963).

7. Fowler, *Stages of Faith*.

8. Philip Hughes, *Putting Life Together* (Fairfield: Fairfield Press/Christian Research Association, 2007); Michael Mason, Andrew Singleton and Ruth Webber, *The Spirit of Generation Y* (Mulgrave: John Garratt Publishing, 2007).

For Hughes, spirituality represents the higher part of a person's nature, that which causes us to go beyond everyday ethical expectations, where true self-giving, compassion and awareness of the divine occur. Negative attitudes and actions are at odds with the spiritual. Hence not all people are spiritual; rather it is a state of awareness and agency to which we might aspire.

*The Spirit of Generation Y* defines spirituality quite differently as 'a conscious way of life based on a transcendent referent'.<sup>9</sup> Spirituality requires a particular choice of a worldview and ethos with which to adhere. Hence the authors test what kind of difference the adoption of a particular worldview (Christian, Buddhist, New Age, etc) makes to a young person's values and attitudes. Once again, not all people are spiritual by this definition, and different systems of spirituality can be compared. One can see the attraction of both approaches for the churches and Christian schools sponsoring the joint study.

The above two understandings are at odds with James Fowler's theory that all human beings have faith, and that what differs among us is the object of our faith and its level of maturity. Hughes' view also differs from a Jungian perspective that sees evidence of the spiritual in the dark side of human nature. In *Virtual Faith*, Tom Beaudoin hears in bleak and brooding rock music the spiritual yearnings of young people.<sup>10</sup> For David Tacey the adolescent preoccupation with death and evil is evidence of an innate spiritual quest for a rite of passage to adulthood.<sup>11</sup> My critique of the Hughes and Mason studies is that their limited definitions of spirituality fail to attend to the ways in which young people might seek spiritual experiences or construct spiritual meaning other than through exemplary ethical aspirations or coherent belief systems.

Secondly, in defining spirituality in terms of peace, happiness, intelligibility and meaning, the studies not only impose seemingly adult notions of spirituality on young people, they also fail to explore sufficiently the place of risk, adventure, and other liminal bodily experiences. Hughes' identification of the importance of excitement scratches at the surface

9. *Ibid.*, 39.

10. Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).

11. David Tacey, 'Authenticity and Spirituality', in *Proceedings from Exploring Adolescent Spirituality* (Melbourne: Centre for Adolescent Health, University of Melbourne, 1997).

of deeper questions. At a spirituality research seminar that I attended in the US in 2008, one researcher commented that after an interview with a young man about spirituality, the interviewee said, 'I wasn't going to say this in the interview, but I feel the most spiritual when I'm having sex with my girlfriend'. This illustrates the difficulty of researchers exploring aspects of spirituality relating to intimacy and the body with young people, especially where the research contexts are clearly religious, such as in a church school.

This issue overlaps with investigation of technology use as an arena in which sexuality, intimacy and spirituality may be inter-related. *The Spirit of Generation Y* report recognised the significance of technology in the lives of young people, particularly their use of mobile phones and the Internet. 'This involves new ways of communicating, alternative ways of managing relationships and new spaces in which friendships are conducted.'<sup>12</sup> The study analysed 'screen time' per week and discussed TV and film viewing with young people. In terms of whether media culture causes young people to adhere to non-traditional spiritual beliefs (such as 'New Age'), the authors concluded that 'popular culture is more about entertainment first, then perhaps is used to assist in personal expression. It does not constitute a major influence on spirituality, values or world-views.'<sup>13</sup> According to these authors, media have little influence on young people's adherence to coherent religious systems. Hughes confirms the importance of music across the thirteen to twenty-four year age range as being the most important aid to achieving peace and happiness. Otherwise, *Putting Life Together* contains limited discussion of technology.

Both studies analyse ICT largely as transmission media rather than as avenues for social interaction. While recognising the social dimensions of technology use, neither study gives particular attention to exploring whether technology-enabled intimacy produces self-knowledge or self-transcendence in ways that are spiritually significant for young people. Furthermore, these studies have not investigated the extent to which the sexual development of the young person may of itself involve a profound spiritual quest toward mature adulthood. At the heart of the problem are the ambivalent views of church and society towards the bodies and bodily development of young people. I suggest that in fact the two issues stated

12. Michael Mason et al, *The Spirit of Generation Y*, 239

13. *Ibid.*, 247.

here are related, namely the possibility of technology use being spiritually significant and the problem of technology being seen as an area of sexual risk.

## 2. Adolescence: The body revolution

Throughout the last century, definitions and representations of adolescence have often centred on the body. The modern notion of 'youth' initially focused on the physiological changes that accompany puberty. Stanley Hall's classic definition of adolescence in the early 1900s centred on youth as a time of biological transformation.<sup>14</sup> According to Hall, in adolescence a person underwent an evolutionary process, morphing from primate to modern adult. This transition was both physical and psychological, a change in mind, body and consciousness; hence the emergence of more than just reproductive capability. The development of the human being from childhood through adolescence to adulthood consisted of a necessary recapitulation of the journey from savage to citizen.

Thus emerged the notion of youth as barbarians who needed civilising, an idea that shaped social science and social work, including education, health care, youth clubs (including church youth work), social work, and juvenile justice. While Hall and those who influenced him saw the terrors of the teenage years as a positive dimension of normal human development, the perceived ' Sturm und Drang' (storm and stress) of adolescence became the rationale for western approaches to youth work that included political control, social exclusion and ideological indoctrination.

The physical and cognitive changes of adolescence require a cultural narrative that gives meaning to this turbulent passage from childhood to adulthood. Hall's legacy was that western society came to see in young people's idealism and imperfections the conflicted nature of humanity. While his theories no longer have currency, there seems little doubt that the 20<sup>th</sup> century marked an unprecedented focus on youth as icons and iconoclasts of social progress. Corporate culture managed to capitalise on both views. From as early as the 1930's, the parallel developments of social science, the mass media and consumer culture resulted in an eruption of financial and cultural activity centred on teenagers as, literally, the em-

14. G Stanley Hall, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education* (London: Sydney Appleton, 1905).

bodiment of individual and national progress. Yet at the same time, young people's rebellious attitudes and actions personified the fears of parents, teachers, employers and politicians.

In the post-World War II years, social representations of youth have tended to idolise or demonise young people, portraying them as the embodiment of social ideals, including physical perfection, or alternatively as delinquents and vandals—rebels without a cause.<sup>15</sup> Australian research indicates that mass media over-represent young people's behaviour as delinquent or criminal.<sup>16</sup> Hence young people are to be seen on screen, billboard and magazine cover but not heard from in the public arena; allowed to compel and attract but not permitted to be distracting or disruptive.

Crawford and Rossiter speak of youth marketing as 'the marketing strategy of inadequacy'.<sup>17</sup> While we cannot solely blame the media for problems of youth, we must consider whether conflicting social expectations contribute to their low self-esteem, dissatisfaction with body image, eating disorders, risky behaviour and deliberate self-harm. A 2008 national survey of 45,600 young Australians aged eleven to twenty-four by Mission Australia identified drugs, stress and depression, body image and personal safety as four primary issues of teenage concern.<sup>18</sup> In another study:

Mental disorders were the leading contributor to the burden of disease and injury (49%) among young Australians aged 15–24 years in 2003, with anxiety and depression being the leading specific cause for both males and females.<sup>19</sup>

15. For example, Christine Griffin, *Representations of Youth* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993).

16. Judith Bessant, Howard Sercombe and Rob Watts, *Youth Studies: An Australian Perspective* (Melbourne: Addison Wesley Longman, 1998).

17. Marissa Crawford and Graham Rossiter, *Reasons for Living* (Melbourne: ACER Press, 2006), 150.

18. Mission Australia, *National Survey of Young Australians* (Sydney: Mission Australia, 2008).

19. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), *Young Australians: Their Health and Wellbeing* (Canberra: AIHW, 2007), 23.

There is evidence that mass media representations of teenage bodies negatively affect adolescent self-image, particularly for girls.<sup>20</sup> A cursory examination of magazines in any newsstand reveals ample evidence that the body has a central place in social representations regarding the place, role and potential of teenagers. The social construction of adolescence places their bodily development within a conflicted cultural narrative in which expectation and reality are at odds, contributing to both physiological and psychological risk and dysfunction. The link between body image, well-being and mental health is suggestive of a spirituality strongly related to one's sense of self. The point here is not to establish psychological cause and effect, but to question the social and cultural story that shapes the identities of young people. Negativity regarding the developing body may result in dissociation between self-image and spiritual wellbeing. Rather than being 'embodied', such spirituality might be viewed as 'antibodied'. To what extent has the Christian church reflected such social and cultural narratives in its theology and ministry with young people?

### 3. Adolescence in Christian theology

The teenage body has been a significant theme in Christian youth ministry, with a similarly conflicted narrative. Until the last decade, Christian theology has given little explicit attention to adolescence, leaving denominational and para-church youth ministries to develop theologies-in-practice. Historically, denominational youth ministries of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries included elements of instruction in the faith, wholesome recreation, leadership development, safe fellowship, worship, moral formation and recruitment for ministry.<sup>21</sup> These activities can be seen both as formative and protective, providing a secure haven within which to inculcate moral and spiritual values while shaping the next generation of leaders. We could describe such ministry with body metaphors of shelter, nurture and exercise.

20. Duane Hargreaves and Marika Tiggemann, 'Idealised media images and adolescent body image: "comparing boys and girls"', *Body Image*, Volume 1 (2004), pp351-361; Patricia van den Berg *et al*, 'Body dissatisfaction and body comparison with media images in males and females', *Body Image*, Volume 4 (2007), pp257-268.

21. Norman F Nelson, *To Help Them Find Their Feet* (Brisbane: Smith & Paterson, 1966) and C Irving Benson, *A Century of Victorian Methodism* (Melbourne: Spectator Publishing, 1935).

An emerging theme in twentieth century youth ministry was the perception that the physiological turmoil of puberty made young people particularly susceptible to sensual desires.

Like the metal filings in the presence of a magnet, youth orient themselves toward a culture's peculiar seductions and align their desires with the most powerful force that seems to desire them.<sup>22</sup>

As adolescence became a more discrete social category, churches' reactions to the accompanying youth culture involved more recognition of the temptations and 'sins' of the flesh, particularly related to sex, drugs and lack of social self-control. Hall's early twentieth century theory of recapitulation, described above, was, in a sense, translated theologically into an inner, personal struggle with base bodily desires; young people must not only be taught the right way to live, but also set free from the sins that threaten their safe passage through puberty to mature adulthood. They must be emancipated not only socially but also spiritually. For the churches, spiritual wellbeing was seen to embody chaste living.

A key element of the post-World War II social revolution was the shift of sexuality from the private to the public sphere. Griffin notes that 'adolescence as a concept is distinctly sexualised', particularly in the social and medical sciences.<sup>23</sup> A similar locus of concern emerged in Christian youth ministry: the bodies of teenagers became individual battlegrounds between holiness and sinfulness, between sacred and secular, between church and world.<sup>24</sup> For example, I recall the youth worker who asked the girls in his youth group to imagine that everyone who touched them anywhere left an indelible fingerprint, and then asking how they would feel on their wedding night when their husband saw the blemishes of their past.<sup>25</sup>

However stark that example seems, in reality the contemporary social and theological narratives that correlate teenage bodies with imperfection and sinfulness are so pervasive as to be almost invisible. Advertising

22. Dean, *Practising Passion*, 30.

23. Griffin, *Representations of Youth*, 160.

24. For example, John C Souter, *Love* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1985).

25. At the time, the youth worker did not state whether or not boys were asked a similar question.

that idolises youth is designed as much as projection of adult desire as it is an appeal to adolescent dreams. In *Useless Beauty*, Robert Johnson sees the book of Ecclesiastes mirrored in the film *American Beauty*, where midlife crisis finds partnership with adolescent yearning for fulfillment.<sup>26</sup> If young people act out the longings of older generations, it is not surprising that their social beatification is more as Persephone, consort of the underworld than as Aphrodite, goddess of love. Adolescent sexuality, particularly female sexuality, is frequently portrayed in films as manipulative, the source of adult temptation and fall.<sup>27</sup> However the biblical narratives themselves are a sober reminder that it is the young who have often been exploited or preyed upon.<sup>28</sup>

What ministry metaphors portray teenagers as filled with sinful desire, needing to be separated from the world and cleansed before being redeemed? Not shelter, nurture and exercise but, perhaps, defense, denial, capitulation and release.

Churches in New Zealand and Australia were not uniformly judgmental of adolescent desires, and worked at ways of expressing more liberal theology through contemporary educational theory and practice. As a youth worker and author in the late 1980's and 1990's, I used and prepared resources concerning young people's identities, decision-making and behaviour, including their sexuality.<sup>29</sup> At the time, values clarification approaches were respectful of individual autonomy while attending to communal norms. However, such approaches usually left the adjudication of difference among peers abstracted from the wisdom of parents and grandparents. When it came to communicating about the body, teenagers and elders were rarely in the same room, let alone on the same page.

On the one hand, in the latter half of the twentieth century, mainline views in the churches seemed to correspond with broader social attitudes concerning the psychosocial development of young people, while nevertheless seeing popular youth culture as a threat to healthy development.

26. Robert K Johnston, *Useless Beauty* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

27. See, for example, the movies *Thirteen*, *Election Day* and the aforementioned *American Beauty*.

28. For example, the Levite's concubine in Judges 19, the rape of Tamar in 2 Samuel 3, and Lot and his daughters in Genesis 19.

29. For example, Craig Mitchell, 'Let's Talk About Sex', *Top Gear: Discipleship Studies for Youth*, Volume 5 (1992): 16-27; and Michael Shimek, *Dating and Marriage* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1978).

Christian youth ministry provided a safe, spiritual fellowship as a healthy alternative to the sexualised youth culture. Both the group environment and firm leadership were seen as important in providing a necessary haven from temptation. Hence youth spirituality becomes strongly associated with safety, community and right behaviour. It is not difficult to see how these developments might contribute to a narrowing of the lens through which the spiritual lives of young people are viewed.

#### 4. Passion, relationship and presence

In the past decade, some youth ministry authors reference the body in redefining ministry with young people, offering ways through and beyond these dilemmas. Kenda Creasy Dean, a prominent youth ministry theologian, suggests that adolescent development is a God-given gift to the world and to the church, rather than a suffering to be endured.<sup>30</sup>

Although the brain's frontal lobes governing reasons and judgement continue to develop into adulthood, by adolescence the emotional centres of the brain are well on their way to maturity, giving teenagers their propensity for leading with their hearts. In other words, the adolescent brain is wired for passion . . .<sup>31</sup>

For Dean, such passion is the source of young people's raw idealism, a longing for intimacy and desire for significance—a cause worth living and dying for. While Dean doesn't deny the wild rollercoaster that is adolescence, she sees in human passions the imprint of divine passion, open to be redeemed rather than negated. In particular, God's fidelity, transcendence and communion engage and transform the adolescent's desire for steadfastness, ecstasy and immanence. Teenage passion is met by the pathos of God, the suffering love of Jesus Christ, whose saving work is to meet, complete and direct teenage desire. Dean's work paves the way for a theology that sees young people's physical development as not being at odds with their spiritual development.

30. Dean, *Practising Passion*.

31. *Ibid*, 6.

I suggest that such bodily themes move beyond both shelter and formation metaphors, and also guilt and submission, to suggest acceptance, presence, faithfulness, suffering and joy.

Andrew Root further critiques youth ministry and develops body themes of relationship and presence.<sup>32</sup> For over two decades, youth ministry in the Western world has been described as relational, more founded on friendship than on instruction or recreation. Root suggests that youth ministry, particularly among US evangelicals, used relationship as a carrot to attract young people into the programs and agendas of the church or ministry group. Such ministries described Jesus as a compassionate boundary-crossing leader, treating incarnation as a pattern for attractional ministry rather than as a theological foundation. Root suggests that these ministries were designed to exert personal influence on young people within a Christian cultural enclave. Their ministry success was demonstrated through charismatic leadership and multiple gatherings, large and small that could inculcate Christian identity, again associating spirituality with safe group environments.

Drawing on the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Root sees the Jesus Christ as the very incarnation of God; incarnation in youth ministry is not simply an attractional strategy.

... God's heart yearns to be near to humanity ... through the incarnation there is a direct solidarity between human being and human being made possible by the humanity of God in Christ.<sup>33</sup>

In seeing incarnation as inseparable from the Cross, Root's conclusion is that 'relational youth ministry is about suffering with adolescents', about place-sharing with young people on their terms rather than personal influence on our terms.<sup>34</sup> Real bodily presence with young people is at the heart of Christ-centred relationships. Other recent youth ministry writing expands related themes of presence and connectedness, in terms of

32. Andrew Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2007).

33. *Ibid.*, 89.

34. *Ibid.*

relational affinity,<sup>35</sup> faith-forming communal practices,<sup>36</sup> discipleship as shared pilgrimage<sup>37</sup> and spiritual disciplines that centre on the experience of God's presence.<sup>38</sup>

These writers seek to define ministry with young people as embodied, present, authentic and engaging. At the same time, they take seriously the need for the presence of a discipling community, participation in spiritual habits, and attentiveness to the young person as a person—someone to sit alongside for his or her own sake. The authors firstly call the church to focus youth ministry on the spiritual lives of young people, their experiences of the presence of the divine or sacred in their lives, and secondly, they commend Christian discipleship as a process that requires a community of presence and embodied practices. In contrast with previous approaches, vulnerability is emphasised over safety, and spirituality seen as requiring personal investment and discipline, not simply group participation.

What may be less evident is the extent to which these developments are both a reaction to the spread of technology and an attempt to engage with it. In attempting to redefine youth ministry, the above authors and others are in part responding to the social, cultural and economic revolution generated in the twentieth century through growth in information and communication technologies. Their call for presence, authenticity and discipleship practice seems in part an attempt to rescue young people from private worlds, virtual relationships and mediated experiences. One could go so far as to say that the tangible presence of the church, the body of Christ, represents a counter-cultural, immediate alternative to the mediated experiences provided by technoculture. While such authors view the body in more positive terms than their predecessors, the impact of technology upon young people is seen generally as problematic, and yet the relationship between the two is largely unexplored.

Dean's thesis invites a further reframing of the conversation. What if we were to see in young people's innate use of communicative technology

35. Mark Oestreicher, *Youth Ministry 3.0* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 2008).

36. Fred Edie, *Book, Bath, Table and Time* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007).

37. *The Way of Pilgrimage* series (Nashville: Upper Room, 2007).

38. Mark Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 2006).

not a negative denial of their true needs, but in fact an authentic search for well-being, meaning and intimacy? Indeed, what if their communicative capacities, augmented by technology, are inseparable from this spiritual quest? The increasing embodiment of ICT suggests a high degree of integration of the self with both the means of communication and its subjects.

## 5. The embodiment of technology

Young people, like technologies, are constructed within popular discourse as the natural inheritors of future societies, and young people's mastery of technologies is read as inevitable.<sup>39</sup>

Technology is so integrated within modern society that some authors now speak of 'technoculture'.<sup>40</sup> Rather than simply referring to electronics entangling everyday life, technoculture is defined as the ways in which in people value and use information and communication technologies 'in the mediated construction of culture'.<sup>41</sup> In other words, the application of technology is inter-related with its users' capacities for interpretation, invention and reinvention within the socio-cultural realm.

In my observation, certain technologies, in their design, functionality and actual usage, are increasingly 'embodied' in one or more of these ways:

- *minituarisation*—allowing physical portability and adding stylistic value;
- *personalisation*—technology styled as an individual fashion accessory that appears trendy or 'cool';
- *functionality*—increasingly complex functions are presented with apparently simple control and feedback mechanisms;
- *customisation*—features, controls and accessories can be varied by the user;
- *sensation*—increasingly sophisticated sensory and tactile control and feedback characteristics;

39. Keri Facer and Ruth Furlong, 'Beyond the myth of the "cyberkid": Young people at the margins of the information revolution', *Journal of Youth Studies*, Volume 4 Number 4 (2001): 452.

40. Lelia Green, *Technoculture: From Alphabet to Cybersex* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2002).

41. *Ibid.*, xxiii.

- *portability*—increasing capacity to function in a range of locations, including network access and capability
- *virtuality*—increasing capacity to portray life-like situations or fantasy situations with realistic or hyper-real characteristics;
- *multi-functionality*—through performing multiple functions, the likelihood of a single product (such as a mobile phone) being seen as indispensable increases, along with its style value (either recreational or commercial);
- *cost*—while some devices are not cheap by any means, they are priced to be seen as necessary accessories for various income brackets.

This list is not exhaustive and describes the product feature and marketing aspects of commodities rather than the more detailed technical aspects of their design and user effects. Some of the above characteristics can be identified as far back as the 'boom box', the Sony Walkman cassette player, portable earphones, gaming devices, portable electronic typewriters, laptop computers, and more lately, mobile phones, Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs), mini-laptops, the ubiquitous Apple iPod and now the iPhone and iPad. In-home entertainment devices are increasingly designed as body-engaging or body-extending, including surround sound, large-screen televisions, high definition image display, and multi-sensory game controllers, such as the Nintendo Wii. The overall trend is that technology engages young people in more ways, at more times and in more places: their participation is multi-sensory, multi-tasked and multi-dimensional.

The above aspects of personal embodiment include individuality, portability, sensory micro-control, sensory feedback, and technology as fashion. Indeed, these trends are undisputed by producers, marketers and media commentators. What then do these developments in technology contribute to the experience of its use? I suggest that the following experiential aspects of technology use are relevant to our discussion of both adolescent spirituality and sexuality.

### *Sensuality*

Through both control and feedback mechanisms, technology is able to more precisely both 'read' from and 'write' to a greater range of human bodily movements and expressions (micro-sensory), more body parts with multi-sensory synchronicity, and with an exaggerated sense of real-

ity (hyper-sensory). While over-stimulation may seem to be the resulting risk, such as with hyper-real computer games, more refined moderation of the senses is equally possible, inducing tranquility and relaxation.<sup>42</sup>

### Intimacy

Greater sensory stimuli provide an avenue for a heightened sense of psychological intimacy—the feeling of being physically and emotionally closer to another. Such intimacy might encompass the adrenalin-sweat of a close battle in a computer game, the romantic nearness of a heart-felt music performer, or the empathic presence of an interstate chat friend. Such experiences blur distinctions between ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ in both the practices and memories of technology users, moreover they indicate emotively varied intimacies with a range of subjects. For young people, both SMS texting and online chatting enable intimate conversation due to their privacy and easy access.

### Spontaneity

The miniaturisation, increased manipulation and portability of particular technologies provide greater accessibility in terms of place, time and control. Users are able to interact physically with an increased range of devices not only more frequently, but are also able to more easily access ‘on demand’ the particular service or source that they seek. The result is more frequent, more impulsive, and for some, more compulsive use, as is the case with young people and mobile phones. Such capacity has behavioural effects with both social and commercial implications.

### Necessity

The habitual nature of humans opens up these technological pandoras, for good or ill, from ‘can’ to ‘will’ to ‘must’. Affordability with availability leads to indispensability, both in the entertainment and employment arenas. The increasing integration of ICT with entertainment content such as movies, games and website experiences is a direct attempt by global ICT corporations to make technology an integrative aspect of both leisure and

42. See for example, iPhone applications such as Brian Eno’s *Bloom*; Grace Cathedral’s online labyrinth at <http://www.gracecathedral.org/labyrinth/interactions/labyrinth.shtml>; and Wild Divine at <http://www.wilddivine.com>.

learning, particularly for children and young people. Technology may be seen as a modern panacea, yet its very ubiquity suggests a very broad and diverse multiplicity of needs and fulfillments; the design challenge for the ICT industry. Similarly, the reasons for technology use are never static for individuals or groups. Evolution is almost inevitably innate to the technological revolution.

### Transcendence

Technology can extend human perception, intuition, connectivity and control beyond its immediate, imagined and sensory limits. Currently, touch-screen and motion-sensitive technologies, such as in the Nintendo Wii and the Apple iPhone and iPod Touch, clearly exhibit appeal to young people. These devices and others allow for extended, heightened or novel experiences that deepen a sense of connection to real or imagined worlds, heighten sensory experiences, and extend the capacity to control real-world events. Our tools are always, by definition, self-transcending.

Each of the above characteristics of technology invites bodily engagement, including physical, cognitive and affective interactivity. As technology requires patterned use, these characteristics inform embodied habits, repetitive practices through which young people engage in meaning-making. According to Anthony Giddens, the construction of the self is a reflexive task for people in post-traditional society.<sup>43</sup> The plurality of cultural structures and forms not only allows for personal choice but requires more than this; an interactive engagement in constructing meaningful and satisfying ways of life. In supporting Giddens’ view, I suggest that reification, the task of assigning artefacts symbolic meaning, is an essential aspect of the use of ICT, through which the *aesthetisation* of everyday life is undertaken.<sup>44</sup>

Rather than seeing young people as passive, even brainwashed, consumers of electronic culture, we may instead see them as consciously assigning significance to technological practices, constantly revising their media use and its meaning, and creatively producing novel applications and interpretations. However, the active role of young people in techno-

43. Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991).

44. The term ‘aesthetisation’ in this context is used by Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (London: Sage, 2007).

logical meaning-making often causes increased rather than reduced anxiety among parents, teachers and church leaders. To use Giddens' terms, the ontological security of teenagers within technoculture challenges the existential anxiety of their elders.

The embodiment of technology, with its sensual, sexual and spiritual dimensions, also constitutes a challenge to social norms regarding privacy, individuality, and authenticity. Having identified the 'body' as a problem in societal views of adolescence, and indicated that ICT is inextricably connected with the bodies of its users, I further suggest that media technologies are seen, both by society and by the church, as a particular danger in terms of sexuality and well-being, and therefore, a threat to spiritual development.

## 6. The risk of technology

In Australia and overseas, technologism has subsumed eroticism as the perceived evil threatening young people. The risks associated with young people's use of technology often encompass public concerns about adolescent sexual expression and safety. Within adults' general unease about teenage obsessions with technology is a more specific disquiet regarding their access to sexually explicit material, unwelcome advances by strangers and either naïve or perverse self-disclosure. Rather than replacing sex as the young person's temptation of choice, the electronic realm in fact encompasses and expands the perceived risks.

In popular discourses concerning ICT, these intimate and uncontrollable aspects of media technologies constitute dual dangers to young people. The mass media frequently associate the Internet with personal risks to teenagers.<sup>45</sup> Several studies indicate that exposure to inappropriate material such as pornography and violence is common.<sup>46</sup> Parents, schools

45. AAP, 'Internet sex groomer gets 15 months jail', <http://news.theage.com.au/breaking-news-national/internet-sex-groomer-gets-15-months-jail-20091216-kw4m.html>. Accessed 18 December, 2009.

46. Michelle Fleming *et al.*, 'Safety in Cyberspace: Adolescents' Safety and Exposure Online', *Youth & Society*, Volume 38 Number 2 (2006): 135--154; Kimberley Mitchell *et al.*, 'The Exposure of Youth to Unwanted Sexual Material on the Internet', *Youth & Society*, Volume 34 Number 3 (2003): 330--358.

and governments are in constant debate about regulating technology to restrict young people's access to websites and chat rooms.<sup>47</sup>

Whereas a teenager's bedroom was once a place of seclusion from the world, with broadband access it becomes an exclusive haven for unrestricted private exploration. In my teaching sessions with adults, often parents and grandparents, this concern is voiced frequently. From their perspective, technology, while desirable, seems an inevitable yet unwelcome intrusion into the personal life of a child, largely outside parental control. It is not difficult to see how adults may see media technologies as seductive and imposing, while simultaneously valuing ICT's educational benefits.

Engagement with media technology, particularly the Internet, may be seen as metaphorically sexual through its combination of sexual content, sensual interfaces, secret late night chats, interactive responses and 'private' locations. Types of 'sexual protection' are even available in the form of electronic filters, albeit with limited effectiveness!<sup>48</sup> This is not to say that the technology is inevitably or essentially sexualised. Rather, the design trends of intimacy and universal access, combined with open entry to a world of content, are seen to allow the exploitation of young people at a time in their development when they are particularly open to sexual exploration. The Internet represents an invasive threat to a child's naïveté. As was the case in the 1950s and 1960s, sexual expression exists as a very public issue of privacy. The difference here is that sexual material is mediated and moves outside constraints of time or space.

While the sexual content of communication technologies may be acknowledged, any overlap with teenage spirituality may be less evident. However a substantial amount of research acknowledges the presence of spiritual themes within the mass media and its technologies.<sup>49</sup> We can see ample evidence of spiritual content in the mass media, from TV shows such as *Medium*, *Ghost Whisperer* and *Charmed* to movies such as the *Harry Potter* series and Studio Ghibli films, for example, *Spirited Away*. These two movies, along with others such as *The Golden Compass* and

47. Australian Communication and Media Authority (ACMA), *Click and Connect: Young Australians' Use of Online Social Media* (Melbourne: ACMA, 2009).

48. Fleming *et al.*, 'Safety in Cyberspace: Adolescents' Safety and Exposure Online', *op cit.*

49. For example, Lynn Schofield Clark, *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media and the Supernatural* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

*Avatar*, exemplify the current trend in youth and children's films of associating the natural world with 'supernatural' powers.<sup>50</sup> *Avatar* combines an interspecies love story with a narrative about the protective and healing power of a 'Gaia' world, a sentient alien planet, essentially a life-force that is able to transcend even the barriers that separate people from different worlds. Entertainment media regularly present narratives with spiritual or supernatural dimensions to children and young people; indeed such media are most likely the primary means by which young people encounter mediated spirituality. Children grow up immersed in media that present them with imaginative worlds transcending everyday reality and offering supernatural narratives of hope, victory and friendship.

Studies of science fiction and fantasy/horror films indicate a strong connection between sexuality, the supernatural and the alien or outsider.<sup>51</sup> Sex and sexuality have long been explicit themes in science fiction films, from *Metropolis* to *Barbarella* to *Alien*. The romance in *Avatar* continues a trend in teenage film and television reaching back to *Star Trek* and beyond, of loving the alien. The *Buffy* series and now *Twilight* continue this theme in relation to the underworld of vampires. If both romance and spirituality are frequent themes in teenage entertainment, two questions arise; to what extent do young people associate spirituality and romance with the habits of use of electronic media (as distinct from their content), and to what extent to adults, who are less native to the electronic world, harbour different or opposing views?

In *Haunted Media*, Jeffrey Sconce suggests that adult fear of technology may be grounded in the evolution of new media throughout the last century.<sup>52</sup> His broad study chronicles early views of electricity and the telegraph as containing spiritual presence, a rising interest in extraterrestrial communication that accompanied the spread of the radio, and the later discourse concerning television as a doorway to unreal worlds. Remember that this is the century in which the notion of 'outer space' entered our homes through the mass media. Sconce identifies an ongoing

50. Sarah Pike, 'Why Prince Charles Instead of "Princess Mononoke?" The Absence of Children and Popular Culture in The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Volume 77 (2009): 66-72.

51. Gerard Loughlin, *Alien Sex: The Body And Desire In Cinema And Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

52. Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

association between electronic media and the spiritual or paranormal in the US. The author notes the parallels between popular views of emerging technologies and their actual content, from Orson Welles' radio play *The War of the Worlds* to televised twilight zones.

Sconce gives evidence of public opinion that electronic technologies are alien devices opening gateways to oblivion. In his view, notions of electricity, radio waves and television transmissions as flowing or liquid are in accord with seeing human consciousness as a stream. Hence the media unlock a floodgate of information and experience in which we might dissolve. The metaphor of technology as a seeping menace is clear. Sconce's study provides a helpful historical discursor to contemporary concerns regarding the invasion of the internet into the household. Today's fifty year olds remember the introduction of television and computers, their parents grew up with the wireless and telephone. Given the pace of technological development in recent decades, the vast majority of adults have vivid memories of how new ICTs have altered home life. Whether or not adults today see technology as sinister, there is little doubt that they are aware of its power to reshape relationships and lifestyles. An implication of Sconce's study is that adults may be more likely than young people to see communication technologies as spiritually menacing rather than life-giving.

## 7. The promise of technology

Richard Stivers sees in the current milieu a tendency to treat technology as magic, something not fully understood by the masses but nevertheless trusted and relied upon for its services. Magic provides control of the natural world.<sup>53</sup> Technology as magic is imbued with symbolic power to solve all of our problems, becoming a focus for our irrational hopes and fears. Historically, magic becomes separated from religion, being more practical, individual and quasi-scientific in its application, such as expressed in the 'new age' movement. According to Stivers, while religion seems to theorise about nature, technology manipulates it. Religion becomes either a mystical escape from the problems of nature or a social projection onto a deity. Meanwhile technology takes the form of expertly-designed

53. Richard Stivers, *Technology as Magic* (New York: Continuum, 2001).

practices forming ritualised behaviours that shape our interactions with the natural world. Such views of technology require magical sustaining mythologies.

Stivers seeks to stand outside the fishbowl of technology in which young people are immersed. Based on Bill Gates' mythology that sees the PC and Internet with unbridled optimism, teenagers may see technology as benevolent, or more likely, as the equivalent of the car; something that is 'just there'.<sup>54</sup> In this regard, young people do not 'use' technology; it is an increasingly invisible aspect of their communication habits. Imagine asking most teenagers, "Do you use a mobile phone?"

For both Stivers and Sconce, the promise of technology is not wholly utopian; its invasiveness in many areas of our lives evokes hidden anxieties at the heart of human existence itself. An implication of both authors' work is that the use of technology requires acts of faith; not only the hope that our tools will do what we ask of them, but that we will not also be consumed in the process. It would be too big a leap to say that such faith is inherently spiritual. Yet, to the extent that such tools embody our hopes and fears, our technology habits may indeed foster the kinds of magical dependence that Stivers suggests.

This is worthwhile territory for further investigation. Beyond utilitarian questions regarding daily usage, to what extent does trust in technology to provide transcendent experiences engender a disposition toward 'mediated' spirituality?

## 7. Conclusion

Public concerns regarding teenagers and their sexual development have been subsumed and even magnified by media discourses concerning technology. Social institutions, including churches, have viewed technology as a threat to young people at the same time that they have embraced its promise for progress. These mixed messages conveyed to young people regarding technology are a continuation of cultural narratives concerning the perils of teenage sexual expression. Furthermore, the personal and social aspects of communication technologies provide for regular, intimate connectedness in ways that can relieve loneliness, invite self-disclosure,

54. Bill Gates, *The Road Ahead* (London: Viking, 1995).

and build trust, and may thus enable the deep knowing that human beings crave. To see the desire for intimacy and connectedness as a strong spiritual yearning, related to self-knowledge and self-transcendence, is to acknowledge ICT as a potentially significant vehicle for mediated spirituality for young people.

If we see young people's spiritual lives through the lens of bodily experience, then both immediate and mediated stimulation, including intimacy and adventure, may be more significant than researchers have recognised. Future studies will need to find data collection methods that invite young people to speak more honestly about the kinds of experiences that are intimate, risky, liminal, and transformational. Moreover, recent studies of spirituality identify the importance of relationships for young people and to some extent recognise the significance of electronic media. However, these investigations fall short of examining the ways in which the social uses of communication technologies may be spiritually significant for young people. Given teenagers' lack of a cohesive language for spiritual experience, further work is needed to explore the transcendent aspirations of their ICT usage.

If young people seek and find spiritual experiences through mediated self-transcendence, then it is critical that churches and their youth ministries investigate whether this requires a shift from the view that authenticity in relationships is limited to physical presence or real-time communication.