

Book review

Andrew Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age: Responding to the Church's Obsession with Youthfulness*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017.

Do you see the need to make faith 'real', 'authentic', 'sticky'? If you are tempted like me to indulge in a bit of 'adverbial theology' (as the late ALC lecturer Joe Strelan called it) but are vexed as to why we find the formation of faith challenging in our secular Western world, then this is a book for you to read.

Andrew Root, who toured Australia last year, is the Chair of Youth and Family Ministry at Luther Seminary, St Paul Minnesota. In *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, he uses his wisdom as a Bonhoeffer scholar, Youth and Family Ministry practitioner, practical theologian and culture critic to debunk the church's need to make faith authentic, youthful and hip. Commenting on Bonhoeffer's critique of the German youth movement of the 1920s and his thesis on youth work (yes, Root has written a book on Bonhoeffer as youth minister!), he entitles his introduction 'Bonhoeffer thinks we're drunk'. We're drunk because we have been intoxicated by the mantra that 'youth are the future of the church'. Bonhoeffer in his *Theses on Youth Work* says, 'Since the days of the youth movement, church youth work has often lacked the element of Christian sobriety that alone might enable it to recognize that the spirit of youth is not the Holy Spirit and that the future of the church is not youth itself but rather the Lord Jesus Christ' (p. xix).

A helpful question that lays at the root of Root's book is this; why is it that 500 years ago in the time of Luther it was nearly impossible not to believe in God, the transcendent was seen everywhere, whereas in our current Western culture it is nearly impossible for many people to believe in God? Picking up this question, Root interprets the work of Canadian Catholic Philosopher Charles Taylor on our secular age and why we find faith formation so difficult in our Western context.

In part one, 'A history of the age of authenticity', Root undertakes a philosophical genealogy of how we got to our present age of authenticity. By 'authenticity' he means anything that 'enslaves our authentic desires with the chains of piety, morality, and dogma' (p. 5). 'That which is authentic is more important than that which is holy, good, or righteous. What is lame and counterfeit, that which corrupts authenticity and keeps us from being real or genuine, making us a poser or a fraud, is worse than that which is evil, demonic or perverse' (p. 6). In the age of authenticity, the ultimate sign of inauthenticity is that which is boring. To explain this Root gives the example of a young muscle-bound man who once expressed to a bible scholar his deep love for Jesus. The young man was obviously passionate about his faith and the bible. But when the topic of Sunday worship came up he explained he rarely went to church as it had none of the adrenaline of his workouts, it was just too boring (p. 7). 'In the age of authenticity, to be bored is not simply unfortunate or unpleasant, it is to be oppressed, to be violently cornered and robbed of authenticity. We as individual selves are now responsible for our own spiritual journey, so if something

is boring, if it lacks connection to the depth of a person's subjective desires it is worth abandoning' (p .8).

Using Charles Taylor's work as a lens, Root cuts through the cultural layers of the 1960s, 70s and 80s and argues the need for the church today to reimagine faith formation. An example of why this is needed is one of the symptoms of our secular age; Moral Therapeutic Deism (MTD). Root names MTD as a tumour wrapped around the bones and organs of 20th and 21st-century Western life and the church is not immune to this disease. Chapter titles in this first part of the book include; The Boring Church and the Pursuit of Authenticity, The History of Youthfulness, The Perceived Scam of the Mass Society, The Rise of the Hippie and the Obsession with Youthfulness, The Rise of the Hip and Churches Filled with Bobos—the Beasts of Authenticity.

In part two, 'A secular age meets Paul, and the youthful spirit meets the spirit of ministry', Root explores Paul's understanding of faith and formation. He argues Paul's conception of faith and formation gives us a new way of imagining faith formation in our context. For Paul, faith and faith formation are linked in negation (the cross), the experience of longing, brokenness and joy. Root builds on the work of New Testament scholar on Paul, Michael J. Gorman. Chapter titles in this second part of the book include; Faith and Its Formation in a Secular Age, What is Faith?, From Membership to Mystical Union, The Music of Formation and Is God a Favour Bestower or Gift Giver?

Root concludes the book with practical steps to consider as the 'household of ministry'. Here he lands his concept of relationality and personhood through the Eastern view of hypostasis. The plot and purpose of Paul's story of being ministered to by Jesus are to reveal the divine hypostasis encountering our hypostasis. Hearing another person's story is an incredible act of ministry because in hearing another's story, we are given the revelation of their person. Furthermore, when personhood is shared through ministry, Jesus Christ is concretely and really present. Root argues 'because the church is the household of ministry, its stories are not stories of glorification or sensation but testimonies to the presence of God coming to us as minister' (pp. 208–209). Also, Root argues for the place of story in the household of ministry as it moves faith formation beyond MTD. In the age of authenticity, testimony becomes of utmost importance as when we articulate our experience through the action of God within Jesus' own life and death story, we find our way into transcendence.

This book has made me critically rethink my attitude I have had as a pastor when I have lamented the fact that more people attend sporting matches with their children than worship in our local church on a Sunday. When I have questioned myself as to what the church has to change to better connect with the people who don't grace our doors anymore and don't think our doors are worth gracing, this book has been a worthwhile corrective. Root's work on faith formation in our Western secular culture has been indispensable in leading me to a different and more gracious frame of mind regarding these questions, as I concern myself more with the lived experiences of people as God in Christ ministers to them through his, and their, death and life experiences.

Tim Jarick