

# **The Underlying Dynamics of World Youth Day**

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**Shoring up the foundations: the large-scale international youth festival as a strategy for the retention of Catholic youth.**

The papers in this session report findings from a three-year study of the most recent World Youth Day held in Sydney. This recent Catholic strategy employing gigantic international youth rallies is examined to discover whether it promises to be effective in retaining youth involvement in the church.

**II The underlying dynamics of World Youth Day.**

**ABSTRACT**

Participants at these very large rallies report that the strongest impact on them is made by the experience of being part of a community based on shared faith. This paper enlists anthropology, religion studies and theology to complement sociological analysis of the multiple layers within that experience: a) the predispositions participants bring to the occasion, based on their family religious nurture, their previous religious experiences and the spirituality these and other influences have shaped; b) the *communitas* experienced in ritual processes; c) symbolic performances enacting the group's sacred identity; d) the ecclesial experience of resurrection / rebirth through participation in sacramental 'mysteries'. These underlying dynamics are shown to explain more adequately the attitudinal and behavioural outcomes of WYD.

## Introduction

At the 2008 meeting of SSSR, our research team reported preliminary findings on the experience of the participants at the 2008 World Youth Day, based on interviews. The post-event internet survey of participants took place at the end of 2008, and today's papers are based on data from that survey. The data partly support our preliminary conclusions, but also correct them in some surprising ways.

### **A. The large-scale international youth festival as a strategy for the retention of Catholic youth: the reach and impact of World Youth Day 2008**

Is the strategy of very large international youth assemblies, held every few years, effective in retaining the active participation of youth in the Catholic church, as is clearly the organisers' intent?

- a) Longer-term retention can only be judged after a significant lapse of time; but if we focus on short-term results, and on the impact on those who actually participated, we can point to modest but real gains: the commitment of those already actively involved is reinforced, and that of a significant proportion of the less committed also appears to be strengthened.
- b) Even in the short term, the success of the strategy depends on the 'reach' of gatherings like World Youth Day -- the proportion of Catholic youth who attend, or who are otherwise positively influenced by the event.
  - a. In 2008, WYD's reach in the host country Australia was strong in the host archdiocese, Sydney: on official WYD figures, it seems as many as 20% of young Catholics aged 15-34 attended as registered pilgrims (the total number of Catholics in the diocese in this age range is derived from the Australian Government Census). 15-35 was the official target age range of WYD. It is also likely that further large numbers attended at least some events without registering.
  - b. Attendance from adjacent dioceses was also fairly strong (8% - 14%).
  - c. But the level of participation of more distant dioceses, according to official WYD figures, was low: 2% - 4% of Catholics aged 15-34 attended from these dioceses. For Australia as a whole, the attendance of Catholics in this age range was about 6%.
  - d. Several World Youth Days in recent years have reportedly drawn crowds of millions to their major events. The attendance at the concluding Papal Mass in the Philippines was estimated at four million. For Sydney in 2008, the official attendance figure for the concluding event was 400,000. There were 223,000 registered pilgrims: 113,000 Australians and 110,000 from 193 overseas nations. The Australian WYD gathering was probably the smallest of the whole series, with the fewest local and international pilgrims attending, because of a number of factors:
    - i. The distance of Australia from countries with large Catholic populations, and the cost of travel in money and time;
    - ii. The economic downturn, becoming more pronounced in 2008, which reportedly led many to change their plans to attend, especially those coming from overseas, even from relatively affluent countries like the USA;
    - iii. The highly secularised culture of the host country and the low rate of involvement of youth in the Australian Church. In the light of our previous research, it seems that most nominally Catholic youth, even those attending Catholic schools, have too low a level of interest in

religion, and too strong a resistance to ‘the church’ for an event like WYD to appeal to them. With few exceptions, even very vigorous and prolonged recruitment campaigns in schools achieved only a modest response.

- c) A successful strategy of retention also needs to reach a particular category of adherents: those whose continued participation in the church is most at risk. As our previous reports have shown, and these papers will further detail, the Australian attenders were nearly all quite religious relative to the total Catholic population of the same age.<sup>1</sup> The event did not succeed in drawing large numbers of the religiously uncommitted, despite very vigorous recruitment efforts in most dioceses – especially through the extensive network of Catholic schools, which educate about half the school-age Catholics in Australia. With few exceptions, the level of religious commitment of those who came from overseas was considerably higher again – understandably, since they tended to be post-school age, and were therefore making a considerable sacrifice of time from work or tertiary education and undertaking large expenses in order to attend. Attenders from developing countries were offered travel subsidies, but many from poor countries who hoped to attend did not succeed in obtaining visas from a government wary of illegal immigrants. On this score then – as a strategy to enhance the retention of youth in the church by attracting large numbers of those most likely to drift away, the event was not all that its planners had hoped for. For all that, it can still be said that in these times, even those who are relatively devoted in their teens struggle to maintain their commitment as they progress through their twenties, so the reinforcement of religious devotion which they undoubtedly experienced was by no means superfluous, and also counts towards the goal of the retention strategy.

## **B. Exploring the experience of the ‘committed’**

The first paper in this section, by Andrew Singleton, identified those who testified that they had made a strong religious commitment as a result of their participation in WYD. The paper explored aspects of these participants’ background that left them open to this outcome, their experiences at WYD leading up to their decision to commit their lives to God, and their intentions to undertake practical changes as a consequence. The third paper in the session, from Ruth Webber, will look at some more of these intended changes in the sphere of civic engagement, within the broader context of the relationship between religion and civic engagement. This paper intends, in what follows, to investigate further the experience of those who made strong commitments as a result of WYD, (we will refer to them, for brevity’s sake, as ‘the committed’, without intending to deny that there were others who were also committed). My particular focus will be on the underlying dynamics of World Youth Day which gave rise to these strong religious experiences for some participants, and less intense experiences for others.

I will do this in three stages:

- Explore further
  - the antecedents of the commitment experience – especially prior religious experiences;
  - the consequences of the experience in attitudes and motives five months after WYD

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<sup>1</sup> We can state this with confidence because we have ‘baseline’ data on the religiosity of the population of Australian Catholic youth from our recent study: Mason, Singleton and Webber 2007.

- Outline some alternative frameworks to set these findings in theoretical perspective;
- Utilise resources from philosophy, history of religions and theology to probe the underlying dynamics of World Youth Day

### **1. Antecedents of the commitment experience**

Singleton found no relationship between the commitment experience and gender (this is in itself a most important discovery); and he showed that the committed had the following characteristics:

- Most of their close friends attended church
- They had attended Mass regularly and engaged in regular prayer by themselves;
- At WYD, they found the Vigil, Papal Mass and Catecheses ‘very helpful for spiritual development’; and looking back on all aspects of WYD, singled out as most helpful: ‘Being with so many people my age who share the same faith’ and ‘The sense that God was present’.
- They belonged (at least later, at the time of the survey) to a Catholic group or organization.

Further, we found that:

- The committed were very unlikely to have been, prior to WYD, ‘in a relationship’. Apart from clearly signifying a one-to-one romantic relationship intended to have a degree of stability, the phrase has no universally agreed meaning concerning sexual intimacy. Among younger teens, it may mean only ‘boyfriend’ / ‘girlfriend’ / ‘going (out) with’ status, but from the mid teens on, carries an increasingly strong implication of a sexual relationship. Smith (2009: 83-4) clearly portrays, on the basis of three waves of interview and survey data from the National Study of Youth and Religion, how engaging in sexual activity or excessive drinking or drug taking, or wishing to keep the option open, leads contemporary American youth to reduce the cognitive dissonance between these activities and religious teachings by mentally discounting the teachings and distancing themselves from their source – often with the intention of returning to it later, in a more settled phase of their lives.

We have argued in many places that youth religious culture has become globalised, spreading not only throughout the developed West, but to urban elites in many developing countries. Our conclusions from Australian surveys and interviews match Smith’s very closely on this question of the relationship between religious commitment and sexual intimacy among youth and on many other issues; and also agree with those of a notable British study of religion and youth (Savage et al: 2006).

- The committed were likely to have a father who was strongly enthusiastic about his religion;

#### *Previous religious experiences*

Next, the previous religious experiences of the committed were examined, drawing on a wide range of questions on this topic in the survey which took place before WYD. Most of them had (at some time in the past) been strongly aware of the presence of God, they said,

- When ‘making a decision to accept Jesus as my personal Saviour’. The answer options were: Never / Once or a few times / Often. It was the choice of ‘Often’ in response to this question that was especially characteristic of the committed. In Catholic theology, there is no once-for-all ‘born again’ conversion experience; conversion is seen as

- gradual, incremental, life-long; commitments are made repeatedly at deeper levels.
- Moreover, in a separate question asking what response was evoked in them on occasions when they were strongly aware of God's presence, they selected: 'A sense of being forgiven, renewed' and 'A sense of determination to change my life.'

This seems at first an astonishing finding. Two months before WYD these young people recall having in the past accepted Jesus as their personal Saviour. Five months after WYD, when asked: 'Could you honestly say your WYD experience has made you really determined to be different in any of the following ways?' (emphases in the original), they selected: 'To be a follower of Christ, and live as he wants me to', or 'To accept Jesus as Lord of my life', or, responding to a similar question, 'Now I want to live as a disciple of Jesus, a witness to him.' Only 6% of them chose the response option which says: 'I already was committed to these things before I went to WYD'.

How can this be true? Are the young people who claim to recall making a significant commitment at WYD guilty of hyperbole? Are they just 'sawdust trail junkies' / Revival addicts? Are they hooked on the religious 'rush' that accompanies expressions of total commitment – the religious equivalent of 'addicted to love'? Research on those who 'came forward' at the religious rallies of the nineteen-fifties reportedly found that most were already 'converted' churchgoers. The 'altar call' is a standard feature of services in many evangelical and Pentecostal churches, and those who respond to it are by no means all 'new converts' – strangers to the church and to religious commitment. Or are these young people so obsessed with their sinfulness that they must wash again and again in the blood of the Lamb? In short, their claim that WYD was the occasion of a significant and new commitment may seem spurious. There is, however, a perfectly logical and plausible basis for the authenticity of their reported experiences.

The *Spirit of Generation Y* study noted the following pattern, which may now well be typical of young Australian Catholics from devoutly religious families. Through their early childhood and most of primary school, the children attend Mass regularly with their families, receive religious instruction at home as well as at school, and experience as normal a level of religious devotion, understanding themselves as followers of Christ, and aspiring to live in his way. But commonly between school years 5 and 8 – that is, in the last two years of primary school and the first two years of high school, the secularity of the surrounding culture and the low regard for religion of the majority of their peers begin to impact; it starts to matter to them that it's not 'cool' to be religious. Very often, we found that at this period children cease, or markedly decrease, their active involvement with religion; they reduce or abandon their commitment and doubt or discard their religious beliefs.

So young people who have lived through this pattern of an early commitment later withdrawn, who then experience a rekindling of their former fervour, can be perfectly truthful in claiming, after WYD, that it was an occasion when they renewed a commitment of their lives to God, that this occurred because of what they experienced at WYD, and that they were not committed in this way when they went to WYD. We should also note that there was no 'altar call' at WYD – no invitation to a public gesture of commitment, and that the 're-committed' are not speaking filled with WYD euphoria, but recalling events five months old.

*Consequences of re-commitment at WYD*

If the commitment to follow Christ was serious, it requires putting into action; it will have consequences in attitudes and motivation. The following table compares those who made strong commitments at WYD with other attenders, on a variety of attitudes and motivations for action.

**Table 1. Catholics aged 15-24: Attitudes and motivations of Recommitted vs. Other attenders.**

Attitude / motivation items	Other (not recommitted) %	Recommitted %	Gamma
<b>Attitude to oneself: Since going to WYD do you think you have a more positive view of yourself your life and your future?</b>			
More positive / much more positive	74	94	.55
<b>Attitudes to God and to faith</b>			
I feel more confident in my belief in God -- that God is real	41	50	.19
I understand better how God is Father, Son and Spirit	11	20	.35
Especially, I have a better understanding of the Holy Spirit	22	42	.41
I believe more strongly that God loves me	23	43	.43
I love God / Jesus more than I did	15	37	.54
I feel I have a closer relationship with Jesus	27	58	.58
I'm more interested now in learning about my Catholic faith	30	48	.36
I'm not embarrassed now to let others see that I'm a believer	36	56	.39
Previously I was just following the family religion, now it's my decision	24	34	.23
<b>Can you honestly say that your WYD experience has made you really determined to be different in any of the following ways?</b>			
To be more considerate of others	30	52	.42
To match my behaviour to my faith	22	60	.68
To be more forgiving, patient, tolerant	42	65	.45
To actually put others before myself	22	48	.53
To be more 'Christ-like' in my behaviour	14	56	.77
I already was committed to these things before I went to WYD	21	6	-.65
<b>Do you think that as a result of WYD your religious faith will have more influence on what you do in daily life? More/much more</b>	26	64	.65
<b>Will you do the following things more often or the same as before?</b>			
Proportion responding 'More':			
Attend Mass	18	33	.37
Pray	43	71	.53
Attend reconciliation	25	46	.44
Contribute to parish	37	55	.35
Talk more about faith issues with others who went to WYD	60	75	.33
Talk more about faith issues with family members who did not attend	46	60	.29
Talk more about faith issues with: non-pilgrims	49	67	.35

All gamma statistics are significant at < .001

The recommitted scored significantly higher on every measure, and claimed that this represented a change on their part, which they attributed to their WYD experience.

## 2. WYD in theoretical perspective

Since the mid-nineteenth century, increasingly sophisticated empirical and comparative studies of religion have given rise to a host of theories which aim to make sense of the empirical observations by setting them in a broader social and cultural context. Here we consider briefly a few of the more obviously relevant theories.

### a) Durkheim: WYD as large-scale collective effervescence

Sociology inherited from Emile Durkheim the understanding that religion plays a fundamental role in constituting and maintaining society. His studies of the foundations of morality and the role of religion in primitive society convinced him that 'there is something

eternal about religion'<sup>2</sup> – society would always need the 'sacred', because the 'collective representations' which constitute society depend upon the sacred. Respect or awe in the presence of the transcendent, and the discipline necessary to restrain individual egotism in favour of social order, are the moral attitudes that make society possible. The attitude of awe is generated when a large group come together to manifest their religious commitment by their presence and their behaviour, and engage together in religious activities focussed on 'sacred' concerns. A strong 'collective effervescence' is generated – potent feelings and sentiments aroused by the presence of the sacred, and also a 'collective consciousness' of shared beliefs regarding sacred things, which unite the adherents into a strong moral community.<sup>3</sup>

For Durkheim, as a committed rationalist, the transcendent sacred is merely society writ large in its essence or ideal: the social principle. It is this that is symbolized by religion, so religion is a social phenomenon.

Modified forms of the Durkheimian reductionist interpretation were later adopted in many functionalist explanations of religion in anthropology, and most recently in Randall Collins's 'Interaction ritual chain' theory (2004). These theories see all the phenomena we have described as explicable in terms of well-understood non-religious social and psychological mechanisms, without any need to treat any aspect of the phenomena as distinctively religious.

Durkheim expounded the theory brilliantly in *The Elementary Forms* and its continuing attraction is that it seems to explain events like WYD so comprehensively:

- the collective effervescence generated in ritual and other communal performances / experiences
- creates a sacred aura around certain objects and around group norms and practices in regard to them,
- uniting the adherents into a moral community.

At WYD, the participants were exposed to the power, objectivity, otherness and enduring character -- in other words, to the *transcendence*, in a basic sense – of a large social entity – the worldwide Catholic church – transcendence, that is, vis-à-vis the individuals of which it is composed.

A case could be made that this was the main effect described by participants, with only incidental appeal to religious entities. The sacred, Durkheim argued, is nothing else than society writ large.

But as Parsons and others (e.g. Bellah 1970, 1973 pp. 48-52) have pointed out, social reality can be understood as scientific fact, and as such has no religious content or sacred aura, and elicits no awe. They suggest that Durkheim's theory logically requires that we go beyond his own formulation to see society as a religious phenomenon, depending on religious symbols which express ultimate values and which refer to non-empirical sacred realities inaccessible to scientific rationality (Parsons 1937: 427). The idea of the social creates the reality. But the social ideal is itself recreated through religion (Donald Capps). So according to these authors,

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<sup>2</sup> Durkheim 1965, Conclusion.

<sup>3</sup> 'A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things – i.e. things set apart and forbidden, which unite into a single moral community or church all those that adhere to them'. Durkheim, 1976: 62.

Durkheim ends by demonstrating, contrary to his own intention, that society is a religious phenomenon!

The reductionism which sees religion as merely a reflection of social realities was refuted by Robert Bellah as inadequate precisely on social scientific grounds (Bellah 1970, 1973). Religion, he maintains, is a reality *sui generis*, not simply reducible to social or psychological phenomena. It is a zone of culture which, while having its concomitants in psychological and sociological phenomena, is not explained by them with no residue. Bellah's key argument is that both Durkheim and Weber cannot explain phenomena like 'collective effervescence' and 'charisma', which are at the centre of their notions of religion, without recourse to non-rational, *sui generis* religious elements such as 'the sacred' which are not explicable in social or psychological terms, and cannot be grasped, conceived or accounted for in the post-Enlightenment rationalist worldview.

The examples of 'collective effervescence' Durkheim cited are accounts of extreme and prolonged emotional exaltation, highlighted by orgiastic rites involving extraordinary violations of customary law, such as sexual intercourse between forbidden partners. In the case of WYD, the expression of collective emotion aroused by symbols of the sacred which reaffirmed the identity of the group was relatively weak. There were moments of excitement when the Pope arrived, and when he was driven through the crowd, but nothing approaching even the comparatively modest fervour of the modern charismatic / Pentecostal prayer service, let alone the mass hysteria of the sacred rampage. Such forces do indeed lie sleeping in the depths, but were not evoked at WYD. Further, the crowd seemed not particularly conscious of itself or of a unified identity; there was more evidence of the enthusiastic and slightly competitive flaunting of symbols of national identity in flags and chants.

In recent times, Randall Collins has proposed a synthesis of elements of Durkheim and Goffman. As described by one enthusiastic reviewer:

Collins's synthesis of Durkheim and Goffman produces something new: the centrality of 'emotional energy' (EE) in social exchanges. Collins's new concept is forged out of Durkheim's account of collective effervescence and Goffman's analysis of the ritual order. Collins defines this state as one of 'heightened intersubjectivity' (2004:35). When our rituals work well we feel 'entrained' by them, when they fail they fall flat: identities are not 'affirmed or changed,' and we feel bored, tired, and eager to escape (2004:51–52). The EE that results from heightened intersubjectivity also sustains a moral order. This is because group rituals sustain conceptions of the common good, both in religious and secular environments (Collins 2004:39–40) (Manning 2006).

Collins's theory clearly captures some essentials of social interaction, and the numerous ingenious applications he provides are illuminating and persuasive. Enthusiasm of all kinds, including religious animation, is by definition an increase in 'emotional energy'. But his account is as reductionist as Durkheim's (he warns the sociologist against 'going native' – taking at face value the participants' religious claims) and is open to essentially the same objection: he ignores the qualitative difference, demonstrated in participants' behaviour and perceptions, between religious rituals and other forms of social interaction, and offers no new explanation for the phenomenon of the sacred. If social reality ever engendered sentiments of awe, it does not do so in an age characterised by hyperconsciousness of social construction.

*b) Victor Turner's anthropological approach: liminality*

Anthropologist Victor Turner, whose perspective was shaped by his study of African rituals, offers yet another view of 'boundary experiences' in his notion of the *liminal* – literally the threshold, the space between two sets of boundaries which one must cross in the transit from one status or life stage and the next (1972). The *limen* possesses multiple potentials: it has an aspect of danger; one has left one status and not yet entered the other; one is socially undefined; the crossing ritual is like a rope bridge across a yawning chasm of nothingness into which, unsupported, we might fall.<sup>4</sup> Some examples: no longer single but not yet married; dying but not yet dead; no longer a child but not yet an adult; repentant but not yet forgiven; born but not yet named, not yet assigned a place within the wider community; or born and alive with human life, but still under the inherited taint of 'original sin', not yet participating in the divine life.

But seen differently, the threshold is also a place of rest between one set of socially-defined responsibilities and the next; hence a place of freedom, of laying down one's burden for a period of rest; of unencumbered play; a place where entirely new things can happen.

Another feature of Turner's *liminal* state is the exceptional kind of sociality experienced with those who are one's companions on the journey: *communitas*. Pilgrims experience an intimacy which ignores the ordinary barriers of social status etc., which is only possible because they are on the road together; they have cast in their lots together for the time being, they depend on each other in an essentially temporary way; after this they will move on. The bonds formed among fellow initiands are of unusual depth and intimacy.

The impression grew stronger throughout the week, that every individual thing that happened was not reacted to in itself, but that the context gave it a special meaning. *There was a kind of aura around nearly everything, that affected how pilgrims responded to it.* An otherwise quite ordinary talk (e.g. the lectures at catechesis) in such a context gets described by pilgrims as 'sensational' and 'mind-blowing'. This seems to have almost nothing to do with the actual content of what is said, which was usually fairly complex and not easily understood or remembered. This special atmosphere seems to be the most important feature of the entire week; it permeated everything, so that when you look at any event without taking it into account, you wonder what there was to fuss about; but within this golden glow, the ordinary is transformed. It's a kind of enchantment of the world; a period of special time in a special place with special people that won't be repeated; this is what Turner calls *liminality*.<sup>5</sup> The pilgrims entered into this liminal consciousness via an *ordeal*: the long and arduous bus trip, the trials of perhaps losing luggage and not getting to their planned destination for the night, sleeping in a strange and uncomfortable place. Ordeals are an important part of pilgrimages and initiation processes. They are a way of putting off those who will never be sufficiently motivated, and of intensifying the striving of the suitable candidates by making them push harder against an obstacle. Groups who endure ordeals together are fused together by the intense *communitas* generated through these experiences.

Yet all that could happen on a football team's trip away without this aura developing. What made this occasion different? The difference was that the pilgrims had entered into the religious / spiritual FPM. They showed heightened awareness of the religious region of meaning, and heightened positive affect towards persons and things connected with it. At what point did they enter this FPM (or start dipping into it)? Gradually through the whole

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<sup>4</sup> The image reverberates sympathetically with the notion of *limbo*.

<sup>5</sup> See also Turner 1972, 1974a, 1974b, 1976, 1986.

period of anticipation – hearing about WYD, wanting to go, deciding to go, raising the funds, hearing talks, becoming enthusiastic, attending DID preparatory events etc. – so quite a long process packed with symbols pointing into this FPM.

In the WYD context, we see many of the elements of *liminality as an interval between times & roles*:

- a) suspension of secular time: an interval of time out of time
- b) suspension of ordinary life's role structure: in this interval I am not school student, office worker etc.; if some of my teachers are there I have a different relationship with them;
- c) suspension of ordinary norms: some exceptionally permitted behaviours: kissing complete strangers;
- d) development of *communitas* between fellow-pilgrims; lowering of ordinary barriers; talking to anyone at the site, or anyone on the train wearing a backpack; sharing intimately with strangers;
- e) daily routines with a new focus: total immersion in religious / spiritual world;
- f) pilgrimage to a sacred place / to hear, see, pray with, be blessed by, sacred person;
- g) elements of hardship, symbolising the trial / ordeal components of initiation ceremonies and / or the penitential elements of traditional pilgrimage (financial cost, loss of work / study time, discomfort, fatigue, sleep deprivation, cold weather, hard beds, tiring travel, unappetising food etc.);
- h) in the more intense moments, elements of the types of experience called *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi 1975), and *peak experience* (Maslow 1994);
- i) At least four types of liminal event may be evoked within WYD, which compete with, contrast against, contradict and at times reinforce each other:
  - i) Sacred celebrity cult gathering: to see / hear a sacred persona (the Pope) – (similarities to large gatherings around Dalai Lama, Sun Myung Moon, Padre Pio); modern pilgrimage to traditional sites like Compostela, Lourdes
  - ii) Youth Liturgy – gathering of the Christian community to share faith in worship
  - iii) Initiation of Catholic youth into adult status / status passage (analogy with tribal initiation of adolescents)
  - iv) Gebhardt's research on the Cologne WYD (Gebhardt 2008) suggested that there would be a strong component of Youth Festival / Rock Concert: a late modern form emerging in the 1960s, with elements of liminality similar to Carnival in European tradition – with strong pagan resonances; orgiastic overtones in use of alcohol & drugs, sexual indulgence; featuring a strong sense of youth defined as over against the old, the Establishment; the festival as *our* time, *our* thing, *our* culture; however this Youth Festival component was scarcely present at all.

### 3. The underlying dynamics of World Youth Day

Even when social scientific theories and empirical findings 'explain' a high proportion of the variance in the dependent variable, they can leave the acute observer with the sense that there is yet more going on than we have grasped. We come up against the methodological and epistemological limit of the social sciences.

We become aware that some dimensions of what the pilgrims experienced are beyond their own capacity to put into words, and are not intelligible to the sociological observer within the limits of social science methodology. This is the case not because the experience took place in some transcendental realm accessible only to religious faith, but because social scientific inquiry is confined to that which is empirically observable, and makes use of discursive, analytical rationality, and religions, as Parsons noted in his critique of Durkheim, posit supra-empirical realities inaccessible to the methods of social science. And like many other aspects of human life, religious experiences fly so close to the ground where we live that they are below the radar of abstractive reason

If we are to press our understanding further, we must move beyond the limits of social science and take to the waters of philosophy, sailing through the epistemological narrows between the Scylla of empiricism and the Charybdis of irrational emotionalism.

Epistemology studies the modes of knowledge, and shows that the modern empirical sciences are based on one particular version of Enlightenment rationality, which restricts the definition of knowledge to that which can be grasped in clear and distinct ideas. This is discursive, analytical knowledge.

However there is a range of epistemological theories which defend the validity of other forms of knowledge beyond the Enlightenment canon: especially pre-conceptual, intuitive, synthetic forms of knowing. We can enrich our understanding of religion with forms of knowledge usually discounted as invalid by modern science, derived from the history of religions, from theology and the practical knowledge of religious insiders, practitioners and participants. Enlightenment rationality has tended to dismiss all of this as irrational emotion, not resulting in any valid knowledge, but this is only one of many epistemological schools of thought, and its dominance is under challenge. We find philosophical models for these alternative forms of knowledge in ancient Greek philosophy (especially Aristotle), in mediaeval Scholasticism (especially John of St. Thomas) and in modern philosophy (especially Husserl, Schütz and Polanyi).

It is universal human experience that ‘there are no words to express the things that matter most’. As well as the divine, the sublime, the beautiful, many everyday experiences are ineffable. Our knowledge of the one we love, for example, exceeds what we can express in words and concepts. Aristotle, who might well be called the Father of Western rationality, nevertheless wrote as the epigraph to his work on rhetoric ‘The greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor’. Theodore Roszak said it well: ‘Music and make-believe tell all the deepest truths’. The deepest and most important life-meanings are encoded in symbols: stories, poems, rituals. Goethe exalted the human capacity for awe, for a sense of the uncanny, as the highest of human faculties: ‘Das Schaudern is der Menschheit bestes Teil’ (Faust). Pascal, rational enough to be one of the inventors of calculus, recognised that ‘the heart has its reasons, that reason cannot know’, and claimed that heart-knowledge reaches deeper than abstractive rationality ever can.

The most powerful religious experiences take place on the basic or primordial level of human awareness, and consist of ‘affective intuitions’ which have not been reflected on so as to give rise to conceptual, discursive knowledge (Mason 2004).

This kind of knowledge – affective intuition – is not rare or uncommon – in fact it is the commonest way we know things. We conduct our most important relationships, and make our

most important decisions, on the basis of these powerful affective intuitions, which grasp, in unified *gestalts*, in single, synthetic acts of knowledge, a great deal more of complex realities than our analytic, discursive reason can formulate in concepts and propositions.

*Phenomenology of intuition and symbols in Husserl and Schütz*

In Schutz's theory of symbols (1967), the symbol is a 'bridge' between an everyday-life reality (e.g. a man in a white cassock and red cape) and a referent (that to which the symbol refers) – a reality existing in a special 'finite province of meaning' (fpm)<sup>6</sup> distinct from the everyday-life world (e.g. 'Vicar of Christ', Head of the Church). The sensory element of the symbol is *perceived* and in that very act, without any intervening process of reasoning, the referent is '*apperceived*'.<sup>7</sup>

*Experiences of the Numinous (Rudolf Otto)*

The huge crowds, the presence of the Pope, the constant reiteration in words and music of formulas of faith, are *symbols* whose referent is God and all that lies within the world of faith. This is the realm of the 'numinous' – the '*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*' of Rudolf Otto's phenomenology of religion (1959). 'Numinous' means 'divine' or 'surrounded with the majesty of divinity' (from the Latin *numen* which means divinity, deity, divine command). Otto's Latin phrase quoted above means 'that which is ungraspable, awesome and strangely attracting'. The WYD forms of these numinous symbols are exceptionally strong compared with those encountered in ordinary school and parish life – powerful enough to endow the spiritual finite province of meaning with the 'accent of reality'. This is another useful Schutsonian<sup>8</sup> phenomenological notion: we endow certain objects of consciousness with this 'accent of reality' – we treat them as real. In this special case, the numinous has the 'accent of *ultimate* reality' – that relativises all other realities: it is seen as the 'really real' compared with the 'merely real' realm of everyday life! Entry into the spiritual / religious FPM is still many steps short of 'having a personal relationship with God', but it's a decisive step beyond 'what you see is all there is'.

For a completely independent testimony that points strongly to the mysteriousness, the ungraspable quality, of the underlying dynamism of WYD, consider the internet blog about WYD in Appendix A from the CEO of Vibewire, a not-particularly-WYD-friendly blogsite advertising itself as giving the 'real' youth view of WYD. It is all the more convincing because the author, probably not Christian, is so obviously struggling with an admitted reluctance and cynicism, and keeps referring to a kind of mysterious energy animating WYD: 'an electricity, a power that I can't explain and maybe only religious descriptions can... There's a sense of belonging that makes no logical sense'. The author appears to be in the throes of a strong numinous religious experience.

Whether they know what they are doing or not, religions that emphasise symbol, image, music & spectacle communicate faith more effectively than those which do not.

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6 In Schutz's social phenomenology, a 'finite province of meaning' signifies a zone of reality separate from the 'everyday life-world'. Each of these provinces has its own 'cognitive style', its own 'mental gear', or mode of attention. 'Reality' in phenomenological terms carries no necessary implication of existence in an external world; it is a quality of an object of consciousness.

7 'Apperception' is Husserlian phenomenological terminology, but the mental process it describes is similar to the Aristotelian and Scholastic theory of perception by analogy.

8 Schutz was not particularly interested in religion, and his theory of symbols was not elaborated with any special reference to religion.

### Core religious experience of the re-committed

So if we marshal these resources to focus on those WYD participants who made strong commitments and followed them up in their attitudes and actions, what is revealed?

Let us look again at what they said about their experience at WYD – especially, what they indicated were the ‘most helpful’ features, those they ‘got the most out of’ spiritually.

#### *The church / ‘community of faith’ dimension*

They reported that the strongest impact on them was made by the experience of being part of a community based on shared faith.

In the survey’s exploration of the ‘atmosphere’ of WYD, pilgrims were asked: ‘*What did you like most about the atmosphere at WYD? Choose your top 5 from this list and rank them from 1 to 5 with 1 as your top choice.*’

**Table 2. Catholics 14-35: atmosphere at WYD (% who ranked item first, second or third).**

Faith: Being with so many people my age who share the same faith	42%
Church: pride in being Catholic, being part of something greater than ourselves -- worldwide and long-lasting	36%
Community: The special kind of friendliness and openness -- you could talk to anyone; you could trust people	29%
Holy Spirit: The sense that God was present	25%
Goodness: WYD seemed to bring out the best in everyone	23%
Crowd: Being part of a huge crowd of happy young people	22%
Friends: A fun time with friends old and new	17%
Sydney: Beautiful sights and good weather	6%

Respondents could select multiple items, so the percentages who selected each item as their first or second or third choice obviously add to more than 100.

The order of the items in the table has been rearranged to put those most favoured in the higher rows. The most important elements of the ‘atmosphere’ of WYD for both genders and all age groups were:

- the sense of faith shared with a multitude of young people
- the sense of Church: pride in being Catholic etc.
- the sense of community: friendliness, trust, openness
- the sense of the presence of God / the Holy Spirit

The first item, ‘being with so many people my age who share the same faith’, was mentioned more often among people’s top three choices than any other. It was what the majority of pilgrims had said before WYD that they were most hoping for, and their hopes were fulfilled – they found the experience powerful and significant. In interviews, pilgrims made it clear that it was very important to them that this was a big crowd of people *around their age* who were expressing their faith by taking part in WYD. They said that in their experience, it was mostly older people who took faith seriously; youth, even if they were Catholic, were not interested in religion, or inclined to make fun of it. They were also used to keeping their faith discreetly private; only close friends would know if they continued to believe, attend Mass, or take part in other religious groups or activities. In the environment of the school, university or workplace, it was not considered ‘cool’ to be ‘into religion’. As a Year 11 student in a Catholic school put it, ‘Oh, it’s social suicide to speak up in R.E.!’ So for young people who had not floated with the tide and laid aside their childhood faith, it felt liberating to be able to express it openly and with enthusiasm, without worrying what others might think.

Much later in the survey, close to the end, participants were asked to compare aspects of WYD and indicate what they had found most helpful; and in this response, they were able to compare the ‘major’ events with quite small scale happenings, and with the less tangible, ‘atmosphere’ aspects of WYD.

The question was: *‘Going back for a moment to the many different happenings at WYD, which one(s) most helped you in your spiritual journey? Choose up to 3 of the most helpful things.’*

The items are rearranged in order to show those most often chosen at the top.

**Table 3. Catholics 14-35: which activity helped you most in your spiritual journey (% of respondents who checked the item among their 3 choices).**

1. Faith: Being with so many people my age who share the same faith	37%
2. Church: pride in being Catholic, part of something greater than ourselves -- worldwide and long-lasting	32%
3. Holy Spirit: The sense that God was present	28%
4. Seeing the Pope, listening to him, celebrating Mass with him	27%
5. Community: The special kind of friendliness and openness -- you could talk to anyone; you could trust people	27%
6. The Vigil night at Randwick	21%
7. Crowd: Being part of a huge crowd of happy young people	21%
8. The Stations of the Cross	18%
9. Goodness: WYD seemed to bring out the best in everyone	19%
10. Morning Catecheses	14%
11. Going to Reconciliation (Confession) during WYD	11%
12. The ‘Days in the Diocese’ in another diocese before going to Sydney	7%
13. The Closing Mass	8%
14. The Pope's arrival at Barangaroo	8%
15. The Opening Mass	6%
16. None of these things	1%

At first sight, the question appears redundant – surely respondents have already said what they found most helpful among all these events and activities? True, but in earlier questions, for obvious reasons, they have been making comparisons within sets of similar things: ‘atmosphere’ items, major events and minor events – just as in a talent quest, there might be a first round of voting in which singers were compared with other singers, and instrumentalists with each other. But having settled their judgment of which WYD activity was most helpful within each category, those who responded to the survey now needed the opportunity to compare items belonging to different groups, (like voting for an overall winner in the talent quest) and this question, with its long list of items of all kinds, provided that opportunity.

The results are quite striking. Several ‘atmosphere’ items were most often chosen as the aspects of WYD that most helped participants on their spiritual journey. ‘Faith’, ‘Church’, ‘the presence of God’ and ‘Community’ (items 1, 2, 3 & 5) are different aspects of the experience of church or ‘ecclesial community’, united around its earthly head, the Pope, the Vicar of Christ (item 4).

It is very significant that in the pre-WYD survey, it was this experience above all that the pilgrims hoped for and anticipated, and when their hope was realised, (often, it seems, more

intensely then they had thought possible), they considered, looking back, that it had been the most important and helpful dimension of their WYD experience.

The pilgrims who recommitted themselves were ahead of others in emphasising these dimensions of WYD as central to their experience, and in summing up the experience as not just ‘one of the best experiences of my life’ but as a ‘life-changing experience’.

Why life-changing? What was so powerful about this experience? Surely these pilgrims had long seen themselves as members of the Church? It’s easy to miss the meaning this experience had for the participants, because it does not fit the Jamesian paradigm of religious experience: the stark, direct encounter between the solitary ‘sick soul’ and whatever he/she takes to be divine.

Religious experiences take their form and meaning from the tradition in which they are situated.

The tradition may shape them as more often numinous or mystical: as ‘My Lord and my God’ or as ‘Tat tvam asi’ – ‘That art thou’; but there is an element of human response: in different forms, the most elementary religious experience is an acknowledgement, a kind of ‘Yes’ to the transcendent.

And in the Catholic tradition, it is the church – not as structure or institution but in its role of Ur-Sacrament (basic or ordinary sacrament) that is the essential context of experiential encounters with the Transcendent, identified in faith as God in Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. God is encountered within the People of God, especially in the sacramental ‘mysteries’ – the ritual processes in which the saving act of Christ’s dying and rising becomes present, drawing the participant into the very life of God.

‘A mystery (Gk. *Mysterion*) is a sacred ritual action in which a saving deed is made present through the rite; the congregation, by performing the rite, take part in the saving act, and thereby enter into salvation’<sup>9</sup> Liturgical celebration of the Eucharist is the concrete reality in which Christ’s saving action in death and resurrection becomes present.

The [older] view that in the liturgy the heavenly Christ merely distributes the graces of his past meritorious acts is no longer seen as adequate. Rather, there is in every one of the saving deeds of the Lord a substantial element transcending time and space and capable of commemoration and re-presentation in a sacramental way (*in sacramento, in mysterio*). It is a question of a presence in mystery (*Mysterien-gegenwart*). What happened in the past under the veil of historical events happens now under the veil of sacramental signs. Celebrations are indeed time-and-space bound, but they bring into time and space something that essentially transcends them (Gilbert 2009).

Although this is more immediately understandable in the case of the Eucharist, every sacrament is such a saving encounter with the Risen and life-giving Lord. The sacraments ritualise the encounters between the divine and human which take place at life-crises / status

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<sup>9</sup> A deservedly famous formulation by Dom Odo Casel. See Casel 1962 and Gilbert 2009. Gilbert notes that [then] Cardinal Ratzinger called Casel’s insight ‘perhaps the most fruitful theological idea of our [20th] century’.

passages.<sup>10</sup> It is at these points that the human encounters its boundary-conditions. In a brilliant metaphor, Edward Robinson<sup>11</sup> suggests that just as a sculpture takes its defining ‘form’, its shape, its visibility, its artistic meaning, from its outer boundary, from the point of intersection of itself with the larger space which contains and transcends it, so also the human being is defined at her limits, where she stretches to the utmost and can go no further; at these points the Transcendent comes to meet her and lead her where her feet could never tread unaided. Robinson’s metaphor adds visual richness to the idea of ‘limit-experience’ defined by Crossan (1988).

Kenda Dean (2004) provides a wonderfully insightful theological interpretation of the specially *passionate* quality of religious experience in youth, and of its role in identity formation and the development of the capacity for genuine love. She reminds us that adolescence is the stage of life in which the heart is furthest in advance of the head; that as they awaken physically to love, youth are searching for a ‘love worthy of a lifetime’; that although they ‘do not want to suffer, they do desperately want to love something *worthy* of suffering, and to be so loved’ (2). Linking this with a profound exposition of the Passion of Christ, and the Passion of God in Christ, Dean proposes that divine love ‘arouses [youth] into full personhood’, drawing them to One worthy of their passionate love, and revealing ‘their true identity as God’s beloved’ (48-50). Dean challenges the Church to overcome its squeamishness in the face of passion, and to return to its vocation of being a ‘communal embodiment of passion’ (45).

This set of perceptions by the recommitted WYD participants: shared faith, community, Holy Spirit, is like a set of lasers triangulating a central point, which at first seems empty, but begins to glow with incandescence. The reality at the focus is Christ, in the very act of saving his People. The participants encounter Christ, know him as the object of their desire, and surrender to his saving grace. Their heart-knowledge is rich beyond words, and has the certainty of immediate experience. But for most of them, it is not conceptual, reflective knowledge, which can be contained in concepts and expressed in the language of ordinary life. Unless and until they pursue further understanding, the experience remains largely on what I have been calling the primordial level – an unthematized affective intuition. But that’s okay; we allow most of our most powerful experiences to remain on that level.

***In summary, further light is shed on the experience of those who committed or re-committed themselves to follow Christ at WYD by considering the dynamic process underlying their experiences at the event.***

From their own testimony of their experiences and changes in attitude, illuminated by theory / general understandings from sociology, anthropology, history of religions and Catholic theology, we are able to grasp more fully the meaning of the experience to the participants, and to generalise cautiously to the meaning of similar kinds of experiences to similar participants.

These participants had strong transcendence experiences; experiences of God / Christ in the manner structured by their Tradition; affective intuitions predominantly at the primordial level, with little reflective articulation, but clear in their circumstances and consequences;

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<sup>10</sup> ‘Life-crisis’ is understood in this context in its etymological sense of ‘turning point’ or ‘movement to another dimension’ rather than ‘danger’ or ‘threat’.

<sup>11</sup> Robinson, for many years Director of the Centre for the Study of Religious Experience established by Sir Alister Hardy in Oxford, is himself an accomplished sculptor.

experiences in which the Church as community of faith, and liturgical celebrations of Eucharist and Reconciliation had a prominent place; experiences which further kindled the flames of their passionate search for a love that defeats death.

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## Appendix A

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### **Friday 18th July: Something is in the air, and maybe it is love...<sup>12</sup>**

Last night I went and sat in the park at Darling Harbour where a concert was playing and just sat and watched and listened. The atmosphere was amazing and not one easily described. It encompassed so many warm and fuzzy words – hope, happiness, unity, love and warmth. But there was more to it, an air of anticipation that is unlike any sporting event or government ceremony.

Walking through the streets yesterday, I felt this same energy. And again, watching the Pope travel through the city in his motorcade, the same feeling was there. It's an electricity, a power that I can't explain, and maybe only religious descriptions can.

I was simply amazed by the sheer volume of people who lined the streets of Sydney to catch a glimpse of the Pope as he travelled past (I think the new Pope-mobile has been supercharged by the way). As a person, I find it hard to fully comprehend the adoration for the man among the masses of people of this country and indeed all over the world.

A friend, very rightly, pointed out that 'Everyone needs a hero, and that's who the Pope is to Catholics.' While that makes sense to me, I still can't fully grasp the enormity of the affect that this one man, a somewhat frail 81 year old, has on the people of the world.

Sydney is infectious at the moment, there's a sense of belonging that makes no logical sense. As we move towards the closing stages of this event, I have to admit that my cynicism of all things WYD are dissipating. Only the most hardened of critics can truly not be affected by the almost overwhelming outpouring of goodness emanating from dozens of locations around Sydney, shown simply through the eyes of those attending.

As up to 100,000 Pilgrims take to the road tomorrow to make the coveted pilgrimage walk to Randwick Racecourse, there is an acknowledgement that the next 2 days will be the most 'annoying' for Sydney residents. But as I watch the tens of thousands of smiling, hopeful faces walking toward their idol, it is going to be really hard for me to get frustrated. And if nothing else, that feeling is something to have faith in. Until tomorrow,  
Nathan

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.projecteye.org/Members/nateCEO/> accessed 20/8/08.