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Generations, Church, and Unity: A Discussion

SIMON ELIAS UNTEREGGER

The following article presents a short summary of a non-representative survey conducted by the *Quo Vadis Institute* in the fall of 2018. It takes into account responses from 55 participants who completed an online questionnaire regarding various preferences in the structure and conduct of Christian church services. Of primary interest for analyzing the results are the differences that emerge between the younger group (**YG** age: 15-40) and the older group (**OG** age: 41 and above).¹ Can distinctions be identified, or are there age-specific trends that can be observed? These questions are raised in the context of a decline in church attendance observed across various denominations in many European countries as well as the US.² Particularly, younger people are less drawn to churches. Could the generational factor, among other factors, also play a role in this decline?³

1. Theoretical Background

1.1 Problematic aspects of thinking Generations today

Scene: Sunday morning just before the church service begins. Karl, Monika, Elisa, and Ben only know each other casually. Their gazes have so far only briefly met, exchanging a friendly smile and a *hello* or a *good morning*, perhaps a nice comment as they were getting coffee. Karl always likes to be seated ten minutes before the church service starts, while Ben is still somewhat stressed

¹ Yes, we are aware of the implications of 'OG' in the hip-hop and rap scene, which carries a humorous connotation in this context.

² The article has been originally written in German; therefore, most of the literature used is also in German, even though we try to quote or at least refer to English-speaking theoretical approaches.

³ The results are summarized here and are available in detail in a longer German-language article. If you are interested in a more detailed depiction of the results please contact us.

and tired on his way to the church. Elisa is chatting with a friend, and Monika is quickly reviewing the pericope to be prepared for the sermon. The four not only differ in their habits but also primarily in their age. Karl is an older retiree in his mid-70s. Monika is 50 and a doctor, Elisa is a 30-year-old retail saleswoman, and Ben is 20 and has just started his studies. Despite these differences, they all attend the same church service and spend about two hours of their time in the same premises every week. With the German sociologist and philosopher Karl Mannheim in mind, the situation depicted above can be described as,

In the same chronological time, different generations coexist. However, since real time is only the time experienced, they all actually live in qualitatively different inner times. [...] Therefore, each moment is actually a timeframe; it has multiple dimensions because it is always reached by various unfoldings of the individual existing generational layers.⁴

Mannheim's theory of generations has gradually supplanted the prevailing positivistic descriptions, which are based on biological depictions of fixed generations that can be determined within specific time periods (around 30 years). For Mannheim, who argues out of a sociological and philosophical background, a "shared horizon of experience" (German: *geteilter Erfahrungshorizont*) lies at the core of a generation. Hence, it pertains to individuals born within a defined historical timeframe who undergo analogous experiences, collectively partake in similar events, thereby establishing a sense of cohesion, which separates them from other individuals which did not make the same experiences.⁵ When we think of generation terms like *Gen Z* or *Gen Y* and how these generations are described, Mannheim's theoretical approaches can be observed. Especially in Germany and Austria around and after the turn of the millennium, the concept of generations experienced a certain revival, so that Sigrid Weigel (2009) points out that "in the debates about the spirit of the times, new generations are virtually invented on a daily basis,"⁶ with terms like *Generation Internet*, *Generation Golf*, and many others appearing in media discourse.

⁴ Mannheim, Karl: „Das Problem der Generationen" In: *Kölner Vierteljahrshefte für Soziologie* 7. 1928. p. 157–185., p. 164-165 [translated by the author]

⁵ See for example: Berkup, Sezin Baysal: „Working With Generations X And Y In Generation Z Period: Management Of Different Generations In Business Life" In: *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*. Bd. 5. H. 19. 2014. p. 218–229; Mannheim is not quoted but the theoretical approach does mirror Mannheims thoughts on generations.

⁶ Weigel, Sigrid: *Genea-Logik. Generation, Tradition und Evolution zwischen Kultur- und Naturwissenschaften*. München: Wilhelm Fink. 2006, p. 93; see also: Kraft, Andreas; Weisshaupt, Mark: „Erfahrung - Erzählung - Identität und die "Grenzen des Verstehens": Überlegungen zum Generationenbegriff" In: *Generationen. Erfahrung, Erzählung, Identität*. Kraft, Andreas; Weisshaupt, Mark (Hg.). Konstanz: UVK. 2009. p. 17–47, p. 23

In terminology, social structure analyses and demographic studies differentiate between age, period, and cohort or generation effects. An age effect is tied to an individual's life course.⁷ For example, in many professional fields, income increases with age. Period effects are linked to historical or social changes and impact entire societies. A phase of economic stagnation that can lead to changes in social structures is therefore a period effect. Cohort effects specifically pertain to distinct cohorts, where a cohort is determined by the timing of an event such as birth or entry into a profession. Thus, changes in educational systems may affect specific birth cohorts, while other birth cohorts complete their educational paths under different circumstances.⁸

Generation terms like *Gen Z*, detached from biological contexts, are extrapolated to societal and even global scales. In this stance, they represent an abbreviation of a highly complex phenomenon that cannot withstand a rigorous social scientific and social philosophical examination. The German sociologist Martin Schröder (2018) therefore points out, that "at least based on differences in attitudes and values, one could assert in a simplified manner: There are no generations in Germany."⁹ Similarly, Aleida Assmann (2007) compares concepts of generations to historical epochs, referencing Niklas Luhmann, who describes epochal terms as a "reduction of historical complexity."¹⁰

In his publication, Schröder (2018) examines statistically generational differences, as frequently depicted in the media and also academic literature. The results of his extensive meta-study indicate that "birth cohorts [post-war cohorts] actually exhibited only minor differences in their attitudes and values."¹¹ Descriptive attempts such as "Members of *Generation Y (Baby Boomers)* have below-average trust in political parties" and "Members of *Generation Z* have a need for security, guidance, and belonging. They are achievement-oriented and ambitious, with a desire for variety, individual development, and enjoyment of life," according to Schröder (2018), resemble more like newspaper horoscopes than empirically grounded statements. As he puts it, "one may ask if any birth cohort was ever against security, guidance, belonging, variety, individual

⁷ See for example: Dallinger, Ursula; Schroeter, Klaus R.: *Theoretische Beiträge zur Alterssoziologie*. Wiesbaden: Springer/VS. 2002.

⁸ See: Klaffke, Martin: *Generationen-Management. Konzepte, Instrumente, Good-Practice-Ansätze*. Wiesbaden: Springer Gabler. 2021, p. 14-16

⁹ Schröder, Martin: „Der Generationenmythos" In: *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*. Bd. 70. 2018. S. 469–494,, p. 491 [translated by the author]

¹⁰ Assmann, Aleida: *Geschichte im Gedächtnis. Von der individuellen Erfahrung zur öffentlichen Inszenierung*. München: C.H. Beck. 2007., p. 52 [translated by the author]

¹¹ Schröder: *Der Generationenmythos*. 2018, p. 490 [translated by the author]

development, and enjoyment of life."¹² The attested differences in attitudes cannot be empirically substantiated, aside from statistically insignificant tendencies. This do not imply that generations don't exist at all. However, the specific way in which they are semantically discussed and conceived in contemporary discourse about generations raises aporias.

1.2 The Generation-Conflict

In 2019, the 25-year-old parliamentarian Chlöe Swarbrick responded to the objections of an older politician during a speech in the New Zealand Parliament with the phrase "Okay, Boomer." The phrase had already culminated as a *Meme* in internet forums and experienced a significant resurgence through Chlöe Swarbrick, as evidenced by numerous reports that globally opened up the generational debate in the media around the same time. In Swarbrick's speech, the frustration of a younger generation towards the attitudes of an older one is evident. Swarbrick highlights her own generation and accuses the preceding generation of doing too little for climate protection or turning a blind eye for too long. Taking it a step further, American author Bruce Gibney, in his 2017 book *A Generation of Sociopaths: How the Baby Boomers Betrayed America*,¹³ describes how the Boomer generation selfishly enriched themselves, thereby generating the crises of social injustice and climate change that younger generations face today. Gibney (2017) clearly places the blame on a birth cohort (the *Boomers*) who, consequently, bear the responsibility to provide reparations to subsequent birth cohorts.

One aspect that comes into play in the 'generation conflict,' as the examples cited illustrate, can be viewed through Bourdieu's concept of "distinction markers."¹⁴ A generation alone cannot exist. Generations are structurally defined by other distinguishable generations. They thus exist through a process of *othering*, a term theoretically elaborated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1985) in the context of post-colonial studies.¹⁵ Stereotypical attributions accompany generational debates.

¹² Ibid. p. 475

¹³ Gibney, Bruce: *A generation of sociopaths. How the baby boomers betrayed America*. New York: Hachette Books. 2017.

¹⁴ Bourdieu, Pierre: *Die Regeln der Kunst. Genese und Struktur des literarischen Feldes*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp. 1999., p. 253. Bourdieu uses the term to describe processes in the genesis of avant-garde art movements.

¹⁵ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty: „The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives" In: *History and Theory*. Bd. 24. H. 3. 1985.

Both hetero- and auto-stereotypes constitute the semantic field of a generation. Terms like *Gen Z* or *Gen X* can thus be examined in the context of identity discourses. From a speech act theory perspective, it can be argued that these terms are spoken into reality or that it is only through constructed alterity that different groups come to be perceived as social structures under a generational label. Apart from the problematic aspects arising out of such processes,¹⁶ with Schröder (2018) in mind, it becomes highly questionable, if those patterns of thought truly align with the intricate social reality we live in.

2. Results of the Study

As mentioned above, the *Quo Vadis Institute* conducted a non-representative online survey in the autumn of 2018 with 55 participants. The primary focus was to explore differences between younger participants (**YG** aged 15-40) and older participants (**OG** aged 41 and above). Self-assessment of their respective age groups and the assessment by the other group were both inquired. Participants were asked to evaluate various aspects of the church service (Worship, Community, People, Sermon, etc.): What is important to them? What do they find bothersome?

In their mutual perception, the younger group viewed the older group as more attached to tradition. They assumed that the older group might be bothered by excessive noise in the church and that they would prefer traditional, particularly German-language songs. The older group suspected that the younger group values worship most and that they would prefer modern, English-language songs. Furthermore, the older group believed that the younger group places great importance on community and that on Sundays, they want to meet friends to engage in discussions.

The older group's perception of the younger group aligns quite closely with YGs statements since the most important aspects in the church service were identified as people, community, and worship, closely followed by the sermon. The sermon, for the younger group, should be tailored to everyday life and their life experiences. What was not mentioned by the older group is that YG desires mentoring from OG. The younger group values the older group's wealth of experience and

¹⁶ See for example: Sen, Amartya: *Identity and violence. The illusion of destiny*. London: Penguin Books. 2007; and: Appiah, Kwame Anthony: *The lies that bind. Rethinking identity*. London: Profile Books. 2019.

seeks specific possibilities for character development within the church to learn from these experiences.

In the Worship category, YG came close in their perception to the actual wishes of OG. The desire for traditional and German-language songs was frequently expressed, as well as noise being identified as a disruptive factor in the church. What the younger group underestimated is the importance of prayer for the older group. OG also regards community as an essential part of the church service. Some participants from the older group have also indicated that they feel their needs and desires are often not recognized in the church and that the focus in the church service tends to be on the younger group. Both groups thus express similar concerns when it comes to having a voice in the church and actively participating in shaping the worship service. In the Sermon category, the responses from both age groups align, and the older group also wishes to incorporate current and timely topics as well as practical applicability of the content provided.

In the last two questions, participants were asked to provide adjectives describing the other age group and to reflect on their thoughts of the current state of the society they live in. YG values consistency in OG, which is also reflected in descriptions like 'hardworking.' They also appreciate the experience and stability in older people's lives. Negative descriptions perceive the mentioned consistency and stability as rigidity, as both terms represent a state of stasis in contrast to the dynamism attributed to the younger group. OG values in YG the aforementioned dynamism, creativity, and flexibility. 'Inquisitive' and 'curious' index an active pursuit perceived by OG in YG. The negative description as 'inconstant' also stems from the positive descriptions, as dynamism and flexibility leave less room for stable structures.

When the responses regarding the individual perceptions of societies are qualitatively compared, no differences between the age groups can be discerned. Both age groups perceive people in Western societies as increasingly 'selfish.' The younger group also criticizes the unreliability they perceive in their fellow humans in this context. Critiques of the 'fast-paced' nature and 'materialism' of our time are similarly expressed by both age groups.

3. Conclusions and Discussion

As the theoretical discussions suggest, generational concepts describe complex multi-causal structures. However, these concepts often fail to fully capture this complexity, and terms like Gen

Z have become theoretically unsupported stand-alone phenomena, typically perpetuated and reproduced without consideration of the concepts and foundations that underlie such terms. One aspect that should be further considered is that generational concepts are most frequently used in management literature and marketing research. In the field of market research, for example, there is an emphasis on the potential purchasing power of Gen Z, and methods are introduced on how to effectively target this generation. Product ranges are often tailored to specific customer segments associated with generational concepts.¹⁷

The increasing number of church departures for example can be described, in part, as a period effect, according to Schröder (2018): due to increasing secularization, scientific progress, or the diffusion of materialistic perspectives in societies, many people no longer see a reason to believe in God or perceive inconsistencies in the worldviews and concepts of God represented by Christian institutions. Age effects can also be considered. Younger individuals are often less bound to existing structures and feel less social obligation to remain members of a church or may have issues with high church taxes, etc. Efforts by Christian institutions to promote the social integration of younger members and provide services aim to counteract this trend.

In the structure of church services, age effects become evident, as the survey results suggest. Particularly, different perceptions of the *Worship* aspects are apparent in the participants' responses. However, both age groups are willing to compromise. Both groups value having their needs acknowledged, but they also express feeling unheard or that the preferences of the other age group take precedence in structuring church services. In this context, the culture of dialogue within churches and the question of whether a constructive exchange regarding individual preferences and desires is possible appear to be crucial.

Therefore, we propose to create the very communication spaces mentioned. In the comparative analysis of the two age groups within the study, more similarities than differences are evident. The most significant distinctions are found in the *Worship* category, with the older group being open to modern songs as long as more traditional content also has a place in the worship service. Both groups express a sense of being able to learn from each other, with the younger group primarily desiring to learn from the experiences and consistency of the older group. The older group

¹⁷ See for example: Kleinjohann, Michael; Reinecke, Victoria: *Marketingkommunikation mit der Generation Z. Erfolgsfaktoren für das Marketing mit Digital Natives*. Wiesbaden/Heidelberg: Springer Gabler. 2020.

appreciates the creativity and energy of the younger group, which they value as a crucial part of the church.

Finally, to give the German and French writing poet and author Rainer Maria Rilke the last words on this (quoted from *Letters to a young Poet*):

*Avoid contributing material to the drama that is always stretched taut between parents and children; it uses up much of the children's energy and consumes the love of their elders, which is effective and warming even if it does not comprehend. Ask no advice from them and count upon no understanding; but believe in a love that is being stored up for you like an inheritance and trust that in this love there is a strength and a blessing, out beyond which you do not have to step in order to go very far!*¹⁸

¹⁸ Rilke, Rainer Maria: *Letters to a young Poet*. Translation by M. D. Herter Norton. New York/London: W.W. Norton. 1962.

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