Part One

CHILDREN, DEVELOPMENT AND FAITH

Modern views of the way faith
develops throughout a child's life.

1 What kind of world?

The cultural context of faith development

Welcome to Clumber Street! Set in the imaginary suburb of Anytown, 'The Street', as it is known to its inhabitants, is a cul-de-sac containing a typical cross-section of ordinary people. It's a microcosm of any town or suburb in the Western world today. Indeed, it could be *your* street or mine.

But suppose we were to look at the residents of Clumber Street a little more closely. What would we find? That's exactly what we're going to do. Because as we discover more about them, we'll begin to put together a picture of the kind of world in which the Millennium generation is growing up and of the worldviews with which they are surrounded.

Let's start at number 1. The first thing we notice is that it's empty. The residents – Mike and Jo – moved out last week. They were a nice, friendly, young couple married two years ago. Clumber Street was their first married home, although they had lived together at number 1 for a year with their baby son Tyler before the wedding. Now they've moved to a larger house a few miles away.

Interestingly, number 1 is typical of Anytown in that it symbolises the fact that Anytown is a place of constant change: people moving in and out; businesses closing down and starting up; new shops and leisure pursuits – life never stays still. Some of the older residents hark back to the 'good old days' when nothing ever changed (or at least that's the way it now seems). But for the Millennium generation, change is a way of life.

Lined up to come into number 1 are the Watts family: Lenny, Dawn and their two children Delia and Sam. They are a bit nervous about moving into a white, middle-class area since they are black and have suffered prejudice – both intentional and unintentional – in their respective jobs. But Clumber Street is handy for Lenny's and Dawn's work and they have

heard good reports about the schools. So they're determined to make a go of it and are looking forward to moving in next week.

Next door at number 3 live the Porters. Bel (Belinda) and Andy (Andrew) are in their early thirties with twin children – Craig and Lisa, aged nine. It's a very busy household since Bel and Andy are both teachers: Bel is Head of Music at Anytown High School; while Andy is Deputy Principal at a college half an hour away.

Not only are Bel and Andy busy, so are Craig and Lisa. Craig takes after his mother and is keen on music (he plays four instruments). He's involved in all sorts of out-of-school activities ranging from weekly guitar lessons to playing in a band. Lisa, meanwhile, has a lively interest in astronomy and has joined the Anytown Skywatchers (Junior Division).

Number 3, then, is a home that is constantly on the go. Someone is always busy with something. Life is like a constantly spinning tumble-dryer.

The residents of number 5 couldn't be more different. George and Mildred Owen are in their late seventies, taking life easy. George retired from factory work fifteen years ago and hasn't regretted it a bit. Mildred has hardly worked in paid employment at all, since she spent most of her adult life as a housewife looking after George and their three children who have now moved away. Indeed, they're scattered throughout the country. The nearest, David, lives just over 100 miles distant.

To all intents and purposes, then, Clumber Street is George and Mildred's family. They are the street's oldest inhabitants, having moved in forty years ago when it was first built. They have seen generations come and go. For them, Clumber Street is a living community and they are its elders. They find their identity there.

At number 7 lives Rachel Symons, a lone parent bringing up her son James (12). Rachel was divorced from her former husband, Alan, six years ago. The divorce was very messy and left a great deal of bad feeling. Alan has since remarried but sees James once a week.

Rachel is lonely and wishes she had another adult in her life. But since Alan there has been nobody else. The pain of her divorce left Rachel unconfident and distrustful of relationships with men. She lavishes all her energy and affection on James.

James, however, *does* have a love of his life – sport. He's fanatical about all team games but especially football and basketball. At five feet eleven inches, he's obviously going to be tall, which suits his ambitions

perfectly: he wants to play international basketball for England. And although he doesn't know it yet, talent scouts have already had their eyes on him as he has represented his school in national championships. James is 150 per cent committed to sport.

Next to Rachel and James live the McDonalds. Or to be accurate, Barry McDonald and Sarah Wilson. Although not married, everyone thinks of them as if they are and calls them by Barry's surname. Barry and Sarah don't mind this. They regard themselves as good as married since they're committed to each other and to their three children: Hayley (10), William (9) and Kerry (7).

Barry is a biochemist who works as a researcher for an international pharmaceutical conglomerate. Sarah is a local doctor. All their children have been brought up to be interested in science and to see it as *the* instrument of human progress. Hayley wants to follow her mother into medicine; William is determined to become an astronaut; and Kerry just likes playing with test tubes. They are all avid fans of *Star Trek* and computer games.

A bit further along the street live Brian, Zoe and Natalie. They're aged between nineteen and twenty-one and are students at Anytown University. They share the house and the rent. But although similar in age, that's where the likeness stops: they're completely different personalities.

Brian is quiet, studious and hard-working. He is studying economics and wants to work for an international oil company when he graduates. He has a small circle of friends who are equally committed to getting good jobs. Zoe thinks he's a bit of a nerd (but then she thinks anyone who works is a nerd).

Zoe is the opposite to Brian. She's loud, extrovert and totally focused on having a good time. She's the complete pleasure seeker, enjoying wild parties, alcohol, recreational drugs and, of course, sex. Zoe doesn't think about the future – there's too much fun to be had in the present. She's simply a hedonist.

Natalie, on the other hand, is ambitious like Brian and enjoys a good time but is nowhere near as wild as Zoe. She has chosen her course – media studies – with great care for she believes the media hold the key to the future. She doesn't want *any* job in the media – she wants a *top* job.

More permanent at number 13 are the Watkinson family. They are an

interesting mix. Phil is 49 and married to Ruth who is a few years younger. He is a self-employed financial adviser. Ruth is a dentist. Both have been married before: Phil to Jackie who died in a road accident seven years ago; and Ruth to Dennis who left her for another woman six years back.

When Phil and Ruth got married last year, they brought with them their respective children. At 14, Alice is Phil's youngest daughter (his other daughter has left home and lives in America). She is fiery and committed to good causes. Her current passion is environmentalism. Her friends joke with her about being a 'tree hugger'.

Ben is Ruth's son. He is 17, thoughtful and romantic at heart (although he's still shy with girls) and sincerely committed to a number of New Age beliefs. Ben's sister Amy (16), however, disagrees with him. She is a committed Christian who worships at a lively church nearby. It has lots of young people and she feels at home there. Recently, she has been trying to get Ben to see the error of his ways but with little success. She's not sure what to do next but plans to talk to her pastor about how to witness more effectively at home.

One door along, number 15, is where Ron and Jill Callaghan live. They run a small business which occupies much of their time. They have no children (no one is quite sure why, though there have been rumours). Now in their late fifties, Ron and Jill keep themselves to themselves, and although they have lived in Clumber Street for eight years, hardly anyone knows them beyond being able to pass the time of day. None of the neighbours has ever been in their house for any reason whatsoever.

Ron and Jill like it that way. They don't see why others should have access to their private world. But even the least observant outsider could get some idea of their lifestyle by observing number 15 from across the street.

Such a person would quickly spot that Ron and Jill's house is very expensive indeed. Everything about it cries 'consumption' – from the well-appointed exterior to the luxury cars in the driveway. What's more, if they could see further, they would notice all the signs of affluence: gold taps in the bathroom, a jacuzzi, a sauna in the back garden, top-of-the range kitchen fittings and appliances, en-suite bedrooms, a home cinema system – the lot! No expense has been spared to give Ron and Jill what they call 'the good life'.

And so we come to the last two houses in the street, numbers 17 and

19. At 17 you'll find Derek Turnbull. He's a single man in his twenties who works as a computer programmer. In fact, computers are his whole life. He lives, breathes and eats computers. Derek's an IT fanatic. He has three PCs of his own, including the latest laptop with every conceivable gizmo. He also has a palmtop that doesn't only tell the time of day in 14 countries simultaneously but can also double as a mobile phone, fax and e-mail link.

Needless to say, Derek's on the Internet (he even has his own website). He has friends all over the world whom he's never met but has chatted to hundreds of times via e-mail. His phone bill would be phenomenal if he didn't work for a communications company who provide him with unlimited call time. For Derek, computers *are* his world.

Oddly enough, Derek isn't a complete loner. He has made efforts to build friendships in Clumber Street. The trouble is he only has one topic of conversation – computers. This is fine for five or even ten minutes but not for hours on end. Consequently, although Derek wants to make friends, he finds it hard.

Finally there's number 19. Here live Linda Jackson and Ellen DeVere. Both are in their early forties and have a lesbian relationship. Ellen (who has only recently admitted to herself that she's gay) has two children living with her by her earlier marriage: Clark (14) and Lois (12). Ellen is a P.A. to a wealthy businessman; Linda is a successful lawyer. They are currently considering fostering or adopting a hard-to-place child and have been encouraged in this by their discussions with social workers from the local authority social services department.

At first, Linda and Ellen were nervous about 'coming out' to their friends and neighbours. But the residents of Clumber Street are a pretty tolerant lot. Apart from George and Mildred who find it hard to understand or condone Linda and Ellen's relationship, the general attitude is one of 'live-and-let-live'. Provided Linda and Ellen's relationship doesn't impinge on anyone else's life, people are happy to regard their sexuality as a purely private matter.

So much for fictional Anytown. If you watch soap operas, you'll quickly recognise in this sketch of Clumber Street a typical soap technique: the representation of society as a whole by a small group of characters located in a single, small community. As with all good soaps, the characters and their situations serve to typify the extremes of what we would find on a much broader canvas. In that sense, Clumber Street is

very untypical. It's unlikely that we would find such a combination in many cul-de-sacs in middle suburbia. But this is done for a purpose: the pen pictures of the residents supply vital clues as to the main features of modern life. Taken together, they act as a microcosm of contemporary society. And in doing so, they make it comprehensible.

In Clumber Street, for example, we observe (not in order of importance):

- the centrality of change in modern life;
- the busy-ness of life;
- the nuclear family no longer the only type of family;
- a range of types of family life;
- marriage as a lifestyle option;
- cohabitation as an accepted alternative;
- divorce and remarriage as a common experience;
- the dominance of computers and information technology;
- confident assumptions about science and progress;
- 'pick 'n' mix' moral and religious beliefs where all views and practices are regarded as equally valid provided they don't interfere with the choices of others;
- sexuality regarded as a purely private matter;
- the idolisation of individual choice;
- the pursuit of pleasure as a legitimate goal in itself;
- belief in material acquisition as a way of life.

The proclamation of faith in Christ doesn't take place in a vacuum but rather has to contend with a cultural worldview already delivered and which has already taken root.

This not-quite-random collection serves to illustrate the complex world into which the Millennium generation is being born. But it does more

than that. It enables us to glimpse something of the worldview (or views) that surround them from birth. In fact, without realising it, the Clumber Street folk in their own ways all place their faith in something, whether family, science, wealth, computers or whatever. They each hold beliefs and practices that give meaning, purpose and a sense of ultimacy to their lives: in short, the sort of faith held when the traditional Christian view of God is pretty well left out of the picture. And it's this secular version of faith that the majority of our children absorb from the moment they enter the world. Once we understand this, we begin to see that the proclamation of faith in Christ doesn't take place in a vacuum but rather has to contend with a cultural worldview already delivered and which has already taken root.

The task of the evangelist must therefore be to *understand* something of this worldview before she points to the reality and truth of the gospel. Before we can convert the world we must first comprehend it.

Contemporary culture

So far we have used the example of Clumber Street to highlight a number of features of everyday life. But there exists a wider picture we need to grasp if we are to build the foundations for effective evangelism. This picture affects children and adults alike but is especially important in understanding the formation of children. It is a sketch of contemporary *culture*.

In what follows I am going to speak primarily of *Western* culture. This is not because it should be regarded as somehow superior to others or more blessed by God. (Indeed, it would be possible to argue convincingly that the West has drifted far from God and is dangerously liable to judgment. But that's a different topic…) Rather, what follows will concentrate on Western culture because (a) I would feel it presumptuous to speak about non-Western cultures since I have little experience of them; and (b) this book is addressed in the first instance to those who either live within Western culture or a society influenced by the West.

There is one more thing to be said before launching into a survey of those larger forces that are shaping – and will continue to shape – the outlook of the Millennium generation. Contemporary culture has been described as postmodern. While I accept the term as a useful label to characterise certain features of Western culture, I have avoided using it

as much as possible. This is partly because the notion of postmodernity is highly contested but also because this particular piece of jargon is not always helpful. So in general, for 'postmodern' read 'contemporary'. We shouldn't get hung up on the term – it's the features that we need to recognise.

A contented culture

The culture represented by Clumber Street is the richest and most powerful in history. Science, technology and modern economics have produced an unprecedented period of economic growth and well-being. From the standpoint of material prosperity, we enjoy a standard of living our forbears would never have dreamt of.

One consequence of this has been the rise of what the American economist J K Galbraith has called 'the culture of contentment.' By this he means that Western culture has now become so prosperous and comfortable that it basks in the belief that it has achieved the good life without end. Of course, there are pockets of poverty, even in rich societies, but progress will ensure that they are temporary and limited. Surrounded by technological advance, political stability, economic growth, universal education and health care, those who live in the West, or who have successfully imitated its development, can rest safe in their contentment. Compared to past generations, we have never had it so good.

But, according to Galbraith, there is a further, disturbing, aspect. In such a culture there is little need for commitment to great moral causes or indeed to anything other than the good life. Economic and political liberty have been achieved. The reasons for the great revolutions of the past – poverty and oppression – have been conquered. For the majority of the population, there is nothing left to fight for except to hold onto contentment. Moral indignation is left to the eco-warriors and animal liberationists on the fringes of society. Most people have neither time nor inclination to get involved with moral campaigns.

The culture of contentment is also ambivalent about God. Its achievements have been won without him. When asked their views by opinion pollsters, the majority will say they believe in God, but when pressed have little idea of what they mean. Certainly they hold no truck with organised religion; nor are they willing to commit themselves to anything more than a threadbare acknowledgment that some kind of supreme Being probably exists. Commitment and Christian discipleship

are pooh-poohed as irrelevant. The reality of life consists in acquiring and consuming material things, looking after one's own, and generally enjoying the short span we have on this planet. God is at the margins or nowhere to be seen, except perhaps in life crises such as birth, marriage and death. Then he may get a look in. Most of the time he is treated as absent.

The society which has piled up material well-being beyond the dreams of any previous civilisation, finds itself with a spiritual hole in its heart.

This, at least, is one side of the story. But, as we shall see, there is another, and it is this other side that makes the attitude of contemporary culture ambivalent. For the society which has piled up material well-being beyond the dreams of any previous civilisation, finds itself with a spiritual hole in its heart and has begun once more to ask questions about meaning and purpose – questions which are essentially religious.

This same society, however, will have little to do with the institutional church. It is willing to talk in terms of 'the spiritual' but not in terms of religion. Hence it remains ambivalent about God. It senses there is something missing that ever-increasing wealth cannot supply; but it is unwilling to return to the God of previous generations. Instead, it indulges in pick 'n' mix beliefs where individuals simply pick what they want from a variety of sources – even a variety of religions – and mix them all together until they arrive at the dish they desire.

Sarah Ferguson, the Duchess of York, illustrates this perfectly. In October 1998 she began hosting a series of daytime TV chat show programmes in the U.K. Here is how a commentator in the London *Times* described it: 'the Duchess of York confided to us, in her introduction, that her personal recipe for spirituality consisted of taking bits from various religions and mixing them together – a process she compared to that of mixing ingredients to make a cake…'. Noting that not all ingredients

would necessarily mix well, the writer couldn't resist pursuing the analogy: 'viewers with long and excitable memories probably couldn't help but wonder if Sarah Ferguson's cake was maybe half baked.'

Behind the joke is a serious point: pick 'n' mix spirituality might not be very coherent. But as long as it works, so what? In contemporary culture, the test of faith is not whether it is true but whether it brings personal satisfaction – that is, whether it brings about contentment. This presents a unique challenge to traditional Christianity.

The evangelistic challenge is enormous – but so is the opportunity.

It's in such a society that the Millennium generation finds itself growing up. Children of this generation are being offered a more confused cultural worldview than was the case with their parents and grandparents, many of whom simply assumed that God was dead and that contentment was the be-all and end-all of human existence. But despite this confusion, the assumptions of the contentment culture pervade every aspect of our children's lives. There is no institution (except perhaps the church at its best) that is not riven with the philosophy of contentment. The worldview of the Millennium generation is being formed by its parents' belief that contentment is the ultimate life goal, with 'spirituality' as merely an aspect of contentment. The evangelistic challenge is enormous - but so is the opportunity.

A consumer culture

When we ask what makes the contentment culture content, the answer is simple: continuous consumption. Without it, Western societies would have no reason to exist. They would simply collapse. And with them would go the economies of the rest of the world. For the world economy is based upon the assumption of ever-rising living standards fuelled by the desire to consume. What's more, it is highly interdependent. It only needs consumption to falter in Europe, America or Asia and recession threatens governments around the globe.

But how is this relevant to a discussion of children finding faith? Remember we are trying to get a bird's-eye picture of the worldview which is drip-fed to our children from the earliest years of their lives: a set of beliefs and assumptions that shapes their understanding of reality from day one. It is nothing less than a version of faith – albeit a godless one. It is a worldview the gospel must subvert if there is to be room for Christ.

What attitudes within consumer culture does the gospel challenge? Firstly, the presumption that creation is given for human beings to manipulate and consume as they wish. This lies at the heart of consumerism. But it also flies in the face of a Christian understanding of the earth as created by God for his glory and only secondarily for human needs, let alone human wants. From the industrial revolution onwards, Western societies have acted as if they possessed an absolute right to exploit the world's resources (including its peoples) for their own satisfaction. Yet the biblical view is exactly the opposite: we are to live as stewards or custodians of God's creation. We are responsible to him for its care and upkeep. And we will be answerable to him for its destruction.

When we begin to think in these terms we see immediately that the cultural assumption of a right to consume lies in stark opposition to the way of Jesus, although in a consumerist society, this assumption is taken for granted and finds its way into our children's worldviews without question. One of the tasks of ministry among children, therefore, is to challenge this view at its roots and to enable young people to become critical of it. This will not be an easy task for them or for those who work among them. But, if we are to honour the truth of scripture and Christian faith, we must present youngsters with an alternative to the consumerist mentality that surrounds them.

Secondly, the gospel undermines the presumption that human beings lie at the centre of the universe. This article of faith (for that is what it is) is built into consumerism. What other justification can there be for the destruction of the environment that has taken place in the name of the right to consume? True, we are now beginning to see the rise of a worldwide reaction against human-centredness in the shape of the environmental movement. But even here there is ambiguity: to most people, environmentalism has taken centre stage not because it seeks to preserve the environment for its own sake but because our survival depends upon it. In other words, humanity remains all-important.

Once more, Christian teaching has something critical to say. Human beings are not at the centre of the universe. God is. Our concern for creation should arise out of our desire to care for the world he has given us, not because we fear for the future of our right to consume. Consumerism is wrong because it denies this fundamental truth.

Thirdly, Christian truth challenges the idolisation of choice. In contemporary culture, economic freedom is seen as a basic human right. The right to choose is the paramount value. The customer reigns supreme. The outcome is that in every walk of life (including church life) the right to choose is inbuilt. Individuals are seen first and foremost as if they are consumers possessing a natural right to have what they want. They are takers rather than givers.

Such an attitude is not consciously thought-out. It is the product of centuries of emphasis on the importance of the individual. Western culture is devoted to the belief that the individual is paramount. As one writer has put it: 'The final values of life begin and end with individuals and with the states or act of individuals.'[1]

The problem with this view is that by promoting the individual to an almost god-like status, culture has progressively chipped away at the equally profound truth that individuals cannot flourish without community. In John Macmurray's words, 'I need You in order to be myself'.[2] Or, to quote Kallistos Ware, 'My human being is a relational being. My personal unity is fulfiled in community.'[3]

Yet the philosophy of consumerism, with its absolute belief in choice, militates against community. It advocates the rights of individuals to choose (and spend) according to their individual desires, irrespective of the needs and considerations of others. The revival of faith in 'The Market' as a solution to economic problems at the end of the twentieth century has merely reinforced such individualism. The Millennium generation, by and large, assumes this to be a fact of life, a self-evidently 'good thing'.

The Australian social commentator Hugh Mackay notes that the emphasis on freedom of choice has its roots in, and is particularly strong among, those who were born in the 1970s and '80s. He calls this the 'Options generation'.[4] This group is particularly significant for our discussion because they are the parents of the Millennium generation. And like all parents, they will pass on their set of values to their children.

But Mackay points out a further crucial consequence: the central value held by the Options generation is that of being free to choose and, more importantly, being free to keep one's options open: to be able to opt in and out of activities or relationships as one wants without permanent or even long term commitment:

> 'Whether they are thinking about a course of study, a job, a sexual partner, a political party, a set of religious beliefs, or even whether they'll be home for dinner tonight, they have decided to remain as non-committal as possible for as long as possible.'[5]

The core value of adolescence, then, is freedom to choose (or freedom to hang loose) combined with absolute belief in the individual. It is one which the parents of the Millennium generation took for granted in their youth and which, consciously or unconsciously, they will pass onto their own children.

This poses a considerable challenge for evangelism for all kinds of reasons. The first is that the self-centred mindset of the Options mentality must be seen as truly anti-Christian. The gospel is concerned with self-*giving* (on the model of Jesus), not self-*getting*. We are to love our neighbours as well as ourselves. God has made us to be people-in-relationship rather than individuals out for themselves. Human beings have been created as individuals-in-community, designed to flourish as social beings in the image of God. It is not God's purpose that they should grow up as isolated individuals, each living in their own little world like modern Robinson Crusoes.

By contrast with contemporary cultural views, faith in Christ leads to the classic Christian virtues of self-renunciation, compassion and generosity to be found and practised in the context of community. Christian faith is a corporate faith not a purely individualistic one. But in the wake of the consumer revolution of the 1980s and 1990s, young people grow up surrounded by exactly the opposite philosophy: acquire, consume and look after number one. Evangelism which is genuinely biblical, therefore, will offer a radical alternative not as an optional add-on to personal salvation but as an integral part of Christian discipleship. The gospel is radical at this point or it is nothing.

A Sci-tech culture

Science and technology have made Western culture what it is. Without them, it would still be stuck in the Middle Ages. There would be no electricity, no gadgets, no mechanised transport, no modern medicine, no life-saving medical machinery. People would live shorter lives, afflicted by plagues and surrounded by suffering. The list is endless.

Few would argue with the view that science and technology have brought enormous progress. Indeed, the McDonald/Wilson household in Clumber Street revolves around an absolute belief in science. But this has been bought at a price. In the wake of scientific discovery and technological development have come previously unimaginable horrors. The self-same scientific and technological mindset that gave us economic, social and medical progress has also given us nuclear weapons, environmental disasters, the gulags and the holocaust. Even now, further technological nightmares lie just around the corner: genetic engineering of humans, cloning to order, 'superbugs' resistant to antibiotics – to mention but a few.

The Millennium generation therefore stands at a critical juncture in the development of scientific and technological culture. The future both beckons and repels. At one and the same time, technology offers itself as saviour and destroyer.

> Science can address the how questions
> but it cannot deal with the why ones.

The young people of Clumber Street consequently represent a generation that relies on science but at the same time is ambivalent towards it. To be sure, they see no other way forward in terms of material progress and the conquest of disease, famine and premature death. But despite this, they are wary. Unlike their grandparents born half a century before, they don't have unlimited faith in science as the guarantor of the unending good life. Neither do they put their trust in technology's ability to solve all the world's problems. And unlike their parents born in the

1970s and '80s they are doubtful about the unquestioned assumption that technology is inherently good because it alone can deliver consumption and contentment.

At present, Hayley, William and Kerry McDonald have simply accepted their parents' uncritical worldview. But it would be interesting to know in 10 years time whether all three held the same beliefs, or whether, as they came to share some of the scepticism of their peers, they stopped believing. Like the rest of the Millennium generation, the McDonald children are at a crossroads.

In addition, the more thoughtful of the Millennium generation realise that while science can answer many questions, it cannot answer the deepest questions of all: Why are we here? What meaning can we give to human existence? What purpose does the universe hold? Science can address the *how* questions but it cannot deal with the *why* ones.

Of course, these issues are not very real during childhood years. But from about twelve years onwards, they will begin to surface. As children move through their teenage years to become young adults, they inevitably find questions of meaning and purpose more and more pressing. Alice, Ben and Amy Watkinson are instances of this.

But how will they answer such questions? A 1994 survey of 13,000 UK young people aged 13–15 revealed some interesting findings: 37% believed in ghosts, 35% in horoscopes, 31% in contacting spirits of the dead, 19% in the devil, 19% in fortune tellers and 18% in black magic.[6] This suggests a real confusion about spiritual issues. Science is not rejected absolutely but is set alongside belief in supernaturalism. As the authors of the report note (p162): 'Despite the scientific and technological basis of culture, there is evidence of beliefs in practices with a supernatural connection … in other words, this is a scientific age with New Age overtones.' If this represents the cultural assumptions of the Millennium generation, the task of evangelism must be to understand and address them.

An IT culture

Of all the scientific/technological developments at the end of the twentieth century, the rapid expansion of information technology is probably the most mind-blowing and the one that contains the greatest potential for both good and evil. It is also the development with which the Millennium generation is most familiar. Whether we like it or not, IT

(and the computers that have given rise to the phenomenon) governs our lives and will continue to do so.

We can see how true this is by imagining for a moment what might be a typical day in the lives of, say, the Porter or McDonald children, or perhaps the Watkinsons. They wake up at 7.00 am. How might they be woken? Craig Porter has a digital alarm clock/radio that switches on automatically and tunes into his favourite pre-programmed radio station. Hayley McDonald is woken by an alarm call from (guess what?) her personal palmtop computer. It, too, is programmed to send out an audio signal and also doubles as a notebook, diary and electronic organiser. It fits into her pocket and goes everywhere with her. Further along Clumber Street, James Symons logs onto the Internet to surf the sports websites.

Meanwhile back at the Porters, Craig's mum, Belinda, switches on the automatic washing machine and sets the timer on the electric oven to come on at 5.00 pm so that she doesn't forget (she has a busy day coming up). Both these appliances are controlled by microchips. As this is going on, Craig's dad, Andy, is rushing out of the door to get to work. He's running late so he grabs his mobile phone to make some calls while travelling to college.

At the McDonalds' house, Kerry is watching breakfast TV on one channel while video recording cartoons on another to watch later. Since they have a digital satellite dish which can get 100 channels, there's never any shortage of stuff to watch and record.

And so the day goes on. At school, Belinda Porter works on a report for the school governors, using one of the school's computers donated by a supermarket chain. Andy, meanwhile, is even later getting to work than he had expected since the signalling system further along the railway line has failed. It is controlled by computer.

In one of the classes at Anytown High, Belinda's son, Craig, is in a music lesson. He enjoys making music on an electronic keyboard just as much as he likes listening to CDs. His teacher always says she can't get over how much better these sound than the old 33 rpm records she used to buy when she was a child. Craig politely nods but doesn't have the faintest idea what she is talking about – 33s were p.c. (pre-computer).

And if all this were not enough evidence of a computer-driven life, we have only to think about what will happen after school and work to appreciate that our entire lives are organised around – and organised by

– activities that depend on computers: watching TV, playing Nintendo games, surfing the Net, going to the cinema, swimming pool or ice rink, eating at McDonalds – you name it, and it probably wouldn't be able to happen without a computer somewhere behind the scenes.

Even this cursory glance at a fictional day makes us realise how computer-centred we are. When we think also of how hospitals, transport, power stations – in fact every aspect of daily life – are dominated by computer technology, it becomes obvious that the Millennium generation is growing up in a world undreamt of when their parents were children.

Images bombard children from all directions so that their perceptions of reality are conditioned by the power of image.

An image culture

We live in a world dominated by images. Television, films, computers, virtual reality, theme parks – all are common features of the contemporary child's world. Images bombard children from all directions so that their perceptions of reality are conditioned by the power of image.

Imagine this, for example. You are watching TV with your 8-year-old son and 6-year-old daughter. Halfway through the programme the advertisements appear. As it's children's TV, all the commercials are child-centred. You groan because you know that you'll be lucky if your purse or wallet escapes the next three minutes unscathed. There will be a succession of images attempting to persuade you and your kids that you cannot afford to be without the advertised products, whether chocolate-covered cornflakes, Barbie and Ken or the latest Playstation game. The pressure to buy will be enormous. (So great is the power of the TV image that entire cable channels are devoted solely to 24 hour shopping. All the viewer has to do is to phone in the name and code number of the advertised item along with a credit card number and the product will be dispatched within hours.)

The power of images, though, is not confined to advertising. At every

twist and turn we encounter the dominance of image. Take, for example, the use of the word 'icon' to denote someone who is held up as representative of a fashion, sport or trend. It is significant that the term is used at all, for icon derives from a Greek word literally meaning image. To say that somebody is an icon, therefore, reinforces the idea that all important aspects of our lives are best understood through image.

In a child's world this is terribly important. Individuals are held up as icons or role models for them to follow, whether it's a pop musician advocating support for good causes (think of Bob Geldof and Live Aid) or an ex-footballer advertising crisps. The point is still the same: icon=image=power.

This equation is highly seductive. In the first place, although advertising is the most blatant example, the substitution of image for argument is even more insidious. In a highly visual culture bombarded by the electronic media, children register the message conveyed by an image much more than one conveyed by rational explanation. Words become secondary; images primary. The power-holders in today's world are those who are able to wield the most effective images.

Secondly, as a number of writers have pointed out, images do not merely *describe* reality, they *interpret* it as well. And whoever acts as interpreter holds great power. This means that the media, who after all are the most important source of information in the contemporary world, possess enormous power over people's lives without most of us realising it.

The most worrying conclusion of this line of thought is that images are capable of being used not to inform and educate but to manipulate. Sometimes this is done intentionally. But, as often as not, manipulation happens unconsciously and without malice aforethought.

Take, for example, the effect of soap operas. They are central to the daily life of millions of children. They form the staple diet of peak time viewing. Indeed, *Neighbours* achieved its dominance precisely because the programme schedulers took the decision to screen it as the final segment of children's television at 5.35 pm after children had arrived home from school. As a result, at the time of writing, *Neighbours* is watched by something like 10 million each day – the equivalent of nearly two-thirds of the entire population of Australia, the country that produces it!

More important than mere numbers, however, is the effect of soaps on child viewers. They are uniquely powerful because they use story – the

most potent of teaching methods – to: (a) send out messages about what is right and wrong; (b) provide examples through characters and situations; (c) define good and bad behaviour through the interaction of storylines and supposedly ordinary people; (d) present the hidden agendas of the writers.

This last point is particularly significant. It means that the beliefs and prejudices of the writers can be smuggled in without viewers realising what's going on. Behaviour or attitudes that would be regarded as doubtful or unacceptable if we encountered them in real life are made more plausible when presented in the setting of a soap opera.

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More often than not (since this is the essence of soaps) this process occurs in the context of sexual morality. Sex for pleasure rather than as a sign of lifelong commitment is portrayed as normal. Indeed, to think of a Christian view of sex as properly confined to marriage is seen at best as merely a lifestyle option and at worst as laughably out-of-date. Homosexual relationships are assumed to be equivalent to heterosexual ones. Cohabitation rather than marriage is the norm. And so on. Clumber Street is typical soapland. What's more, disagreement with such views is quickly dealt with by the simple device of avoiding rational discussion and putting contrary views in the mouths of characters who are no more than a joke. The message this sends to children is, from a Christian point of view, disastrous.

But it's in the area of religion that soaps send out the most subversive messages. Invariably, religious beliefs are portrayed as marginal, neurotic or hypocritical. The upshot is to create and sustain an impression that religious faith doesn't matter, is irrelevant to normal life and is the preserve of those who are either two-faced or unable to cope with reality. There are rare exceptions but this portrayal is the norm.

Once more we are faced with the massive power of image in a culture saturated with images. Children, exposed to images day after day, find themselves bombarded with messages most of which carry an anti- or sub-Christian worldview. This is the reality of the world in which the Millennium generation live.

A sensation culture

A strong case can be made out that the driving force behind contemporary culture is the desire for pleasurable sensation. Indeed, our very first description of culture as a 'culture of contentment' suggests exactly this point. For what are all the aspects of consumer culture we have already identified if not sensation-centred? Consumerism, science and technology, information technology, the media – all are driven by the demand for pleasure. Our entire culture is geared to this purpose.

The distinguished sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has provided a penetrating analysis of what this means. He argues that people no longer find their purpose and identity in producing things or serving others but in experiencing pleasures. The modern individual goes all out to achieve ever greater sensations and stimuli whether they be spending and shopping, alcohol, sex, sport, computer games or drugs. The typical individual in contemporary society organises his or her life around maximising pleasure and minimising everything that detracts from it. In Bauman's words, the individual's life is 'lived as the role of a *pleasures collector* – or, more exactly, a *sensations-gatherer*.'[7]

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Interestingly, Bauman cites the modern obsession with physical fitness as an example of this. In recent years, fitness has become a central purpose not as a necessary part of healthy development of body and mind (*mens sana in sano corpore*) but as an end in itself. Why? Because only fully fit people can experience sensations to the full. In the modern view, says Bauman, 'the body is first and foremost a receiver of *sensations*; it imbibes and digests *experiences*; the capacity of being stimulated renders

it an instrument of *pleasure*. That capacity is called fitness…'[8]

But, of course, the story doesn't end there. A drawback appears. The demand for sensations and pleasures can never be fulfilled. No sooner is one peak reached than another looms into view: 'The body's capacity for vivid sensation and ecstasy is doomed to be forever short of the elusive ideal … impatience climbs the ceaselessly rising pile of successive disappointments, spurred by suspicion of inadequacy.'[9] Consequently, the relentless pursuit of pleasure is a wild goose chase. It can never be satisfied. The sensation culture is hollow.

As if in support of Bauman (though not knowingly), Mackay supplies the following comment from an Australian teenager:

> 'We hang out in parks and we drink. We go camping and we get smashed. We go swimming and we get smashed. We go to the drive-in and we get smashed. We go fishing and we get smashed… Being with each other and not doing anything that you have to do is fun. We go to the pub, talk about cars and get drunk. We are getting smashed basically nearly every night. In fact, I know some people who have been drunk every night since New Year, and we're into March already.'[10]

This is pretty crude stuff. Not every young person is so hooked on such unsubtle pleasures. But strip away the emphasis on alcohol and the message is one that fits contemporary culture well: pursuit of pleasure is the ultimate life-goal. And there's nothing wrong with it.

Two further examples, rather less drastic and somewhat nearer to the experience of children, illustrate how near at hand the values of the sensation culture lie.

The first is shopping. Once upon a time you shopped in order to live. Nowadays, the order is reversed: to live is to shop. It has become almost a hobby. A day at the shopping mall is seen as a leisure activity. It doesn't matter too much whether you buy anything: the pleasure lies in looking and fantasising. A new term has even crept into our vocabulary: 'retail therapy'. The young people portrayed in *Neighbours* use it regularly.

The second example is even more close to children's lives: the world of virtual reality.

Two-and-a-half miles from where this book was written, in the centre of Nottingham, England, stands a statue commemorating the greatest outlaw of all time, made famous by Errol Flynn, Kevin Costner and a host of lesser film and TV stars. Who do I mean? Why Robin Hood, of course.

One hundred yards further along the road, it's possible to enter a building and find yourself in the supposed world he inhabited. *The Robin Hood Experience* (as it's known) takes you back in time to Sherwood Forest, the Merry Men and, of course, the evil Sheriff of Nottingham. For a few pounds, it's possible to imagine you have been transported back into the Robin Hood myth (I say myth because it's questionable whether he even existed. And if he did, it certainly wasn't in the way the legend would have us believe).

This kind of experience is known as virtual reality. It can take many forms: a physical environment such as a theme park (Disneyworld is perhaps the best-known example), a computer game or even a computer-generated imaginary environment experienced directly by the brain through an electronic headset. Anyone who has seen the film *The Lawnmower Man* or is familiar with the concept of the holodeck in the *Star Trek* series will know what I mean.

It is now technologically possible to create an artificial environment that to all intents and purposes seems like the real thing, but which is not.

David Porter offers a definition that describes electronic virtual reality very well. It is: 'the creation of a world that appears real to the observer, with which he or she can interact, in which choices and actions made have real effect – but which exists only in the mind of the person experiencing it and the calculations of the programmer.'[11]

The point is that it is now technologically possible to create an artifi-

cial environment that to all intents and purposes seems like the real thing, but which is not. The advent of computer technology ranging from the personal computer to commercial computer systems that operate fairgrounds, theme parks and the like has meant that much more lifelike and apparently real situations can be simulated than ever before. As Porter notes: 'At the same time that the Internet has been expanding and changing our relationship to information and knowledge, the science of virtual reality has been escalating.'[12]

Virtual reality, especially through the medium of Playstation or Nintendo computer games is now an everyday occurrence for children. From a very early age, they are exposed to it.

The rapid growth of virtual reality technology has made it a common television experience. You can buy headsets which let you 'see' a virtual world. Sensors attached to your body and hand allow you to manipulate a virtual replica of yourself in the virtual landscape. You can go to entertainment arcades where two people stand in podiums a safe distance away from each other, wielding swords. They cannot see each other in real life. But in a virtual world they see each other's electronic self and can fight each other – even virtually 'kill' each other.'[13]

This is the reality (not the virtual reality) of the culture in which our children are growing up. What could better exemplify its insatiable demand for stimulus and sensation?

A morally confused culture

We've seen that the people of Clumber Street are a pretty tolerant lot. And in many ways, that's an attractive feature. None of us would wish to live in a street full of stiff-necked, self-righteous Pharisees continuously poking their noses in where they weren't wanted.

But behind the issue of tolerance, there lurks a much bigger question: how to agree on issues of right and wrong where conflicting viewpoints arise. If we were to go back four hundred years, the answer would be relatively straightforward: what did the Bible and the church say? Although people may have disagreed on specific moral issues, there would have been wide agreement about where to turn for authoritative guidance.

No such possibility exists nowadays, however. The days have long passed when the majority of people would regard Bible and church as authoritative in matters of morality. The rise of individualism (as we have noted) has meant that individuals are the final arbiters in deciding

what is right and wrong.

So in Clumber Street we find an array of views and practices in relation to family life and sexual relationships. Each household organises itself as it wishes. Mike and Jo Tyler at number 1 lived together with their baby Tyler for a year before getting married; Rachel and James Symons at number 7 are a single-parent family; Barry McDonald and Sarah Wilson at number 9 are unmarried with children but live as if they are married; the three students at number 11 do their own thing individually, ranging from the conservative and quiet Brian to the hedonistic Zoe; the Watkinsons at number 13 are an amalgamation of two previous families (an increasingly common phenomenon); while at number 19, Linda and Ellen represent perhaps the most radical departure from what was once the norm.

But, of course, that's precisely the point: there is no longer such a thing as a norm. Twenty – even ten – years ago, a gay household contemplating adoption would have been regarded as way out, if not unacceptable. Now the residents of Clumber Street scarcely bat an eyelid.

The reason why no norm can be agreed is that contemporary Western culture lacks a source of shared moral authority. In morality, as in politics and economics, the right of the individual to choose is paramount. Provided such choices do not interfere with the choices of others and provided they do not wreck society, a wide disparity of beliefs and practices is acceptable. In a consumerist culture, pick 'n' mix morality is inevitable. And it's up to the individual to do the picking and mixing.

The effect of all this is to produce moral confusion among children and young people. Where everything is a matter of choice, it's inevitable that different individuals will make different choices, usually on the basis of what works for them. The Options generation has thus bequeathed to its children, the Millennium generation, not only a bewildering array of moral choices but – even more problematically – no coherent means of choosing between them.

Putting the Pieces Together

We began with a bird's-eye view of an imaginary street in an imaginary town. This enabled us to identify a number of major features of contemporary culture.[14] But why is such an exercise important? Surely, children finding faith is a purely personal matter?

I hope that by now the reader will have grasped that children don't grow up on desert islands. From the moment they enter the world they are bombarded with sights, sounds, sensations and ways of thinking about the world that shape their growth and development in every way. Whilst they are individuals, they also take their cue from society. Their worldviews will to a large extent reflect the worldviews of the society in which they mature. We should never underestimate the extent to which we are all products of our age.

But having said this, I would want to stress also that children are capable (as are we all) of *transcending* their cultural context. They are *more than* products of the society in which they grow up. Theologically, we would want to say they are made in the image of God with all that implies.

Effective evangelism, then, will need to recognise both these truths. This is why the evangelist must understand something of the culture in which the gospel is proclaimed as well as understanding the gospel message itself. In years gone by, we have tended to stress the latter but ignore the former. I hope that by the end of this book even the most sceptical reader will appreciate that to hold such a view is no longer possible. Children find faith in their personal and cultural contexts: this is where God is at work.

Notes to chapter 1

1 Quoted in Francis Bridger and David Atkinson, *Counselling in Context,* London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1998, p93.
2 Quoted in Bridger & Atkinson, p119.
3 Bridger & Atkinson, p119.
4 From Hugh Mackay, *Generations.* Reprinted by kind permission of Pan Macmillan Australia Pty Ltd. © Mackay Research Pty Ltd, 1997.
5 Mackay, p140.

6 Leslie J Francis & William K Kay, *Teenage Religion and Values,* Leominster, Gracewing 1994, p151.
7 Zygmunt Bauman, *Life in Fragments,* Oxford, Blackwell 1995, p.115.
8 Bauman, p116.
9 Bauman, p117.
10 Mackay, p137.
11 David Porter, *Children at Risk,* Eastbourne, Kingsway 1998, p177.
12 Porter, p177.
13 Porter, p177
14 The features I have described are sometimes known as postmodern. For a further overview, see David Lyon, *Postmodernity*, Buckingham, Open University Press, 1994.