

A KIND OF MIND TO COMMUNE WITH

by Kenneth Bergland

Abstract

In Norway research on students and religion provides useful information for the church as it seeks to present the Gospel to a post-Christian culture and retain its own maturing young people. Erling Birkedal's longitudinal and qualitative study of faith among youth from age 13 to 25 could be considered the most significant piece of Norwegian research on this topic at this time. The information and insights gleaned yield challenges and possibilities we as a church are facing in communicating a mature SDA-faith among contemporary Norwegian students.

Recent Research on Norwegian Students

Research on students and religion in Norway provide important information for the church as it ministers to university students.¹ Perhaps the most important single researcher on this specific topic is Erling Birkedal.² According to Birkedal his informants are 'faithless' towards what they view as conventional and institutional religion, going in a more individual direction. They view their own self as the highest authority.³

For those who still call themselves Christian at age 25, it is typical to show a large degree of independence from religious authorities. There are traces of a conventional Christian faith, simultaneous with attempts to combine various concepts of God independent of any religious tradition. The majority of Birkedal's informants show a tendency towards a constructivist faith—faith that is not received but constructed independent from religious authorities.⁴ It seems largely to be an unconscious syncretism in which people adopt elements they sympathize with from various sources, often unreflective of or indifferent to their incompatibility. Even if his informants show a high degree of independence from any religious authority or tradition, Birkedal still found a low degree of critical attitudes towards Christianity.⁵ Holmquist claimed in a recent interview that there is a potential in this situation. He says that youth now more often come ignorant about Christianity, which also makes

them look upon it as more exotic. They therefore tend to be more open than before.⁶

Among those who have been able to retain some kind of faith through their student stage of life, Birkedal sees the process of altering their views of God from the concrete in the early teens to the more abstract at age 25 as a possible reason. He thinks those who have lost their former faith, or never had one, confirms this interpretation. This group typically retains a view of God with anthropomorphic, authoritarian and transcendent traits. These are the people who see God as most judging, retributive and limiting. However, they also reject the existence of such a god by holding atheistic or agnostic views of God. Birkedal therefore sees those who have lost their former faith as having stagnated and unable to develop views of God they can live with.⁷

As a characteristic of his informants Birkedal found that there is a general opposition against the view of an authoritarian and normative God, even among those who called themselves "certainly Christian."⁸ They insist on a lifestyle independent of a divinely revealed ethical standard and retributive judgement. Interestingly enough, although 59% of Holmquist's informants considered themselves Christian, they did not view faith as an important part of life.⁹ Among University students Fagermoen found that only 4% refer to God or the Bible as a source to determine right and wrong; 35% found the basis for ethical distinctions as inherent in the subjective consciousness; and 47% saw it as

culturally conditioned. Truth, and especially ethics, were considered as subjectively and culturally relative. Even approximately half of those who did say they believe in God think that truth is relative.¹⁰ This indicates that divine revelation is largely absent from the mindset of the youth. Among those who do claim to believe, their beliefs have a limited influence upon their ethical and lifestyle choices. In the sense of an externally revealed standard for life and lifestyle issues, the students could seem to live “beyond good and evil,” to borrow one of Nietzsche’s titles.¹¹

On the other hand, in a certain sense one does find a dualistic concept of good and evil in their worldview. Birkedal’s informants who believe in God tend to place prime emphasis upon God as a caring-person, one who supports in every way and is only good towards humans. They are less concerned about the cognitive-objective sides of God, being able to live with paradoxes and contradiction, and are more inclined towards the emotional-subjective relation to God.¹² As one of his informants said, God is “a kind of thought to commune with.”¹³ The tendency is clearly away from dogmatic questions about who God is, towards questions about His function in one’s subjective life.¹⁴ In the absence of objective truth, they still hold on to pragmatic truth—what works here and now. An interesting phenomenon is that even if they largely have a mystical concept of God, as the *Deus absconditus* who has not revealed Himself,¹⁵ those who do believe appear to agree with the final stanza of *Brand*, written by the Norwegian poet Ibsen, that “He is the *Deus caritatis*” – the loving God.¹⁶ They are certain about God’s essence at the same time as they doubt any sources claiming to reveal something about God.

Concerning the existence of evil, Holmquist’s research on teenagers shows that one-third believe that something called evil does exist. These teens were slightly more convinced about the existence of God than the existence of evil or Satan.¹⁷ Even if this indicates what we might expect among older students, none of the surveys provide us with a basis to carry over the teen findings to older students. But it seems to provide a basis for concluding that among both teenagers and students the dualistic concept of good and evil is present in the outlook on spiritual beings and the cosmos,

especially in viewing God as only good. But this dualism is hardly seen as having any practical consequences for ethical choices in one’s personal life.

Birkedal concludes that an emotional subject-subject relation to God seems to be a good basis for retaining faith, while an ongoing cognitive conflict, a “cognitive dissonance” as he calls it, between faith and science tends to loss of faith.¹⁸ Those with a mere cognitive approach are the ones that struggle the most with retaining faith.¹⁹ More specifically, an experience of security, divine presence, good relations to other believers, combined with one’s own quest for meaning and a deeper understanding of faith contributes to sustaining faith.²⁰

Studying the importance of the social dimension for retaining faith, Birkedal observes that the religious plurality the students live in probably explains the common trait of cultural relativism among his informants.²¹ Still Birkedal sees the attachment to family and particular groups as explanatory for the individual variations.²² To him it seems to be that non-faith is inherited easier from the parents than faith. Faith-communities seem to strengthen or weaken faith, depending on the individual’s experience with significant persons within these communities, and to what degree the individuals themselves meet the norms and expectations of the community.

Fjellhaug Bibelskole found that approximately 70% of the students reckoned themselves as belonging to a Christian denomination (60% to the state-church), and 47% said they participated in religious activities on a weekly basis. It can be assumed that institutional religion has some influence on the students’ faith, even if they want to construct faith subjectively. Since a defined lifestyle and specific moral and ethical views tend to define those inside and outside, an individual’s ability to conform to these have proven the most significant factor for whether youth continue in the community or not. At the same time some sustain and develop their faith outside such communities. It is here that dialogue with partners, friends and other believers can nurture their faith. While like-mindedness is important, it seems that openness and tolerance for other views are seen as the most important characteristics of dialogue.²³

Paradigmatic Challenges and Possibilities for SDA Student-Work

On the basis of the above survey, what challenges and possibilities are present for SDA work on the University campus. I will focus on three different areas.

First, there is the issue of spiritual authority. As SDAs we would not see a need to convince the students about the authority of the Church and its tradition. We can encourage the students in independent thinking and developing integrity in regard to human institutions and conventions.²⁴ But we do face a major challenge in helping them see the spiritual trustworthiness and authority of the Bible as God's Word. The *Deus absconditus* seems to be the One students at large believe in, if they believe. So how can we help them accept the *Deus revelatus*?

Even if the students, in their acceptance of relativism and pluralism, will easily classify convictions about the Bible as a subjective truth, a possible initial step can be to help them consciously reflect around the human epistemological limits, ontological relativity and pluralism's logical contradictions. By exploring our human limitations together with them, we might help them realize the need of something beyond the self. On the other hand the subjective domain needs to be acknowledged. As Zurcher has pointed out, "Truth is really known only when it becomes inner life."²⁵ And Douglas elaborates on this point by stating, "The self-authenticating experience of faith verifies the validity of the Holy Scriptures."²⁶ We must therefore not only speak of biblical truth as an objective and external reality, but assist them so the *Deus revelatus* and biblical truth can become experiential realities in their lives.

Second, there is the concept of good and evil. It is not as though a distinction between the two is absent among students. We can possibly start from their moral categories. We can affirm God's goodness in the subjective and immediate realm, but at the same time we need to find ways of communicating His goodness also in the more objective salvation history. The well-articulated concept of the great controversy and the sanctuary-service can meet this challenge. This seems to be especially important since some tend to lose their

faith in God as they lose sight of His goodness in the here and now.

Even if Birkedal found that those who alter their former views of God as authoritarian and normative tend to retain their faith, remaining faithful to the three angels' messages cannot reduce our message to a popular definition of the *Deus caritatis*. We need to help the students see more than a superficial statement of doctrinal beliefs. For example, we often lack a true expression of love (1 John 3:16); the fact that God's judgment has come does not compromise His love (Rev. 14:7); and keeping the commandments of God contributes to life rather than reducing it (Rev. 14:12). Further, we need to communicate that all life is sacred, a holistic spirituality that include cognitive, emotional and lifestyle-issues. Upholding a dualistic distinction between good and evil as it relates to lifestyle and the final judgment is possibly one of our major challenges, as the popular sentiment sees these ideas as extremely repulsive. But in upholding moral categories we must always be willing to scrutinize our own viewpoints by continually evaluating whether they are biblical standards and not merely subjective or cultural. We must also create environments where the students can raise their honest questions and express doubt in the process of adopting biblical standards.

Third, the issue of presence seems to be crucial in our work among students. The idea of presence needs to be addressed both from the perspective of the presence of God and presence of believers who live their faith. Many lose their faith when they experience the absence of the caring God. Churches have tended to communicate a static and one-dimensional view of God as always giving what is immediately experienced as good and secure. In this we might have done our youth and students a disfavor. Instead we should communicate a more biblical and realistic image of God as One who is with His people in a dynamic relationship. Yes, He might at times pedagogically lead His people by turning His back upon them without rejecting them, or allowing discomfort and insecurity to work for a higher good not experienced in the immediate. On the other hand, the above survey has also shown that our prime avenue to reaching students is in being dialogue-partners they can trust. Taking into consideration the inherent skepticism to institutional

religion, our individual SDA students are possibly the best instruments in reaching out into the university community as they live their faith among their fellow students.²⁷ Here we need to nurture and equip them in their task as witnesses on the university campus.

Endnotes

¹Tor Erling Fagermoen, "Hvor Postmoderne Er Universitetsstudentene I Oslo Anno 2005?" Kristiansand: Mediehøgskolen Gimlekollen, 2005; *Spørreundersøkelse Om Religion Og Verdensbilde*. Bergen: Bergen Kristelige Studentlag, 2009; *Livssynsundersøkelse Blant Studenter Ved Universitetet I Oslo*. Fjellhaug bibelskole, 2006; Morten Holmquist, *Jeg Tror Jeg Er Lykkelig ... Ung Tro Og Hverdag*. Oslo: Kloster Forlag, 2007.

²Erling Birkedal, "Kanskje Jeg Tror På En Gud, Men ..." *En Langtidsstudie Av Gudstro Hos Unge*. Oslo: IKO-Forlaget, 2008.

³Birkedal, 112.

⁴Birkedal, 146.

⁵Birkedal, 111.

⁶Cf. Turid Sylte, "Religion Engasjerer Nordmenn Mer Enn Før," *Vårt Land* 11.05.2009. Here Holmquist claims that 24% in the age between 18 and 34 say that they do not believe at all. Fagermoen found that of his informants, i.e. students at the University of Oslo, 37% would call themselves atheists and 27% agnostics (Fagermoen, 10).

⁷Birkedal, 105-6 and 09.

⁸Birkedal, 85 and 107.

⁹Holmquist, 84, 87 and 111. Cf. Birkedal, 43. Birkedal refers to Henriksen and Repstad who suggests a sacramentally-oriented Christianity, rather than a lifestyle-oriented Christianity (Birkedal, 137). Even if we can disagree with this, still it might help us understand why some students prefer other denominations compared to a more lifestyle-oriented adventism.

¹⁰Fagermoen, 11 and 13-14. Holmquist found that among the teenagers only 2% consulted a religious book to find out what was right and

wrong - preferring their own conscience, friends and parents (Holmquist, 91). Cf. Birkedal, 76, 80, 93 and 106. Fjellhaug Bibelskole found that over 40% read in the Bible now and then and that 14% viewed it as God's spoken word to us (Livssynsundersøkelse).

¹¹Birkedal, 63 and 109.

¹²Ibid, 87-88, 91 and 111. Cf. Fagermoen, 15.

¹³Birkedal, 84. Cf. Fagermoen, 14.

¹⁴Birkedal, 50 and 154.

¹⁵Fagermoen found that 55% of the students have a feeling that "it is most likely something there, even if it is unclear" (Fagermoen, 12).

¹⁶Henrik Ibsen, "Brand," *Samlede Verker*, vol. 1. Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 2000, 549. Cf. Birkedal, 80, 85 and 137.

¹⁷Holmquist, 51.

¹⁸Birkedal, 115-16 and 50.

¹⁹Ibid, 126.

²⁰Ibid, 117.

²¹Ibid, 147 and 51.

²²Ibid, 112.

²³Ibid, 63, 121-22, 24, 27, 30-31 and 35-36. Cf. Holmquist, 115-16.

²⁴Ellen G. White, *Education*. Mountain View, Cal: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1903, 17.

²⁵Jean Zurcher, *Goals and Spiritual Values of Existentialism*, Biblical Research Institute. (no date provided by author)

²⁶Herbert E. Douglass, *Faith as an Existential Experience*, Biblical Research Institute. (no date provided by author)

²⁷Cf. Birkedal, 98; Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages from the Writings of Ellen G. White*, vol. 3 Washington DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1958, 233-34.