

Shifting Grounds: Can Spiritual Ecumenism Satisfy the Legitimate Quest of Millennials?

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Abstract

The spiritual restlessness of millennials rests on a legitimate search that is hardly satisfied by the structure that we find in traditional religions. Yet, the preponderance of ecumenical initiatives in contemporary society means that there are forms of spiritual ecumenical practices that might serve as a solution. Beyond serving the central interest of ecumenism, namely Christian unity, these forms of ecumenical spiritualities may provide spaces for the millennial encounter with the divine in a way that holds their constant spiritual “negotiation” in balance with the need for some form of “habitation” that institutional religion provides. This article investigates how spiritual ecumenism is best suited for responding to the quest of millennials, and it equally provides concrete examples to justify such a claim.

Keywords

millennials, spirituality, ecumenism, Taizé, Nightfever, the Experience

Introduction

On February 28, 2017, an international conference, *Luther and the Sacraments: A Catholic Rereading in an Ecumenical Perspective*, took place at the Gregorian University in Rome.¹ During the plenary, an American participant made an

1. The conference was part of the events that took place in the run up to the 500th anniversary of the 16th-century Protestant Reformation (1517).

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intervention on the statistical decline in the practice of confession (the Sacrament of Penance/Reconciliation) among American Catholics. This is particularly in parishes where there is little or no emphasis on this sacrament. In response, Brother Richard of the Taizé Community in France gave a counter-report. According to Richard, the number of young people who avail themselves of the sacrament of reconciliation in Taizé is surprisingly on a steady increase. Why the contrasting reports? The difference lies in the fact that in Taizé the sacrament is presented as an opportunity to search one's soul; as a *space* where one unburdens his or her heart to a spiritual counselor or director. Without devaluing the content of the sacrament, Taizé's approach discontinued some traditional trappings of the sacrament, presenting it as a true reconciliation moment rather than mere confession or penance for sins. Taizé's approach is explained by two possible reasons: (1) the fact that Taizé has over the years *learnt* from the experiences of the millennials who regularly visit there, and (2) that Taizé's ecumenical nature provided it with a better chance of examining spiritual practices from multiple perspectives.

Based on the foregoing, this article aims at investigating a possible way of assuaging the legitimate spiritual quests of millennials. Challenged by the existing political and socioeconomic instability as well as the non-embedded nature of millennials in culture and tradition, this article seeks ecumenical solution to the plight of this generation of youths. In other words, it asks the question, In what ways can a certain form of ecumenical spiritual practice, address the spiritual (cum existential) concerns of millennials? In this article, the phenomenon of millennialism is taken in a general sense, with examples of ecumenical spiritual practices taken from Europe and Africa. To succeed, such an ecumenical approach must be ready to admit the nature of the world as a *space* of divine encounter.

Millennial identity and the contest between “seekers” and “dwellers”

According to the latest Pew Research Center study on millennials, “anyone born between 1981 and 1996 (ages 23 to 38 in 2019) is considered a Millennial.”² This set of individuals have been variously defined as “socially and politically liberal”³ and as “digital natives” whose “attempt to escape from the alienation found in contemporary societies”⁴ incline them towards virtual communities. Millennials are not

2. Those born after 1997 are considered “part of a new generation.” This is a slight shift from an earlier projection in 2016 which had included those born in 1997 within the millennial bracket. Cf. Michael Dimock, “Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins” (January 17, 2019), *Fact Tank: News in the Numbers*, Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/> (accessed January 28, 2020).

3. Arthur Asa Berger, *Cultural Perspectives on Millennials* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 22.

4. Berger, *Cultural Perspectives on Millennials*, 52, 53.

necessarily considered as having common traits. Across different races and social strata millennials perceive reality a bit differently, such that they are identified as the “quintessential postmodern generation.”⁵ Postmodernism’s dismissal of grand narratives (Jean-François Lyotard, Sarah Joseph) implies the rejection of homogeneity of religion, tradition, culture, and even politics. Millennials are thus inclined towards a fragmented, differentiated, privatized lifestyle, in which everything becomes fluid and is in a state of constant flux. Hence, their personalities are marked by a persistent search for meaning. Paradoxically, this millennial search is equally confronted by the desire for credulity, stability, and habitation.

One of the contemporary, prominent American sociologists, Robert Wuthnow, in his study of spirituality in America, suggests that “the character of spirituality appears to be changing.”⁶ Wuthnow’s investigation which focuses on the “subtle reordering” in people’s understanding of the sacred reveals a shift from the “traditional spirituality of inhabiting sacred places” to “a new spirituality of seeking”⁷ in which the quest for the sacred is incapable of being satiated by any particular tradition or religion. When considered in the context of the postmodern worldview, Wuthnow’s observation should be seen as not limited to the American society, but also applicable to other societies, including the global south. With respect to spirituality, his analysis points to some sort of difference between the older generation and millennials.

In his analysis of the contemporary shift in spirituality, Wuthnow distinguishes between “dwellers” and “seekers.” Dwellers represent a spirituality that is marked by “habitation,” and seekers by “negotiation.” Spirituality in this case is understood as consisting of “all the beliefs and activities by which individuals attempt to relate their lives to God or to a divine being or some other conception of a transcendent reality.”⁸ For dwellers, the emphasis on habitation is based on the understanding of God as occupying “a definite place in the universe” while at once creating “a sacred space in which humans too can dwell.”⁹ Dwellers thus assume a sense of security and stability by virtue of a spirituality that is locatable rather than fleeting. On the other hand, while engaging in a spirituality that constantly negotiates, seekers are often in a constant “search for sacred moments that reinforce their conviction that the divine exists.”¹⁰ There is a sense of unstable, shifting grounds, in their search for meaning. This represents the experience of most millennials. Seekers are quite

5. Berger, *Cultural Perspectives on Millennials*, 85. The postmodern character of millennials is already highlighted in Fredric Jameson’s *Postmodern; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

6. Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 1.

7. Wuthnow, *After Heaven*, 3.

8. Wuthnow, *After Heaven*, viii.

9. Wuthnow, *After Heaven*, 3.

10. Wuthnow, *After Heaven*, 4.

adventurous as they continue to “explore new spiritual vistas.”¹¹ Part of the interest of this article is to enquire into the chances and challenges that are presented in this millennial quest for spiritual satisfaction.

The public context of millennial spirituality: Challenges and promises

For most millennials, spirituality generally represents a *space* for an encounter with God. It does not necessarily imply a “place” or “location” defined by religious institutions and structures. There is a certain deterritorialization in millennial spirituality. God could be encountered anywhere, everywhere, even in popular culture; in spaces considered mundane, corrupt, and sinful. The thought that the presence of God is discernible in the complexity of a popular culture by millennials would ever puzzle the minds of those who insist on the traditional practice of religion or spirituality. The intrigue is that it shatters the narrativity of philosophical dualism, seen in the contrast between the spiritual and the natural, between “a real wind” and the “sound of sheer silence” (cf. 1 Kgs 19:11, 13). It evokes the plausibility of the unrestrainable and uncontrollable character of God, delineated appropriately in a pneumatology that defies religious structuralization or institutionalization.

That God could be, and is, encountered in noise, confusion, and the blustery space of pop culture reaffirms the pleasant acknowledgment of the psalmist:

Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say “surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,”
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you. (Ps. 139:7–12)

The psalmist’s recognition of “the inescapable God” critically confronts the individual who suddenly realizes that the world belongs to God, even in the midst of freedom that allows for depravity and sin to thrive in world. It equally challenges the often-paternalistic attitude of religion as it foists boundaries and attempts to limit divine operation. Within the church, the question of God’s omnipresence has a very

11. Wuthnow, *After Heaven*, 4.

simple and clear answer. Affirmative! But then one is certain to experience a dogmatic discomfort to the question of divine presence in the chaos of pop culture. Mircea Eliade, the reputable Romanian historian of religions noted that the then emerging youth culture of the 1960s was something that the Judeo-Christian religion could not recognize, and thus was incapable of engaging with.¹² This is still largely the case today despite some global initiatives within the Roman Catholic Church, such as World Youth Day and the Youth Synod. Perhaps, no one is really interested in the answer to such a question since the experience of God in such spaces is a matter of discernment, which until recently has never been a theologically attractive theme.

If the question of divine encounter in “non-sacred,” secular spaces is typical of millennial spirituality, then we are faced with a process of discernment in which millennials assume in themselves both active and passive agency. Some have through profound experiences integrated their spirituality within the scheme of their art and popularity. Stars like Laetitia Wright, Yvonne Orji, Kendrick Lamar, and Chance the Rapper belong to this category. The other category, namely passive agents, would include young fans and audiences who find their way to God through the artistry of these pop stars. Indeed, the convictional power of popular culture in its entertainment, lifestyle, and networking means that it is equally laden with a content that could sometimes be considered an oddity in the context of religious spirituality.¹³

Of particular significance is the fascinating figure of Chance Jonathan Bennett, popularly known as Chance the Rapper. Born in 1993, Chance is a typical millennial, a consummate act in the pop world, and at once, an active agent in creating a space for divine encounter within the popular culture. In 2016, Chance made the headlines for winning three Grammy awards from his album, *Coloring Book*. Quite intriguing is the fact that Chance was the first independent artist to do so. *Coloring Book* has been described as “a creative, public space where Chance talks to/about God.”¹⁴ In every sense, Chance’s music is quite unconventional and thus presents a countercultural narrative. His work remains “contextual, nontraditional, anti-status quo, relational and collaborative.”¹⁵ In actively creating this space of encounter, Chance “effectively transforms a mix-tape into a pedagogical space” that invariably captures his “vision of a young adult life framed by God.”¹⁶

12. Cf. Mircea Eliade, *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).

13. One could refer to the caricature of religiosity in which popular celebrities like Michael Jackson, Oprah Winfrey, and Beyoncé Knowles-Carter are sometimes given a “divine status” by zealous fans.

14. Karen E. Mosby, “Black Millennial Encounters with God through the Coloring Book of Chance the Rapper,” *Religious Education* 113, no. 3 (2018): 326–38; 331.

15. Mosby, “Black Millennial Encounters with God,” 331.

16. Mosby, “Black Millennial Encounters with God,” 331.

I do not intend to explore the context of Chance's music but to highlight some pedagogical content of his work that can aid millennials in their spiritual quest. Karen Mosby already examines some of these insights in the context of religious education; a pedagogical model that pays attention to "millennial identity and sensibilities."¹⁷ Indeed, identity is a huge issue when it comes to millennials. Mosby derives four pedagogical models from Chance's *Coloring Book*, and I shall apply them in a way that serves millennial spirituality and not just religious education. They include: (1) reclamation of the public sphere, (2) identifying God as the sanctifier of millennials, (3) developing and living out authentic Christian identity, and (4) celebration of one's particular identity

Reclamation of the public sphere

Traditional spirituality is often critical of the public sphere, and sometimes it assumes a superior or judgmental attitude whenever it chooses to engage the public sphere. Even the attempts by public theology appear selective by its excessive focus on politics. Yet the public sphere remains the cultural environment of most millennials. Through his music, Chance "reclaims the public sphere and popular culture" and considers them "as generative spaces where God is actively present and meaning-making is possible."¹⁸ If the world is graced by God, then popular culture is not immune to grace as long as it exists in God's graced world. This is not being impositional but an admission of the indubitable presence of God in the world; a world in which popular culture exists and thrives.

God as the sanctifier of millennials

A certain kind of relationship with, and awareness of, God presents itself in Chance's work. Chance "relates to God as One who sanctifies young adult humanity."¹⁹ Mosby argues that "traditional religious spaces have become oppositional sites for many millennials," in such a way that "they feel pressured to check their generational culture at the door of the sanctuary."²⁰ This does not suggest an uncritical validation, in whole or in part, of the generational culture of millennials. Both sides need to be deconstructed to promote conversation and dialogue. The critical factor in this context is that the legitimacy of millennials as *imago Dei* is neither devalued nor suspended by God. Millennials, just like everyone else, are created in the "image and likeness" of God. As such their sustenance and sanctification comes from God as well.

17. Mosby, "Black Millennial Encounters with God," 334.

18. Mosby, "Black Millennial Encounters with God," 335.

19. Mosby, "Black Millennial Encounters with God," 335.

20. Mosby, "Black Millennial Encounters with God," 335.

Authentic Christian identity

Public celebration of Christian identity goes against one of the critical elements of the secular culture, namely the “privatization of religion.”²¹ But then this identity can equally be meaningfully affirmed within this same culture. In fact, such affirmation happens only within this world.²² In this secular culture, Chance remains “unapologetic about his Christian faith” though “without being judgmental or coercive” about it.²³ He approach provides a certain openness and authenticity that can help millennials in their spiritual search. Interestingly, Chance does not categorize his music as “Christian” or “gospel” music,²⁴ and he freely collaborates with artists of various backgrounds. His approach is “ecumenical,” not in terms of the search for Christian unity, but in the fact that it recognizes difference and allows for the flourishing of multiple voices. Without the acknowledgement and recognition of diversity, dialogue towards unity remains impossible. Such disposition towards difference is of particular interest to millennials who are mainly interested in forging “relationships with the goal of transformation rather than conversion.”²⁵ Transformation leads to a more authentic witnessing to the Christian identity since it engages the agency of the subject. A certain interpretation of conversion resonates with transformation, but the predominant meaning and usage gives it off as a legalistic, moralistic experience. Millennials tend to abhor this.

21. Sociologist Jose Casanova identifies “the privatization of religion” together with “differentiation” and “decline in religious beliefs and practices” as the three elements of secularization. Cf. Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Privatization of religion means that religious beliefs and practices become marginalized from the public sphere. In other words, religion becomes an optional, free, noninstitutional affair. This phenomenon has been described by Casanova as the “cult of the individual” or “believing without belonging” by Gracie Davie. Cf. Gracie Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).
22. A recent doctoral dissertation at the KU Leuven defends this argument. Cf. Robert Aaron Wessman, *Missionary Options for a Secular Age: Remaining in the World for the Salvation of the World* (Leuven: Faculty of Theology/Religious Studies, 2019). Wessman draws inspiration from Edward Schillebeeckx’s sacramental theology in which the world is presented as the place of divine encounter, and so, of salvation. Hence, Schillebeeckx’s counteractive, but paradoxical principle of “extra mundum nulla salus” (“There is no salvation outside the world”) goes against the delimitation of the operational space of grace to the church (“extra ecclesia nulla salus”).
23. Mosby, “Black Millennial Encounters with God,” 335.
24. Chance’s approach here is different from situations where religious institutions have adapted some forms of popular culture to their celebrations. One readily finds this in much contemporary “gospel music” that adapts its sounds and lyrics to secular hip-hop, pop, and afrobeat. In fact, Bob Dylan’s music is even used in some Protestant churches. For more on this topic, see Rupert Till, *Pop Cult: Religion and Popular Music* (London: Continuum, 2010); Andreas Häger, *Religion and Popular Music: Artists, Fans, and Cultures* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).
25. Mosby, “Black Millennial Encounters with God,” 335.

Celebration of particular identity

Identity is a whole lot of things, and so is not exhausted by Christian identity. Most millennials feel the lack of rootedness, and so it is important for them to rediscover their particular historical and cultural heritage. This feeling, to a large extent, determines or shapes their spiritual disposition. Chance in his music does not explicitly address “black identity,” but he “honors and celebrates his racial/ethnic heritage and history.”²⁶ Underscored here is the fact that one’s spirituality or religious identity cannot be separated from one’s cultural identity. Both are entangled. Every culture is a space of/for divine encounter. Besides, the various spiritualities that we have today emerged from specific cultural backgrounds. Christianity, for instance, emerged from (and is entangled with) the Jewish culture. Millennial search for authenticity therefore requires an acknowledgment of the complex set of factors that make up one’s identity, not in an oppositional way but in a way that allows for the celebration of diversity and the flourishing of everyone.

What has spiritual ecumenism got to offer?

Following the religious interest of millennials as well as the focus of this article, the question above deserves some attention. However, the attention here does not require outlining the theoretical explanation of what spiritual ecumenism entails, rather it demands reflection concerning the form of spiritual practices that can assuage the yearnings of millennials. The ecumenical character of these models of spirituality can be gleaned not only from the fact that they originated from different ecclesial backgrounds, but also that they are constitutively open to embracing every believer irrespective of ecclesial background or affiliation. In order to provide the answer to the question of the resourcefulness of spiritual ecumenism, three models of spirituality are presented as important in this case. These include: Taizé, Nightfever, and the Experience. While the first two models have become global models, the last model is still confined to its context but have parallels in other climes. More so, while the Taizé and Nightfever models constitute defined, sustainable spiritual practices for mostly the younger generation, the Experience provides an annual rallying point of Christians from different denominations.²⁷ Most important is the fact that all of them are marked by openness and some sort of freedom, which most millennials find very attractive. At this moment, it is important to briefly examine these three models.

26. Mosby, “Black Millennial Encounters with God,” 335.

27. From a global perspective there is certainly a limitation in the choice of examples in this article: two European (and somewhat global) and one African—with the American and Asian contexts not considered. However, the selection is made on the basis of my personal experience and encounter.

Taizé model

If you are ever in doubt whether young people in the West are still deeply interested in God or not, then you need only visit the Taizé community. It is named after a village in southern Burgundy France, where the founder, Brother Roger, settled after he had moved from peaceful Switzerland to help victims of war in the 1940s. Today Taizé has become a Mecca of Christian spirituality for many young people who are seeking God and meaning. Its popularity has also spread across the entire world, including most countries in Africa.

Taizé is founded as an ecumenical community with brothers from different parts of the world belonging to it, irrespective of their denomination. It has become a very clear example of spiritual ecumenism, a form of ecumenism that is not based on dialogue on doctrinal and ethical issues but purely on common worship that considers the deeper yearnings of the society in which we live. Ours is a society where people are in anguish, pain, deprivation, brokenness; a society in need of healing and restoration. For Dirk Lange, such are the needs of our world today “that the community needed to be attentive to the questions, yearnings, anguish, and also the hopes and aspirations prevalent in the world.”²⁸ In response, Taizé has constituted itself as a community that seeks to be open and to listen. The community reflects a surprising paradox: its members live, “not as a cloistered community cut off from the world but as a monastic community whose vocation was deeply embedded in a Gospel-welcome for the world.”²⁹

The community organizes silent retreats, Bible studies, reflection, work, and other spiritual activities. People throng to Taizé because they find there a church that is free and spontaneous, uninhibited by institutional boundaries. People come “because of the beautiful prayer and the vision of a church that was a place of welcome and reconciliation among and for all peoples: believers, those of other faiths, and nonbelievers.”

Despite our doctrinal boundaries can we make our parish communities places of hospitality and welcome? How often do people feel at home in our churches? For most millennials who have become “seekers” in their quest for spiritual satisfaction, Taizé becomes a fitting pilgrimage center where they find peace before moving on, and to which they can always come back again and again. For hospitality and welcome to characterize our churches, our spirituality must speak the language of peace, reconciliation, and joy that comes from within. In this way Taizé community challenges us all.

One distinguishing mark of the spirituality that is practiced in Taizé is its meditative dimension. Silence is integrated with music in Taizé in a fashion that captivates the soul. In this practice, individuality is reconciled with community. While

28. Dirk G. Lange, “Rediscovering Communal Prayer: The Witness of the Community of Taizé,” *Liturgy* 30, no. 4 (2015): 28–35; 30–31.

29. Lange, “Rediscovering Communal Prayer,” 31.

the silence attends to the individual, the music brings everyone into community. Often, we make the mistake of paying too much attention to the community without taking care of the individual. So, what happens is that since people are getting so concerned about the self, they soon abandon those spiritual exercises in our churches that pay zero attention to their individual yearnings in search of all these postmodern forms of spiritual exercises. On this count Taizé challenges us once again to find spaces for both individuality and community to dwell.

For this to happen, we can begin practicing Taizé spirituality in our churches. In a typical Nigerian fashion, for instance, the Taizé melodies could be adapted to fit into the local spiritual rhythm, combining meditation and soul-rendering music. The impact of such a method lies in the fact that it takes people into real prayer where they learn to walk with God; it reduces some unnecessary blabbing in the name of praying; it leads people to identify the core of their beings; it builds a community that is in tune with both their individual selves and with one another. Nobody feels out of place. And it offers the needed ecumenical space for the practice of spirituality by millennials. We also find the Taizé type of spiritual practice in another practice called “Nightfever,” which is also popular among European youths today.

Nightfever model

The spirituality model known as “Nightfever” refers to “a night of prayer” that takes place in “open churches with a special atmosphere of music, prayer and candlelight.”³⁰ Deeply rooted in Catholic tradition, Nightfever started on October 29, 2005, shortly after the 20th World Youth Day (WYD) in Köln. During the WYD celebration, the cities of Köln, Bonn, and Düsseldorf experienced a multitude of young people singing and praying day and night. It was such an amazing event that kept the churches open and full even past midnight. These German cities indeed felt the youthfulness of the church like never before in recent decades. It was in the aftermath of this experience, when the churches reverted to its cold and empty ambience, that the Nightfever was birthed by two students—Andreas Süß and Katharina Fassler—who felt that the WYD must continue in the daily lives of the youth, and planned the first Nightfever in St. Remigius Bonn. The Nightfever concept was adapted to the Evening of Joy of the Emmanuel Community, and is designed to answer the spiritual yearnings of millennials. In the English version of the official website one reads,

Nightfever is an initiative of young Christians (16–35 years) and is carried out as a community action of trainees, students of different faculties, pupils, young adults from parishes, different communities, seminarians and orders. Initially, Nightfever was

30. Nightfever, “History,” <https://nightfever.org/us/location/gb/page/history-gb/> (accessed September 15, 2019).

planned as a single event, but its high reputation, frequentation, and many requests have led to Nightfever being run on a regular base.³¹

It is important to highlight the ecumenical importance of Nightfever. Given the very simple and accessible elements of the spirituality, it opens up to spiritual ecumenism in a profound way through the volunteerism of youth members. Today, Nightfever has become a regular aspect of major events like the Ecumenical Church Gathering (Ökumenischer Kirchentag), the Annual Church Meeting (Kirchentag), the Catholic Assembly (Katholikentag), and many other ecumenical events all over Germany and beyond. These are made possible by the nine component elements of the spirituality. These include the following:

1. *Prayer*—At the “center” of Nightfever is prayer, particularly in the form of the adoration of the Eucharist. However, unlike the formally structured adoration, this practice of prayer does not require any “special technique in order to pray properly.” People are required to approach Christ without pretension or disguise and to pray in convenience and in silence.
2. *Kindling of candles*—Candles are lit within the dark church/chapel to bring forth the light of the faith and hope in God. People are invited to light candles even when they may not have the time or disposition to join in the prayers, as a way of uniting hearts and minds in prayer.
3. *Invitation*—To share the “amazing experience of God’s love and presence” with others, the young volunteers invite others who are on their way to other events “to stay in the church for a while and to let themselves be moved by the presence of God.”³² This is done without any compulsion or demand for commitment.
4. *Conversation and reconciliation*—Part of the Nightfever spirituality is the opportunity for consultation and conversation with priests who “listen, give advice and are absolutely closemouthed and discreet.”³³ This exercise may or may not involve the sacrament of reconciliation though it is highly recommended as an opportunity to unburden or liberate one’s self from all forms of stress and as a channel of receiving the mercy and grace of God.
5. *Biblical sayings*—Biblical passages are written and kept at the altar for people to pick from. Often these sayings “speak” to the individual and could form impulses for prayers and reflection.
6. *Blessings*—This is done by the priest through the imposition of hands on the individual, inviting the feeling of God’s presence and attention. Nightfever

31. Nightfever, “History.”

32. Nightfever, “Elements,” <https://nightfever.org/us/location/gb/page/elements-gb/> (accessed September 15, 2019).

33. Nightfever, “Elements.”

recognizes God as “the originator and guarantor of this blessing”³⁴ and this conviction has a very profound effect.

7. *Prayer request*—Individuals can request for prayers both for themselves and for others. Written prayer requests are deposited in a red box near the Blessed Sacrament.
8. *Singing and music*—These actions serve as “impulses to the faithful, to the praying individual.”³⁵ Together, they constitute a means of entering into dialogue with God. The songs are interspersed with Psalms and short prayers.
9. *Workshops and talks*—Nightfever offers educational or catechetical moments to connect faith with real life. The objective is to highlight the element of rationality in one’s faith commitment. Hence, the focus is to determine “how our faith and the teachings of the Church can be lived and practiced in our everyday life.”³⁶

These nine elements provide a space for millennials to practically and actively engage their faith without feeling excluded or marginalized in any way. It connects with their desire to take charge of their innermost selves and to find a space to exercise their leadership in faith matters. By inviting others to participate in the event, millennials find their own voice in the church and, without the prerequisite of any special training in conducting spiritual exercises, feel empowered within the Christian community.

Despite the fact that Nightfever has taken place more than 3500 times in more than 200 cities of the world, and in over 27 countries, it is yet to find a home in Africa. The increasing distress of the millennials in their quest for spiritual satisfaction in Africa requires that the church makes space for the introduction of this form of spirituality in other parts of the world. With the necessary training that is offered by the Nightfever Academy, the teaming African youth may be led to explore this model of spirituality in answer to millennial questions on spirituality and reality in general. It already provides a less-tense meeting ground for the exercise of spiritual ecumenism.

The Experience model

One common feature of the models we have presented so far is music. Music appeals to everyone, especially the millennials who have little or no patience for the ritualistic dimension of religion. Music creates a communal feeling that does not pay so much attention to the identity boundaries of participants. Such boundaries are immediately made clear during religious teachings or preaching, and become even more highlighted at liturgical practices. The Experience model, as others above, is equally centered around music.

34. Nightfever, “Elements.”

35. Nightfever, “Elements.”

36. Nightfever, “Elements.”

Convened and hosted by Paul Adefarasin, the Senior Pastor of one of the mega Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, House on the Rock Church, The African Praise Experience (TAPE or Experience) has become a landmark Christian event in Nigeria “headlined by a joyful assemblage of people through music, dance and praises, with the combination of word, worship and wonders.”³⁷ It was started in 2006 and has since then been hosted annually, always in the month of December. It is reported that the event, which started with a population of about 70,000, now boasts over 700,000 in yearly attendance, thus making it “the largest musical concert in Africa.”³⁸ Its uniqueness, however, lies in the fact that it features only the gospel music genre. As such, the Experience fields the best in the world and in Nigeria. Popular Nigerian/African artists that have performed at the Experience over the years include Tim Godfrey, Chioma Jesus, Midnight Crew, Sonnie Badu, Nathaniel Bassey, Frank Edward, Tope Alabi, and Mercy Chinwo, while some of the international acts include big names like, Travis Greene, Don Moen, and Donnie McClurkin.

TAPE is described as “an interdenominational Gospel concert” since the attendance and participation of performers cut across ecclesial affiliations. This is despite the fact that it is hosted by a Pentecostal pastor. Notwithstanding that it does not set itself out as a platform for ecumenical fellowship, TAPE inevitably fulfils an ecumenical role in bringing Christians across divides into prayer for the nation and praise fellowship. Thus, beyond the concert, TAPE, according to a report, is “an opportunity for the Christian community to unite in offering corporate prayers for our nation and dismantling the age-old barriers of corruption, politics, ethnicity and doctrinal difference that characterize everyday living.”³⁹ In a subscript at the official website, one reads the following:

What would it cost you to be in God’s presence as some of the world’s most highly acclaimed psalmists bring down heaven on earth? Exactly, nothing! We want to offer all Nigerians the opportunity to experience God in an atmosphere of heavenly bliss. It is a sacrifice in faith so that as praise ascends to God, He will look upon our nation favourably and bless the land. The experience of God’s presence cannot be bought, so there is no price tag.⁴⁰

37. Editor, “Adefarasin hosts African Praise Experience in Lagos,” *The Guardian*, <https://guardian.ng/news/ade-farasin-hosts-african-praise-experience-in-lagos/> (accessed August 31, 2019).

38. Official website of *The African Praise Experience*, <http://theexperiencelagos.com/1G1V/> (accessed September 31, 2019).

39. House of the Rock, “Donnie McClurkin, Don Moen, Others Headline The Experience 2017,” *Connect Nigeria* (November 13, 2017), <https://connectnigeria.com/articles/2017/11/donnie-mcclurkin-don-moen-others-headline-the-experience-2017-house-on-the-rock/> (accessed January 13, 2020). While barriers signal markers of identity, they should not be dismantled since differences are part of what makes unity meaningful. However, there ought to be limits to the emphasis on differences, specifically in cases where it obstructs the common good and human flourishing as willed by God.

40. Official website of *The African Praise Experience*.

This statement makes an ecumenical appeal that is predicated on some form of nationalism by the “opportunity it offers all Nigerians” to do something that would attract God’s “favourable gaze and blessing upon the nation.” Much of this is inspired by the conditionality of 2 Chronicles 7:14—“If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.” However, the TAPE does not in any way include the penitential act in its program. The focus is exclusively on the praise of God. Meanwhile, it satisfies millennials’ inclinations to celebrity figures as well as to some sort of freedom from authority: “no price tag.”

However, TAPE could become a very profound ecumenical spiritual anchor for millennials. By providing a space that is not determined by doctrinal boundaries, millennials are free to explore what it means to experience God in an atmosphere of total freedom alongside others. Whether this experience is sustainable or fleeting is a matter of debate. But the fact that it is now anticipated annually, and has also inspired similar concerts in different parts of the country is something positive. More still, even though it offers “freedom from authority” to millennials, it also engages them in a very interesting way, in terms of the organization. For instance, the 12th year of TAPE engaged more than 600 inner-city youths in controlling the overwhelming traffic as part of Civic Social Responsibility (CSR).

These three examples point to the attention to freedom, personal involvement, and the nontraditional disposition of millennials. This disposition challenges the spiritual tradition that is built on conformity, rules, structure, and stability. But while millennial spirituality is largely defined by “negotiation,” it is important that the quest be “accompanied,” just as in the Taizé praxis of the sacrament of reconciliation. In a way, Taizé maintains some sort of “traditional” structure, which confirms the conflictual disposition of millennials, who even in their “negotiation” also feel the need for rootedness.

Millennial spirituality as “negotiation” in the process of accompaniment

In addressing the spiritual quest of millennials, their experiences become the *locus* of engagement. A paternalistic approach that assumes a predetermined template of spirituality, one that lividly dismisses the nonconformist attitude of most millennials, and even ridicules their claim to divine encounter in the most unusual of places, is certainly not a useful strategy. The consequence would be a greater polarization between millennials and the church. And this makes the situation more complex. The restlessness of most millennials, often confused by their boisterousness, prioritizes the “seeker”/“negotiation” model over that of “dweller”/“habitation.” In seeking satisfactory response to their deepest inescapable yearning for the divine, places are transformed into spaces of encounter and religious dogmas are viewed as fluid. Resistance becomes the only response to any propositional

attitude from traditional spiritualities. However, since the church cannot sacrifice dogmas in order to accommodate millennial sensibilities, and one dare not suggest that it does (given the necessity of its identity and mission that is rooted in the objective reality of the truth it has received), the church can at least assume a different approach in its encounter with millennials.⁴¹ Negotiation becomes then a two-way street in which the church makes appeal to millennials by reexamining its method rather than content.

In that sense, millennial quest as well as the church's approach to millennials constitutively becomes a process of discernment. Discernment in this respect takes the form of "accompaniment" in which, as Pope Francis puts it, the "art of listening" is adopted as a mechanism for spiritual care (*Evangelii Gaudium* [EG] §171). Accompaniment becomes as it were a journeying together in freedom and openness, rather than an attitude of superiority or control. For Pope Francis, the "art of accompaniment" instructs us "to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other (cf. Ex 3:5). The pace of this accompaniment must be steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and our compassionate gaze which also heals, liberates and encourages growth in the Christian life" (EG 169). In this process, "listening" is indispensable. Millennials must be listened to as they openly pour out their frustrations, the concerns, the joys, and even convictions about themselves, the world, and God. And so the pope insists that "we need to practice the art of listening, which is more than hearing." According to him, "listening, in communication, is an openness of heart which makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur." Listening is not a passive disposition.

Listening helps us to find the right gesture and word which shows that we are more than simply bystander. Only through such respectful and compassionate listening can we enter on the paths of true growth and awaken a yearning for the Christian ideal: the desire to respond fully to God's love and to bring to fruition what he has sown in our lives. (EG 171)

At the heart of the gospel is God's love that is offered and invariably provokes a response. The church responds to this by becoming a sacrament of God's love and compassion in the world. Millennials are entitled to this love in the church's pastoral ministry, even though they operate from a rather different worldview and have unique kinds of experience. Their quest is, however, not isolated from the much broader "spiritual crisis" of today's secular world, a crisis that equally provokes a revolution.

41. Bruce Tulgan has written a work that focuses on the change of disposition of the older employers towards millennials. It is based on a similar tendency to misunderstand millennials and not to take them seriously, in this case, within the work place. Cf. Bruce Tulgan, *Not Everyone Gets a Trophy: How to Manage the Millennials* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2016).

It is therefore important to view the “negotiation” and “discernment” aspects of millennial spirituality from two final points, namely the “spiritual revolution” and ecumenical responsiveness.

Millennial spirituality as a response to global “spirituality revolution”

The millennial quest for spirituality mimics the general reasoning behind the “spirituality revolution” that is happening across the globe, particularly in the West. According to David Tracey, this “spirituality revolution” is a sudden realization by secular society that “it has been running on empty, and has to restore itself at a deep, primal source, a source which is beyond humanity and yet paradoxically at the very core of our experience.”⁴² It is a certain form of post-individualism era hitherto justified by techno-scientific ideology. Today, this ideology has paradoxically reverted its absolute autonomy over the society. The reversal is located precisely in “recent discoveries in physics, biology, psychology, and ecology” that “have begun to restore dignity to previously discredited spiritual visions of reality.”⁴³ And so, the revolution emerges as a countercultural “rebellion against the rise of materialism, inhumanity and economic rationalism”⁴⁴ that was promoted by the already discredited scientific worldview. This claim may also be disputed by the increasing contradictions that emerge in the form of neo-nationalisms, triggered by the immigration crisis across Europe and America.⁴⁵

These contradictions or oppositional forces do not necessarily cancel out the “spirituality revolution,” and may even be a symptom of the revolution. In the absence of cultural rootedness, expressed in some form of existential certainty or stable spiritual tradition, many young people are wont to seek meaning in all kinds of ideologies, including ideologies that have historically been proven to be toxic to society. A deep awareness of the intrinsically evil nature of some historical events continues to vanish just as the sense of the sacred. Yet the desire to hold on to something reemerges. Hence, in responding to religious tradition, one is confronted by two strong tendencies, namely “fanatical loyalty” or “fanatical opposition.”⁴⁶ Of course many millennials demonstrate the latter, or at least express an attitude of indifference. There is also another category of the indifferent. At this point, the distinction between religion qua religion and spirituality becomes necessary.

42. David Tracey, *The Spirituality Revolution: The Emergence of Contemporary Spirituality* (Hove: Brunner-Routledge, 2004), 1.

43. Tracey, *The Spirituality Revolution*, 1.

44. Tracey, *The Spirituality Revolution*, 3.

45. In a May 29, 2019 interview with CNN’s Christiane Amanpour, German Chancellor Angela Merkel refers to the rise of “dark forces” in Europe. These are represented by voices of ultra-nationalists, anti-Semitism, and anti-immigration forces all across Europe.

46. Tracey, *The Spirituality Revolution*, 75.

Spirituality introduces a different kind of dynamic that could explore convergences among a religiously diverse group. In fact, spirituality reinvigorates a natural interest in religion, especially among those who are fanatically opposed to it. The reason is that “religion offers the spirit a complex language, a sense of tradition and cultural memory.”⁴⁷ There is no intention to create a dualism between religion and spirituality. Spirituality is not opposed to religion but rather constitutes its core. Religion is actually born out of spiritual experience of the grandeur of creation and in an attempt to reach out to the sublime mystery that is responsible for creation. In that sense, the hardened crusts of religion may sometimes have to give way for access to its center.

In dealing with millennials’ quest, therefore, a spirituality that operates from their inner, personal experiences remains a starting point prior to any introduction to religious beliefs and belonging. To reverse this strategy is to make them feel threatened by codes that appear “alien and external to the self.”⁴⁸ Indeed, as Tracey puts it, the model of spirituality that could assuage millennials would be one “in which the sacred is intimate and close, a felt resonance within the self, and a deep and radiant presence in the natural world.”⁴⁹ It must be an incarnated spirituality; a spirituality that does not construe grace as external to the world but as immanent and active within it.

Millennial spirituality as an opportunity to ecumenical responsiveness

Spirituality is diffuse. This is made more evident by the possibility of a “seeker” identity in search of spiritual satisfaction. In that sense an ecumenical approach can offer some responses to the millennial question. Primarily, an ecumenical approach constitutes the conscious collaborative efforts that address millennials. It attempts to manage the crisis of Christian division in such a way that it does not further deepen the scandal of disunity. This does not suggest that each Christian denomination gives up its unique identity in the collaborative design but rather offers the variety that is constituted by both the differences of the denominations and the common spirituality that all can identify with. An example is an ecumenical development of the Office of the Hours in such a way that it serves both the need of “spiritual ecumenism” and the millennial search. An ecumenical approach also offers millennials the template for a possible integration of the “dweller” option. Spiritual ecumenism responds with an integrated seeker–dweller/negotiation–habitation model that gives a sense of stability in fluidity.

An ecumenical response grapples with the tension of identity and difference. Thus, it underscores the dilemma of the millennials in their fluid, nontraditional,

47. Tracey, *The Spirituality Revolution*, 75.

48. Tracey, *The Spirituality Revolution*, 75.

49. Tracey, *The Spirituality Revolution*, 76.

restless search. The tension is reconstituted not as a place of uncertainty but as an expression of a spiritual pilgrimage where certainty and doubt unite in a complex but creative way. All spiritual classics, such as John of the Cross's *Dark Night of the Soul* and *Ascent of Mount Carmel* or Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle* and *The Way of Perfection*, are marked by this tension. In this way, spirituality differs slightly from dogma. For while the former is lived and experienced personally and profoundly in an imperfect, bumpy, and often uncertain pilgrimage, the latter symbolizes perfect creedal codices that represent the ideal. While these are not necessarily contradictory, spirituality resonates with millennial sensibilities and is not likely to attract the opposition that traditional spirituality faces. Perhaps it is the spirituality of the mystical or contemplative type that holds this millennial appeal, but such an exploration is better taken up in another investigation.

Conclusion

Given the nontraditional, noninstitutional psychological disposition of millennials, their spiritual quest constitutes a threefold challenge for the church. First, the challenge requires that the church reexamine its approach towards the millennial generation and reassesses the effects of the predominant spiritual exercises and practices. The examples of Taizé, Nightfever, and TAPE point to another approach in which personal agency, involvement, and responsibility of millennials are emphasized in a context that is marked by freedom and discernment. Second, the church must become a space for the flourishing of millennials and not a place of judgment and moral imposition. Millennials are created by the same God, and also desire to celebrate their Christian identity in an authentic way. In that way, the church must focus on facilitating the transformation of millennials. Most millennials are concerned with becoming good and responsible human persons rather than identifying as agents of religious dogmas. But Christian identity and becoming a good human person are not contradictory in any way. After all, it is only a good person that makes a good Christian. The added advantage to this transformation is that millennials can contribute meaningfully to church's reclamation of the public sphere, in a way that is more inclusive than exclusive. Finally, the church is challenged to live and act ecumenically. Spiritual ecumenism is a sure means of keying into the nondenominational or trans-denominational mentality of most millennials, a channel through which they can appropriate a form of spirituality that recognizes their common legitimate concerns. In this process, both the millennials and the different churches engage in mutual learning and mutual transformation.

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