

Jewish Youth Not Lost

We wail a lot about all those "fallen-away," irreligious Jewish youth. Some of us even worry about these defenseless Jewish youth being gobbled up by the big, bad Christian missionaries.

This kind of concern about Jewish youth is a piece of middle-aged arrogance. And a mis-reading of what's happening on the American religious scene.

The older folks among the Christians have also been wailing about the alleged "godlessness" of their youth. The California State Board of Education has, in the past few weeks, attempted to remedy this situation by down-playing the theory of evolution in science textbooks; and by calling for the teaching of "moral and spiritual values" in the schools. A number of Christian church bodies have launched a loosely combined effort, called "Key 73," mainly to evangelize and recapture their lost youth.

The fact is that the American Christian youth have not become a pagan mass. This month an authoritative survey reveals that three quarters of all Americans under 30 years of age firmly believe that Jesus Christ is the true messiah. That's a pretty fundamental article of Christian faith. An even higher percentage of those 21 and younger hold that belief. And if you think that the college-going youth are weaker in their religious belief, you're wrong. A higher percentage of those in college, than those out of school, hold that fundamental belief.



Raab

Indeed, there's a religious renaissance going on among the youth. When the flower culture was flourishing briefly in the Haight-Ashbury, a few observers pointed out how similar it was to certain styles in the very early history of Christianity. Well, the flower children have graduated to more conscious levels of religiosity—which interestingly enough, have become more dependent on Judaeo-Christian roots, the early experimentation with Eastern religious styles having diminished, somewhat.

In their concern, the old folks are committing a standard error: troubled and confused by sharp changes in young people's cultural mores and attitudes, towards contemporary religious forms, the old folks are automatically defining these as "loss of religion." But the evidence is that young people have a stronger religious impulse than their parents had, *and* are interested in relating that impulse to their traditional religious roots—roots from which many of their church-going parents may indeed have become detached.

Jewish youth, as a group, are doing the same thing. By and large, they have a stronger religious impulse than their parents had, *and* are trying to find ways of expressing it within a *Jewish* context. In a way, it's easier for them. They have initial access to their religious tradition not only through doctrinal belief, but through a distinct culture, and through an identification with a living historical community—whose vibrations they now feel from around the world.

The JCRC has been concerned with the way in which "moral and spiritual values" are going to be taught in the schools, because it doesn't want to see a merger of church and state. It would be concerned about "Key 73" officially entering the school walls for the same reason. But these are matters of community relations and civil rights. Those campaigns, in themselves, are not going to convert many to anything, much less many Jews to Christianity.

However, because of the quickened religious consciousness among youth in general, efforts to accommodate these youth to institutional religious life—if they include efforts to accommodate institutional religious life to the youth—could be fruitful. Rabbis and synagogue leaders are beginning to recognize this, and are looking for ways to seize the opportunity.

But, at this point, such a special effort on their part is called for not because a sense of Jewish identity is unusually low among Jewish youth, but because it is unusually *high*. Such a special effort directed towards Jewish youth is built on the fact of special opportunity, not on the need for defense.