

### Hijacking God's grace

'I think Christians are a bunch of narrow-minded hypocrites!' 'What's wrong with sex before marriage?' 'Why can't I look at the witchcraft web sites?' 'Who says it's wrong whacking someone if they're playin' you up?' The list of tricky questions that I have 'fielded' in youth work situations seems endless. Not only do the young people test me, in terms of my own (and the Church's) moral coherence, but the people I talk to about youth work challenge me too!

'What do you mean you give them condoms – doesn't that encourage promiscuity?' 'Surely if you give them needles for their heroin you are only encouraging them?' 'Why do they behave so badly ... blame the parents ... if only they had more discipline ...' Since when was the wisdom of Solomon a prerequisite on the youth worker person specification?

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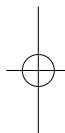
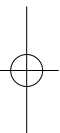
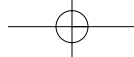
Where do you draw the line in terms of what you will and won't discuss with young people? A good example is the debate surrounding *Harry Potter*. I must confess that I worry that we ask the wrong questions in relation to some of the dilemmas we face about contemporary culture. In the case of *Harry Potter* many of the questions we ask revolve around the issue of whether it is a morally 'right' or 'wrong' story for young people to access? Should we read or watch it? Will it influence young people in a negative way? This type of moral reductionism seems a bit like the question: 'Is it right to play the lottery?' Surely a more important question for us, as Christians, is: 'Why do people get so much hope from the lottery?' Too often, it seems that Christian debate is completely given over to questions of defining what is 'right' and what is 'wrong'. Have we developed beyond early Jewish Christians who kept hijacking God's grace with questions about the rights and wrongs of circumcision (see Galatians)? So many young people say to me that they couldn't get involved with church because they are not good enough! All the time Christians are straining to define 'rights' and 'wrongs' we run the risk of putting yet new hurdles in front of young people and their potential experience of God.

### Popular culture

In my youth group, and amongst the young people I meet, I have shared in some excellent discussions about *Harry Potter* as well as many other books, films and programmes. The list includes *The Matrix*, *Lord of the Rings* (JR Tolkien), *The Dark Materials* trilogy (Philip Pullman), *The Wind on Fire* series (William Nicholson), *Eastenders* and many others. These discussions have covered in some depth the themes of forgiveness, repentance, sacrifice and redemption, often in a spontaneous and authentic way that I could never have planned as a 'lesson'.

I'm sure I'll be criticised for contradiction but I feel we need to get the questions we ask 'right'! My question would be how can we use contemporary interests/culture to enable young people to connect with God? Look at Paul on Mars Hill

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(Acts 17: 16-34): despite the fact that Paul was 'upset to see all the idols' (v16) we read that he uses the contemporary context to connect with the people. Imagine if he had started his sermon with, '... I found an idol to the Unknown God ... you can't have idols, it's against the law!' or '... This is theologically unacceptable' or '... this could lead you into idol worship.' No, instead Paul makes a connection with popular culture and goes on to share good news with the crowd in such a way that eventually they want to hear more.

### Connecting or compromising?

A creative and moral test for Christian youth work is to enable young people to get beyond the almost Pavlovian guilt/defensive/fear reaction that so many have when anything to do with God is mentioned. This needs to be long enough for young people to catch on to the tenderness of God's mercy and love. At times this may demand that we bite our theologically correct tongues in

order to explore spirituality in a non-defensive and open climate. I wonder if James was more worried by swearing when he wrote about the dangers of the tongue (James 3) than he was about what we might do to each other with our sophisticated and elaborate moral language codes?

Some questions for discussion: So where do we draw the line in discussion with young people? What are your moral absolutes – how do they affect your relationships with young people? How can we develop ways of connecting with contemporary culture so that we don't compromise our own belief systems? What books, films, plays, soap operas, stories have you found useful in opening God talk with young people?

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