

Christian BattleCry! November 2009

A Report From the Front Lines

At first glance a Teen Mania Ministries' BattleCry event may seem like a relatively innocuous, albeit asinine spectacle. A mass of teens and preteens ranging in number from just under two thousand up to fourteen thousand gather in a megachurch or stadium for a two-day Christian rock concert broken up by prayers asking for a greater capacity for love and forgiveness, infomercials for mission trips and leadership schools, motivational talks about combating loneliness



and peer pressure, and the occasional Nickelodeon-style sketch or after-school-special melodrama with strong Christian overtones. Generally talented, musically gifted rockers such as those in School of Worship sing passionate love songs of sublimated desire for the two-thousand year old Hebrew carpenter of their dreams, rather than for the girls who ignored them in high school or the groupies who can't get enough of them now. Hip-hop artists such as J.R. and Trip Lee perform songs about staying pure. Youth pastors such as the cartoonish Joel Johnson proudly proclaim how they received their first kiss from a girl on their wedding day at age twenty-seven, and how God, whom Joel somehow calculated is so "smitten with love for us" that He thinks about each of us exactly three-billion times per second, is asking us for a "love encounter," and wants us to "have a taste of His love," and get under "His love waterfall."

But after a certain point the absurd and the amusing becomes tragic and grows increasingly disturbing. And this is not simply due to certain ideas being spread that many of a more secular mindset would find distasteful, such as compassion and altruism being Christian inventions, with the implication being that Christians are best suited for such acts, or that God is calling his young evangelists to preach the gospel and possibly turn their public schools into their mission fields by starting Bible clubs, holding lunchtime and recess prayers, incorporating Jesus into oral reports, targeting loners to hear "the Word," and creating a "Heaven's top ten hit list." This disturbing quality is not even due to the patriarchal, archaic notions of human sexuality being taught to these young people, most noticeably when someone like youth pastor Kental Glasgow, with the help of some well-edited visual aids, inculcates his adolescent audience with the notion that boys who choose to give in to temptation are being disrespectful towards the girls they are giving in to temptation with, that girls who lead boys astray are "nasty," and that the mere thought of teenage romance, or romance at any age when the end goal is not matrimonial bliss, is inherently foolish, misdirected, and dangerous. And youth pastor Joel compares romantic love to fire, in the sense that it can be a good thing, but when taken out of the fireplace of marriage, it can only cause harm. During courtship, Joel recommends the creation of a relationship contract, which both parties sign after negotiating the contents of the said contract with their parents and pastors, even if both parties are in their twenties. The contents may include prohibitions against "allowing faces to touch," hand holding, being alone together after sundown, and "allowing personal areas to touch." Not surprisingly, topics such as birth control and STD prevention are absent from such talks, but again, this is not the most disturbing aspect of a BattleCry event.

No, for me, what I found to be most disturbing at the event in Hoffman Estates, Illinois, just outside of Chicago, this past November, which only had 1,900 attendees, was when Kental, with some more stylish video clips, began speaking about counterfeit identities that we take on when we hide who we are and allow ourselves to be defined by others, rather than by Jesus. And, needless to say, not every young person present was defined by Jesus or wanted to be defined by Jesus. Some of the kids were surely there because their parents forced them or because it was what their youth group was doing that weekend. Some may have just been there for a fun time. One kid in his early teens even lamented to me that at these events so many people are "all about Jesus,"

By Ait

but come Monday the fervor would be gone. But what was most disturbing, what was often either sad or frightening, was encountering the young people whose lives are defined by Jesus.

Stephanie Smith, a young singer with a punk wardrobe and a Gwen Stefani vibe, who has been dealing with depression for years as well as the pain of an absentee father with whom she has been struggling to reconnect with, grew teary eyed and had a quiver in her voice as she spoke of God's love for her and how she, as well as everyone in the audience, is part of a chosen generation with a purpose given to them by God. When a recent high school graduate who was now paying to intern at the Honor Academy, another affiliate of Teen Mania Ministries, and was trying to recruit me to do the same, spoke of how the internship had brought him closer to Christ, his pupils dilated. Expressions of anger flashed on his face when he discussed how homosexuality, abortion, and fornication are becoming acceptable and mainstream. Countless other young people freely spoke about their own "love encounters" with Jesus, enthusiastically talking about him as if he were a celebrity they knew personally. Some even asked me, a stranger, if I knew what his plan was for me and if I had been saved. One kid, who couldn't have been older than 14 or 15, who sat across from me at lunch, told me about his personal relationship with God, about the voices in his head that "might be [his] own thoughts, might be God, or might be something else," and about how when he was on a mission trip in Panama he and his companions were being bothered by insects until he said a prayer and God blew them away with a wind again and again as needed.

What was most disturbing about BattleCry was not only that they were teaching religion to children, indoctrinating them with a perverted view of the natural world and their own sexuality, teaching them to find comfort in a delusion, telling them to define themselves in an ultimately empty concept — but that they did such a good job at getting these messages across, of speaking to teenagers on their own terms, and of making their messages so appealing to young people.

Hell and damnation were rarely mentioned. Love was mentioned nearly three billion times per second. God was portrayed as someone who wanted you to come as you are and would love you for you, someone who does not want to see you suffer, someone who knows what's best for you and can offer you a joyful, purposeful existence if you only followed his law. Yet questions remain, like if he loves you for who you are why should homosexuals, "nasty" girls, and the boys who disrespect "nasty" girls have to change, and, if they fail to change and curb their "unnatural" behaviors, should they feel any guilt for offending a god who loves them so much?

Upon returning from my first BattleCry, other questions remained as well. Over the course of those two days I had spent with those nineteen hundred young Christians, was I spending my time with young people who were being brought up to be out of touch with reality and society if they did not find a way to experience a normal adolescence? Was I was experiencing America as it is once you are far enough removed from a major city? Or was I actually getting a glimpse of our country's future?

Atheist BattleCry? October 2009

Atheist 2.0, the Atheist Youth Movement

"If we don't reach the young people, we're screwed," explained Ed Buckner, president of American Atheists, when responding to a question during his talk at the 2009 Atheist Alliance International convention in Burbank, California. Stuart Bechman, president of the AAI, made it clear in an interview that he and his organization are equally committed to getting young people involved in secular causes, stating "It's probably the most important priority we have in AAI." And Dr. PZ Myers, biologist and author of the popular science blog *Pharyngula*, expressed similar sentiments: "It's absolutely essential. It's the future of the movement. If we're just a bunch of old gray people, we're dead. We want to grow."

Chapel

However, despite the importance attributed to reaching out to young people, and despite the popular statistic in atheist circles that many, including Buckner, like to point out, that "the age range that has the highest percentage of increase in nines is the youngest age range," secular groups still seem to have great difficulty in getting this younger demographic involved.

At many conferences young people can be a rarity. Within local groups they may be limited to one or two token college students assuming there are any at all. The efforts of groups such as the Secular Student Alliance are admirable, but are still dwarfed by Christian giants such as the Campus Crusade for Christ. Secular Student Alliance numbers are

growing, as demonstrated by their 250 percent increase in affiliate groups during the last three years, but they're not yet at a point where a college freshman can arrive at practically any university in the country and reasonably expect to find one of their affiliates, or a similar group with a similar message on campus. Although Secular Student Alliance attracted nearly one hundred attendees to their 2009 conference and two hundred more for their field trip to the notorious Kentucky creationist museum with PZ Myers, they're not yet at the level of BattleCry which can tour across the country and expect to attract audiences in the thousands.

The natural questions that follow are why is there such a paucity of young secularists active in secular causes and why do Christian organizations seem to be so much more successful at reaching out to this demographic? To begin with the first question, many secularist organizations have very passive marketing and recruitment strategies. They may set up a website or dabble in the social media, but beyond that, finding a freethought community is the responsibility of each individual. The problem with this is that the thought that there is a secular community out there waiting to be found is not one that always will occur to a young secularist, or even an older one. In addition to that, as Lyz Liddell, the SSA's senior campus organizer points out, the initiatives by major atheist organizations to reach out to young people are still relatively new, becoming a priority only within the last five years at most. Some, such as Hemant Mehta, the chair of the SSA's board of directors and delegate to the Secular Coalition of America, would say that although getting young people involved has become a greater priority in the last few years for national organizations, it's still not enough of a priority. In a recent interview he explained that today there are many young people that want to get involved but they don't have the money, and that "Atheist groups need to offer more travel grants to other conferences, more scholarships to their own conferences, and extremely discounted student rates to their own events."

Another reason that young people tend not to get involved is that, at the local level, college students willing to venture off campus, which many are not, and twenty-somethings who just left the university, experience what Liddell calls "a kind of disconnect." They go from "a freethought community at their college with a bunch of people their own age, usually very progressive, very outspoken, [and] very active," to a group of new people that are part of a very different demographic. The crowd is a lot older. They may easily be the youngest person there. And "the meetings are probably more lecture and discussion based and less interactive and activity based." Collectively these factors may make a young person feel uncomfortable. Mehta goes further, saying that local groups often don't reach out to younger people, and that their "discussions tend to be boring...there's a lot of negativity at [their] meetings," and their advertising is sub-par, usually done on "poorly-designed websites that no one can navigate, instead of Facebook where students are looking."

As for the second question, the most obvious response to why Christian organizations are so much more successful at getting young people involved is that Christians are more numerous in the population, there's no stigma attached to being Christian — as opposed to being an atheist, or even a secularist — and their organizations, which have been around much longer, can outspend those of atheists several times over. As SSA executive director August E. Brunsman pointed out, "the Campus Crusade for Christ's annual budget is over a quarter of a billion dollars. And they have over twenty-five thousand employees." Compare that to the Secular Student Alliance's two employees. Does this disparity in funds and manpower account for a lack of involvement of young Nones? Definitely! However, there are other issues as well, less ostensible problems that, if addressed, most certainly would not make up for this disparity, but would most likely still have an impact worth noting.

There are some things Christian organizations do quite well that secular organizations seem to have some degree of difficulty with. One such thing is making that important initial effort to reach out to young people. Another is doing so in such a way that these efforts connect with them. Christian organizations learned long ago how to do these things. They learned how to make their message appear youthful, cool, relevant, and sometimes even sexy. They learned how to effectively implement the social media. They learned how to frame issues related to their causes in such a way that they appeal to such youthful characteristics as a distrust of established institutions, the desire to rebel against authority, and the ideal of wanting to make the world a better place.

The Survivors, a Christian group that specializes in providing high school and college kids with pro-life media and activism training, describes themselves on their website as "engaged in a battle to end America's genocide," going on to say "we are directly affected by this holocaust, because it happened to us — we are the target. Abortion has claimed the lives of our classmates, friends, our brothers and sisters." The American Life League and Rock for Life employ the same rhetoric, while holding rock concerts and pizza parties, and selling stylish, consciousness raising T-shirts. BattleCry implements a similar strategy. On the home page of their website they have the following: "At this very moment, an entire generation of young people is at risk. Giant corporations, media conglomerates, and other purveyors of popular culture have leveraged every dollar they can spare, as well as every waking hour, into claiming the souls of today's

youth." At their events, they too have bands and pizza, as well as videos and plays. The basic message of these organizations is "There are established institutions out there that are out to get you with their lies. The grown-ups are too apathetic to do anything about it. Do you want to be part of the problem or part of the solution? Now let's make the world a better place by rebelling against authority! It'll be cool. There'll be pizza and music...and church...which is one of the cool institutionalized sources of authority." Compare that to SSA's message of being around "to organize, unite, educate, and serve students and student communities that promote the ideals of scientific and critical inquiry, democracy, secularism, and human based ethics." It's to the point, but lacks the enthusiasm and sense of urgency conveyed by their Christian counterparts.

Now, this is not to say that to get young people involved secular organizations need to throw pizza parties and rock concerts, while incessantly spewing hyperbole. However, the occasional youthful event, or youth targeted message, delivered with sincerity and plausibility by the right individual or group, wouldn't hurt.

The Rational Response Squad carved a niche for themselves a few years ago doing just that with their own brand of cavalier atheism exhibited in their Internet exploits, not to mention their "Blasphemy Challenge" and debates with creationists. These activities seemed to strike a chord with young nonbelievers. However, due to what some might call a lack of organizational ability in addition to rumors of alleged in-fighting, both figurative and perhaps literal, they seem to have lost the prominence they may have once had.

More currently striking a chord with young nonbelievers are several atheist bloggers. Mehta, who authors the Friendly Atheist blog in addition to fulfilling his SSA duties, says "bloggers as a whole do a decent job of reaching out to young people and I'm just a cog in that machine. Younger people read blog posts because they're accessible, free, and easy to pass along to friends."

Other prominent cogs in that machine are "Brother" Richard Haynes, the author of the blog *Life Without Faith* and the owner and president of Atheist Nexus, the largest social networking site exclusively for nontheists, and PZ Myers, who not only authors *Pharyngula* but also serves on the board of Atheist Nexus and holds the honor of having the largest group on that site. With Atheist Nexus, Haynes hopes to help foster a sense of community amongst nontheists. As of late 2009, Atheist Nexus has more than 13,000 members scattered across all 50 U.S. states and more than 200 countries. Many of its members are under 30, and are not otherwise affiliated with any other atheist organization.

As for Myers and *Pharyngula*, Myers says "It's not directed towards any audience, it's a personal enterprise. I'm just shouting out what I think." And this consists of biology lessons, personal anecdotes, musings on current events related to science, and an infectious love of cephalopods, all of which seems to especially resonate with young people. When asked why this might be, Myers humbly responded it "is entirely coincidental," before going on to say "it might have something to do with my own personal immaturity. I don't know..."

Reaching the same audience is the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science, which not only delivers science news and information to a multitude of young readers via their website, but is also responsible for such ingenious works of atheist advertising as the "Scarlet Letter," the "OUT" campaign, and the new "Crocodile" mascot. In addition, the RDFRS has come to be praised by the likes of Bechman and Buckner for encouraging young people via their website to become active within the atheist community, and working with established organizations such as the AAI and AA to get them to offer student discounts and make their conferences more accessible to young secularists. [Ed. Note: AAI offers \$15 student discount memberships.]

In fact, AAI's efforts to involve young people at this year's convention were greater than those of practically any other national atheist organization in recent history, other than perhaps the SSA, and they definitely paid off. They offered discounts to students, worked with RDFRS, had a thread on the RDFRS website, and advertised on podcasts, as well as blogs such as Myers' *Pharyngula*. These efforts resulted in approximately one hundred of the seven hundred conference attendees being students, and many, many others under age 30 as well. Making the atmosphere of the conference more welcoming to these young guests were vendors such as the Arrogant Atheist with their incisive, humorous, and fashionable apparel, and the band Ana Kefir, which is Arabic for "I am infidel" or "I am [a] nonbeliever." There was even a Saturday night party sponsored by Atheist Nexus, featuring atheist rapper Proclaim! and the band Black Party Politics, and being broadcast online to several hundred viewers. It paled in comparison to the atmosphere at a BattleCry event, but it could almost rival that of a Rock for Life concert in Washington, D.C. around the anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, and that is definitely a step in the right direction.

And as with any journey to the desired destination, it all begins with that first step.

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