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Youthful German Skeptics Challenge Religious Convention

Teenagers at a pop concert A generation of young Germans has turned its back on organized religion, finding the church outdated and irrelevant. Yet a new study shows that focusing on spirituality could win them back.

A dozen teenagers hung out at the Lengsdorf neighborhood's youth center on a recent cold spring evening. Some lounged on a wraparound sofa while others hammered away at a foosball table.

The center, in a middle class neighborhood in the western German city of Bonn, sits just across the street from Lengsdorf's graceful St. Petri church and uses a couple of basement rooms in a parish building. But you won't find these teenagers in the pews come Sunday morning. Like many German youth, they're completely uninterested in organized religion.

Both Desiree, 17, and Laura, 15, who didn't want to give their last names, identified themselves as Protestants and said they willingly went through three years of confirmation classes, although Desiree admitted she did it "only for the presents."

While they both expressed an interest in spiritual themes, they don't consider themselves religious. Desiree never goes to church and Laura only attends at Christmas.

"Most of the people I know who are Protestant don't believe in God," Desiree said. "I don't believe in God because I think it makes for lazy thinking. I think religion is something people made up."

What makes German teens tick?

While about half of German young people say they're religious, the vast majority don't act on their faith. About two out of every three Germans identify themselves as Catholic or Protestant, yet many by birth only.

One study showed that a mere 4 to 6 percent of young Germans attend Sunday services, and then only occasionally.

A newly released survey by the Heidelberg-based Sinus-Sociovision showed that while young people search for meaning to their lives, they don't equate the answers with religion.

Sinus-Sociovision identified different "milieus," or groupings of young people with similar goals and values, such as traditionalists, post-materialists, hedonists or experimentalists. Some of these groups have little or no contact with organized religion. Yet across many different types of youth, there's a general interest in spirituality, the survey found.

This is backed up by a Bertelsmann Foundation study published in December 2007, which found that a relatively large 41 percent of Germans aged 18 to 29 expressed belief in God, and life after death.

Reincarnation trumps resurrection

Desiree might reject God, but she believes in life after death.

"I believe that people are reincarnated. I've seen reports where people talked about their experiences in past

lives and it seemed very believable," Desiree said.

"But you're heart doesn't keep beating after you die. I can't imagine it," Laura countered.

Hierarchy and rules: very uncool

While many young Germans reject church, Steffen Hauff doesn't believe that they have rejected God. Most of his 20-something peers might skip Sunday morning services or frown on traditional Christian views on sexuality. But they believe in something spiritual, even if it's not fashionable to call it God, Hauff said.

In Hauff's experience, "young people are very open towards spirituality." Yet they don't want the hierarchy and rules that they see as going along with organized religion, said Hauff, who was involved in Catholic youth organizations and scouting while growing up.

Hauff currently heads Aktion West-Ost, a group which organizes youth exchanges between Germans and Eastern Europeans. He's seen plenty of teenagers get excited about a spontaneous prayer session or sing along. Yet these more relaxed forms of religious expression remain very distant from the Sunday morning experiences found in most Catholic or Protestant churches in Germany.

Hauff agrees with the Sinus-Sociovision conclusions that in order to reach teens, Catholic youth organizations need to target their message to the different youth subcultures which often have very little contact with church. Furthermore, they need to take the dive into the Internet-based social networking world in which many teens are immersed.

Teens question tradition

Hauff said he doesn't think the goal should be filling the church pews with young people.

"It's not important that people are only in church for two hours on Sunday mornings. The important thing is everyday parish life; that they spend time together and help each other," Hauff said.

Yet while it is often easy to convince teens to attend fun events like World Youth Day, it should also include a deeper relationship with God, religion and the church, said Sigrid Grabmeier. Teens usually aren't interested in more serious commitment, said Grabmeier, of Germany's We are Church, a group advocating reform of the Roman Catholic Church.

Most teens are turned off from church because there are "so many rules they don't understand and don't agree with," Grabmeier said. Few are willing to become actively involved in trying to bring about change.

Yet Grabmeier sees the youthful desire to question orthodox beliefs as healthy. Even her teenage sons, while religious, opted to take ethics at school because they felt it was important to expand their own understanding of the world.

"I find it interesting," Grabmeier said. "They were quite fed up with only seeing [religion"> from a Christian perspective."

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