



## THESE KIDS TODAY

After one of their weekly meetings campus ministers participate in a taped discussion for *Sooner Magazine* on a favorite subject and a chief concern: the university student

**Shields:** Rabbi, you've been longer than the rest of us, would you have any comments on students today compared with those you've known in past years?

**Eppstein:** Well, that's like casually dropping a mountain on my shoulders. I could make a lot of comments. I don't know whether students are any different today, but they certainly seem different. Maybe it's merely a difference of manners and superficial fads. Or maybe it's

a sign I'm getting older. They don't seem as serious as they have in the past. Not that they ever were very serious.

**Ross:** Don't you feel that they're better educated than the generations before them? I can't help comparing them to my generation.

**Eppstein:** I don't know. I find most of them don't seem to know anything. They don't know who Browning was, or I'll mention a passage from the Bible

that you assume everyone knows and they never heard it, or I'll make a reference to Milton, speaking of his blindness, and they stare back at me, blindly.

**Gibson:** But they can talk about things in terms of sciences, in engineering and related fields that leave me gasping for a way to communicate with them. I think they generally may have blind spots as far as their being prepared for a liberal arts education, however.

**Wiginton:** This is part of our problem, and part of our reason for being here is to channel their interests and this seeking for knowledge into the area of religion.

**Scruggs:** I think in any student generation there's going to be a certain number of goof-offs, and probably it's a consistent percentage of the student body. But I would agree with Father Ross that by and large the student is much better prepared—that is, the good student—than my generation was.

**Ross:** I attended an English class this morning and I was impressed and really rather amazed at the precision of the questions and the concepts that were being dealt with. I know my experiences haven't been the same as yours, Rabbi. I think perhaps the kind of things they're interested in are different today. In terms of literature they read James Baldwin instead of Robert Browning.

**Eppstein:** But isn't there something horrible about a generation that doesn't know anything about Browning—I don't mean to sound like a Browning buff—not even to know he was a poet?

**Scruggs:** Who's Browning?

**Eppstein:** I think they're interested, but I think they're just out of touch with the past. They're simply not in the cultural tradition we have. It's as if they were people from another planet.

**Scruggs:** They're certainly more existentially oriented—more to the moment—to what's happening around them. I find students in all divisions of the University who are quite literate politically and fairly sophisticated as to what's going on in the world, students who reveal real thought, concern and quite a bit of reading. And perhaps they do spend more time reading contemporary authors, but these are the people who speak to them. Maybe they're more self-centered than other generations and are less interested in the historical perspective, but they've got a lot going for them that we didn't have in terms of their ability to use their minds. They have the intellectual tools. It's a matter of motivation more than anything else.

**Webb:** I think the student today has been orphaned. For two reasons. First, our increased prosperity has allowed us to be lulled to sleep as far as any concern for the past, and second, the increasing anonymity of each individual has given him a sort of defeatist attitude. So many go about as an atom bombarded from many sources, never having much time

or energy or concern for anything but getting through this day and readying themselves for tomorrow. This has left us orphaned, I believe, in our perceptions, separated from any understanding of our heritage.

**Ross:** It seems to me they ask different questions. Again, you wonder what sort of tricks memory plays on you, but it seems to me that the basic question that students asked themselves 20 years ago was "What am I going to do with my life?" The question today is more basic, one of personal identity: "Who am I?" This seems to be the question they ask, and you have to talk to them differently.

**Wiginton:** Do they ask it in a pessimistic way?

**Ross:** I wouldn't characterize it as pessimistic. I would say in a confused way.

**Scruggs:** One of the things here that's important is that for the more sensitive student is a very real sense that he's living in the 21st century. He's anticipating what's coming, and the guide lines and traditions of the past are to him, whether we agree or not, irrelevant. The space age, the nuclear threat, the technological breakthroughs, social change—this is a new world that's emerging, and yet he keeps asking this question, "Who am I?" It's an age-old question, and he's caught, it seems to me, between these two. If he's at all sensitive, he knows he's a child of the past and a citizen of the future. And the future is bearing down. This is one reason for the pressure in school, a lot of which the university puts on and lot of which the student puts on himself because he's caught in this tension within himself as he senses what's happening in the world.

**Eppstein:** They don't realize the past is part of the present and also part of the future. They don't understand that "tradition" is the word and not "past." They're not interested. It's finished; it's over. We're plunging into the future, but you can't work into the future without, at least in a healthy way, heeding a heritage.

**Scruggs:** I think we've short-changed them to a certain extent. This tradition, particularly the religious tradition, has been put to them much too categorically, much too simply, and I think they're rejecting the past in the way it's been interpreted to them. I find when they get hold of an exciting history professor and begin to delve into the solid tradi-

tion of the human story and things begin to open to them, they see guide lines to the future. But in many cases when the contemporary student breaks with the past, he's making a legitimate break.

**Wiginton:** We shouldn't lead them to break with the past just because it was simple. There are many simple things that need to be carried over to the present. For instance, many of the earthy teachings that our parents taught us. The ethics and moral teachings of the Scriptures can be presented in a simple way so that people without a college education can understand.

**Gibson:** There's one thing I'm convinced of in terms of describing students at OU or students as I have encountered them from other campuses. They cannot be described as "they." You can break them down into numerous categories. You can talk about the particularly alert students or the ones here to get a degree and not concerned about an education or those here for social reasons. You can't talk about these groups in a single "they."

**Eppstein:** True. And I think we all could agree that the greatest satisfaction we have in our work is in working with the individual.

**Webb:** One of the things that concerns me is what I would call a moral relativity. Combining the loss of a heritage with existentialism in a free society where individual freedom is stressed—these have come together and lodged in what I would call a moral relativity. We have relativized any absolutes that the culture ever had whether it was God or laws or whatever and at the same time we have absolutized the relative in terms of one's own individual rights. The end result is a mutual irresponsibility. I'm the first one to state that I don't think campus clergy should be moral guidance clinicians, but as a minister of God I am extremely concerned about this moral relativity and what I would call moral individual chaos that is now present. It's not coming. It's with us, and where we go from here is a very serious and ominous question.

**Alexandre:** I think we should examine why the student should be in the position of an orphan. If it's related to the fact that he's going through a transition from the world of absolutes to a world of relativity, then when does this transition occur? When he first comes to col-

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THE REV. JIM SHIELDS, Methodist



RABBI VICTOR EPPSTEIN, Jewish



THE REV. WILLIAM ROSS, Catholic

lege? Is this some sort of condition in high school now? I don't know. I think perhaps when one comes to college, there's a big jump—a big break—and a lot of students who have been living in a communal world governed essentially by parents rebel against the absolutes that have been forced upon them. They want to be able to analyze the situation and see whether these standards are worthy of being considered absolute. They're willing to throw them off completely in their investigation.

**Webb:** I think this is one of the misconceptions of today. We make the assumption that when students come to college they are leaving a world governed by parents. They're not. The permissiveness of parents, the absentee father, the need parents have to be accepted by their children have led to a student who long before he ever arrives on campus is totally orphaned as far as any absolutes are concerned. And the church is as guilty here as the parents and anyone else.

**Shields:** Are you saying this is true here in the Bible Belt?

**Webb:** Jim, I would say it is widespread.

**Shields:** Some of us might think we see some kids who come here who have had strong homes, who have had guide lines, and Norman's statement talks a little more to this situation than it might in other places.

**Webb:** I think probably the urban culture hasn't hit as much here.

**Shields:** Not as much as some other areas, but I think it has.

**Gibson:** I'm thinking at the same time that you point to absentee fathers, I am

thinking of students who are rebelling against arbitrary fathers, fathers who have given the person no opportunity to exercise his own judgment. You've got both of these things present.

**Eppstein:** Children always rebel against their parents. That's an old, old story. But there was a time when the person heard as much as the parent was the minister, the teacher. Today who is the person heard most?

**Webb:** Hugh Hefner.

**Eppstein:** Well I don't know their names, but they're the fellows on TV. There are all sorts of people who are talking and being heard, and we haven't even become aware what the situation is. There's a rising flood of unculture. It isn't just a different culture—it's a non-culture which has washed out everything else. I think Webb is quite right. They didn't have it when they came.

**Alexandre:** I think this is going to reflect on the religious life, too, if I can use that term and I don't like to use it. If they have a problem with absentee parents then going back to the basic structure of the father being the priest of the house and a kind of God-image, it appears that besides an absentee parent we've also got an absentee God. The most we can expect, then, as spiritual orphans, with at best a stepfather rather than a father, is to be stepsons.

**Scruggs:** I think we've got a deeper problem than just parents as such. I feel that the parental patterns we have seen that cause problems with students—these anxieties—are based in our time and are new. I think we've got to accept the fact that this is a new world

facing problems that have never been faced, facing some of the ultimate questions of life in a context that is really quite new. I talked with a student recently who was really disturbed because he had called his mother to tell of an academic honor he had received, and she had said, "Well, that's nice, dear." Granted a parent can, even if he doesn't understand what the kid's doing, react in a different way than just saying, "That's nice." But what I tried to help him see was that the chances are, even though his parents are college educated, they're never going to understand what he's doing. I think there's a bridge between the college generation and their parents at this point that somehow we have to come to recognize and establish relationships on different terms than we have before.

**Eppstein:** I think we're concentrating on a very small part of the scene. It isn't just the problem of the student who is ahead of his parents or his parents don't understand because they're ignorant. We have perhaps as many or more the other way around. The parents are well educated, have a sound cultural heritage and the children are worshipers of the Beatles.

**Ross:** I think what's distinctive about this age, and it probably came out of the Second World War is that a lot of things came together at one time. There was the emphasis on winning the war, fathers gone, a disrupted society. Young people had to devise their own form of recreation. Then you had the advent of the car—I hate to get mundane about this but this was a technological ad-



THE REV. DON GIBSON, *Christian*



THE REV. TRAVIS WIGINTON, *Baptist*



THE REV. DON SCRUGGS, *Presbyterian*

vance which had a tremendous impact upon our culture. These kids now have freedom, freedom no other kids have had. They are the first teenagers, the first 13- to 19-year-olds in the history of the world who have been allowed to establish their own culture. And they will resist any efforts to impose on that culture and dictate to it. The Beatles are a symbol of this. It's madness, you know, but it's theirs. They've been cut adrift and have responded with a culture of their own. I think what we find in the colleges is an effort to articulate what they've been doing all along.

**Ballard:** I would like to come to the defense of several significant pockets of our so-called unculture, and I think I could agree with the illustrations you might give, Rabbi. It seems to me quite natural that this generation responds the way Americans traditionally have responded to history. And by tradition I mean the factor of the frontier which allowed persons to forget history because of the necessity of the present.

**Eppstein:** They thought they were forgetting it. A man like Thomas Jefferson might reject tradition but he was the product of tradition.

**Ballard:** And I grant you this, but you'll have to admit that Americans have in essence rejected history as any valid interpretation for the present. This is, like it or not, part of our civilized tradition.

**Eppstein:** Henry Ford.

**Ballard:** Yes. We may not like these illustrations but they are nonetheless our tradition. It's been carried down to the children's children. And now we're seeing the result. I think this has been

aided by so-called traditional religion in which, for instance, we're able to decide a certain thing, namely decipher our situation, forget our past and start a new life. We've seemed to settle on this particular element within traditional American religion. I think this has enhanced the dubious tradition which America has inherited. And now, quite frankly, the present generation couldn't care less about the Browning the elders knew. Today James Baldwin writes about the Browning generation, describing what elders who knew about Browning did to other elders who didn't know about Browning. And perhaps these significant pockets—and Berkeley is an example—are reevaluating the meaning, the narrow meaning of freedom and calling for a redefinition of what it means to be an American in freedom. And, of course, they went to excesses, we could say. All right. But that doesn't explain the meaning of Berkeley. And I would like very vigorously to defend these pockets which I think are very encouraging. I'll grant that at OU they're a very small remnant.

**Gibson:** I have found a deep fear on the part of many students in the area of entering into meaningful human relationships. That is, really exposing oneself to another—his deep desires, his longings, his ambitions. I think you can explain this in a lot of ways, but I'd be interested to know if anyone else has discovered such a fear.

**Webb:** The motto of the National Florist Society is "Say It With Flowers," and I think this is indicative of a group of people in a society who perhaps fear

being sensitive, fear losing their virility. **Ross:** This is one of the crises of identity, I think, because if you're not sure who you are, you don't want to expose this to anyone else. And yet they talk about this more than any other generation has.

**Webb:** Well, to get scriptural, love your neighbor as you love yourself, and if you can't love yourself as it applies to self-knowledge, you can't possibly convey anything to one another.

**Scruggs:** There is a tremendous sense of fear, but it's grounded in reality as far as the sensitive students are concerned. They recognize the potentiality for good and evil, and it scares them to death as it does many of us. They can see the path of both destruction and salvation. They know how to get on the path of destruction. They've seen it personally, politically, every other way. But they don't know how to get on the other path. This is the point at which they reject tradition because the tradition is why we're where we are.

**Eppstein:** Don, what are they afraid of? We've always had fear. That hasn't just been invented.

**Scruggs:** Oh, no.

**Eppstein:** When I was young, we knew there were things we ought to do. We had a sense of duty, and we were afraid we couldn't live up to it. That's what we were afraid of. Now they're not afraid of not living up to some standard, because they don't have that standard.

**Gibson:** I disagree. Many of them still do. For instance, in talking about marriage, I've found many to be deeply

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THE REV. ROBERT WEBB, *Episcopalian*



NORMAN ALEXANDRE, *I-R Council*



THE REV. CLAY BALLARD, *Methodist*

concerned. They don't want to end in the divorce court or to go through life pretending they're happy.

**Eppstein:** Are they afraid they won't be happy or that they won't make someone else happy?

**Gibson:** Both. Many aren't sure they can contribute to the happiness of another, and vice versa. One told me, "You know, my well being as a person doesn't depend upon any *one* other person. For me to enter into marriage is to limit myself in finding my major fulfillment as far as human relationships are concerned in this one whom I marry. I don't want to have to depend on one person. Such well being comes from many people." That's the concept this person had whether it's an accurate concept or not.

**Eppstein:** This certainly is the death of God, isn't it? When all a person worries about is himself, his fulfillment, his happiness—no concern for any values outside himself. And this is what we've been pointing to all along. This breakdown of tradition, religion, heritage, call it what you will. It's a concentration on self, the worst kind of egotism.

**Shields:** There's another question I'd like your comment on. How do you proceed in the ministry in a campus situation?

**Scruggs:** With fear and trembling. The situation we've described points up the context we work in, and I'd like to approach this by talking about something I believe to be relevant. Granted there are a lot of students who are this wishy-washy Protestant type—come when

you want to, don't come when you don't and so forth. And there are students who respond to our work, grow in it and become responsible members of the religious community and responsible citizens when they leave here. But I'm thinking of another group of students—the ones making today's headlines. The Berkeley students, the civil rights participants, the Peace Corps students. These people as I have known them in a sense are saying, some of them quite articulately, something important to the religious community. And that is—take the civil rights struggle—"Look at the mess we have. We work here in Mississippi and Alabama and everywhere and the greatest opposition we get is from people who quote the Bible and say they are Christians. We reject this tradition. If you can show us in one way or the other where this tradition is relevant to this struggle then I'll listen to you. But then and only then." I agree with them that this is a legitimate rejection and venturing into newness. And I believe students respond to the Peace Corps rather than church missions for the same reason. It's more relevant to them.

**Eppstein:** You're talking about a very small percentage of this generation.

**Scruggs:** But these are the people—I'm convinced—who are going to be the leaders of the next generation. I think we must take these people very seriously in our work.

**Eppstein:** Some who will be leaders wouldn't have dreamed of being in the Peace Corps. You're talking about the

Berkeley people, the protests, the picket lines, about a small group carried away in a present-day fad. It'll be something else in five years.

**Scruggs:** I believe these people, with those in technology, are on the frontiers of the future. It's with these we need to work. Not to overlook the others but to be aware of this sensitivity.

**Webb:** The availability of the priest or pastor to the students is essential and with this goes a need to know whom you are talking with. In the college ministry we must see that the word of God is conveyed intelligently; it must be well thought out and, pardon the expression, sophisticated.

**Gibson:** If by sophisticated, you mean that it has to be put on an intellectual basis that represents the same kind of serious, deep investigation that goes on in the rest of the students' academic lives, then I would say, yes.

**Eppstein:** There's also room for naive people, too. We don't expect the world to consist entirely of intellectuals.

**Gibson:** I would agree.

**Shields:** An interesting comment was made one time, and I think you've said the same thing in another way, that Kitty in *Gunsmoke* is a good example of a campus minister. That she is at her place of business where she's always available to sit down and talk. She has the time, she's present and that this is part of what she considers her job. It's a personal kind of ministry. You could say this is the Gospel according to *Gunsmoke*.

**Eppstein:** Amen.

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