

“ADOLESCENT HERESY”: THE REJECTION OF PARENTAL RELIGIOUS VALUES

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To those people who believe that the function of religion is to explain life in terms of ultimate meanings, the transmission of their religious values to their children becomes an essential task. Parents are desirous that their offspring shall come to embrace the attitudes and behaviors that they themselves prize so highly. And, of course, most younger children do adopt patterns of thinking and acting somewhat similar to those of their parents.

However, as these young people enter the adolescent years, a change often takes place. They may exhibit an increasing sense of alienation from the value system of their parents and a hostility toward certain religious practices such as church attendance and codes of conduct. This is not to say that all adolescents manifest these symptoms. Some may be unaffected, some may exhibit mild non-conformity, and others may flame out in open rebellion. With some, the alienation may begin in the pre-teen years, while with others it may not occur until the late teens. In some cases, after a few years of disaffection—quiet or stormy—the youth will appear to have passed the crisis and will settle back into a life-style resembling that of their parents. In other instances, they will sever all ties with the church of their childhood. Some of these will eventually rejoin the church. Some will not.

This phenomenon must command the interest of every student of applied religion as well as that of every sincere Christian believer. Psychologist David Ausubel calls it “adolescent heresy.”¹ How can it be accounted for and how can it be prevented or remediated?

It would be overly simplistic to attempt to identify and describe *the* cause of religious alienation in adolescents. The roots of

¹David P. Ausubel, *Theory and Problems of Adolescent Development* (New York, 1954), p. 271.

human behavior are varied and complex indeed. Yet, it is possible to weave together a number of strands from the adolescent experience and discern a pattern which reveals why such "heresy" is not at all abnormal or unreasonable—perhaps even likely. At the same time, this view will suggest ameliorative measures. But first it is necessary to examine the concept of "developmental tasks."

1. *Developmental Tasks*

Certain students of human behavior, such as Erik Erikson,² have divided the life span into a series of stages. Each stage has its own particular questions, challenges, and crises. Each has certain tasks to be accomplished. To at least some degree, the mastery of these developmental tasks is necessary to reach maturity for that stage and to prepare the individual to cope with the next step in his or her overall growth.

One developmental psychologist who has provided a helpful formulation is Robert Havighurst.³ He has divided the life span into six stages: (1) infancy and early childhood, (2) middle childhood, (3) adolescence, (4) early adulthood, (5) middle age, and (6) later maturity. For each stage, Havighurst has described the tasks appropriate to it.

The term "development tasks" suggests that the behaviors are programmed into the maturing process of an individual so that they become appropriate only at a certain time. The person does not have either the motivation or the ability to master them at an earlier stage, but once the biological-psychological time-clock has tolled the destined hour, an individual is internally driven to attempt to accomplish them. For example, among the tasks of infancy and early childhood are learning to walk and learning to talk. These are natural to a certain period in the developmental process.

2. *Tasks of Adolescence*

Two of the tasks appropriate to the adolescent period are (a) gaining emotional independence from parents and other adults,

²Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, 2d ed. (New York, 1963), pp. 247-274.

³Robert J. Havighurst, *Development Tasks and Education*, 2d ed. (New York, 1952).

and (b) achieving assurance of economic independence.⁴ Closely related is the search for a separate and personal identity. Perhaps the basic question of adolescence is, "Who am I?" The youth must search for meaningful self-consciousness. They have to learn to relate to others in a mature way, gain some semblance of what they will do with their lives, and develop some sort of philosophy of living. Teenagers are in imagination trying out the roles of marriage partner, parent, career pattern, citizen, and church supporter to determine what will fit. They are learning to build conscious value systems and to commit themselves to them. This is an experience in striking contrast to that of the small child, who has been largely dependent upon parents for constant advice, as well as for emotional and financial support.

In the stage of infancy and early childhood, it is difficult to prevent children from attempting to walk and talk when their "inner calendar" indicates that the time has arrived. To do so might result in severe emotional damage. So in adolescence, it is difficult to "fight nature" and quash the drives toward independence, self-identity, and personal-value choice. The internal pressure to leave off adolescence and become an adult is great, and is not to be easily denied. Just as some children do not learn to walk and talk, so also some adolescents never gain real independence or fail to develop a personal value system, but in both cases, this is abnormal development.

Achieving independence or emancipation is, however, a gradual process. It is as if the land of childhood and the land of adulthood were separated by a dark and murky swamp. The passageway through this swamp of adolescence is ill-defined and only negotiated by picking one's way with difficulty. Lawrence Schiamberg has suggested that one of the reasons for a conflict between generations is "the lack of clearly defined steps marking the recession of parental authority over children."⁵

Life in modern, western cultures has exacerbated the problem. During a large share of this world's history and in various cultures, young people could be socialized largely by their own parents in

⁴Ibid., pp. 42-47.

⁵Lawrence B. Schiamberg, *Adolescent Alienation* (Columbus, Ohio, 1973), pp. 29-30.

their own homes. Boys learned adult male roles (largely agricultural or pastoral) in working with their fathers. Girls acquired adult female roles (mostly homemaking skills) from their mothers. By the time of puberty, the young person was often ready to assume his or her place in adult society. The adolescent had a sense of responsibility and career certainty that resulted in feelings of independence and clearness of identity.

Today, particularly in the western world, becoming an adult is not so simple. While the home remains an important factor, it must share the task of child socialization with many other influences. Career options are varied and complicated, and years of formal schooling are necessary to pursue many of them. The explosion of information bombards the youth on every side. Society is in a state of rapid change. Learning becomes quickly obsolete, so the successful adult of today must acquire the skills to cope with a rapidly changing environment. Even the expectations of marriage and parenthood have been widely revised, calling for a maturity and command of interpersonal skills not needed in the traditional home of yesterday.⁶ The long transition period between being grown-up in some ways and not-yet-grown-up in others causes strain and makes it increasingly difficult for the adolescent to find his or her separate identity.

Hilmar Wagner states that the lengthened educational period required in modern society has created many of the adolescent-parent conflict problems by delaying economic and emotional independence from parents at a time when youth are physically and sexually mature and eager to achieve their own identity.⁷ William Rogers suggests that the increased moratorium between childhood and adult responsibility, resulting in delayed independence, is one of the chief sources of youth-parent conflicts.⁸

3. *Rejection of Parental Values*

So here now is a physically and sexually mature adolescent driven by God-given forces to become a responsible, independent

⁶David and Vera Mace, *We Can Have Better Marrings If We Really Want Them* (Nashville, Tenn., 1974), pp. 61-65.

⁷Hilmar Wagner, "Adolescent Problems Resulting from the Lengthened Educational Period," *Adolescence* 5 (Fall 1970): 339-344.

⁸William R. Rogers, *The Alienated Student* (Nashville: Board of Education, The United Methodist Church, 1969), pp. 51-52.

adult. The proper time for this in the developmental scheme of human beings has arrived. But in most cases, this individual simply cannot yet assume the responsibilities of adulthood, for there is still lack of emotional maturity and there is still dependence on parents for financial support. Unable as yet to set up his or her own home or enter upon a career, this youth seeks subconsciously to make some other statement of independence—which may well involve a rejection of parental values. Such a rejection of parental values may simply be the adolescent’s effective way of saying, “See, I am not the same as you. I am a different, separate person. I can choose my own way of life.”

Gordon Allport has described in the following way the relationship between this adolescent rebelliousness and the search for identity:

The well-known rebelliousness of the adolescent has an important relationship to his search for identity. It is his final bid for autonomy. Rejecting one’s parents, in whole or in part, may be a necessary, if cruel stage in the process. It is the adolescent counterpart of the toddler’s negativism.⁹

The same concept has been expressed well by Dorothy Rogers: “The adolescent’s rebellion relates to his quest for identity. It is his declaration of independence and, on his level, corresponds to the two-year-old’s negativism, in his more primitive stage.”¹⁰ And in the statement from which the title of the present article has been drawn, Ausubel explains, “We have noted that in certain instances of parent-youth conflict, displaced aggression toward the parent may be directed against the church, resulting in a characteristic type of adolescent heresy.”¹¹

4. *Change in Referent Group*

The adolescent’s attempt to make a statement of independence is not only necessary in order to preserve the sense of self-identity, however, but it may also be very frightening. To step out into the

⁹ Gordon W. Allport, *Pattern and Growth in Personality* (New York, 1961), p. 125.

¹⁰Dorothy Rogers, *The Psychology of Adolescence*, 2d ed. (New York, 1972), p. 277.

¹¹Ausubel, p. 271.

complex world alone, without the familiar support of mother and father, can in fact be overwhelming; and in search of some reassurance for the new journey, the adolescent often turns to the approval of a peer group. As Charles Stewart points out, this may be a dependence and conformity equal to that from which emancipation is sought.¹² But perhaps the support of peers forms a useful "half-way station" on the journey from childhood to adulthood. Upon having made the passage successfully and settled the identity question, the young adult's need for peer approval diminishes.

Useful or not, however, the shift from parents to peers may increase the likelihood of the adolescent's rejecting parental values. This is particularly true when the peer climate forms a counter-culture opposed to the culture of the older generation. Ausubel explains the dynamics involved:

It is hardly surprising that some of these unique structural characteristics of adolescent peer groups inevitably influence the value systems of adolescents. The need for conformity places a premium on loyalty and moral expediency, encourages snobbishness and intolerance, and de-emphasizes the importance of moral courage and consistency.¹³

The process of rejecting parental values is made more likely by the fact that adolescence is a time when the critical faculties are being developed, and the youth are beginning to notice flaws in the adult value system. The God-like image of parents held by younger children has been shattered, and the all-too-human weaknesses have been discovered. The young person may discern that the significant adults in his or her life are much more ready to proclaim certain values than they are to live by them. The young person may also find that highly-touted values, even when practiced in a legalistic manner, do not necessarily make the adult a happier, more effective, more winsome person. Luella Cole and Irma Hall point out that adolescents "want to find something in religion, but many of them fail to do so. Their reactions to failure often take the form of intolerance, cynicism, and withdrawal from

¹²Charles W. Stewart, *Adolescent Religion* (Nashville, Tenn., 1967), p. 268.

¹³Ausubel, p. 358.

contact with church activities."¹⁴ Ellen White has brought the application even closer: "It is because so many parents and teachers profess to believe the Word of God while their lives deny its power, that the teaching of Scripture has no greater effect upon the youth."¹⁵

5. *Personal Value Choice*

The foregoing material has been presented to help the reader to a better understanding of the adolescent experience and to suggest why "adolescent heresy," with its rejection of parental values, is not to be unexpected under the circumstances. This does not mean, of course, that all young people must or will reject the religion of their parents or that young people are not interested in values. On the contrary, studies have found that religious values are of significance to a large majority of evangelical teenagers and that most of them believe the doctrines common to evangelical churches.¹⁶ Parental influence has been found to be most important in the fostering of religious development,¹⁷ and students tend to conform to a religious ideology held jointly by their parents.¹⁸

What the foregoing discussion has brought to view—and this is a point of utmost significance—is that the adolescent wants the values to be *his or her own* values. The principle must be internalized and thought through. If parental values are retained, as they may well be, it is because they have become the adolescent's *own*. But if he or she is forced to choose between independence and self-identity on the one hand and values on the other, values are usually jettisoned in the effort to maintain integrity. Carrol Tageson states:

Adolescents are no longer satisfied with arbitrary appeals to authority on questions of moral or religious doctrine and practice.

¹⁴Luella Cole and Irma N. Hall, *Psychology of Adolescence*, 7th ed. (New York, 1970), p. 503.

¹⁵Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif., 1903), p. 259.

¹⁶Roy B. Zuck and Gene A. Getz, *Christian Youth—An In-Depth Study* (Chicago, 1968).

¹⁷Merton P. Strommen, *Five Cries of Youth* (New York, 1974).

¹⁸Snell Putney and Russell Middleton, "Rebellion, Conformity, and Parental Religious Ideologies," *Sociometry* 24 (June 1961): 125-135.

They are increasingly interested in the meaning of religion for their lives. . . .

The moral and religious training previously acquired is generally retained, though the basis for doing so shifts from loyalty to parents and the prestige enjoyed by authority to peer group influence and more mature rational considerations.¹⁹

6. *Prevention and Healing*

What, then, can parents and religious leaders do to prevent the growing spirit of independence in the adolescent from becoming an occasion for the rejection of priceless values, and how can adults reach out to heal breaches that have already occurred between them and the young people in the sphere of religion? Although space limits prohibit a full discussion in this article, I would call attention briefly to several suggestions that emerge from, or are related to, the description that I have given above of the adolescent experience:

1. *Attempt to understand the situation.* When adolescents perceive that their parents are not fighting them or trying to thwart their independence, but are listening to them, struggling to see things through their eyes, and helping them to reach their goals, much of the pressure to reject parental values is removed.

2. *Facilitate gradual independence.* Parents can search for increasingly wider areas of decision-making to turn over to their children. The goal of parenting is to rear responsible, independent adults. Wise parents rejoice to see their sons and daughters learning how to get along without them.

3. *Give responsibility and hold responsible.* Modern urban life with few "chores" has made it difficult to find meaningful responsibilities for young people. But the adolescent who knows that he or she is handling a meaningful adult task and is really important to family, community, or church feels grown-up. The need for making a rebellious statement of independence is gone.

4. *Guide in value formation.* Adults have a tendency to try to transmit their own fully formed values to their children as a list of

¹⁹Carroll F. Tateson, "Spiritual Direction of the Adolescent," in *Psychological Counseling of Adolescents*, ed. by Raymond J. Steimel (Washington, D.C., 1962), p. 140.

“dos” and “don’ts,” “rights” and “wrongs.” To adults it makes sense to share the winnowed wisdom of their years of experience. But no one can use another’s value system and still be an independent, principled human being. Adolescents need to be confronted with value issues and learn how to apply basic principles to their own particular problems.

5. *Teach how to make decisions from principles.* The ability to make decisions is a chief hallmark of the mature adult. Youth need to learn this skill by observing parents and other significant adults working through the process and by being confronted with situations that demand that they practice this skill under wise guidance.

6. *Allow some unwise decisions.* In the learning experience, people often learn to make good decisions by making some poor ones and reaping the consequences. Wise parents know that they can prepare their young people for independent adulthood only by giving them room to try out their judgments and allowing for occasional failure. To be overly protective is to deny growth toward independence and self-identity.

7. *Do not act like a defeated army.* Some parents fight their teenagers’ independence every step of the way. They must eventually relinquish control, but in the process, so much damage is done to the relationship that the parents can have no positive influence on their children’s development. The more parents oppose them, the more likely it is that adolescents will reject the parental values. It is well for parents and religious leaders to remember that religion can never be passed on by force.

8. *Model attractive and satisfying religion.* Young people will choose their own values—if not today, then tomorrow. They might very well choose to accept what their parents believe in, provided they find that that value system leads to the happiest, most effective, most fulfilling life possible. No one can force his or her value system on another, but can only provide a living demonstration that it is superior to all alternatives.