

Children of God: the awkward teenage years

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Abstract

In this essay I explore some of the manifestations of 'teenage rebellion' in matters of faith and society: how disillusionment with God can manifest and impact our lives. As we grow from infancy to adulthood, an early childish optimism towards our idealised vision of life often gives way to dissatisfaction, cynicism and disillusionment in our teenage years. This is a natural by-product of a youthful idealism based on unrealistic notions, and hopefully as we continue to mature to adulthood we understand life more deeply and regain our satisfaction, enthusiasm and sense of wonder with all that this life and universe have to offer. In general, I believe that this disillusionment is rooted in our early failure of understanding. The core of the Christian faith is a personal relationship with God through the person of Jesus. A person who believes in God but does not have a relationship with him may find that this level of faith is insufficient to withstand the additional pressures, responsibilities and difficulties that adulthood requires. On a broader perspective, I also look briefly at disillusionment with science from the Enlightenment to the present day.

Introduction

We live in an age of promise.

Advertisements promise that if only we buy a certain car or use a certain brand of toothpaste, our dreams will come true and our lives will be richer and more fulfilled. Humanist scientists and philosophers boldly promise that the future will be better, everyone will be happier, wars will cease and we will understand everything. Hollywood promises that the good guys always win, the wrongs are always avenged within the two-hour running time, and the ending is always reassuring. By the time we reach adolescence we are thoroughly used to a cycle of over-promise and under-delivery. Is it any wonder if we are similarly disillusioned with our childhood faith?

In a recent study of online narratives exploring deconversion from Christianity (Wright et al. 2011), the authors identified a common theme of 'personal dissatisfaction with God'. Summarising many individual accounts, they write:

These accounts speak of a broken relationship with God as one might talk about a marital divorce... Some writers emphasized the inequity of their relationship to God. The writers did so much for God – praying, attending church, following God – but God did little in return.

Such statements suggest that Christianity has somehow failed to deliver on its promises, and God hasn't kept his end of the deal.

Identifying the problem

A striking picture emerges from comparing religious affinity of each age group with the year below it. If we take the 2006 Australian Census (ABS 2007) and compare the religious responses of each age group (e.g. 34-year-olds with 33-year-olds, etc.), we see the pattern in Figure 1. While the power of this data set is limited, we do see that the sharpest decline in Christian self-identification seems to happen in the age group 15-25.

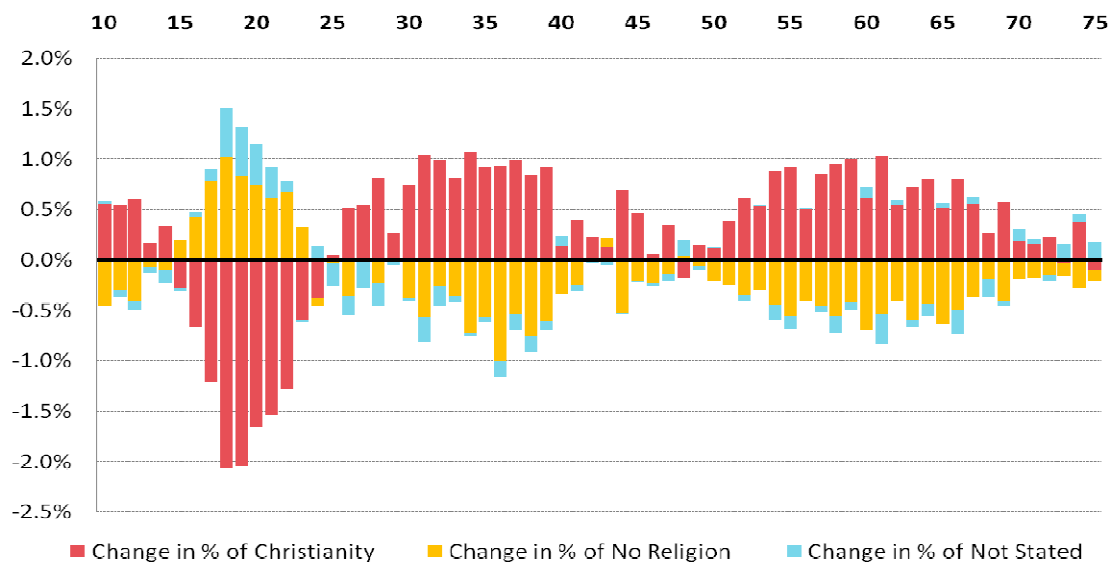


Figure 1 - Change in reported religious affiliation relative to previous age level, as a percentage of total age cohort, Australia, 2006 Census

Rebellion against a Christian upbringing during the teens and early 20s is not confined to the current generation. Classic examples from the past include Friedrich Nietzsche, who dropped out of theology studies at age 20 and became an atheist. Bertrand Russell likewise abandoned his Christian faith at 18, and Richard Dawkins writes that he rebelled against his 'normal Anglican upbringing' (whatever that may mean) as a teenager, and decided that God didn't exist.

Some important questions for us to ask are: what might be driving this disillusionment, and why does it seem to be particularly prevalent at that age?

Whence the disillusionment?

Philosopher and sociologist David Carlin wrote an essay on 'Motives for Atheism' (Carlin 2009) in which he explored various influences that seem to push individuals towards a rejection of Christianity. Among these was what Carlin calls 'Man, the Absolute', or, the idea that our lives are made important and meaningful by the fact that we are completely in charge. This humanist ideal is in conflict with the Christian concept that our significance is endowed upon us by our creator, and our lives are meaningful because we bear his image.

Another motive explored by Carlin was 'Conspicuous non-conformity', or atheism as an act of rebellion. He writes:

Some people like to be 'different'. If they are teenage girls, they may colour their hair orange or wear a ring through their nose. Prior to the sexual revolution, a teenage girl could differentiate herself from her peers by losing her virginity at an early age, an age at which almost nobody else would think of doing such a thing. But losing one's virginity at an early age is too common an event to make a girl different nowadays... If they are teenage boys, they may talk very loudly in inappropriate places or freely use obscenities in public. The point is to give offence to respectable opinion. In a cultural milieu in which everyone, or at least nearly everyone, takes it for granted that God exists, you can shock respectable opinion by openly announcing your atheism.

Carlin 2009

What Carlin is talking about here is not a passive disengagement with religion, a subtle slide towards agnosticism, but rather a loud and angry denial of the divine, which may bear more than a passing resemblance to a teenager slamming his bedroom door and screaming that he hates his parents.

The final motif from Carlin's essay for our purposes involves Libertinism, a desire for guilt-free indulgence in activities which would clash with a Christian worldview. Although increased sexual freedom is the most obvious example, it is not the only one: other avenues of desired freedom may involve immoral business dealings, and so forth. Writing in *The Irrational Atheist*, social commentator Vox Day remarks:

The idea that there is any rational basis for atheism is further damaged by the way in which so many atheists become atheists during adolescence, an age that combines a tendency toward mindless rebellion as well as the onset of sexual desires that collide with religious strictures on their satisfaction.

Day 2008 p. 263

I believe that the core issue with most of these lines of thought involves faulty preconceptions of God. If we grow up with an idea of God as a magical wish-granter in the sky, we will be disappointed when our wishes are not granted as we would like. But we are not truly disappointed in

God, but rather in our preconceptions. The quote earlier in this essay which spoke of disillusionment with 'God not keeping his side of the deal' is based on a flawed idea of God's promises: He never promises to make our lives easy if we trust in him.

The Person of God desires a personal relationship; He is not a formula which, on demand, produces certain outputs given certain inputs.

The wilderness years

Turning for a moment to institutional concerns, it is worth noting that most churches are built around families. This is useful and sensible: churches are about community and a healthy community is built on families as the basic unit. But as people enter their late teens, they don't really fit into the family model: they are somewhere between leaving their childhood family and starting a family of their own. In traditional society an adolescent would stay in their family home until they got married, but in modern Western society our teenagers enter a 'wilderness phase' where they wander outside of a supporting family structure. In consequence, they also often find that they are outside of traditional church structure.

Not all teenagers rebel against their families, and not all break ties with their parents as they enter adulthood. But those who maintain their family connections are those who have a strong personal relationship with their parents. Tim Victor, a Christian mentor in South Africa who has worked extensively with people who are on the fringes of the Christian faith, noted (in an email to me on 25 October 2011) that:

Teens may leave church as a healthy part of testing their values, or they may stay because God is an experienced reality, a Person who mentors and encourages.¹

In his experience, people who return to faith as adults typically do so for four reasons:

1. They are experiencing a time of personal crisis or need;
2. They feel a need to re-test the assumptions that led to their rejection of God;
3. They have started to experience God;
4. They feel a deep desire to connect with God and need to explore it further.

If we examined the motivations of adults who reconnect with parents after a rebellious adolescence, I suspect that the similarities would be striking.

Is this phenomenon actually all part of God's plan? Adolescence necessarily involves a pushing of boundaries and testing of previously assumed truths. Distancing oneself from parents is a vital part of growing

¹ Quoted with permission.

up: as we move from adolescence to adulthood we need to discover our own identities and limitations, independent of the constant support and protection of our parents. Parents give their children more space during this stage, allowing teenagers increasing freedom to make their own decisions and choose their own way. Is it possible that God as our divine father does something similar? (There is a limit to this line of thinking, of course: we may one day become parents ourselves, but we will never achieve equivalence with God.)

Disillusioned with science?

The susceptibility of teenagers to be disappointed with life is stereotypical to the point of cliché, but there are other social disillusionments which are perhaps worth examining.

The current popular debate over the reality (or not) of anthropogenic climate change indicates a strong disillusionment with science. I am not claiming definitively that anthropogenic emissions are changing the Earth's climate in a noticeable way, but I *do* note that this is the overwhelming consensus amongst climate scientists. Denialists of climate change are, in fact, denying the science. Of course science is always fallible and subject to revision, and of course science does not hold all the answers in this complex issue. But to claim that human-induced climate change is not real is to reject scientific consensus and claim another standard for decision making.

Is this also a problem of faulty preconceptions? Continually fed a diet of journalistic hype, are we disillusioned with the reality of science? We are continually promised that our lives will be happier and more fulfilled through science and technology, and yet although our material circumstances are (on average) significantly improved from the Middle Ages, are we happier or more fulfilled?

In the *Iron Man* movies and comics, the titular hero is almost the platonic ideal of technological improvement: Tony Stark has taken scientific and technical ingenuity and crafted into a literal force for good in the world, a powered suit of armour which he uses to fight evil. He is inspired to do this by his father, Howard Stark (also a technological wiz), who marketed his own inventions under the banner, 'Better Living through Technology'. And yet, despite all the technological improvements, the overarching narrative of the *Iron Man* series is one of perpetually unfulfilled promise: yes, the *Iron Man* suit is a force for good, but there are always new and improved technologies for perpetrating evil that it must be employed to fight. ²

² The concept of a superhero as a Nietzschean *übermensch* is an interesting one on many levels, but for the purposes of this essay I simply note that for such a narrative to ring true and hold any lasting appeal it requires a dynamic of continual struggle. However powerful the hero, however godlike his powers, he is never able to achieve lasting resolution. The superhero may be a more idealised version of our struggle against evil, but for the genre to work the evil must also necessarily be inflated. Actually *achieving* mastery over evil and suffering through our own self-actualisation (whether that

In a broader sociological sense, it's worth noting that society has been deeply disillusioned with science before. The bold scientific idealism of The Enlightenment in the 18th Century culminated in the bloody French Revolution and subsequent Reign of Terror; and the Romanticism of the early 19th Century reflects a disillusionment with the rationalism of the previous era. Similarly, the Industrial Revolution of the late 19th Century brought the promise of 'Better Living through Technology': extraordinary breakthroughs in the means of production led to unprecedented material improvement, and invigorated the belief that science and technology could solve all our problems and answer all our questions. This optimism was laid to rest, along with millions of young lives, on the fields of World War I.

But almost no one who experienced World War I is alive today, and human memory is short. The last fifty years have been filled with confident humanist claims about the perfectibility of mankind and the power of science to solve all our problems (partly inspired, ironically, by the devastating demonstration of that power in Hiroshima and Nagasaki). Is the next crushing disappointment on the horizon?

Similar causes?

In fact, this discussion of scientific disillusionment brings us straight back to the issue of faulty preconceptions of God.

A rising faith in Scientism was ushered in by the Enlightenment and accelerated during the Industrial Revolution. In parallel with this trend came a shift in popular philosophy: key academics (and some theologians) shifted their espoused beliefs from traditional Christian theism to a more limited deism during the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment belief in the fundamental fathomability of the universe seemed to leave no gaps for God to fill: He was relegated to a supporting role as perhaps the Prime Mover who set the universe in motion, but who had then since left it to run its own course.

The 19th century saw the Industrial Revolution accompanied by massive advances in the biological and geological sciences. The latter half of the century also saw the 'Victorian crisis of faith', as philosophical naturalism took root as an important worldview. Although naturalism was a useful assumption for scientific theorising, it spread far beyond the academic journals and Royal Society meetings. Thomas Henry Huxley, the most vocal and prominent supporter of Darwinian evolution, saw no scientific justification for faith in God and coined the term 'agnosticism' to describe his own beliefs.

But perhaps the Victorian crisis of faith and the rise of Scientism came from the same source: an undue emphasis on rationality.

involves a powered suit, gamma radiation or a magical ring) is not a feature of the superhero genre. Meaningful, permanent victory is unachievable in our own strength, even for Superman.

Many key Christian thinkers of the Enlightenment sought to use the rationality of science to provide support to their faith. John Locke described God in terms of human experience: he considered what moral and rational qualities were desirable in a divine being: justice, wisdom, compassion and so forth, and extrapolated them to infinity. God is thus human experience writ large. René Descartes posed God's existence as a logical necessity: God is supremely perfect, existing is more perfect than not existing, thus God must exist.³

But this God-as-a-rational-construct is not the God of the Bible, who exists before human rationality and cannot be fully comprehended. The God of the Bible exists before and independent of the material universe, and yet is omnipresent within it. As Ludwig Wittgenstein put it,

A proof of God's existence ought really to be something by means of which one could convince oneself that God exists. But I think that what believers who have furnished such proofs have wanted to do is give their 'belief' an intellectual analysis and foundation, although they themselves would never have come to believe as a result of such proofs.

Wittgenstein 1997 p. 85

I am not suggesting that Locke and Descartes did not have a genuine relationship with God, but their definitions seem to require a pre-existing knowledge of him. Thus Alasdair MacIntyre writes that,

The God in whom the nineteenth century ceased to believe was invented in the seventeenth century.

MacIntyre and Ricœur 1969

The Victorian crisis of faith was only an issue where there was a faulty preconception of God. In contrast to the perspectives offered by Descartes and Locke, Blaise Pascal rejected a purely rational approach to the divine, emphasising in *Pensées* that God must be experienced '*en raison, et en coeur*', or 'with the reason and the heart':

We can, then, have an excellent knowledge of God without that of our own wretchedness, and of our own wretchedness without that of God. But we cannot know Jesus Christ without knowing at the same time both God and our own wretchedness.

Therefore I shall not undertake here to prove by natural reasons either the existence of God, or the Trinity, or the immortality of the soul, or anything of that nature; not only because I should not feel myself sufficiently able to find in nature arguments to convince hardened atheists, but also because such knowledge without Jesus Christ is useless and barren. Though a man should be convinced that numerical proportions are immaterial truths, eternal and dependent on a first

³ For a good introduction to the interface of philosophy with the Christian faith (including the contributions of Locke, Descartes and Pascal) I recommend Alister McGrath, 2001, *The Christian theology reader*, 2nd edn, Blackwell Publishing.

truth, in which they subsist and which is called God, I should not think him far advanced towards his own salvation.

The God of Christians is not a God who is simply the author of mathematical truths, or of the order of the elements; that is the view of heathens and Epicureans. He is not merely a God who exercises His providence over the life and fortunes of men, to bestow on those who worship Him a long and happy life... the God of Christians is a God of love and of comfort, a God who fills the soul and heart of those whom He possesses, a God who makes them conscious of their inward wretchedness, and His infinite mercy, who unites Himself to their inmost soul, who fills it with humility and joy, with confidence and love, who renders them incapable of any other end than Himself.

Pascal 1660 p. 110

Knowing of God, or knowing God?

If God is to be susceptible to scientific inquiry, He must be limited to the material universe. But God transcends the material and gives meaning to creation itself. Wittgenstein again:

To believe in a God means to understand the question about the meaning of life.

To believe in a God means to see that the facts of the world are not the end of the matter.

To believe in God means to see that life has a meaning.

Wittgenstein 1916 p. 74e

Because God transcends the material universe, our understanding of him cannot be limited to the material. If we simply know of God through our intellect, we do not have a real relationship with him. As our hormones ramp up and our reason becomes flooded with new ideas, our knowledge of God may prove inadequate. To weather the turbulent storms of adolescence we must also *know God* in our hearts, beyond rationality and reason.

This 'knowability of God' is not an optional extra: it is the core of the Christian faith. The Gospel narrative describes the process by which the creator God becomes one with the created humanity. In the person of Jesus we see the intangible, distant and separated God of the old covenant taking on human form and living in personal relationship with all people. This same personal relationship is available to us today.

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