

# Touring Adolescent Athens

with Dave Benson

## CONCERNING THE TARGET GROUP

For the purposes of my thesis, I was particularly concerned with teens aged fifteen through nineteen. It is during this period that powerful new cognitive abilities (first developed in early adolescence) become established, enabling meaningful apologetic dialogue. Thus, these three terms—*teen*, *adolescent*, and *youth*—will be used interchangeably for this period, though at times research will be drawn from, and findings will be extended to, all in this transition from childhood to adulthood.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, my particular attention is upon non-Christians (comprised of both *seculars*—“the nonreligious, ex-religious and undecided”—and those of other religious and New Age outlooks), and marginally or nominally Christian youth (characterized by identification with a denomination, but participation in church once a month or less, and little engagement in Christian practices such as prayer and Bible reading).<sup>2</sup> Collectively I term these youth *outsiders*: “those individuals who look at Christianity [and the church] from the outside in.”<sup>3</sup> Such a term is less semantically pejorative than alternatives. In 2007, this represented approximately 40 percent of Americans aged sixteen through twenty-nine.<sup>4</sup> In 2005, this represented approximately 80 percent of Australians aged thirteen through twenty-four, here termed *Generation Y*.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This process is rarely completed before the late twenties. See Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 3-25.

<sup>2</sup> Following Michael Mason, Andrew Singleton, and Ruth Webber, *The Spirit of Generation Y: Young People's Spirituality in a Changing Australia* (Mulgrave, Australia: John Garratt Publishing, 2007), 6, 140-47.

<sup>3</sup> David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity ... and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 249.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-18.

<sup>5</sup> Mason and others, *Generation Y*, 63, 70. This generational grouping is referred to variously as *Gen Y*, *Millennials*, *Mosaics*, and *Echo-Boomers*. Data for this thesis derives from multiple studies, each employing their own age ranges for Generation Y. Following Mason and others (p. 63), Gen Y ideally represents those born between 1981 and 1995, yet my emphasis is upon the characteristics of outsiders, not precisely quantifying the size of this group.

## CONCERNING THE ADOLESCENT PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTEXT

### *Psychological Development—The Thinking Teen*

In summary, as John Santrock contends, “Adolescence may be an especially important juncture in religious development.”<sup>6</sup> An increasingly nominal and secular adolescent population is left to combat conflicting scientific, historical and philosophical accounts of reality with fading memories of childhood Bible stories. At the very time they are positioned to logically weigh alternate perspectives and form their identity, asking moral and philosophical questions, they need dialogue partners prepared to intelligently challenge their tacitly held beliefs in the quest for greater coherence and correspondence that in turn enriches life. The latest research from Australia confirms this perspective. In the first analysis of interviews, “‘The Teenage Questioner’ . . . was considered a possible spirituality type in its own right.”<sup>7</sup> The questioning phase is, however, transitional. Moratorium gives way to identity achievement during emerging adulthood, and the taboo topic of religion—alongside whatever beliefs are chosen by the individual—largely subsides into the accepted fabric of one’s worldview. Arnett notes that these final beliefs “have surprisingly little connection to their religious training in childhood and adolescence, a reflection of emerging adults’ resolve to think for themselves and decide on their own beliefs.”<sup>8</sup> Apologetic dialogue during this questioning phase may prove instrumental in altering the life-course of the thinking teen.

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<sup>6</sup> John W. Santrock, *Adolescence*, 7th ed. (Boston, MA: McGraw Hill, 1998), 424.

<sup>7</sup> They are primarily represented by nominal Christians drifting to secularity in secondary school, having suspended or attenuated traditional beliefs once significant challenges and unanswered questions prevailed. See Mason and others, *Generation Y*, 167-70; also Hughes, *Putting Life Together*, 134.

<sup>8</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 166-67.

### *Neurological Development—The Connected Teen*

Combining these insights, effective apologetic engagement must challenge the thinking of teens—offering feedback whether through questioning their logic, presenting pertinent facts, or inviting them to try on an alternative perspective—but in such a way that attention is gained and kept through novelty and relevance, without excessive pressure in order to avoid an illogical, emotional argument. The latest neurological insights substantially vindicate the aforementioned psychological stage theories, synaptic pruning and myelination corresponding to adaptation and organization in response to new and challenging experiences.<sup>9</sup> Such engagement is therefore *critical* during adolescence, their brain a “teeming ball of possibilities, raw material waiting to be systematically shaped,” literally molding how and what they think about God, Christianity, and the Bible.<sup>10</sup>

### *Pedagogical Development—The Entertained Teen*

In *Exploding the Myths*, Marc Aronson—editorial director and author for a publishing firm specializing in “Young Adult” novels (YA)—challenges many unexamined stereotypes concerning teens and reading.<sup>11</sup> His central contention: “Teenagers are intelligent, engaged, reachable, and much more varied than adults believe them to be.”<sup>12</sup> Far from spelling the end of YA literature, the multimedia explosion has freed writing in substance and form to greater creativity and colour, with educated and literate teens moving seamlessly “from screen to online to magazine to book to CD to CD-ROM.”<sup>13</sup> How broad is YA literature, and what sells? Aronson suggests, “YA is everything from . . . medieval romance to Beat poetry, from violent

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<sup>9</sup> Strauch, *Primal Teen*, 112-13.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>11</sup> Marc Aronson, *Exploding the Myths: The Truth About Teenagers and Reading*, Scarecrow Studies in Young Adult Literature, ed. Patty Campbell, no. 4 (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2001). The book category of “YA” addresses youth aged fourteen through eighteen (p. 9).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, inside cover.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8, 10.

hockey stories to Holocaust diaries . . . . YA is as varied as the multimedia mix of teenagers' lives, as complex as their stormy emotional landscapes, [and] as profound as their soul-shaping searches for identity."<sup>14</sup> What's "in"? Multiculturalism resonates, revealing the "ambiguous, complex, self-contradictory splendor" and human depth of a non-dominant culture.<sup>15</sup> "Coming of age" stories that capture the intensity of adolescence rate well, describing "a great crossing" from smallness to a larger world of gritty challenge.<sup>16</sup> Surprisingly, with the rise of hip-hop, poetry that captures emotional intensity is again popular.<sup>17</sup> For boys in particular, intricate fantasy novels reign—think Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. "Many are very long, include their own unique languages, and require the reader to understand whole new geographies . . . and particular blends of magic and superscience."<sup>18</sup> Whether in fantasy or non-fiction, sugar-coated moralizing is out; teens want gritty reality, messy endings, and real consequences.<sup>19</sup>

## THE VALIDITY AND NECESSITY OF TEEN APOLOGETICS

As we pursue an appropriate apologetic directed to adolescent outsiders, what does it mean to be "all things to all people"? It is commonplace among youth workers to assert that this entails stripping off the modern strait-jacket of rational truth claims, instead donning postmodern garb: subjective lures; creative experiences; unapologetically sharing our story. Yet the psychological, neurological, and pedagogical insights we have surveyed challenge this reading of youth. Adolescents are in a critical period of cognitive, social/emotional and moral/faith development, receptive to alternative constructions of reality as in perhaps no other time in life. They are most decidedly *not* born with "postmodern eyes." Rather, they are socialized *into* such a worldview,

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 20-21.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 59-60.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 79-83, 118. Central characters—like the adolescent readers themselves—are often driven by *ideals*, even while confronting *realism* on their journey.

in tension with their innate tendency toward cognitive coherence and correspondence relative to their experiences. Furthermore, I fear that this “everything must change” response by youth workers to the postmodern philosophical shift in academia is as captive to the *Zeitgeist* of our age as attempts to rationally “prove” the Bible were to the Enlightenment agenda of autonomous reason. Dulles highlights some contemporary sociological factors undermining apologetics:

In a pluralist society like our own, religious faith is felt to be divisive. To avoid conflict Christians frequently take refuge in the excuse that people should be left free to make up their own minds about what to believe. . . . Even to raise the question of truth in religion is considered impolite. This withdrawal from controversy, though it seems to be kind and courteous, is insidious.<sup>20</sup>

Dulles expresses concern that the privatization of religion and the refusal to offer a sound apologetic countering alternative truth claims have produced “fuzzyminded and listless Christians, who care very little about what is to be believed . . . . It is a degenerate offspring of authentic Christianity.”<sup>21</sup> In turn, an *exclusively* “postmodern” approach may further undermine the plausibility of the Bible in the eyes of outsiders as they are taught versions of science and history that render Biblical claims unbelievable, while no answers to their pressing questions are forthcoming from Christian contacts.

At this point, lest I be misconstrued, I want to largely affirm Jones’s critique of modern arguments for the Bible: as finite and fallen, we cannot “prove” the Scriptures are God’s Word; even if we could, we deal not so much with an infallible Word as our fallible interpretations.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, I appreciate Jones’s creative suggestions for an increasingly postmodern audience: we must help teens “inhabit the Biblical story and make it their own.”<sup>23</sup> I am concerned, however, with the tendency of youth writers to extend hunches into axioms irrespective of data, and apply what is true of one part to the whole. Prominent Canadian sociologist Reginald Bibby expresses a similar concern:

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<sup>20</sup> Avery Robert Dulles, “The Rebirth of Apologetics,” *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life* 143 (2004): 19-20.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>22</sup> Jones, *Postmodern*, 18-24, 194-204

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 205-213, 212.

At the level of the individual, both the postmodern and the generational approaches tend to be deductive, starting with a conclusion, then adding the facts. The postmodernist point of view is highly theoretical, rather than empirically derived. Its claims are important and warrant careful research. But at this point . . . *it's a big idea in need of lots of data.*<sup>24</sup>

It is of no small significance that the primary researchers providing the most current and extensive studies in America, Australia, and Canada, all challenge the postmodern assumption of “a radical discontinuity between the contemporary situation and modernity.”<sup>25</sup> Smith and Denton are most pointed:

We have observed a noticeable tendency when it comes to . . . youth workers, to overgeneralize, overstate issues, frame situations in alarmist terms, and latch onto simplistic answers to alleged problems. But the fact is that the . . . religious lives of American youth are diverse and complicated. . . . Religious communities should also stop . . . presuming that U.S. teenagers are actively alienated by religion . . . and so need some radically new “postmodern” type of program or ministry. None of this seems to us to be particularly true.<sup>26</sup>

Interestingly, when Senter suggested various models that may emerge in the forthcoming “revolution” in youth ministry, scenario five—entitled “New Model of Youth Pastor”—introduced readers to a closet intellectual, Don, whose deep thinking on difficult topics attracted inquisitive outsiders struggling to come to grips with a confusing, war-torn world. “The word of the day became, ‘Why?’ . . . Don found himself overwhelmed with opportunities to discuss the theological and philosophical questions of the day” with students as he ran “forums” in an evangelistic group setting, bringing the Bible to bear “on issues that were on their minds with which they grappled.”<sup>27</sup>

Rational apologetic engagement remains a *valid* and *necessary* enterprise for influencing adolescent outsiders. Given that they are interested in, and intellectually capable of such a dialogue, failure to challenge the “thinking teen” renders us guilty of infantilizing youth.<sup>28</sup> Rather

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<sup>24</sup> Bibby, *Canada's Teens*, 202. See also pp. 164-68.

<sup>25</sup> Mason and others, *Generation Y*, 355.

<sup>26</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 226.

<sup>27</sup> Senter, *Coming Revolution*, 176-77, 198-202.

<sup>28</sup> Philip Graham, *The End of Adolescence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 23-24; Robert Epstein, *The Case against Adolescence: Rediscovering the Adult in Every Teen* (Sanger, CA: Quill Driver Books, 2007), 163-72, 369.

than dumbing down to the lowest common denominator, we must caringly call them to step up to exercise their capabilities in answering questions they are already asking.<sup>29</sup> They will tend to believe claims for which supportive examples most readily come to mind, and once their beliefs are established, they will usually persevere despite contradictory evidence.<sup>30</sup> Accordingly, Barna research suggests that over 90 percent of commitments to Christ in America occur before the age of eighteen.<sup>31</sup> Secular society is not shy in challenging the Bible's authority. Christians must therefore enter this dialogue while adolescent identity is in formation.

Having considered the psychological context of contemporary western adolescents—and in turn having cleared a space for youth ministry supportive of apologetic engagement—we now turn to an empirically informed sketch of their sociological context.

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<sup>29</sup> Hughes, *Putting Life Together*, 149.

<sup>30</sup> Weiten, *Psychology*, 330, 337-38.

<sup>31</sup> Kinnaman and Lyons, *UnChristian*, 72.

## **SOCIOLOGICAL CONTEXT FOR CONTEMPORARY WESTERN ADOLESCENTS**

In seeking an accurate *sociological* portrait of contemporary western adolescents, we may begin with a rough outline offered by social commentators. Generational analysis stereotypes “Gen Y” as “wanting instant gratification; technologically savvy; [valuing] family and friends; community-minded; fun-loving; morally relativistic; optimistic about their future.”<sup>32</sup> They have been shaped by the Internet, the 9-11 terror attack, Harry Potter, mobile phones, and both the Columbine High School and Virginia Tech massacres. Broader aspects of the social context include “increased instability in family arrangements; rampant consumerism; and individualisation.”<sup>33</sup> Aptly and alternatively termed “Mosaics,” this generation apparently exhibit eclectic lifestyles, nonlinear thinking, racially integrated relationships, and a “customized blend of multiple-faith views and religious practices.”<sup>34</sup> Such sketches provide useful starting places. Yet as we observed in chapter two concerning the postmodern assumption, the reader is right to question their accuracy. Are such descriptions empirically grounded or overworked caricatures? Our attempts to contextualize the Bible for adolescents will be only as good as our understanding of adolescents.

Ideally, sociological research should set the *particular* portrait of youth—such as their relationships, love of music, search for identity, and generational dislocation—against the *general* background. Indeed, “one of the biggest obstacles to our understanding teenagers’ lives is the common apparent inability to see their lives within the larger, very powerful social and cultural context that forms it.”<sup>35</sup> This broader milieu—including widespread pluralism, postmodernism, moral relativism, secularism, consumerism, and fragmentation—shapes their attitudes, albeit often unknowingly. The general and the particular context interrelate with the *spiritual context*,

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<sup>32</sup> Michael Mason, Andrew Singleton, and Ruth Webber, *The Spirit of Generation Y: Young People's Spirituality in a Changing Australia* (Mulgrave, Australia: John Garratt Publishing, 2007), 230.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

<sup>34</sup> George Barna, *Real Teens: A Contemporary Snapshot of Youth Culture* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2001), 17-18.

<sup>35</sup> Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 264.



affecting the attitudes of teens to spirituality and religious beliefs, Christianity as a whole, and the Bible in particular. My task in chapter three, then, is to paint this portrait for the reader to clearly see contemporary western adolescents.

For what in particular, though, are we looking? And how should we use this data? Walt Mueller helpfully suggests that we adopt the stance not of sociologists, but of Acts 17 crosscultural missionaries. Following Paul, we should seek to understand “Athens” before engaging the “Areopagus.”<sup>36</sup> We must look for clues within a rapidly changing youth culture toward commending the inspiration and authority of Scripture. The following cultural survey, then, takes the reader on a reflective walk through adolescent Athens.<sup>37</sup> Each “citizen” and cluster will have slightly different experiences, yet the city as a whole has a particular vibe. What, in youth culture, can I *commend*? What must I *challenge*?<sup>38</sup> Or, borrowing from Alister McGrath’s metaphor of apologetic engagement, what *bridges* offer a point of contact, and what *barriers* must be removed or bypassed so that teens will read the Scriptures for themselves?<sup>39</sup> In chapter five we will answer these four questions as we evaluate the apologetic approaches of Schaeffer, Strobel and Bell. For now, we walk together through the general context of western youth, first attending to *pluralism*.

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<sup>36</sup> Walt Mueller, *Engaging the Soul of Youth Culture: Bridging Teen Worldviews and Christian Truth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 42.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 224-26.

<sup>39</sup> Alister McGrath, *Intellectuals Don't Need God and Other Modern Myths* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993), 5-6, 24-30, 63-64.

## GENERAL CONTEXT

### *Pluralism*

John Stackhouse helpfully distinguishes three definitions, or types, of *pluralism*.<sup>40</sup> First, “*Pluralism as Mere Plurality* . . . means the state of being ‘more than one.’” Second, “*Pluralism as Preference* . . . affirm[s] that ‘*it is good* that there is more than one.’” Third, “*Pluralism as Relativism*” comes with several varieties: affirming the equality of all options; questioning our ability to judge; or nihilistically denying *good* and *evil*, *truth* and *falsity*. Concerning contemporary culture, Stackhouse notes that while pluralism is not new, “the *scope* of pluralism is greater than ever. . . . The *amount* of pluralism is extraordinary. . . . The *pace of change* is unprecedented. . . . [And] widespread *doubt* about whether anyone has the answer, and whether we could recognize it if they did, is new.”<sup>41</sup> Youth culture surely offers “Exhibit A.”

Millennials constitute “America’s most racially and ethnically diverse, and least-Caucasian generation,” less than two-thirds white.<sup>42</sup> Ninety percent have friends of a different race.<sup>43</sup> An influx of immigration, combined with media exposure that gravitates to the new and unusual, has proliferated ethnic and lifestyle adolescent social identities. The old-school hierarchical system—cheerleaders and jocks, preppies, geeks/nerds, then alternatives—has morphed into innumerable groups and variations on a theme—“Skaters” embrace hip-hop, “Goths” advocate environmentalism, “Rednecks” seek tutoring, “Lebs” (Lebanese cliques) don Adidas—each mixing and matching where “status inequality is relatively muted.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> John G. Stackhouse, Jr., *Humble Apologetics: Defending the Faith Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3-11.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 36-37.

<sup>42</sup> Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 15.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>44</sup> Murray Milner, Jr., *Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids: American Teenagers, Schools, and the Culture of Consumption* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 100-102, 130.

Beyond pluralism as “mere plurality,” *multiculturalism*—as the official policy for both Canada and Australia—has embedded “pluralism as preference” in the popular imagination.<sup>45</sup> As the west has diversified through immigration and high minority birthrates, the impossibility of *assimilation*—seeking to meld a common identity from all cultures—has given way to pursuit of utopian *cultural pluralism*: we must strive to maintain and celebrate cultural differences and identity for the richness of all.<sup>46</sup> Schools teach history from indigenous perspectives and celebrate “multicultural day” while sampling traditional dances and exotic foods. Most youth appear to have internalized such values, shunning racism. Yet such superficial displays of tradition create “ethnic box” versions of multiculturalism, presenting a unified culture detached from the daily life of most migrants.<sup>47</sup> Australian social commentator Hugh Mackay, referring to Australia as “Kaleidoscope Nation,” notes the loss of a clear Australian identity in the face of unprecedented ethnic diversity. With terrorism on the rise, some youth recoil from imposed multiculturalism toward insularity; an attitude of self-protection supposedly justifies poor treatment of illegal immigrants politically and riots such as those by flag-wielding Australians against Lebanese youth in Sydney, 2006.<sup>48</sup>

Turning to religion, then, one would expect the open display of many faiths and the apparent embrace of pluralism to translate into a boom in other religions and eclectic spirituality.<sup>49</sup> While there has been significant growth in other religions, it is primarily through immigration, not conversion. In both America and Australia, other religions represent less than 7 percent of Generation Y. Religious “switching” or “syncretism” is likewise minimal. Those advocating for multiculturalism want youth to celebrate the religious options available while

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<sup>45</sup> Stackhouse, *Humble Apologetics*, 35-36.

<sup>46</sup> Snowman and Biehler, *Psychology*, 135-36.

<sup>47</sup> Amanda Wise, “On Youth, Hybridity and the Politics of Representing the East Timorese Community,” in *Ingenious: Emerging Youth Cultures in Urban Australia*, ed. Melissa Butcher and Mandy Thomas (North Melbourne, Australia: Pluto Press Australia, 2003), 84-85, 99.

<sup>48</sup> Hugh Mackay, *Advance Australia Where?* (Sydney, Australia: Hatchett Livre Publishers, 2007), 137-38, 144-48, 256-61.

<sup>49</sup> Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 37-38.

avoiding any attempt to discuss or judge the incommensurate truth claims therein. Disagreement is perceived as a threat to societal stability. Youth lack guidance to differentiate or choose between religions; all options begin to look alike. All options are thereby cheapened, undermining commitment to any given belief system. Perhaps as a result, the majority of youth retain their traditional commitment to Christianity by default, or slide into nominal Christianity or outright secularity. Few youth exercise their option to experiment or engage with the religious smorgasbord. Adolescents exhibit their preference for pluralism, however, in shunning exclusive claims to truth: nearly 70 percent believe many religions may be true, while almost half are against attempts to convert others. Their core concern, it would seem, is preserving the freedom to choose your beliefs without forcing this preference on others or denigrating their views.<sup>50</sup> Pluralism has encouraged an “openness to possibility,” and an unwillingness to sign off on any particular religious story in the name of tolerance. As Clark notes, however,

unfortunately, this tolerance of difference is not based in knowledge or a desire for understanding. While young people say that they believe all religions are equally good, they often know little about the tradition with which they identify themselves, let alone the traditions of others.<sup>51</sup>

Such insights are suggestive for apologetic engagement. We can *commend* youth culture for recognizing and protecting the dignity of individual choice, and for dismantling hierarchy built upon superficial distinctives such as nationality and music preference. Meanwhile, we must *challenge* the myth of self-determination independent of social setting, and the naïve embrace of all options as equally good, unaware that beliefs have consequences. Christianity’s “radical monotheism” challenges adolescent polytheism and henotheism, relativising lesser centres of value and power and dethroning all idols including self.<sup>52</sup> Yet, to the degree in which Christianity is perceived as a weapon of colonialism—exclusive and closed to additional truth, thus destroying differences and homogenizing society toward “One True Culture”—it will likely be outright rejected by youth.<sup>53</sup> This is a significant *barrier*. A *bridge*, then, exists in how Christianity has been uniquely contextualized within every culture, encouraging good while confronting evil, and thus leading to life. Ultimately we need not be threatened by pluralism, for as missiologist David Wells contends,

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 71, 89-90, 137, 205-6; Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 31-32, 36-37, 72-75, 115, 260.

<sup>51</sup> Lynn Schofield Clark, *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 228.

<sup>52</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 22-23.

<sup>53</sup> Heath White, *Postmodernism 101: A First Course for the Curious Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Brazos Press, 2006), 43-45.

Pluralism was the stuff of everyday life in biblical times. Nothing, therefore, could be more remarkable than to hear the contention . . . that the existence of religious pluralism today makes belief in the uniqueness of Christianity quite impossible. Had this been the necessary consequence of encountering a multitude of other religions, Moses, Isaiah, Jesus, and Paul would have given up biblical faith long before it became fashionable in Our Time to do so.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth, or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids, MI.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1993), 263-64.

## *Postmodernism*

The rhetoric of “all options are equally good” is one manifestation of *postmodernism* among adolescents. In chapter two we explored the common assertion that western youth are *postmodern*. To reiterate, I believe that youth developmentally tend toward logical and ordered thought. Nevertheless, they are socialized toward valuing experience over reason. How, then, are we to understand such social forces? First we must differentiate *postmodernism* (the philosophical movement) from *postmodernity* (the related cultural phenomenon).<sup>55</sup>

*Postmodernism*, in broad-brush strokes, is *both* a reaction against the confidence of modernity in “universal, autonomous reason,” and a radicalized extension of modernity’s pursuit of freedom from premodern authority.<sup>56</sup> In premodern times, by and large, western society was hierarchically structured. Knowledge and virtue were derived from the authority of tradition. The Reformation reduced unquestioned authority to the Bible itself. Enlightenment thinkers such as Descartes went further, seeking a firm foundation for all knowledge and virtue beyond dogma. Modernity sought freedom from ignorance and fear through confidence in the “power of reason.”<sup>57</sup> Progress toward “One True Culture,” peace and prosperity were expected, all built upon unified and objective knowledge. The project, however, failed. *Philosophically*, “all human perception and thought is necessarily *perspectival* . . . . There is no neutral, disinterested thinking. There are simply angles of vision on things that offer various approximations of the way things are.”<sup>58</sup> As such, appeals to “Truth” appeared increasingly naïve. *Practically*, two world wars and industrialization’s fallout dismissed modernity’s utopia as a “pipe dream.”<sup>59</sup> Even science, through an explosion of discovery, led not to uniformity but instead further

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<sup>55</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 20.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>57</sup> Heath White, *Postmodernism 101: A First Course for the Curious Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 37.

<sup>58</sup> Stackhouse, *Humble Apologetics*, 26, 27.

<sup>59</sup> J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 20.

fragmentation of knowledge. This knowledge, in turn, was often used to oppress rather than liberate, as with eugenics, nuclear warfare, and Communism.

Enter postmodernity, tersely defined as “incredulity toward metanarratives” by Jean-François Lyotard—that is, skepticism toward any *grand story* claiming to represent “*the truth*” for all people.<sup>60</sup> This “hermeneutic of suspicion” has undermined the sweeping redemption-narrative of Scripture.<sup>61</sup> Biblical history is seen by skeptics as propaganda to validate the victors; “dangerous” doctrines such as Hell, and salvation exclusively for the faithful, mask a will to power that was seen in the inseparability of western colonialism and Christian mission.

Has this postmodern shift spelled the end of reason? Hardly! The present penchant for *tolerance*—as the equality of all beliefs, contrasted with former notions of respect for those with whom you disagree<sup>62</sup>—is the *most* reasonable response *if* you believe objective “Truth” either doesn’t exist or cannot be known. Relativism and diversity effectively guard against oppressive metanarratives, lubricating a pluralistic society. As such, postmodernists don’t desire to transcend this malaise; rather, they “swim, even wallow, in the fragmentary and chaotic currents of change as if that is all there is.”<sup>63</sup>

Debate exists over how, and how much, postmodernism influences postmodernity. James Smith argues that “we take culture seriously by taking ideas seriously. . . . There is a trickle-down effect between philosophical currents of postmodernism and cultural phenomena related to postmodernity . . . .”<sup>64</sup> *Soul Searching* certainly recorded postmodern rhetoric

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<sup>60</sup> Smith, *Postmodernism*, 65.

<sup>61</sup> Wright, *The Last Word*, 7-9, 97-98.

<sup>62</sup> Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler, *The New Tolerance* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1998), 19-20, 43.

<sup>63</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 44. This cognitive compartmentalization is fostered by the flood of disconnected television images captivating teens through “novelty, interest, and curiosity.” See Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 51, 65.

<sup>64</sup> Smith, *Postmodernism*, 20-21.

regarding religion: “Everyone decides for themselves,” “Who am I to judge?” “There is no right answer,” “I don’t want to be offensive or anything.”<sup>65</sup>

David Wells offers another, equally tenable perspective.<sup>66</sup> He contends that modern fragmentation is unlikely due to popular culture embracing little-read French philosophers. Rather, present skepticism—whether darkly nihilistic, or shallow, uncommitted and flippant—is the result of consumerism. Youth in particular are bombarded with overwhelming choice yet are unsure how to choose beyond recourse to personal preference. In a culture where talk of politics and religion are at times taboo, teens reduce religion to “just another commodity” as they pragmatically construct meaning. While American youth apparently expressed relatively few doubts, youth in general were uncertain of their beliefs.<sup>67</sup> In Australia, approximately 80 percent of Generation Y agreed that “it is hard to know what to believe about life.”<sup>68</sup> Few are radically relativistic about all knowledge; science—which fuels technology, providing ever more powerful gadgets for youth to consume—still holds pride of place, relatively free from suspicion. Some teens may hold a simplified version of postmodernism as their philosophy of choice. Nevertheless, the confusion over beliefs that teens confess and their selective application of suspicion argue in favour of Wells’s over Smith’s perspective: most teens are not consciously postmodernists. Rather, they have “assimilated it without thought or critique simply because it’s part of the cultural soup they’ve been marinating in for so long.”<sup>69</sup>

It would seem, then, that Hughes accurately interprets the pragmatic postmodernism influencing today’s teens: the diffuse “cloud” of youth beliefs revolves around a white (or “certain”) core of culturally accepted knowledge—such as learned in science (or, less so, history) class; this core diffuses outward to the grey (“uncertain”) area of personal opinions and

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<sup>65</sup> Smith and Denton, 143, 145, 160.

<sup>66</sup> David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Pow'rs: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 61-67, 72-78.

<sup>67</sup> Smith and Denton, 40, 87-89, 94.

<sup>68</sup> Hughes, *Putting Life Together*, 134-35.

<sup>69</sup> Mueller, *Engaging*, 52.



preferences on matters such as morals and metaphysics.<sup>70</sup> These few “certainties” can support only a secular and personal “midi-narrative” that facilitates enjoyment of life in the here and now. Anything beyond this—including Biblical belief—is considered unstable, thus optional and largely irrelevant.<sup>71</sup>

Theoretically, postmodern fragmentation should produce despair.<sup>72</sup> Interestingly, some studies have found Generation Y—at least compared to Generation X—to be at once less cynical and skeptical and less concerned with questions of ultimate meaning, and more optimistic and more engaged with societal institutions. Howe and Strauss suggest Millennials may “rebel” by behaving better, not worse, than their predecessors.<sup>73</sup> Perhaps the hunger for meaning is staved off by the sweets of “short-term, low-level meanings, by a lifestyle filled with ‘distractions’ and ‘noise’”; entertainment, Internet, numerous trivial choices, and constant music toward sensory overload drown out uncomfortable questions.<sup>74</sup> If so, such superficial “midi-narratives” may crumble when an insulated teen unexpectedly faces the collapse of a relationship, the suicide of a friend, or the disintegration of a family.

An effective apologetic should *commend* the postmodern recognition that autonomous reason is impossible: we are both finite and fallen. Yet, we must *challenge* the tacitly held and self-defeating skepticism that all metaphysical beliefs are equally right (or wrong) and thus simply a pragmatic preference. We must address the *barrier* of skepticism toward the Biblical narrative as oppressive, yet do so in a non-coercive manner lest we confirm their suspicions. Finally, we should *bridge* the taboo of discussing beliefs by sensitively showing Christianity’s relevance to their lives. We can guide their ability to critically think through asking them insightful questions such as concerning the nature of true human “freedom” that can furnish happiness and withstand the storms of life.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 124-26, 170-73, 192. Indeed, the realization of a “plurality of options” may have been decisive in the “moving of religion from the realm of publicly accepted knowledge to the grey periphery of personal decision” (p. 133).

<sup>71</sup> S. Savage, S. Collins-May, B. May and G. Cray, *Making Sense of Generation Y: The World View of 15-25 Year Olds* (London: Church House Publishing, 2006), 36-37.

<sup>72</sup> Bibby, *Canada’s Teens*, 164.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 192-197, 203-4; Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising*, 4-8, 66-67.

<sup>74</sup> Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 331-36.

<sup>75</sup> White, *Postmodernism 101*, 162-64. Cf. Jn. 8:31-35.

## *Moral Relativism*

In a climate of suspicion toward unifying metanarratives, some form of moral relativism is to be expected. *Moral relativism*—defined by Walt Mueller as “the view that each person’s personal standard of right and wrong is as legitimate, true and authoritative as any other”<sup>76</sup>—has pervaded youth culture. Across Canada, America and Australia, roughly two-thirds of youth believe that “what is right or wrong is a matter of personal opinion.” Concerning morality, the majority claim “everything is relative.”<sup>77</sup> Moral relativism is most evident in the area of sexual ethics. The Biblical ideal of monogamous heterosexual union within marriage sounds positively antiquated to most of Generation Y, for whom “losing virginity is considered a rite of passage into maturity.”<sup>78</sup> The median age of first vaginal intercourse for Australian youth has dropped from nineteen (in the 1960s) to sixteen (in the late 1990s).<sup>79</sup> The primary reason youth gave for rejecting religion was disagreement with Biblical teaching opposing homosexuality, followed by church refusal to ordain women and then restrictive rules about pre-marital sex and abortion.<sup>80</sup> In Canada, 80 percent of youth approve of sex before marriage when partners “love” each other; 60 percent condone sex if they merely “like each other.”<sup>81</sup> Roughly 90 percent of teenagers *expect* to marry and stay married for life—a conservative stance—yet the same proportion approve cohabitation and a “try before you buy” mentality, believing this will safeguard marriage from divorce.<sup>82</sup> The “pro-life” (or “anti-choice”) position also appears antiquated when upward of 30 percent of Canadian teenage pregnancies since the 1990s ended in abortion.<sup>83</sup> Meanwhile, over

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<sup>76</sup> Mueller, *Engaging*, 66.

<sup>77</sup> Bibby, *Canada’s Teens*, 248; Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 143-45; Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 92-93, 327.

<sup>78</sup> Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (New York: Penguin Group, 1994), 207.

<sup>79</sup> Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 41.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 80, 114.

<sup>81</sup> Bibby and Posterski, *Teen Trends*, 56.

<sup>82</sup> Bibby, *Canada’s Teens*, 91, 143-44; Hughes, *Putting Life Together*, 107; Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 108-116.

<sup>83</sup> Bibby and Posterski, 56.

50 percent approve of homosexual relations—double that of 1984.<sup>84</sup> In sum, youth occupy the centre of their moral universe, free to determine right and wrong for themselves.<sup>85</sup>

This sense of autonomy and relativism is societally reinforced. The *media* offer a “map of reality” by which teens may evaluate moral decisions: what compares praise or denigrate shapes adolescent moral norms. By depicting upward of nine sexual scenes per hour, and affirming alternative sexual orientations as authentic expressions of identity, MTV teaches teens that sexuality is just a pleasurable game.<sup>86</sup> *Educators* also sow relativistic seeds through the “hidden curriculum” of tolerance toward all lifestyles and guidance-free “values clarification” activities.<sup>87</sup> Meanwhile, *parents* often support their lying and cheating children toward academic advancement, the end justifying almost any means.<sup>88</sup>

Adolescent morality appears to be built solely upon preference and pleasure: youth are adrift on the sea of postmodern amorality, lost without a moral compass that would point them to any standard beyond themselves.<sup>89</sup> Such an evaluation is, however, incomplete. Most youth claim to follow their inner light of conscience to the right choice that balances their primary drive to “enjoy life” with their concern to bring “no harm” to others.<sup>90</sup> Over 80 percent said they made moral decisions by doing what they believed to be right, while fewer than 10 percent simply did what brought happiness. If they are internally unsure of right from wrong in a particular situation, however, nearly 40 percent revert to whatever makes them happy, with 30 percent seeking parental advice, and only 8 percent following the Bible. Many youth do feel free to *draw*

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<sup>84</sup> Bibby, *Canada's Teens*, 89-90, 185.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>86</sup> Quentin J. Schultze and others, *Dancing in the Dark: Youth, Popular Culture and the Electronic Media* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 99; Walt Mueller, *Youth Culture 101* (El Cajon, CA: Youth Specialties; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 145-47, 168, 288. See, for instance, Katy Perry's chart-topping “I Kissed a Girl,” track 2 from the album *One of the Boys*, produced by Dr. Luke, 2:59 min., Capitol Records, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a1Y8utsY6LY> (accessed 2 July 2008).

<sup>87</sup> Santrock, *Adolescence*, 417-19.

<sup>88</sup> Anne Marie Chaker, “The New Cheating Epidemic,” in *Adolescent Psychology*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., ed. Fred E. Stickle, (Columbus, OH: McGraw Hill, 2007), 78-81.

<sup>89</sup> Mueller, *Engaging*, 89, 97.

<sup>90</sup> Hughes, *Putting Life Together*, 41, 108-9.

from the guidance of individuals and institutions in choosing their own position: 37 percent take notice of the moral views of those they respect.<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, the myth of self-determination blinds youth to the fact that their “independently” formed views *are* in fact influenced by many sources—including parents, a latent cultural Christianity, friends, school, and the media—whether they like it or not.<sup>92</sup> As such, the moral behaviour youth exhibit is usually more conservative than what they condone. In the last decade, even as sexual experimentation has increased, there has been a linear decrease of around 10 percent in the proportion of adolescents having sexual intercourse and terminating pregnancies. Additionally, while 7 percent of youth admit same-sex attraction, less than 4 percent of teens identify themselves as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.<sup>93</sup> Even for supposed “relativists,” it is *not* a case of “anything goes”: fewer than 10 percent of Canadian adolescents approve of extra-marital sex, and rape is consistently condemned.<sup>94</sup> Teens defend their right to choose, yet as they experience the physical and emotional fallout from “alternative lifestyles,” they often seek a better way.<sup>95</sup> Youth cannot easily change, however, without upsetting their clique.

Chap Clark suggests—based upon a six-month ethnographic study and a corresponding literature review—that contemporary youth feel *abandoned* by adults. As a result, youth form especially close friendship “clusters.” Each group constructs its own ways of relating and a binding moral code: a “world beneath” adult awareness.<sup>96</sup> Youth do have ethical standards—they recognize lying and cheating are wrong—but such concerns are a “second-tier ethic,” pragmatically relativized to protect oneself and one’s friends.<sup>97</sup> Patricia Hersch concurs: youth

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 105-6.

<sup>92</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 172-75, 233.

<sup>93</sup> Ritch C. Savin-Williams and Lisa M. Diamond, “Sex,” in *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology*, ed. Lerner and Steinberg, 206, 213.

<sup>94</sup> Bibby, *Canada’s Teens*, 91; Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia*, 205-6, 219.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 218-19.

<sup>96</sup> Chap Clark, *Hurt: Inside the World of Today’s Teenagers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 59, 98.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 146-52.

are not “moral mutants,” rather, “they hold morality tightly to their immediate lives where they might have a glimmer of control.”<sup>98</sup>

Beyond the cluster’s code, and even while saying that most moral matters are merely opinion, only one in ten teenagers deny that “some things are right and other things are wrong.”<sup>99</sup> The pretense of relativism is quickly discarded in the face of personal abuse, societal injustice, and terrorist attacks.<sup>100</sup> Over two-thirds of youth are quick to condemn homophobia, racism, genocide, global poverty, environmental degradation, and the moral failings of clergy.<sup>101</sup> Furthermore, youth are quick to commend the spirituality of individuals such as Nelson Mandela and Mohandas Gandhi, who suffered and persevered toward the wellbeing of others.<sup>102</sup> A number of studies have noticed a recent but promising shift back toward world engagement and social concern, stemming from adolescent idealism.<sup>103</sup> Accordingly,

few teenagers consistently sustain such radical relativism. . . . What almost all U.S. teenagers—and adults—lack, however, are any tools or concepts or rationales by which to connect and integrate their radical relativistic individualist selves, on the one hand, with their commonsensical, evaluative, moralist selves on the other.<sup>104</sup>

Smith and Denton’s short interview and gentle but prodding questions had Steve, an agnostic, swing from protecting the poor one minute, to begrudgingly accepting an evolutionary rationale for their extermination the next: “I wish it didn’t have to be that way,” Steve laments. He has one eye on a moral compass of sorts, though no “compelling language” to ground his moral intuition.<sup>105</sup> Mason, Singleton and Webber noted the apparent incongruity in which the “strongest moral value” they encountered among adolescents was the “taboo” against putting

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<sup>98</sup> Patricia Hersch, *A Tribe Apart: A Journey into the Heart of American Adolescence* (New York: Ballantine Publishing Group, 1998), 100-103.

<sup>99</sup> Bibby and Posterski, *Teen Trends*, 56.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 177-78.

<sup>101</sup> Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 31, 78-80, 110-14, 210-14; Hughes, *Putting Life Together*, 96, 108, 114.

<sup>102</sup> Hughes, 110.

<sup>103</sup> For instance, Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising*, 216, 301-3.

<sup>104</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 144.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 95-96, 101.

your values on others.<sup>106</sup> Such irony is lost on most teens, further evidence of adolescent failure to integrate their relativistic and moralistic selves. Barna’s research, while confirming adolescent moral relativism, discovered that most sense morality is a critical issue upon which they haven’t spent sufficient time to formulate solid views: “Only one out of every six youths has a firm opinion on moral truth.”<sup>107</sup>

How, then, should we respond? We may commend the general moral posture of youth: “Judge not, lest ye be judged” (Matthew 7:1). Yet, we must challenge the ensuing relativism—which makes any notion of sin (and consequently grace) nonsensical<sup>108</sup>—as vacuous rhetoric, unlivable, and ultimately harmful. Tolerance, whilst important, is a particularly anemic cardinal virtue. Furthermore, we must challenge the “fantasy of a risk-free existence” promulgated by popular culture.<sup>109</sup> Whilst we must not alter God’s moral laws for public consumption, we must address the barrier of adolescent attitudes toward Christianity as an irrelevant system of rules, out of step with contemporary life. Only a compelling case for Christian morality will help “‘choosers’ come to accept external authority [such as Scripture] in beliefs and morals.”<sup>110</sup> We help bridge this divide as we discuss with teens their moral beliefs, lovingly test their moral house for structural integrity, and then commend a more solid Scriptural foundation and life-giving ethic in walking the way of Christ.

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<sup>106</sup> Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 323.

<sup>107</sup> Barna, *Real Teens*, 63, 90-92.

<sup>108</sup> Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1995), x-xiii, 199.

<sup>109</sup> Peter L. Berger and Brigitte Berger, *The War Over the Family: Capturing the Middle Ground* (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 135.

<sup>110</sup> Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 339.

## *Secularism*

Biblical morality, then, is under duress. So too is Biblical history, simultaneously attacked by postmoderns (as an oppressive metanarrative) *and* moderns (as archaic and unbelievable).

Figurehead for the “New Atheists,” Richard Dawkins, is quick to contend,

The Virgin Birth, the Resurrection, the raising of Lazarus, even the Old Testament miracles, all are freely used for religious propaganda, and they are very effective with an audience of unsophisticates and children. Every one of these miracles amounts to a violation of the normal running of the natural world.<sup>111</sup>

Modernity is far from being a “spent force.”<sup>112</sup> Modernity and postmodernity at times work in tandem, as both have been nurtured by widespread *secularism*—that is, “indifference to or rejection or exclusion of religion and religious considerations.”<sup>113</sup> Our understanding of postmodernity must therefore be further nuanced.

Perhaps *postmodernity* is better termed *hypermodernity*: “modernity against itself.”<sup>114</sup> Continuities between modernity and postmodernity abound, and much of the supposed fruit of postmodernism—even *relativism*—derives directly from modern beliefs.<sup>115</sup> Einstein relativized space-time around the constant of the speed of light. Darwin effectively relativized morals through the “given” of evolutionary origins.<sup>116</sup> Despite claims that postmodernism affords renewed openness to God, even religion is relativized around the autonomous self which seeks freedom from all constraints. Pragmatism rules as individuals—lacking a grid upon which to evaluate ultimate truth claims—reduce their focus to “happiness now,” maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. Spirituality serves a therapeutic end. This quest for “freedom” renders both modernity and postmodernity inherently “naturalistic,” tempting us to “live as if God doesn’t

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<sup>111</sup> Richard Dawkins, “Snake Oil and Holy Water,” *Forbes.com*, 4 October 1999, [http://www.forbes.com/asap/1999/1004/235\\_2.html](http://www.forbes.com/asap/1999/1004/235_2.html) (accessed 5 September 2008).

<sup>112</sup> White, *Postmodernism 101*, 158.

<sup>113</sup> Merriam-Webster’s Online Dictionary, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/secularism> (accessed 5 September 2008).

<sup>114</sup> Stackhouse, *Humble Apologetics*, 27.

<sup>115</sup> Smith, *Postmodernism*, 20.

<sup>116</sup> Crystal L. Downing, *How Postmodernism Serves (My) Faith: Questioning Truth in Language, Philosophy and Art* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 186.

exist.”<sup>117</sup> As Wells wryly observes, moderns constantly need to “be in motion” progressing toward greater freedom—“*post-Puritan, post-Christian, and post-modern. . . . They are modern because they have to be post-modern.*”<sup>118</sup>

Enlightenment rationality helped end Christianity’s monopoly over western thought, with science seemingly supplanting the need for the “God hypothesis”: “Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist.”<sup>119</sup> Postmodernism has relativized all metaphysical beliefs, reducing them to matters of preference. Science—offering a big story akin to religious metanarratives—has, however, evaded the postmodern scalpel in the eyes of popular culture: technological success has secured its status.<sup>120</sup> Science alone is perceived to offer certainty, rendering competing claims implausible. As Lesslie Newbigin explains, “We are pluralist in respect of what we call beliefs but we are not pluralist in respect of what we call facts.”<sup>121</sup>

Secularism sets in. When “religious” voices make absolute claims in the public square—such as “faith-based” schools affirming creationism and a definite code of sexual conduct—they are accused of “balkanizing the community” and constituting a threat to pluralistic peace that must be silenced.<sup>122</sup> Fearing ridicule, Christian students keep their beliefs to themselves.<sup>123</sup> The Gore-Tex-like wall separating church and state keeps the Bible out even as the “neutral” core

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<sup>117</sup> Craig M. Gay, *The Way of the (Modern) World: Or, Why It’s Tempting to Live As If God Doesn’t Exist* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 17-18, 185-90.

<sup>118</sup> David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth, or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 60, 61.

<sup>119</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (New York: Norton, 1986), 6.

<sup>120</sup> As mentioned earlier, the modern dream of “science as Saviour” has faltered: knowledge has fragmented, and technology has enabled eugenics, nuclear warfare, genetic modification and so forth. In this regard, the amorality of technology has discredited science. Some youth raise concerns about science in regard to environmental protection, world peace, and the wastage of money on billion-dollar particle accelerators when many are dying of starvation. Nevertheless, skepticism toward and criticality of science was virtually absent from all the youth research, far less than the suspicion directed toward religious and political institutions. In general, science is considered by teens as an authoritative source of knowledge.

<sup>121</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 27.

<sup>122</sup> Michael Bachelard, “Faith School Boom ‘Creates Division,’” *The Age*, 25 February 2008, <http://www.theage.com.au/news/investigations/faith-school-boom-creates-division/2008/02/24/1203788146680.html?page=fullpage#contentSwap1> (accessed 25 February 2008).

<sup>123</sup> Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 164.



dogmas of Secular Humanism—naturalistic evolution, ethical relativism, legal positivism, and so forth—are allowed to permeate the classroom.<sup>124</sup>

Not surprisingly, then, Smith and Denton observed what they termed “residual positivism and empiricism” among the youth they interviewed: the only beliefs deserving absolute commitment were those perceived to possess “irrefutable material or logical evidence providing positive verification.”<sup>125</sup> They observed relatively little religious switching, but noted that for most American adolescents, Christianity had degenerated into a pathetic caricature of itself—“moralistic therapeutic deism”—concerned with being nice to others while supported by a detached God who just wants you to have high self-esteem and be happy.<sup>126</sup> Religion was “not a big deal,” operating “somewhere in the background”—“something you’re ‘supposed’ to do,” but “low on the priority list.”<sup>127</sup> In Australia, this watering down of faith has progressed in the second generation of “unchurched” people to where almost half of Generation Y eschew any religious identification and are either uncertain of or disbelieve in the existence of God.<sup>128</sup> Over 20 percent of formerly Christian youth reject church affiliation before turning 25; most of these join the “No Religious Identification” (NRI) grouping which grew a staggering 27 percent between the 1996 and 2001 Census.<sup>129</sup> The largest part of these—roughly 30 percent of Millennials—are classified as “secular.” Ambivalent toward or dismissive of religious beliefs, they focus purely on enjoyment in the here and now.<sup>130</sup> “Seculars” typically trust only what they can see, believing that science’s evolutionary dictates and a simple lack of evidence have disproved God and the Bible.<sup>131</sup> In their experience, dead people stay dead and God does not

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<sup>124</sup> David A. Noebel, J. F. Baldwin, and Kevin Bywater, *Clergy in the Classroom: The Religion of Secular Humanism*, rev. 2d ed. (Manitou Springs, CO: Summit Press, 2001), 3-9, 141-44.

<sup>125</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 181.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 162, 171.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 119, 129, 158, 161.

<sup>128</sup> Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 82, 311.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 75-78.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 203-207.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 115, 221-22.

speak. The taboo over discussing religion, however, has allowed naïve views to go unchallenged: “There’s all these images of what God might be like, but there are no photographs,” asserts a fourteen-year-old.<sup>132</sup>

As generations have slid from the church toward unbelief, so too has their attitude to the Bible. A growing number of atheists and agnostics no longer care about religious questions. In summary, “the secular strand in Australian society is flourishing.”<sup>133</sup>

In response, we may commend the impulse to test all truth claims and see if these things are so.<sup>134</sup> If God truly did create, and Jesus truly did live, die and resurrect, then Christianity need not fear empirical scrutiny whether through science or history. Nevertheless, we must challenge the limits of such a search, the presupposition of methodological atheism, and recognize the necessity of faith for all belief. In short, we must deconstruct the barrier posed by tacit and uncritical adolescent belief in a closed system of naturalistic cause and effect, which has rendered both God and the Bible implausible to many seculars. An evidential bridge must be extended to seculars, drawing them toward a worldview which makes sense of their deepest longings for truth, justice, beauty, and loving relationships.

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 53-54, 227.

<sup>134</sup> Cf. Lk. 1:1-4; Jn. 20:30-31; 21:24-25; Acts 17:11, 24-31; Rom. 1:18-20; 1 Cor. 15:1-20; 2 Pet. 1:16; 1 Jn. 1:1.

## *Consumerism*

If the collective beliefs of adolescent outsiders could be boiled down to one worldview, it would be the undemanding “metanarrative of secular individualism.” This system builds upon the cornerstone of personal freedom and choice, and seeks to erect an edifice of self-fulfillment and happiness.<sup>135</sup> Eighty percent of Australian youth believe it is okay to pick and choose your religious beliefs in a system that works for you.<sup>136</sup> It would seem that such views relate to unbridled *consumerism*. As Stackhouse explains, “To a consumerist culture, everything looks like goods or services to be bought as the sovereign (and perpetually manipulated) individual consumer decides.”<sup>137</sup> Adolescents and advertising are inextricably linked: the word “teenager” was first introduced in 1945 as a demographic handle for marketing purposes.<sup>138</sup> Thus, we do well to consider this “symbiotic” and consumeristic relationship between youth and the media, all made possible by technological innovation.<sup>139</sup>

“Millennials are a consumer behemoth, riding atop a new youth economy of astounding scale and extravagance.”<sup>140</sup> Those who “have” want more; those without see “having” as the path to happiness. There is much to be had: laptops, sneakers, iPods, cell-phones, brand-label clothing, and music. Possessions are supplemented by experiences: concerts, makeovers, holidays, *American Idol* auditions, extreme-sports, movies, parties, and so forth. Youth are confronted by seemingly limitless choice, each commodity offering the world and calling for attention. Consumerism easily distorts adolescent identity. “Consume-to-live” mutates into “live-to-consume.”<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 55, 331-34.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>137</sup> Stackhouse, *Humble Apologetics*, 37.

<sup>138</sup> Thomas Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager* (New York: Avon Books, 1999), 8.

<sup>139</sup> Schultze and others, *Dancing*, 11.

<sup>140</sup> Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising*, 265.

<sup>141</sup> Mueller, *Youth Culture*, 232.

Take music, for instance, coming second only to “friends” as a top source of adolescent “peace and happiness.”<sup>142</sup> Ninety percent of youth listen to music every day: it provides the soundtrack for their lives. Their favourite genre is hip-hop, with hard-hitting messages that purport to “keep it real”—giving voice to their own sense of alienation.<sup>143</sup> Youth drive the music market as they purchase nearly half of all albums; accordingly, more radio stations are aimed at adolescents than any other demographic.<sup>144</sup> In the vacuum of secular culture, however, artists readily take on god-like importance in the eyes of impressionable teens looking for an advocate who understands. Television programs like *Music Is My Life* sing praise through adolescent testimony of how music “saved” them from the brink of despair, securing their life-long devotion—much to the delight (and plan) of media moguls.<sup>145</sup>

Adolescents are voracious media consumers. On average, “Generation M” (“M” for Media) multitask to cram nearly nine hours of media content—in descending order, comprised of music, television, videos, computer/Internet, and movies—into seven hours’ exposure per day.<sup>146</sup> In 2005, roughly 30 percent of all movie admissions were sold to youth aged twelve to twenty.<sup>147</sup> Youth lead the uptake of technological innovation, from super-cooled computer systems to SMS.<sup>148</sup> In Australia, over 90 percent of youth aged sixteen to twenty-four possess a mobile phone.<sup>149</sup> Disturbingly, an increasing minority obsessively use their phone (over twenty-five times per day), meeting the criteria for behavioural addiction: “euphoria, tolerance, withdrawal

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<sup>142</sup> Bibby, *Canada’s Teens*, 20; Hughes, *Putting Life Together*, 51-52, 175.

<sup>143</sup> Barna, *Real Teens*, 27-28; Hersch, *A Tribe Apart*, 85; Mueller, *Engaging*, 129-30.

<sup>144</sup> Santrock, *Adolescence*, 302.

<sup>145</sup> See <http://www.muchmusic.com/tv/musicismylife/> (accessed 8 September 2008).

<sup>146</sup> Rideout and others, *Generation M*, 79-80.

<sup>147</sup> Mueller, *Youth Culture*, 110; Borgman, *Kumbuya*, 132-34.

<sup>148</sup> Elaine Lally, “Mods and Overclockers: Technology, Young People and Cultural Innovation,” in *Ingenious*, ed. Butcher and Thomas, 161-73. Cooling liquid increases processing speeds for gamers.

<sup>149</sup> Shari P. Walsh, Katherine M. White, and Ross M. Young, “Over-connected? A Qualitative Exploration of the Relationship Between Australian Youth and Their Mobile Phones,” *Journal of Adolescence* 31, no. 1 (February 2008): 78.

and relapse.”<sup>150</sup> Youth have similarly become reliant upon Internet networking programs such as Facebook and MySpace, a type of “exhibitionism gone wild” in which their thoughts, pictures, and experiences are freely displayed and “blogged” for all to see.<sup>151</sup>

Come high school graduation, the average American has spent nearly 20,000 hours watching television—almost 7,000 more hours than those spent in the classroom—and has been exposed to roughly 5,000 advertisements and subliminal product placements per day.<sup>152</sup> Consumerism promises freedom. The pursuit of such a lifestyle, however, has driven more youth into part-time work to fund their purchases, alongside extended and expensive years studying in search of a higher-paying job. During this time they have been indoctrinated into “an ethos based on consumerism, conformity, and immediate gratification.”<sup>153</sup> Their focus easily becomes fixed on the temporal, further reinforcing secularization.<sup>154</sup> Western culture as a whole is materialistic, yet youth have been particularly prone to its lure. Marketers have exploited adolescent insecurities, building loyalty toward their corporate sponsors who have effectively “pimped” youth to traffic their commercial wares.<sup>155</sup>

With time and money at their disposal, adolescents are a marketer’s dream. In seeking to secure the \$150 billion teen market, marketers both reflect back what youth desire, and tempt them toward the next “incarnation of ‘cool.’”<sup>156</sup> The media depict idealized images of girls as thin and blemish-free, males as toned and tanned, aware that nearly half of youth are unhappy

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>151</sup> Evan Hunter, “Not How They Used To Be: Shifting Trends Among College Students,” *Youth Worker Journal* 24, no. 4 (March/April 2008): 14; Mackay, *Australia*, 128-29.

<sup>152</sup> Milner, *Freaks*, 159; Mueller, *Youth Culture*, 219.

<sup>153</sup> James E. Côté and Anton L. Allahar, *Generation on Hold: Coming of Age in the Late Twentieth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 147.

<sup>154</sup> Gay, *Way of the (Modern) World*, 146-58, 212-13.

<sup>155</sup> Schultze and others, *Dancing*, 11-12, 47, 59-61, 77, 178-82, 194-204.

<sup>156</sup> David Kupelian, *The Marketing of Evil How Radicals, Elitists, and Pseudo-Experts Sell Us Corruption Disguised as Freedom* (Nashville, TN: WND Books, 2005), 67.

with their appearance, and that two girls in one hundred are as thin as professional models.<sup>157</sup> As with sex, jealousy sells. “Cool hunters” are employed by corporations such as MTV, Sprite, and Disney to infiltrate teen cliques in search of the latest fad and to talk up their products through “buzz marketing”.<sup>158</sup>

Unlimited choices collide with finite resources. Accordingly, youth practice both “selective consumption,” and “selective listening.”<sup>159</sup> Only those claims and images that appeal to the viewer are heeded. Failing this, the teen—who prefers interactive media and control—will simply switch channels, their short attention span having moved on.<sup>160</sup> In the competition for adolescent time and attention, it would seem that the Biblical story has been swamped by more entertaining voices.<sup>161</sup> Even when adolescent attention is captured, Biblical themes are often reduced by the media to simplistic images that “elicit excitement, fear, and titillation in exchange for profit,” as in the case of angels, demons, and Hell in the script of *The Simpsons* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.<sup>162</sup>

It is no coincidence that many youth feel most “at home” while hanging out in shopping malls: all of life is reducible to “buying, consuming and spectating.”<sup>163</sup> As our pluralistic society tends to relativize all religious authorities, youth are increasingly free to pick and choose from disparate belief systems that serve their needs. Adolescent attitudes to religion have shifted “from obligation to consumption.”<sup>164</sup> This is clearly seen in the rise and eclecticism of “New Age” spirituality in Australia, representing 17 percent of Generation Y as a whole and nearly

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<sup>157</sup> Bibby, *Canada's Teens*, 13; Kathiann M. Kowalski, “Body Image: How Do You See Yourself,” in *Adolescent Psychology*, ed. Stickle, 24-27.

<sup>158</sup> Douglass Rushkoff, “The Merchants of Cool,” *Frontline*, produced by Rachel Dretzin and Barak Goodman (PBS: 2001), <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/> (accessed 8 September 2008).

<sup>159</sup> Bibby and Posterski, *Teen Trends*, 95; Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 65-70.

<sup>160</sup> Mackay, *Australia*, 124-26; Mark McCrindle and Mark Beard, *Seriously Cool: Marketing and Communicating with Diverse Generations* (Baulkham Hills, Australia: McCrindle Research, 2006), 40.

<sup>161</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 270.

<sup>162</sup> Clark, *Angels*, 13.

<sup>163</sup> Mandy Thomas, “Hanging Out in Westfield Parramatta,” in *Ingenious*, ed. Butcher and Thomas, 114.

<sup>164</sup> Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 228.

forty percent of NRIs.<sup>165</sup> Even here, commitment levels are low: 30 percent of youth believe in phenomena such as reincarnation, though only 10 percent regularly engage in New Age practices—yoga, meditation, tarot cards—and fewer than 4 percent are seriously involved.<sup>166</sup> Hugh Mackay dubs today’s youth “The Options Generation.”<sup>167</sup> Faced with ever expanding choices, they are commitment-phobic, always waiting for the “new thing” to replace an obsolescent option in the hope that this will perfectly fulfill their desires.<sup>168</sup> For many—especially New Agers—this has meant bypassing the Bible’s authority, and settling for a bricolage of beliefs of their own construction. Youth are often unaware, however, that their preferences may be harmful.<sup>169</sup>

After a twenty year longitudinal study of the association between religious beliefs and mental health, Rosemary Aird discovered that “belief in a spiritual or higher power other than God is positively associated with anxiety/depression, high levels of delusional ideation, and antisocial behaviour.”<sup>170</sup> She noted the association between consumerism and do-it-yourself spirituality, warning that youth had simply swapped the “perceived tyranny of institutionalised religion” for the “tyranny of self.”<sup>171</sup> All options are *not* equal, after all.

In response, we may commend youth in their quest for what brings “life to the full,” yet challenge whether the plethora of consumerist options have ever truly delivered their promises. In the tradition of Biblical prophecy, the oppression of teens at the hands of manipulative marketers must be exposed. This challenge must be nuanced, however, for all youths to varying degrees are complicit consumers. They desperately need to hear a “convincing critique of the distorted understandings of individuality,

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<sup>165</sup> Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 306-7.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 70, 187-88.

<sup>167</sup> Mackay, *Australia*, 171.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 109, 170-80.

<sup>169</sup> Bibby and Posterski, *Teen Trends*, 170-72.

<sup>170</sup> R. L. Aird, “Religion, Spirituality, and Mental Health and Social Behaviour: A Longitudinal Study” (Unpublished Ph.D. diss., School of Population Health, The University of Queensland, 2007), 205.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

autonomy, freedom and morality.”<sup>172</sup> The low level of adolescent commitment and their preference for the “new thing” form a barrier to embracing the ancient faith of Christianity, the multitude of advertisements drowning out the voice of wisdom crying in the streets. Yet, by telling the Biblical story in a fresh and compelling way, we can connect teens with One who truly can quench their deepest thirst (John 4:13-15). An authentically lived and countercultural message of simplicity and sacrifice exudes its own form of “coolness” that may catch an image-is-everything generation off guard.<sup>173</sup> Perhaps it is from within the lyrics and images of popular culture’s music and movies which youth so cherish, that a starting point for dialogue may be found.<sup>174</sup> In doing so, we offer a bridge to adolescents increasingly dissatisfied with this shallow and plastic culture, helping them transcend self-interest.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 346.

<sup>173</sup> Milner, *Freaks*, 60.

<sup>174</sup> Borgman, *Kumbuya*, 185-88; Clark, *Angels*, 235; Russell D. McTowsen, “‘M’ Is for Music: Connecting With Kids and the Music They Love,” *Youth Worker Journal* 24, no. 4 (March/April 2008): 44-45.

<sup>175</sup> Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 323.



## *Fragmentation and Fragility*

As we have sketched this portrait of Millennials, the picture that emerges is one of *fragmentation*. Developmentally, adolescence is the period when teens should progress toward integrated and logical thought, redefined relationships with parents and friends, and a definite identity. Instead, our world produces cognitive compartmentalization, relational disconnection, and identity confusion. Most teens seem to function well most of the time, multi-tasking and adapting their behaviour as they interact with family, teachers, and friends. Yet, fragmentation has made adolescents particularly *fragile*. Parents wonder how their apparently well functioning and optimistic teen simultaneously struggles with self-harm or suicidal ideation: their child is a walking paradox.

Superficially, today's teens are *surprisingly upbeat*. Approximately 90 percent of Australian teens are moderately or highly satisfied with their lives.<sup>176</sup> Furthermore, only 7 and 11 percent agree that "I don't belong" and "My life has no purpose."<sup>177</sup> Mason, Singleton and Webber concluded that "there is no evidence from this study of a widespread plague of meaninglessness, social alienation or lack of social support."<sup>178</sup> Similarly, in both Canada and America, nearly 90 percent of teens describe themselves as happy with life and optimistic concerning the future.<sup>179</sup> Furthermore, Millennials are the first generation in over sixty years to reverse the slide on numerous behavioural indicators: compared to Generation X, they are less likely to have sex, get pregnant, use drugs, commit a violent crime, or attempt suicide.<sup>180</sup> Such rosy results seemingly justify researchers who declare that this "Sunshine Generation" will head a revolution to rebuild society.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Hughes, *Putting Life Together*, 42.

<sup>177</sup> Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 269. It is noteworthy, however, that happiness declines across the teen years, and that active Christians fare on average 5 to 10 percentage points better than nominal Christians, New Agers and Seculars.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 321.

<sup>179</sup> Bibby, *Canada's Teens*, 148; Barna, *Real Teens*, 46-48.

<sup>180</sup> Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising*, 19, 35, 204, 210.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-67, 178.

This celebration is premature, however, for today's teens are also *highly stressed*. Over 20 percent of adolescent outsiders feel negatively about themselves and report that they are “hurting deep inside and nothing seems to help.”<sup>182</sup> The majority report that they regularly worry about diverse factors such as school grades, post-school direction, gang violence, abuse and rape, AIDS, environmental degradation, economic collapse, terrorism, and suicide.<sup>183</sup> Not surprisingly, then, stress and depression have skyrocketed. In 2000, 30 percent of college freshmen reported being “frequently overwhelmed,” double that of 1985.<sup>184</sup> In America, 2007, 18 percent of students carried a weapon to school, 6 percent skipped school for fear of violence, 8 percent of students were raped, 15 percent seriously contemplated suicide, and 7 percent of students attempted suicide.<sup>185</sup> While some negative trends may be down,<sup>186</sup> harmful risk taking is still epidemic. In the month prior to this national survey, approximately 45 percent of teens drank alcohol (with 26 percent binge drinking); 35 percent had sex (40 percent of those were “unprotected,” and 23 percent combined sex with alcohol or drug use); 30 percent rode in a car with a drunk driver; 20 percent smoked marijuana; and 5 percent used methamphetamines.<sup>187</sup> For females in particular, rates of eating disorders, self-harm—such as “cutting” to modulate stressful emotions—and rape are still on the rise.<sup>188</sup>

Many teens are unsure where to turn for help. Traditionally, the family has been the primary relational unit. With parents working longer hours across multiple jobs for financial security, many teens have become “latchkey kids”—they control their coming and going from the

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<sup>182</sup> Hughes, *Putting Life Together*, 9, 11, 63.

<sup>183</sup> Bibby, *Canada's Teens*, 34-36, 42-43.

<sup>184</sup> Reed Larson, “The Future of Adolescence: Lengthening Ladders to Adulthood,” in *Adolescent Psychology*, ed. Stickle, 14.

<sup>185</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance—United States, 2007,” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report: Surveillance Summaries* 57, no. SS-4 (6 June 2008): 7-12 <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/ss5704a1.htm> (accessed 1 July 2008).

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-36.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-26.

<sup>188</sup> Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia*, 157-58, 170, 184-85, 219-24, 230.

house, alone and unsupervised.<sup>189</sup> Relational disconnection is further exacerbated by rising divorce rates (splitting nearly 50 percent of marriages), greater age differences between parents and children, and shrinking family sizes.<sup>190</sup> Adolescents—possessing the raw machinery physically and cognitively for adulthood—are often told to “grow up,” but are then infantilized by numerous societal restrictions such as limited work opportunities, capped wages, tough driving laws, and involuntary hospitalization.<sup>191</sup> Our culture offers teens no recognized rites of passage into adulthood, while ballooning credentialism keeps youth in school, out of work, and dependent on parents for longer. It is no surprise that many teens are bucking the system and turning to violent gangs in search of control.<sup>192</sup> These factors all push teens toward their peers for affirmation.<sup>193</sup>

Even in cliques, however, youth rarely feel the freedom to find, let alone be, “themselves.” The school environment facilitates status-relations as students compete for a place in the pecking order.<sup>194</sup> Youth identity is further fragmented as they “edit” themselves before even their closest friends to protect from “peer shock”: exclusion, betrayal, and disillusionment.<sup>195</sup> It would seem that “hooking up” is not simply experimentation to satisfy their physiological sex-drive, but for many is the search for a “temporary salve” to ease loneliness.<sup>196</sup>

Chap Clark, in reconciling the paradox of simultaneously upbeat and stressed teens, compares adolescents to

the vaudevillian plate spinner who is skilled at getting several plates to spin at once and even making it look easy at times. But the performer and the audience both know that the plate spinner is one small event, decision, or experience away from having the entire show

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<sup>189</sup> Santrock, *Adolescence*, 196, 284.

<sup>190</sup> Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 232-33.

<sup>191</sup> Epstein, *Case against Adolescence*, 9-11, 32-51.

<sup>192</sup> Côté and Allahaar, *Generation on Hold*, xv-xvii, 3-4, 68-69, 106-7.

<sup>193</sup> Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 232-33.

<sup>194</sup> Milner, *Freaks*, 4-7, 22-25, 166.

<sup>195</sup> Hersch, *A Tribe Apart*, 213-14, 262; Elkind, *Grown Up*, 81-97.

<sup>196</sup> Clark, *Hurt*, 123.

fall to pieces. . . . [Likewise] the energy it takes to keep them on their poles is taking its toll on the hearts and psyches of midadolescents.<sup>197</sup>

He suggests that adolescents often lack a whole sense of self, and as such “appear genuinely happy, carefree, and seemingly healthy,” even as underneath they are fragmented and fragile. Adults, however, will know the truth only if they care enough to probe and persevere.<sup>198</sup>

The apologetic implications are manifold. We may commend their desire for relational connection and risk-taking, yet challenge them to move beyond promiscuity and the short-lived “buzz” to what brings intimacy and life-giving adventure. There is no greater risk than to lay your life down in love for another. Adolescent perceptions of adults as agendered—with Christians using the Bible to force conformity—form a barrier to genuine engagement. Yet, we may extend a bridge to teens through the Bible’s wisdom, guidance, and clarity concerning their identity as males, females, and humans. The love-story of a self-sacrificial God woos a generation for whom “sexual issues [are a] doorway to the soul.”<sup>199</sup> Christianity also offers meaningful answers to adolescent angst in the face of seemingly meaningless tragedy, guiding them in the art of lament in a culture allergic to suffering.<sup>200</sup> Such answers, offered in compassion, invite teens to trade their compartmentalization, confusion, and disconnection, for the liberation of integration, identity, and intimacy.

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 20, 42. See also Elkind, *All Grown Up*, 21 regarding unintegrated “patchwork selves.”

<sup>199</sup> Scott Davis, “From Pimped to Pure: Helping a Sexualized Generation Experience Intimacy,” *Youth Worker Journal* 24, no. 1 (September/October 2007): 50; Bob Yoder, “The Good News of Lament: How We Can Help Kids Face Tragedy and Grief,” *Youth Worker Journal* 24, no. 1 (September/October 2007): 45-47.

<sup>200</sup> Doug Fields, *Your First Two Years in Youth Ministry: A Personal and Practical Guide to Starting Right* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Youth Specialties and Zondervan Publishing House, 2002), 289; Bob Yoder, “The Good News of Lament: How We Can Help Kids Face Tragedy and Grief,” *Youth Worker Journal* 24, no. 1 (September/October 2007): 45-47.

## SPIRITUAL CONTEXT

### *Spirituality and Religious Beliefs*

Having painted a particular portrait of youth set against the general cultural background, we now turn to consider adolescent attitudes to spirituality and religious beliefs. A number of attitudes have already been identified. For instance, contrary to popular postmodern expectations, less than 4 percent of Australian and American youth are “serious spiritual seekers” *outside* of historical religious traditions. Christianity is still, by far, the dominant religion in Australia (46 percent) and America (75 percent).<sup>201</sup> Eclecticism of belief is virtually restricted to New Age devotees; the majority of youth are following their parents’ beliefs, or are sliding into either a disengaged and watered down version of traditional Christianity—“moralistic therapeutic deism”—or outright secularism. Furthermore, we noted that the majority of teens “lean toward an open and inclusive religious pluralism on the matter of religions’ truth claims.”<sup>202</sup> What, then, characterizes the spirituality and beliefs of Millennials?

*First*, most Millennials are *theists*. Eighty-four percent of American teens believe in God, 12 percent are unsure, while 3 percent are atheists.<sup>203</sup> Of the 16 percent of Millennials classified as NRIs (No Religious Identification), only 17 percent altogether disbelieve in God.<sup>204</sup> In Australia, 51 percent of Generation Y believe in God, 32 percent are unsure, while 17 percent are atheists.<sup>205</sup> For NRIs (more so the “New Age” cohort), 82 percent either believe in God or a personal higher power.<sup>206</sup> This is significant for our purposes, as disbelief in God would seem to fatally undermine any claim of Scriptural “inspiration.” The challenge is still pressing, however, as in Australia only half of youth confidently believe in the existence of Jesus, or that God

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<sup>201</sup> Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 180, 301-7, 319, 331; Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 31, 79-82.

<sup>202</sup> Smith and Denton, 73.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 41. While two-thirds held to a Biblical conception of God, over 30 percent were deists, New Agers (ascribing to a generic higher power), or generally uncertain.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 31, 41.

<sup>205</sup> Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 301.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 82-87.

communicates with humans.<sup>207</sup> Many youth are confused about who Jesus is, with increasing numbers in upper secondary school skeptical as to whether he lived at all.<sup>208</sup>

*Second*, most Millennials are *open* to the supernatural. Perhaps in reaction to our culture's overwhelming materialism, Generation Y are more interested in and accepting of non-material phenomena than Generation X.<sup>209</sup> Lynn Clark in her media study *From Angels to Aliens* noted the strong appeal of supernatural programs to teens—*Buffy*, *Smallville*, *Angel*, *Harry Potter*, *Matrix*, and so forth. She reflected on themes in these shows and concluded that “today’s young people want to be a part of something that is bigger than themselves: they want a destiny, a calling, a challenge that is ultimately worthy of their time and energy.”<sup>210</sup> Concerning definite Australian belief in particular phenomena, 39 percent of Generation Y believe in miracles (12 percent NRI), 56 percent in life after death (42 percent NRI), 44 percent in angels (24 percent NRI), and 35 percent in demons (23 percent NRI).<sup>211</sup> Definite belief in “New Age” phenomena was also significant, including fortune-telling (21 percent), communication with the dead (23 percent), astrology (25 percent), and reincarnation (31 percent).<sup>212</sup> In comparison, American youth are on average 15 percentage points *more* likely to believe in Biblical phenomena, yet 15 percentage points *less* likely to believe in paranormal phenomena than their Australian counterparts.<sup>213</sup> Interestingly, the American data reveals that anywhere from 28 percent (concerning fortune-tellers) to 57 percent (concerning life after death) of NRIs “maybe” believe in these phenomena.<sup>214</sup> Youth, then, are *open* to the supernatural.

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>208</sup> Hughes, *Putting Life Together*, 146.

<sup>209</sup> Mackay, *Australia*, 14, 281-82.

<sup>210</sup> Clark, *Angels*, 69, 234.

<sup>211</sup> Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 96.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>213</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 43.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 43.

*Third*, most Millennials are *confused* over their beliefs. Uncertainty over God’s existence has climbed among Australians, from Boomers (26 percent), through Generation X (28 percent), to Generation Y (32 percent). Forty-four percent of Australian NRIs were uncertain as to God’s existence.<sup>215</sup> The vast majority of youth express their difficulty at times in deciding what to believe. Exposed to so many alternatives, many are lost in an ever-expanding metaphysical mist.<sup>216</sup> Even though some youth were certain about their “yes” or “no,” all researchers noted that the vast majority could not coherently communicate their own beliefs, let alone explain another’s worldview.<sup>217</sup> This incoherence reflects our cultural taboo against serious religious discussion: if youth rarely talk about their beliefs, or experience the challenge of competing views in conversation, they are unlikely to be articulate when pressed. Furthermore, youth have more pressing things about which to talk: sport, school, music, gossip, parties, sex, and so forth. Youth may be “open” to the spiritual dimension, but it is one of their lowest priorities.<sup>218</sup> At best, only 20 to 40 percent of Australian, American and Canadian youth highly valued “spirituality” or “religion.”<sup>219</sup> There is, however, no lack of interest in pondering the tough questions: in Canada, for example, 70 percent of teens often or sometimes wondered about life after death, how to find happiness, the purpose of life, why we suffer, the world’s origin, and if God exists.<sup>220</sup> This questioning is most prominent among nominal believers and New Agers, who drift into secularity if solid answers are not forthcoming.<sup>221</sup>

An apologetic for Christianity, then, should establish a link between God’s existence and His special revelation. Furthermore, this apologetic should commend the reasonability of believing the supernatural phenomena recorded in the Bible, and that the Bible itself is—through its prophetic accuracy—a prime example. This should be done in a supportive conversational context, where youth are free to clarify their own beliefs and question Christian beliefs without judgment.

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<sup>215</sup> Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 82, 84.

<sup>216</sup> Hughes, *Putting Life Together*, 11, 126, 140, 149.

<sup>217</sup> For instance, Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 217, 344; Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 27, 262.

<sup>218</sup> Hughes, 134.

<sup>219</sup> Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 70, 174, 260; Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 68, 266; Bibby, *Canada’s Teens*, 13-14.

<sup>220</sup> Bibby, *Canada’s Teens*, 119.

<sup>221</sup> Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 167-71.

## *Christianity*

As a Christian dialogues with teens, he or she must be cognizant of how teens perceive Christianity in general. Christians are stereotyped, for better or worse, creating expectations that modify judgments of both the apologist and the message they bring.<sup>222</sup> Based on nationally representative polling by David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons in America, this is a significant cause for concern, for “Christianity has an image problem.”<sup>223</sup> Sixteen- to twenty-nine-year-old outsiders perceive Christianity as antihomosexual (91 percent), judgmental (87 percent), and hypocritical (85 percent). The majority view Christians as “old-fashioned, too involved in politics, out of touch with reality, insensitive to others, boring, not accepting of other faiths, and confusing.”<sup>224</sup> Roughly 60 percent think that Christianity makes little or no sense, and 70 percent believe it holds minimal relevance for their lives. Regrettably, many of those willing to reconsider perceive that Christians either have no answers, or that Christians are unwilling to participate in genuine dialogue, simply seeking to shout down the opposition.<sup>225</sup> Christians are identified primarily by what they oppose rather than affirm.<sup>226</sup> Even positive impressions of Christianity reflect misunderstanding: 80 percent of respondents approve Christianity for “teach[ing] the same basic idea as other religions.”<sup>227</sup> In general, Jesus is still positively perceived. Christians, in contrast, appear positively “unChristian.”

Nearly 20 percent of secular Millennials voice similar vitriol against Christians.<sup>228</sup> Such views are reinforced by media stereotypes—think Ned Flanders and fallen tele-evangelists—and misrepresentation from reducing complex metaphysical and moral discussions to thirty-second

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<sup>222</sup> Clark, *Dialogical Apologetics*, 191, 199.

<sup>223</sup> Kinnaman and Lyons, *UnChristian*, 11, 251-53.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>225</sup> Kinnaman and Lyons, *UnChristian*, 28, 33.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>228</sup> Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 78-80; Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 104-5.



soundbites that are unlikely to advance any discussion in a highly politicized environment.<sup>229</sup>

Teens often cluster by belief—only one of five best friends for nonreligious teens were believers—such that misperceptions remain uncorrected. Christian youth thereby appear to be an insular, judgmental clique.<sup>230</sup>

Each of these attitudes must be taken into account. We will engage Millennials only to the degree we are comfortable with complexity, keen to listen, calm and caring in conversation, and prepared to explain before we proclaim. Nevertheless, this dour critique of contemporary Christianity likely overstates the problem for three reasons. First, justifications offered for rejecting the church may be rationalizations after the fact. Prominent media criticisms provide a ready excuse when, in reality, the vast majority simply stopped going to church—or never went in the first place—because they had higher priorities, lacked transport, or couldn't be bothered. Religion may not be a “big deal” to many, but few are openly hostile.<sup>231</sup> Second, most of these critiques are from the “culture wars” context in America. Australia and Canada are less politically and religiously polarized than America, and church attendance is usually chosen rather than forced. While only 40 percent of Australian youth attend church at all, 83 percent of these find their church “warm and welcoming.”<sup>232</sup> Third, these critiques primarily represent Generation X. Faced with rampant consumerism, fractured individualism, and imminent terrorism, Generation Y are more open to religion than their predecessors.<sup>233</sup> It appears that high-demand religious groups with definite teaching and expectations—like Pentecostal and conservative Protestant churches—are able to sustain, or even gain, numbers, while less distinctive mainline churches lose nearly 30 percent of their youth to secularization.<sup>234</sup> In Canada, commitment to Christianity and weekly participation in religious groups have returned to 1980s levels after a fall

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<sup>229</sup> For instance, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YfrpdaTnSGw> (accessed 20 October, 2008).

<sup>230</sup> Smith and Denton, 57.

<sup>231</sup> Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 108-9, 117-18; Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 104-6, 116, 119.

<sup>232</sup> Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 99, 102.

<sup>233</sup> Mackay, *Australia*, 11, 275-77.

<sup>234</sup> Mason and others, 135-37.

in the 1990s.<sup>235</sup> In both Canada and America, nearly half of Millennials are open to greater involvement.<sup>236</sup> Half of nonattending teens are positive about religion, and a further third are neutral.<sup>237</sup> Therefore, while there is genuine opposition to Christianity, it is unwarranted and unhelpful for Christians to adopt a defensive posture in dialogue with outsiders.

In summary, while negative perceptions of Christians and Christianity are common, Christ is still well received. Furthermore, many outsiders would respond positively to a friendly group atmosphere with programming that speaks to their core concerns in a relevant way.<sup>238</sup> Better yet, Christians can evacuate the Christian bubble, show teens the love of Christ, listen to their questions and complaints, then humbly commend the Word which leads to life. Oversimplifications and appeals to authority—“God said it, I believe it, that settles it!”—are ineffective. Faithfulness to Christ and love of our skeptical neighbour demand a sufficiently nuanced approach through “compassionate dialogue.”<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> Bibby, *Canada's Teens*, 196-97.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, 130; Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 37-38.

<sup>237</sup> Smith and Denton, 63, 104.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

<sup>239</sup> Merchant, *Lord Save Us*, 28-29, 45.

## *The Bible*

The Bible is presently an embattled book, as it has been for two centuries or more. Media-savvy scholars announce damaging assessments. Bart Ehrman cautions that “there are more variations among our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament.”<sup>240</sup> The Jesus Seminar—cited nearly every Easter and Christmas by *Newsweek*, *Time*, and the like—claims that only 2 percent of Jesus’ sayings are authentic; the remainder are either dismissed outright (82 percent) or are doubtful (18 percent).<sup>241</sup> Best-selling novels and their screen adaptations have esteemed (though fictional) historians accusing the church of burning earlier gospel accounts that emphasized Jesus’ humanity over his divinity.<sup>242</sup> Such revisionism is then readily absorbed and espoused by an anti-authoritarian populace as Christianity’s real history.<sup>243</sup> The church’s internal disagreements over Scripture have not helped. Fundamentalists at times treat Genesis like a science textbook, while liberals tend to “safeguard” religious meaning by mythologizing all historical assertions.<sup>244</sup> The “right” and “left” seemingly turn to the Scriptures only to support their own agenda. In turn, this casts suspicion on anyone quoting the Bible, whether concerning sexual ethics or foreign policy: “That’s just your *interpretation!*”<sup>245</sup>

This culture has clearly shaped adolescent attitudes to the Bible. Even Christian teens in America are quick to state that “I’m not too religious.” “I’m not a fanatic, I don’t . . . go up and down the street waving a Bible,” testifies a fourteen-year-old Texan.<sup>246</sup> NRIs commonly perceive

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<sup>240</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 89-90.

<sup>241</sup> Gregory A. Boyd, *Jesus Under Siege* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1995), 88; Robert Walter Funk and Roy W. Hoover, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus: New Translation and Commentary* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997).

<sup>242</sup> Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, special illustrated edition (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 242.

<sup>243</sup> Kimball, *The Like Jesus*, 193.

<sup>244</sup> *CWFS, NFC*, 121-24.

<sup>245</sup> Ehrman, *Misquoting*, 217.

<sup>246</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 141, 143.

Christians as on a moral hobbyhorse with the Bible acting as a megaphone to amplify judgment, especially against “gays.”<sup>247</sup>

Secular NRIs simply discount the Bible’s miracles—creation, healing, resurrection, and so forth—deferring to conventional scientific and historical accounts.<sup>248</sup> Upward of 60 percent of Australian youth disbelieve most or all of these Biblical stories.<sup>249</sup> Over 70 percent do not affirm that “The Bible is God’s Word and all it says is true.”<sup>250</sup> Not surprisingly, then, in Australia 73 percent of Millennials as a whole and 92 percent of NRIs never read the Bible.<sup>251</sup> In Canada, over twice as many youth read their horoscope (33 percent) as the Bible (13 percent) in a given week.<sup>252</sup> In general, American teens are far more respectful toward the Scriptures. According to Barna (2001), 90 percent consider the Bible a good source for moral guidance, 75 percent believe the miracles in the Bible, and 60 percent of teens affirm total Biblical accuracy. Nevertheless, with only one out of three teens regularly reading the Bible, few really know which morals, miracles and history they are affirming. Furthermore, 60 percent of teens believe that “all religious faiths teach equally valid truths.”<sup>253</sup> Nearly 70 percent of American teens may claim to be “very familiar with all the major principles and teachings of the Christian faith.”<sup>254</sup> The reality is, however, that today’s youth are *Biblically illiterate*.

In 2005, the Gallup Organization conducted a nationally representative survey of American teens concerning Biblical knowledge.<sup>255</sup> Positively, the majority of American teens

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<sup>247</sup> Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 78-80, 214.

<sup>248</sup> Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 81.

<sup>249</sup> Hughes, *Putting Life Together*, 147-48.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

<sup>251</sup> Mason and others, 120.

<sup>252</sup> Bibby, *Canada’s Teens*, 124. Similarly for America, see Barna, *Real Teens*, 40.

<sup>253</sup> Barna, *Real Teens*, 125-27. More recent research by Kinnaman and Lyons, *UnChristian* (2007), report that only 30 percent of sixteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds believe the Bible is “accurate in all the principles it teaches” (p. 24).

<sup>254</sup> Barna, 130.

<sup>255</sup> Marie Wachlin and Byron R. Johnson, *Bible Literacy Report: What Do American Teens Need to Know and What Do They Know?* (New York: Bible Literacy Project, 2005), 1-5, <http://www.bibleliteracy.org/Secure/Documents/BibleLiteracyReport2005.pdf> (accessed 27 May 2008).

were familiar with Christian usage of “‘Easter,’ ‘Adam and Eve,’ ‘Moses,’ ‘The Golden Rule,’ and ‘The Good Samaritan.’” Only one-third to one-half of teens could identify key sayings from the Sermon on the Mount, what Jesus did at Cana, and Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus.<sup>256</sup> The majority of English teachers surveyed were concerned over decreasing adolescent Biblical literacy.<sup>257</sup> Less than 10 percent of public schools taught a Biblical unit, primarily because teachers feared claims of intolerance and legal repercussions.<sup>258</sup> Lacking even a rudimentary knowledge of Biblical facts, it is reasonable to conclude that adolescent understanding of the overall Biblical story, and the mission of Jesus therein, is even more limited and distorted.<sup>259</sup>

In commending the Bible to contemporary western adolescents, we must address a largely indifferent and at times hostile audience who are both confused about, and skeptical of, the Bible. Any assertion that the Bible is accurate, inspired, and authoritative, fundamentally challenges adolescent autonomy to determine their own beliefs.<sup>260</sup> As such, they have vested interests in rejecting such claims. Adolescents resist rules; they may, however, respond to solid reasons to believe.<sup>261</sup> While such skepticism must be challenged, perhaps a group-based reading of Scripture first-hand—with an emphasis on application—may soften their attitude as they encounter beauty, inspiration, enlightenment, freedom, and wisdom.<sup>262</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> Ibid., 24-25.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid., 5-7, 16-18.

<sup>259</sup> Australian and Canadian Biblical literacy, as less Christian countries, would be worse.

<sup>260</sup> Mason and others, *Gen Y*, 91; Kinnaman and Lyons, *UnChristian*, 211-12.

<sup>261</sup> Strobel, *Harry*, 49.

<sup>262</sup> Jones, *Postmodern*, 105, 137; Kimball, *They Like Jesus*, 208. Cf. Pss. 19:9-11; 119:45, 98, 105.

## CONCLUSION

We began this chapter with a sketch of western youth: pluralistic, skeptical, morally relativistic, consumeristic, and individualistic. Having now completed this sociological survey, a few caricatures have necessarily been softened: the “bogeyman” of the “spiritual-but-not-religious” seeker has been dismissed,<sup>263</sup> and the radical postmodern relativist was more accurately depicted as a confused pragmatist overwhelmed by too many choices with too little guidance.<sup>264</sup> A more nuanced portrait has emerged as we have painted within these lines: most youth follow their parents’ religious convictions; we are decidedly not *post-Christian* (though we are *post-Christendom*); secular skepticism and scientism are prevalent; all hold *some* moral absolutes; and increasing numbers of youth are reacting to a superficial and solitary existence by pursuing meaning and community. Teens are often unsure of their beliefs, protective of their autonomy to decide, and hostile toward Biblical authority. Yet, many are still contemplating life’s biggest questions, looking for answers that make sense of their existence and that work relationally. Many adolescents desire compassionate guidance and resources to deal with the numerous stresses of being a teen as they pursue an enjoyable (and resilient) life. Each teen and teen subculture varies in subtle though important ways from this general portrait, requiring further adjustments toward a tailored apologetic. Nevertheless, it is into this broad cultural context that we must “translate” the Bible.<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 266.

<sup>264</sup> Bibby and Posterski, *Teen Trends*, 170.

<sup>265</sup> Borgman, *Kumbuya*, 32.