

ARTIGOS

The Challenges of SDA Youth Alienation

Renato Stencel, MaEd

Professor de História do Adventismo do curso de Teologia do Unasp
Centro Universitário Adventista, Campus Engenheiro Coelho
renato.stencel@unasp.edu.br

ABSTRACT: the present work deals with the challenges of alienation among Seventh-day Adventist children and teenagers. Their perception of Religion and its development were taken into consideration in an essay to detect the influences that had made an impact in these youngsters. From that perspective, it was possible to make a comparative analysis between the results of a strict and authoritarian religion, imposed to these youngsters, and a religion lived through tenderness and acceptance.

Keyword: youth, alienation, religion, youth development, adult influence.

O DESAFIO DA ALIENAÇÃO ENTRE JOVENS ADVENTISTAS DO SÉTIMO DIA

RESUMO: o presente trabalho trata dos desafios da alienação nas crianças e nos adolescentes adventistas. Para tanto, a percepção de religião e o desenvolvimento da mesma forma levados em consideração numa tentativa de detectar as influências com as quais os mais novos têm tido contato. A partir dessa perspectiva, foi possível realizar uma análise comparativa entre os resultados de uma religião estritamente autoritária, imposta a esses mais jovens, e uma religião demonstrada por meio do carinho e da aceitação.

Palavras-chave: jovens, religião, desenvolvimento do jovem, influência dos adultos.



I. Introduction

The main reason for this essay, is to try to identify the reasons for “why the SDA church? Is it really true? And if it is, “What is going on with the SDA youth today? We all know that a considerable amount of these young people have been suffering severe consequences of alienation.

It is known that it is not unusual for children to reject the faith of their parents when they reach adolescence. In the earliest teens this rejection may be expressed by a negative attitude towards some of the church standards. “Sometimes they find no personal meaning in its worship patterns, and reject it’s teaching as guidelines by which to order their life style”¹. These characteristics will be more visible in a later stage of their lives when they reach the phase of early adulthood. Now more free from parental control they may adopt a lifestyle quite distant from the previous one that was taught by their parents. They may rarely attend services and openly violate church standards. Some will find their way back to a personal faith, and religion will become an essential part of their lives. But for many alienation will be forever.

I believe this issue has brought many concerns to parents and to most of the SDA leaders all over the world. In a certain way all of us are responsible for the guidance of the SDA youth, whether it be as parents, teachers or church leaders. We are all involved in some degree over this particular problem. It bears in our hands today a tremendous challenge of finding an answer or a possible solution for this dilemma.

II. How Youth See Religion?

We should consider that different views and ideas can be observed among SDA youth concerning religion. Many of our young people have been feeling that: “Christianity may serve some purpose for their elders or even certain of their peers, but it has nothing for them. They cannot see its values as relevant to their present concerns and needs. They are not finding answers inside the church to face their daily problems successfully. For some religion seems to be something that takes most of the joy out of present living and adds a burden of guilt to the contemplation of the future.”²

A specific study about Alienation from religion among Adventist teenagers was performed on four hundred students at the level of secondary school in USA. The researcher highlights some ideas of what our youth has been thinking of religion today. Here we have some statements³:

- a. “It’s a bunch of do’s and don’ts”.
- b. “People like to cram it down me, and that’s what makes young people feel resentment”.
- c. “I don’t have any feeling about it”.

¹ Roger L. Dudley, Why Teenagers Reject Religion, 1978, pp. 8.

² Roger L. Dudley, The Journal of Adventist Education, Vol. 41, No. 5, pp. 5, Summer, 1979.

³ Roger L. Dudley, Selected Variables Related to Alienation From Religion as Perceived by Students Attending Seventh-Day Adventist Academies in the United States, Ed. D. dissertation, Andrews University, 1977.



- d. "It is a ritual-type thing. Emotional ups and downs".
- e. "I couldn't care less about the religion I've been pushed into".

The picture that was painted above represents the point of view of a substantial group amidst our youth. But at the same time another large group of Adventist are finding a rich, personal religious experience or, at least, are open to such experience. Many of them accept the values of the church readily and remain positive towards their religion. After presenting these two divergent sides we come across the questions: What makes the difference? Why do some adolescents feel good about their religion while others are hostile towards it? Why are some positively oriented towards the church while others are against it?

III. Youth Development

When we start to analyze the changes that happen in this particular time of their life span, we'd better adopt a principle, which will facilitate our understanding and will provide a different dimension about this issue. The principle is stated as it follows: "We should better see their problems through the eyes of the young people rather than embrace the adult point of view". How do things seem to them at the moment they are acting?

When adults observe this principle, they will obtain a more clear and perceptible view towards the major changes and challenges will they face during this period? For most of the people in our culture, youth is a very turbulent time. Caught between childhood and adulthood, the adolescent faces some unique problems. Coleman described some of the tasks during this period:⁴

- a. Developing a clear sense of identity and self-confidence
- b. Adjusting to the body changes
- c. Developing new, more mature relations with age-mates
- d. Achieving emotional independence from parents
- e. Selecting and preparing for an occupation
- f. Achieving mature values and social responsibility
- g. Preparing for marriage and family life
- h. Developing concern beyond self

The manner in which they will tackle these two central points (challenges and changes) will determine their future success or failure. Erickson considers a need to answer the question, "Who am I?" the primary crisis during this stage of life. "Mental and physical maturation brings to the individual new feelings, a new body, and new attitudes. The person starts to build a consistent "Identity" out of self-perceptions and relationships with others. Conflicting experiences as a student, friend, athlete, worker, son, lover and so forth, must be integrated into a unified sense of self."⁵ According to Erickson's theory, the person who fails to

⁴ James C. Coleman, *Psychology and Effective Behavior*, Glenview, 1974.

⁵ Dennis Coon, *Introduction to Psychology*, 1980, pp. 353.



develop a sense of identity will experience confusion and uncertainty about who they are and where they are going?

Independence is one of the most important goals during this phase. "This includes both emotional independence from parents and other adults and at least the beginning of economic independence."⁶ When they face this moment they may reject some of their parents' values or customs as a way of seeing themselves as a new person. Schiamberg explains this process in this way: "With his increasing intellectual maturity, his struggle for independence, and his change in reference group from family to peers, he tends to question many of the previously accepted guidelines for his behavior, especially those stressed by his parents and his church."⁷

The choices made during this period will emerge as a fundamental pillar for the rest of their lives. It will be a very serious mistake if parents or teachers encourage young people to accept their values without make them first reflect about them.

IV. Second Generation Influence

In his article "The Alienation of Adventist Youth from Religion," Wayne Judd states: "Much of the alienation and disillusionment that touches the lives of youth today is second generational."⁸ Religious alienation is related to the quality of the interpersonal relationships between adolescents and their parents or Adventist teachers, especially as these relationships concern religious values. Often youth perceive that the very parents and teachers who are insisting that young people conform to their adult standards are the same parents and teachers who do not always conform themselves. Or if they conform to these standards, they violate other principles that the youth see as more fundamental and vital.

In the book *Education*, Mrs. White relates youth rejection of religion with the gap between adult profession and practice: "It is because so many parents and teachers profess to believe the Word of God while their lives deny its power, that the teaching of Scripture has no greater effect upon youth."⁹ We should realize that young people have a very developed ability to find out what their parents and teachers are really like. In his article "Sick of Hypocrisy", T. R. Torkelson affirms that: "youth alienation is largely a result of adult hypocrisy"¹⁰ The way youth are treated by parents or teachers will largely determine their future reaction towards religion. "Religious commitment in young people is positively correlated with a warm, supportive family and religious influences in the home. Students report their parents as generally similar to themselves in religious commitment, and that

⁶ Roger L. Dudley, *Why Teenagers Reject Religion*, 1978, pp. 31.

⁷ Lawrence B. Schiamberg, *Adolescent Alienation*, 1973, pp. 30.

⁸ Wayne Judd, *The Alienation of Adventist Youth From Religion*, *The Journal of Adventist Education*, Vol. 48, No. 4, pp. 19, April-May 1986.

⁹ Ellen G. White, *Education*, pp. 259.

¹⁰ T. R. Torkelson, *Sick of Hypocrisy*, *Signs of the Times*, March, 1970, pp. 3.



religious students tend to perceive their families as more happy, warm, and accepting than do nonreligious students.”¹¹

As educators we have been trying to model pupil’s lives, but during this process we’ve been missing a vital aspect. The whole point is not what we are preaching or what we are teaching that will exercise the greatest influence over student’s lives but what kind of example we are communicating through our lives, what we are in ourselves! This is the major point that will make the final influence over their lives. In his book “Jesus the Teacher”, J.M. Price states: “What you are speaks so loud that I cannot here what you say.”¹²

The influence of a teacher upon each student must be one of the greatest influences in child development. Approximately 180 days every year for about 6 and a half hours a day, a young person is under the guidance of one or more teachers. This total approximately 1.170 hours each year for 12 or more years. The student accumulates a great mass of information during these hours. “How much of this information will lead a young person beyond preparation for this world to readiness for the world to come? The teacher’s influence is one of the most determining factors in a young person’s choice for or against the Christian life-style and for eternity.”¹³

V. The Results of a Strict Religious Education

When we examine youth characteristics, we are able to conclude that they have an interest in values and religion. They are seeking foundations upon which to build their lives. Havinghurst and Taba expressed it this way: “Most of these young people seem to be eager to respond to moral values. Even those who rebel against their environment seem to cherish an inward ideal of desirable conduct. It seems, therefore, that rebellion and bad conduct are usually rooted in causes other than rejection of moral values themselves.”¹⁴ What are these other causes? Rebellion is often a reaction to the authority itself rather than to the values represented by the authority. This alienation then is not directed against religion itself but against the authority that holds that religion.

Strange things have been done in the name of religion. We all desire our young people to love God and the church, but in searching these goals many parents and teachers are fighting to force their value systems over the adolescents and eventually the most probable result will be alienation from their religion. “The more rigid and autocratic the home or school is in respect to religion, the more likely it is that the young person will develop alienation from and hostility towards that religion.”¹⁵

¹¹ Martin A Johnson, Family Life and Religious Commitment, Review of Religious Research, Spring, 1973, pp. 144-150.

¹² J. M. Price, Jesus The Teacher, 1954, pp. 9.

¹³ Barbara L. Manspeaker, Did I do What I Could?, The Journal of Adventist Education, Vol. 48, No. 1, October-November, 1985.

¹⁴ Robert J. Havinghurst and Hilda Taba, The Adolescent Character and Personality, pp. 96, 1949.

¹⁵ Roger L. Dudley, Why Teenagers Reject Religion, pp. 61, 1978.



In the book *Child Guidance*, Mrs. White discussing the education of youth points out that the rigid and the autocratic methods eventually leads to character disaster: “The severe training of youth- without properly directing them to think and to act for themselves as their own capacity and turn of mind will allow, that by this means they may have growth of thought, feelings of self-respect, and confidence in their own ability to perform – will ever produce a class who are weak in mental and moral power. And when they stand in the world to act for themselves, they will reveal the fact that they were trained, like the animals, and not educated.”¹⁶

VI. Conclusion

As we have seen there is a great correlation between “Alienation” and the quality of relationships that youth experience with their parents and teacher. Educational studies have been proved that modeling is one of the most important principles in the learning process. In a particular position, parents and educators must consider themselves as models, because in a higher or lower degree they have been observed by the youth. Since childhood we have told them that our religion will bring meaning, happiness and will make their lives worth living. But if religion is not doing anything for us, how can they hope that it will do anything for them?

If our goal is to make them feel positive toward religion, we should start working in the way to build a solid and meaningful relationship with them. This relationship should emerge as a result of mutual respect and caring. They must feel that we respect them as a separate, and worthwhile persons, and that we believe their ideas are important, and we care about what happens to them.

Parents and teachers who care for their youth will never impose rigid values especially in an autocratic way, but they will guide them in considering the principles and making their own decisions. All of this should be done in a spirit of love, acceptance, warmth and understanding. Alienation and hostility cannot survive in such a climate.

¹⁶ Ellen G. White, *Child and Guidance*, pp. 227.