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Religion's Generation Gap?

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What happens when teenage children are more devout than their parents? *The Wall Street Journal* addressed that question in a [major report](#) published in the March 2, 2007 edition of the paper. As reporter Katherine Rosman explains, "An increasing number of teens and young adults who were raised in nonreligious or nominally religious families are getting swept up in religious fervor. This is creating a complicated and sometimes painful family dynamic."

Her first example is Kevin Ellstrand, a 16-year-old Christian whose parents are "self-described secular humanists." Kevin is serious about his Christian commitment and is highly involved in Christian activities and Bible study. His parents are scared of his fervor. He is scared that his parents are headed for hell. As Rosman reports:

In a time when many teens are having sex and taking drugs, his parents mostly consider his piety a blessing. They get upset, however, when Kevin explains that he doesn't believe in evolution. "To me, this is appalling," says his mother, Karen Byers, who has a doctorate in strategic management and was raised a Methodist. "We get into arguments, and voices get a little louder than they should." Kevin says: "I don't want my parents to go to hell for not believing in God. But that is what's going to happen, and it really scares me."

Kevin's father, Alan Ellstrand, director of M.B.A. programs at the University of Arkansas business school, says he respects his son but is saddened that he has such worries. "I'm sorry that's the byproduct of his religious studies," says Mr. Ellstrand, who grew up Unitarian.

This is a fascinating phenomenon — but one hardly unique to Christian history. It certainly is a reversal of the conventional wisdom of recent years. We are at least somewhat surprised to find teenagers who are so much more committed than their parents.

On the other hand, the pattern also makes sense. These young people have had to swim against the tide ever since they identified as Christians. Many know almost nothing of the easy-believism of their parents' generation, and they have had to defend their Christian commitments and beliefs from the inception. They understand cultural hostility to Christianity, and they have made their commitment. There is no room for a half-hearted approach to the faith.

More from the article:

This issue is especially fraught in immigrant communities. Magdalena Ramos, 48, and her late husband came to Los Angeles from Honduras 24 years ago to provide economic opportunity for their children. "Every parent wants their child to have more money," says Mrs. Ramos, a housekeeper who didn't raise her son, Abner, with religion. During his sophomore year at the University of California at Los Angeles, Abner declared that he had decided to devote his life to Christ. But she became disappointed when Abner decided to forgo his plans of becoming a psychologist in favor of low-paying ministry work. Though Mrs. Ramos says she is proud that her son is "a good Christian," she had thought he would be the first person in the family with a professional career. He also had told her when he was a boy that he'd one day help support her. Says Abner, who now is 29: "My mom's dreams for me are inconsistent with the callings God has for me."

This pattern is not specific to any ethnic group. Several years ago, a campus minister at an evangelical institution told me that he had recently run into a spate of trouble with parents of his students. The reason? These Christian college students were committing themselves to missions and ministry in record numbers. As one upper-middle-class couple told

this minister, “We didn’t invest \$80,000 in our daughter’s education just to see her throw her life away in some distant spot in the world as a missionary.”

The scary part? Those parents considered themselves Christians.

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