

# A Crisis of Parenting Is the Root Cause of America's Rapid Secularization

Not long ago, I asked a young tradesman to quote on a job. We'll call him Bruno. We began talking and I mentioned that I was a Catholic. "Religion," he said, "that's a good thing." I asked what his was and he told me that he was a Muslim.

"But," Bruno added. "I wasn't always a Muslim." Tell me about it, I said. He explained:

*When I was in fifth class, some kid on the playground asked me what my religion was. I didn't understand what he was talking about. I said, I'm Australian. No, you moron, the other kid said, what God do you believe in? Um, same God as everyone else, Bruno replied. And when he went home, he asked his mother, Mum, what religion are we?' She said, 'well, we're Turkish, so I guess we're Muslim.*

And that was the beginning of Bruno's religious journey.

For most kids, though, it would have ended then and there on the playground. More and more children are growing up without any religious affiliation. Being Australian is apparently about as much religion as they can stomach.

And it is their outlook, rather than adolescent rebellion against parental faith that is driving the drift away from God, according [to a study by Lyman Stone](#). [Stone](#) is a Lutheran demographer who works with the highly-regarded [Institute for Family Studies](#).

In Western countries like Australia, secularization, or its twin, deChristianization, is definitely a thing. Churches are being turned into restaurants or Airbnbs. Attendance at church

services is declining. The percentage of Americans with no religious affiliation (“nones”) in Gallup surveys has risen from close to zero in the 1950s to nearly 30 percent.

There are various explanations for this slide into secularism. The most obvious is that secular parents are raising secular kids. But Stone points to a survey which showed that the share of parents in the 1990s who were raising their children with no religion held steady at 7 percent. But the proportion of children who said they had no religion kept rising anyway.

*Kids born in the 1990s didn't lose their faith as adults; they had already lost it in childhood. There is little to no change in belief in God for 1990s kids between ages 18-20 and 28-30. In other words, the decline in religiosity we've seen across America in the 2000s and 2010s, and especially among young people, isn't driven by a loss of faith among adults in that period. It appears to be driven by a failure by parents to pass on the faith in the 1990s and 2000s.*

According to the polls, secularisation in America is galloping ahead. Is this because everyone is becoming more godless? No, says Stone: largely it's because of generational replacement. Year by year unchurched Millennials born in the 1990s form a larger and larger proportion of the population.

Is it because the millennials' religion was beaten up in a cage fight with science? No. Stone writes: “The arguments that persuade children to believe things are not necessarily rationally coherent or compelling, and by the time people are old enough to fully absorb the content of religious debates (their 20s), they tend not to change religion.”

The drift away from religious belief happened when the children were very young, before they became interested in listening to [Neil deGrasse Tyson's](#) YouTube videos. Stone says:

*... loss of religion is about childhood socialization. [School](#)*

environments that prioritize career and never present religious vocation as an option, neighborhoods where churches are zoned out, churches preaching more political sermons than about the challenges of family and adolescence, the explosion of youth pornography usage, social media connecting young children to the social worlds of older children in a totally unsupervised platform, and so forth. The reality is that the last 30 years have seen a dramatic diminution of parental influence in general as kids spend more of their life in child care settings, at school, and online. This shift has protected them from some damaging influences (teens today do less drugs and have less premarital sex) but has also reduced the reach of some good influences (churches, parents).

Stone is blunt: *the parents of Millennials “were uniquely unsuccessful at passing on their faith to their children [emphasis added].* As a result, huge shares of young adults today had at least nominally religious upbringings, lost confidence in that religion sometime before age 22 and often before age 15, and now form a large mass of today’s nonreligious adults.”

This observation doesn’t tell us why these parents failed. There are at least two reasons.

First, parents were unprepared for cultural change in schools and the secularising influence of media. They thought that the kids would be all right if they copied the way their parents had raised them. They aspired to be “good enough” parents, but “good enough” left their children unprotected.

Second, as Stone points out, they didn’t copy their parents. “They divorced at higher rates, gave their kids more screen time, let their children spend their whole childhood in almost totally secularized schools, and were far less likely to take their kids to church regularly. If the parents of the 1980s to 2000s had in fact disciplined their children as well as their

parents disciplined them, churches today would likely have more young people.”

If Lyman Stone is correct, America’s secularisation is due, not to a crisis of faith, but to a crisis of parenting.

Nothing is irreversible, as my Muslim friend’s experience demonstrates. But religious parents who don’t teach their toddlers to take God seriously are unlikely to have adult children who share their values.

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