

On “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” as U.S. Teenagers’ Actual, Tacit, De Facto Religious Faith₁

• *Christian Smith*

My book *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, coauthored with Melinda Lundquist Denton, follows over hundreds of pages a variety of topical trains of thought and sometimes pursued diversions and digressions. But what does the bigger picture of the religious and spiritual lives of U.S. teenagers look like when we stand back and try to put it all together? When we get past what we discovered about adolescent inarticulacy regarding religion, systematically sort through the myriad stories and statements about religious faith and practice, and pull apart and piece back together what seem to be the key ideas and relevant issues, what did we conclude?

Here we resummaries our observations in venturing a general thesis about teenage religion and spirituality in the United States. We advance this thesis somewhat tentatively, as less than a conclusive fact but more than mere conjecture. Namely, we suggest that the de facto dominant religion among contemporary teenagers in the United States is what we might call “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.” The creed of this religion, as codified from what emerged from our interviews with U.S. teenagers, sounds something like this:

1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when he is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.

Such a de facto creed is particularly evident among mainline Protestant and Catholic youth but is also more than a little visible among black and conservative Protestants, Jewish teens, other religious types of teenagers, and even many “nonreligious” teenagers in the United States. Note that no teenagers would actually use the terminology “Moralistic Therapeutic Deist” to describe themselves. That is *our* summarizing term. And very few teenagers would lay out the five points of its creed as clearly and concisely as we have just done. But when one sifts through and digests hundreds of discussions with U.S. teenagers about religion, God, faith, prayer, and other spiritual practices, what seems to emerge as the dominant, de facto religious viewpoint turns out to be some version of this faith. We could literally fill another chapter of this book with more quotes from teen interviews illustrating Moralistic Therapeutic Deism and exploring its nuances and variants. Given space limitations, however, suffice it here to examine merely a few more representative quotes depicting this religion’s core components.

First, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is about inculcating a moralistic approach to life. It believes

that central to living a good and happy life is being a good, moral person. That means being nice, kind, pleasant, respectful, and responsible; working on self-improvement; taking care of one's health; and doing one's best to be successful. ... Being moral in this faith means being the kind of person who other people will like, fulfilling one's personal potential, and not being socially disruptive or interpersonally obnoxious. ... Such a moral vision is inclusive of most religions, which are presumed ultimately to stand for equivalent moral views. Thus, a nonreligious white girl from Maryland said, "Morals play a large part in religion; morals are good if they're healthy for society. Like Christianity, which is all I know, the values you get from like the Ten Commandments. I think every religion is important in its own respect. You know, if you're Muslim, then Islam is the way for you. If you're Jewish, well, that's great too. If you're Christian, well, good for you. It's just whatever makes you feel good about you." Feeling good about oneself is thus also an essential aspect of living a moral life, according to this dominant de facto teenage religious faith. Which leads to our next point.

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is also about providing therapeutic benefits to its adherents. This is not a religion of repentance from sin, of keeping the Sabbath, of living as a servant of a sovereign divine, of steadfastly saying one's prayers, of faithfully observing high holy days, of building character through suffering, of basking in God's love and grace, of spending oneself in gratitude and love for the cause of social justice, etc. Rather, what appears to be the actual dominant religion among U.S. teenagers is centrally about feeling good, happy, secure, at peace. It is about attaining subjective well-being, being able to resolve problems, and getting along amiably with other people. One fifteen-year-old Hispanic conservative Protestant girl from Florida expressed the therapeutic benefits of her faith in these terms: "God is like someone who is always there for you; I don't know, it's like God is God. He's just like somebody that'll always help you go through whatever you're going through. When I became a Christian I was just praying, and it always made me feel better." ... It is thus no wonder that so many religious and nonreligious teenagers are so positive about religion. For the faith many of them have in mind effectively helps to achieve a primary life goal: to feel good and happy about oneself and one's life. It is also no wonder that most teens are so religiously inarticulate. As long as one is happy, why bother with being able to talk about the belief content of one's faith?

Finally, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is about belief in a particular kind of God, one who exists, created the world, and defines our general moral order, but not one who is particularly personally involved in our affairs—especially affairs in which we would prefer not to have God involved. Most of the time, the God of this faith keeps a safe distance. He is often described by teens as "watching over everything from above" and "the creator of everything and is just up there now controlling everything." ...

For many teens—as with adults—God sometimes does get involved in people's lives, but usually only when they call upon him, which is usually when they have some trouble or problem or bad feeling that they want resolved. In this sense, the Deism here is revised from its classical eighteenth-century version by the Therapeutic qualifier, making the distant God selectively available for taking care of needs. ... Like the Deistic God of the eighteenth-century philosophers, the God of contemporary teenage Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is primarily a divine Creator and Law-Giver. He designed the universe and establishes moral law and order. But this God is

not Trinitarian, he did not speak through the Torah or the prophets of Israel, was never resurrected from the dead, and does not fill and transform people through his Spirit. This God is not demanding. He actually can't be, since his job is to solve our problems and make people feel good. In short, God is something like a combination Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist—he is always on call, takes care of any problems that arise, professionally helps his people to feel better about themselves, and does not become too personally involved in the process. ...

We want to be very clear about our thesis here. We are not saying that all U.S. teens are adherents of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Some teens are simply disengaged from anything religious or spiritual, and other teens embrace substantive religious beliefs and practices that effectively repudiate those of this revisionist faith. Some teens do appear to be truly very serious about their religious faith in ways that seem faithful to the authoritative or orthodox claims of the faith traditions they profess. We are also not saying that anyone has founded an official religion by the name of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, nor that most U.S. teenagers have abandoned their religious denominations and congregations to practice it elsewhere or under another name. Rather, it seems that the latter is simply colonizing many established religious traditions and congregations in the United States, that it is merely becoming the new spirit living within the old body. ... Indeed, this religious creed appears in this way to operate as a parasitic faith. It cannot sustain its own integral, independent life. Rather it must attach itself like an incubus to established historical religious traditions, feeding on their doctrines and sensibilities, and expanding by mutating their theological substance to resemble its own distinctive image. This helps to explain why millions of U.S. teenagers and adults are not self-declared, card-carrying, organizationally gathered Moralistic Therapeutic Deists. This religion generally does not and cannot stand on its own. So its adherents must be Christian Moralistic Therapeutic Deists, Jewish Moralistic Therapeutic Deists, Mormon Moralistic Therapeutic Deists, and even Nonreligious Moralistic Therapeutic Deists. These may be either devout followers or mere nominal believers of their respective traditional faiths. But they often have some connection to an established historical faith tradition that this alternative faith feeds upon and gradually co-opts if not devours. Believers in each larger tradition practice their own versions of this otherwise common parasitic religion. The Jewish version, for instance, may emphasize the ethical living aspect of the creed, while the Methodist version stresses the getting-to-heaven part. Each then can think of themselves as belonging to the specific religious tradition they name as their own—Catholic, Baptist, Jewish, Mormon, whatever—while simultaneously sharing the cross-cutting, core beliefs of their de facto common Moralistic Therapeutic Deist faith. In effect, these believers get to enjoy whatever particulars of their own faith heritages appeal to them, while also reaping the benefits of this shared, harmonizing, interfaith religion. This helps to explain the noticeable lack of religious conflict between teenagers of apparently different faiths. For, in fact, we suggest that many of them actually share the same deeper religious faith: Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. What is there to have conflict about?

One way to gauge people's interest in different matters is to track their language use. What do people talk about? How often do they use different kinds of key words and phrases? The idea behind this approach is that people's discourse roughly reflects their concerns and interests. We used this method as one means of assessing U.S. teenagers' relative orientations to religious and therapeutic concerns. We systematically counted in our interview transcripts the number of

teenagers who made reference to specific subjects or phrases of interest. We found, first, that relatively few U.S. teenagers made reference in their interviews to a variety of historically central religious and theological ideas.

...

For comparison with these tallies on religious terms, we also counted the number of teens who made reference to the key therapeutic ideas of feeling happy, good, better, and fulfilled. What we found ... is that U.S. teenagers were much more likely to talk in terms broadly related to therapeutic concerns than in the religious terms examined above ...

...

In fact, our interviewed teenagers used the single, specific phrase to “feel happy,” for instance, more than two thousand times. In short, our teen interview transcripts reveal clearly that the language that dominates U.S. adolescent interests and thinking about life—including religious and spiritual life—is primarily about personally feeling good and being happy. That is what defines the dominant epistemological framework and evaluative standard for most contemporary U.S. teenagers—and probably for most of their baby-boomer parents. This, we think, has major implications for religious faiths seriously attempting to pass on the established beliefs and practices of their historical traditions.

...

Like American civil religion, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism appropriates, abstracts, and revises doctrinal elements from mostly Christianity and Judaism for its own purpose. But it does so in a “downward,” apolitical direction. Its social function is not to unify and give purpose to the nation at the level of civic affairs. Rather, it functions to foster subjective well-being in its believers and to lubricate interpersonal relationships in the local public sphere. Moralistic Therapeutic Deism exists, with God’s aid, to help people succeed in life, to make them feel good, and to help them get along with others—who otherwise are different—in school, at work, on the team, and in other routine areas of life.

...

It helps to organize and harmonize individual religious beliefs “below” it. It also both feeds upon and shapes—one might say infects—the religious doctrines and practices at the organizational and institutional level “above” it. In addition it mirrors and may very well interface with American civil religion at the highest level by providing the nation’s inhabitants a parallel and complementary common, unifying, functional faith that operates at a more apolitical, private, and interpersonal level of human life. The cultural influence of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism may also be nudging American civil religion in a “softer,” more inclusive, ecumenical, and multireligious direction. What is conservative becomes more “compassionate,” what is liberal becomes more “bleeding heart” and “inclusive,” and what is remotely particularistic is increasingly universalized. All can then together hold hands and declare in unison, “Each person decides for himself/herself!” And those who believe that only the born again who are justified by the spilled blood of Jesus Christ go to heaven, or that the Angel Moroni really did appear to Joseph Smith with a new and commanding revelation, or that God’s chosen people really must faithfully observe his laws are suspect.

...

... Moralistic Therapeutic Deism—is colonizing many historical religious traditions and, almost without anyone noticing, converting believers in the old faiths to its alternative religious vision of divinely underwritten personal happiness and interpersonal niceness. Exactly how this process is

affecting American Judaism and Mormonism we refrain from further commenting on, since these faiths and cultures are not our primary fields of expertise. Other more accomplished scholars in those areas will have to examine and evaluate these possibilities in greater depth. But we can say that we have come with some confidence to believe that a significant part of “Christianity” in the United States is actually only tenuously connected to the actual historical Christian tradition,⁹ but has rather substantially morphed into Christianity’s misbegotten step-cousin, Christian Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. This has happened in the minds and hearts of many individual believers and, it also appears, within the structures of at least some Christian organizations and institutions. The language—and therefore experience—of Trinity, holiness, sin, grace, justification, sanctification, church, Eucharist, and heaven and hell appear, among most Christian teenagers in the United States at the very least, to be being supplanted by the language of happiness, niceness, and an earned heavenly reward. It is not so much that Christianity in the United States is being secularized. Rather more subtly, either Christianity is at least degenerating into a pathetic version of itself or, more significantly, Christianity is actively being colonized and displaced by a quite different religious faith.

The material above has been excerpted from a version of “Summary Interpretation: Moralistic Therapeutic Deism,” from *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* by Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, copyright © 2005 by Oxford University Press, Inc.