

What teens believe

By [Carol E. Lytch](#) in the [September 6, 2005](#) issue

In Review



Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers

Christian Smith, with Melinda Lundquist Denton
Oxford University Press

Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton have conducted the most comprehensive and reliable research ever done on youth and religion. For the next 50 years writers on the topic will be referring to their book.

The centerpiece of their project is a random telephone survey of teenagers (aged 13-17) and their parents in 3,000 U.S. households. The survey is complemented by 267 face-to-face interviews of teens in 45 states. By drawing on these two sources of data, the researchers were able to produce an analysis that is better than that of the two other major quantitative researchers in the field, George Barna and George Gallup; it is the standard against which other research on teens should be tested. The only thing that would have improved their study would have been the addition of a third source of data—participant observation in teens' congregations, schools, homes and activities.

Though the study confirms some things other researchers have established, the authors surprise us with some of their findings and offer insightful way of expressing what the data reveal.

We have known for years that parents are key influences on teens' religious lives. Despite the tendency of parents to say they are helpless in this area, three out of four religious teens consider their own beliefs somewhat or very similar to those of their parents (they are more similar to their mothers' beliefs than to their fathers'). In choosing friends, teens tend to surround themselves with people who reinforce the shaping influence (religious or nonreligious) of their parents. This finding carries two important messages: First, peers may be important to teens, but parents are still primary when it comes to religion. Second, "teenagers . . . are not a people apart, an alien race about whom adults can only shake their heads and look forward to their growing up."

This finding indicates that popular authors have gone too far identifying distinctive characteristics of each generational cohort. Although there are distinctive World War II and baby boom cohorts, generations since then have been more alike than different. Too much has been made of Generation X, Generation Y, the millennial generation, the lost generation, baby busters, the 13th generation and so on. As Smith and Denton say, "Any generation gap that exists between teens and adults today is superficial compared with and far outweighed by the generational commonalities."

We have also known for years, though it has never before been so clearly documented, that religious participation correlates with good social outcomes. Smith and Denton show that religiously active teens fare better than religiously disengaged teens when it comes to smoking, drinking, drug use, school attendance, television and movie viewing, sexual behavior, body image, depression, relationships with adults and peers, moral reasoning, honesty, compassion and community participation.

Smith and Denton reveal that youth are not flocking to “alternative” religions and spiritualities. The vast majority of the teenagers identified themselves as Christian—either Protestant or Catholic—or as Jewish or Mormon. Relatively few of the teens were affiliated with more than one religion. Half of teens said that faith is very or extremely important in their lives; only about 8 percent said faith was not important at all. The students did not perceive schools as especially hostile to students who are openly religious.

The vast majority of the teens regard their congregations as warm and welcoming. Those who attend youth groups generally like them. Of the teens who attended worship services, 70 percent rated their congregation as a very good or fairly good place to talk about serious issues, such as family problems, alcohol or troubles at school. Of the teens who had some interest in learning about their faith, the majority reported that their congregation did a fairly good or excellent job at teaching them what they wanted to learn. Seventy-seven percent of all teens who belonged to a congregation said that they expected to be part of the same kind of congregation at age 25. All religious groups seemed equally at risk of losing teens; no single religious group stood out as responsible for producing nonreligious teenagers.

Smith and Denton’s most striking finding is that teens are traditional. “Contrary to popular perceptions, the vast majority of American adolescents are not spiritual seekers or questers of the type often described by journalists and some scholars, but are instead mostly oriented toward and engaged in conventional religious traditions and communities.” “Spiritual but not religious” does not describe how teens view themselves.

Teens’ conventionality has some troubling aspects, however. Smith and his team of interviewers talked to teens who said that religion is “just how I was raised,” that it is “not worth fighting about,” that it is simply “good for lots of people.” In other words, teens consider religion to be of marginal importance and are inarticulate

about the content of their faith.

Religious traditions understand themselves as presenting a truth revealed by a holy and almighty God who calls human beings from a self-centered focus to a life of serving God and neighbor. Adherents are understood to be reared or inducted into a historically rooted matrix of identity, practices and ethics that define selfhood, loyalties and commitments. But according to Smith and Denton, teens understand religion to be something quite different: religion helps them make good life choices and helps them to feel happy. “The de facto dominant religion among contemporary U.S. teenagers,” the authors explain, “is what we might well call ‘Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.’” The “creed” of this religion, gleaned from interviews with teens, is as follows:

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 God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.

Teens made few references to traditional religious concepts such as justice, grace or resurrection. “When teenagers talked in their interviews about grace, they were usually talking about the television show *Will and Grace*, not about God’s grace.”

Smith and Denton regard this “recognizable religion” as a middle way between organizational religion (that of churches, denominations and seminaries) and individual religion (which is idiosyncratic, eclectic, syncretistic). They claim that it is widely shared among teens, and is largely apolitical. It fosters “subjective well-being and lubricates interpersonal relationships in the local public sphere.” And it is sinister because it supplants traditional religious faiths.

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism appears to mix with more traditional beliefs and practices in different ways for conservative Protestants, mainline Protestants, black Protestants, Roman Catholics, Jews, Mormons and the nonreligious. The authors

devote an entire chapter to American Catholic teens to explain the “apparent relative religious laxity” of that group.

What would it look like for congregations to move their youth beyond Moralistic Therapeutic Deism? Smith and Denton cannot answer this question because they did not study youth in the context of their religious communities. That is why their research is just one piece (albeit an important piece) of a picture to be completed by studies of youth and congregations and practical theological resources. However, in a postscript Smith and Denton suggest how religious communities might better engage their teens. They say that parents should be more interested and involved in youth ministry and that parents and faith communities should more forthrightly teach youth their distinctive beliefs and practices. Faith communities need to help youth to articulate their faith in reference to life issues, using the vocabulary, story and theology of their tradition.

The increasing individualism of society can also be leveraged to enable young people to question Moralistic Therapeutic Deism and to distinguish themselves as Christian individuals, Smith and Denton contend. They ask congregations to develop teens’ capacities for “serious, articulate, confident, personal and congregational faith” in contrast to the neutral discourse about religion of the pluralistic public sphere or the strident religious speech of those who cause offense.

Smith and Denton have an urgent message: stop defining adolescence as “a social problem” and adolescents as “alien creatures, strange and menacing beings, perhaps even monsters driven by raging hormones, visiting us from another planet.” Most teen problems are linked to adult problems. So adults need to get over their fear of young people. Moralistic Therapeutic Deism does not have to undermine authentic religious identity and deep Christian commitment.