



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.

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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. One seventeen-year-old white Mormon boy from Utah said this very clearly: “I believe in, well, my whole religion is where you try to be good and, ah, if you're not good then you should just try to get better, that's all.” 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. As more than one teenager summarized morality for us: “Just don't be an asshole, that's all.” 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.² Which leads to our next point.

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is also about providing therapeutic benefits to its adherents.³ 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." Making a similar point, though drawing it out from a different religious tradition, this fourteen-year-old white Jewish girl from Washington describes what her faith is all about in this way: "I guess for me Judaism is more about how you live your life. Part of the guidelines are like how to live and I guess be happy with who you are, cause if you're out there helping someone, you're gonna feel good about yourself, you know?" Thus, service to others can be one means to feeling good about oneself. Other personal religious practices can also serve that therapeutic end, as this fifteen-year-old Asian Buddhist girl from Alabama observed, "When I pray, it makes me feel good afterward." Similarly, one fifteen-year-old white conservative Protestant girl from Illinois explained: "Religion is very important, because when you have no one else to talk to about stuff, you can just get it off your chest, you just talk [to God]."

It's good." And this fourteen-year-old East Indian Hindu girl from California said of her religious practices, "I don't know, they just really help me feel good." 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." As one fifteen-year-old Arabic Muslim boy from California put it:

God is like an entity that decides when, if, he wants to intervene with a lot of things. To me God is pretty much like intervention, like extreme luck. Say you're \$50 away from something and you find \$50 on the floor, then that's probably God's intervention or something like that. But other than that it just seems like he's monitoring. He just kind of stays back and watches, like he's watching a play, like he's a producer. He makes the play all possible and then he watches it, and if there's something he doesn't like, he changes it.

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. As this fourteen-year-old white mainline Protestant boy from Colorado said, "I believe there's a God, so sometimes when I'm in trouble or in danger, then I'll start thinking about that." 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. As one fourteen-year-old white Catholic boy from Pennsylvania responded to our inquiry about why religion matters, "Cause God made us and if you ask him for something I believe he gives it to you. Yeah, he hasn't let me down yet. [So what is God like?] God is a spirit that grants you anything you want, but not anything bad." Similarly, this seventeen-year-old conservative Protestant girl from Florida told us, "God's all around you, all the time. He believes in forgiving people and what-not, and he's there to guide us, for somebody to talk to and help us through our problems. Of course, he doesn't talk back." This last statement is perhaps doubly telling: God, being distant, does not directly verbally answer prayers, according to this girl, but he also does not offer any challenging comebacks to or arguments about our requests. Perhaps the worst the God of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism can do is to simply fail to provide his promised therapeutic blessings, in which case those who believe in him are entitled to be grumpy. Thus, one sixteen-year-old white mainline Protestant boy from Texas complained with some sarcasm in his interview that, "Well, God is almighty, I guess [yawns]. But I think he's on vacation right now because of all the crap that's happening in the world, cause it wasn't like this back when he was famous." Likewise, this fourteen-year-old white conservative Protestant boy from Ohio told us that, "God is an overall ruler who controls everything, so like, if I'm depressed or something and things aren't going my way, I blame it on him. I don't know why." But few teens we talked to end up blaming God for failing them, since Moralistic Therapeutic Deism usually seems to be effective in delivering its promised benefits to its many teenage believers in the United States.

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. Its typical embrace and practice is *de facto*, functional, practical, and tacit—not formal or acknowledged as a distinctive religion. Furthermore, we are not suggesting that Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is a religious faith limited to teenage adherents in the United States. To the contrary, it seems that it is also a widespread, popular faith among very many U.S. adults. Our religiously conventional adolescents seem to be merely absorbing and reflecting religiously what the adult world is routinely modeling for and inculcating in its youth.

Moreover, we are not suggesting that Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is a religion that teenagers (and adults) adopt and practice wholesale or not at all. Instead, the elements of its creed are normally assimilated by degrees, in parts, admixed with elements of more traditional religious faiths. 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. The following list shows the number of teenagers who explicitly mentioned these concepts in their interviews:

- 47—personally sinning or being a sinner
- 13—obeying God or the church
- 12—religious repentance or repenting from wrongdoing
- 9—expressing love for God
- 8—righteousness, divine or human
- 7—resurrection or rising again of Jesus
- 6—giving glory to or glorifying God
- 6—salvation
- 5—resurrection of the dead on the Last Day
- 5—the kingdom of God (2 Christian, 3 Mormon)
- 5—keeping Sabbath (of 18 Jewish interviews)⁴
- 4—discipleship or being a religious disciple
- 4—God as Trinity
- 4—keeping Kosher (of 18 Jewish interviews)⁵
- 3—the grace of God
- 3—the Bible as holy

- 3—honoring God in life
- 3—loving one's neighbor
- 3—observing high holy days (of 18 Jewish interviews)
- 2—God as holy or reflecting holiness
- 2—the justice of God
- 0—self-discipline
- 0—working for social justice
- 0—justification or being justified
- 0—sanctification or being sanctified

When teenagers talked in their interviews about “grace,” they were usually talking about the television show *Will and Grace*, not about God’s grace. When teenagers discussed “honor,” they were almost always talking about taking honors courses or making the honor role at school, very rarely about honoring God with their lives. When teens mentioned being “justified,” they almost always meant having a reason for doing something behaviorally questionable, not having their relationship with God made right.

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—as shown in the following list—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:

- 112—personally feeling, being, getting, or being made happy
- 99—feeling good about oneself or life
- 92—feeling better about oneself or life
- 26—being or feeling personally satisfied or enjoying life satisfaction
- 21—being or feeling personally fulfilled

Note that these are not total number of times that teenagers used a word or phrase, but simply the number of teens who used them. 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.

What we are theorizing here, in other words, is the very real existence of a shared American religion that is analogous to the American civil religion that Robert Bellah astutely described in 1967,⁶ yet which operates at an entirely different level than civil religion. It is not uncommon for people to think of the United States as comprising a variety of diverse religions that coexist more or less harmoniously: Protestant, Catholic, Jew, Freewill Baptist, Irish Catholic, Conservative Judaism, Reformed Presbyterian, Latter-day Saint, and so on. But the reality is actually more complicated than that. “Religion” in the United States separates itself out and operates at multiple levels in different ways. American religion is most obvious at the level of formal organizations, the plane on which denominations, seminaries, religious congregations, publishing houses, and other religious organizations operate. But religion also often operates distinctively at a level “below” the organizational plane, at the level of individual belief and practice. Here religious faith is often eclectic, idiosyncratic, and syncretistic, inconsistently—from the perspective of most organized religious traditions, at least—mixing together elements as diverse as belief in infant baptism, interest in horoscope predictions, and the collection of religious kitsch. This is the dimension that some scholars have called “lived religion” or “popular religion.”⁷ Beyond these two levels, Bellah’s major contribution in 1967 was to reveal civil religion operating in the United States at yet another level—“above” the plane of formal religious organizations. Bellah very insightfully showed how religious symbols and discourse—appropriated and abstracted from the Judeo-Christian tradition—are mobilized at a national civic level for purposes of national order, unity, and purpose.

What we are suggesting here in our observations about Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is that, to understand the fullness of “religion” in the United States, we need to come to see yet another level or plane of religious life or practice operating in this social order (as shown in figure 2 on page 169 of *Soul Searching*). At the “bottom” exists the eclectic, idiosyncratic, and discretely syncretistic faiths operating at the level of individual religion. “Higher up” abides the more coherent, systematized faiths operating on the plane of organizational religion. Even “higher” exists the nationally unifying political faith of American civil religion. But situated between the individual level at the “bottom” level and the organized religions and civil religion on planes above that, there operates yet another distinct level of religion in the United

States—the widely shared, interfaith religion of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. 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.

Finally, to suggest that “religion” in the United States operates complexly and distinctly on different levels, however, does not mean that those levels never interact or influence each other. They do. Purely individual beliefs, for instance, are shaped in part by the teachings of organized religion—as well as by horoscopes, advice columns, talk show hosts, and so on. American civil religion is affected both by liberal religious activism and by the Religious Right operating at the level of formal religious organization. The same observation about interlevel interaction and influence is also true of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. 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. The flock of

sheep is diversified and expanded, but certain goats remain part of the picture nonetheless.⁸

Adults in the United States over the last many decades have recurrently emphasized that which separates teenagers from grown-ups, highlighting things that make each of them different and seemingly unable to relate to each other. But, as reported in our book, *Soul Searching*, our conversations with ordinary teenagers around the country made the contrary clear to us, that in most cases teenage religion and spirituality in the United States are much better understood as largely reflecting the world of adult religion, especially parental religion, and are in strong continuity with it. Few teenagers today are rejecting or reacting against the adult religion into which they are being socialized. Rather, most are living out their religious lives in very conventional and accommodating ways. The religion and spirituality of most teenagers actually strike us as very powerfully reflecting the contours, priorities, expectations, and structures of the larger adult world into which adolescents are being socialized. In many ways, religion is simply happily absorbed by youth, largely, one might say, “by osmosis”—as one sixteen-year-old white Catholic boy from Pennsylvania stated so well: “Yeah, religion affects my life a lot, but you just really don’t think about it as much. It just comes natural I guess after a while.”

However, it appears that only a minority of U.S. teenagers are naturally absorbing by osmosis the traditional substantive content and character of the religious traditions to which they claim to belong. For, it appears to us, another popular religious faith—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 organ-

izations 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.

Notes

1. This paper is 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. Used by permission of Oxford University Press.
2. There is a strong connect between this vision of morality and the “emotivism” described by Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982).
3. For more on the therapeutic in culture, see James Nolan, *The Therapeutic State: Justifying Government at Century's End* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966); Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: Warner Books, 1979); James Hunter, *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age without Good or Evil* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); Joel Shuman and Keith Meador, *Heal Thyself: Spirituality, Medicine, and the Distortion of Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Andrew Polsky, *The Rise of the Therapeutic State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); John S. Rice, *A Disease of One's Own: Psychotherapy, Addiction, and the Emergence of Co-Dependency* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1996); Ronald Dworkin, *The Rise of the Imperial Self* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996); Robert Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1976); Daniel Yankelovich, *New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981); James Nolan, *Reinventing Justice: The American Drug Court Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).
4. Four other Jewish teenagers mentioned Sabbath specifically to say that they do not keep or observe the Sabbath.
5. Three Jewish teens mentioned keeping Kosher to say that they do not.
6. Robert Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* (Winter 1967): 1–21.
7. See, for example, David Hall, *Lived Religion in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Erling Jorstad, *Popular Religion in America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993).
8. For an explanation about how such status differentiations and cultural constructions of difference are essential to the making of human identities, see Christian Smith et al., *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
9. As specified by numerous, defining historical creeds and confessions, including the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Chalcedonian Creed, the Athanasian Creed, Canons of the Council of Orange, the Belgic Confession, the Westminster Confessions, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Augsburg Confession, the Canons of Dort, the Scots Confession, the Thirty Nine Articles of the Church of