

## ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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### *A Moralistic, Therapeutic, Deistic God?*

One of my favorite authors today is sociologist Christian Smith, the William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Sociology at the University of Notre Dame. Smith has authored a series of books that superbly analyze the culture of American teens and emerging adults (18-30 years of age). In his 2005 study, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, Smith summarizes the worldview of America's teen culture. This worldview surfaced during a series of broad-based surveys and interviews conducted by Smith and his research team. In my view, the results of this study also summarize the larger worldview of the broader American culture as well. In this *Perspective*, I want to summarize Smith's thesis.

Smith's general thesis about teenage religion and spirituality in America is that the de facto dominant religion among contemporary US teenagers is Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD). He offers that thesis after extensive research interviews and surveys among America's teens. The research focused on how they view God, their religious habits and practices, how they interact with those who are a part of their own faith tradition, and how they view prayer, church attendance, discipleship, youth group and other religious/spiritual exercises. This de facto creed is particularly evident among mainline Protestant and Catholic youth, but is also visible among black and conservative Protestants, Jewish teens and other religious types of teenagers. MTD has five key elements:

1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over 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 in life is to be happy and to feel good about yourself.
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.

Central to MTD is the moralistic approach to life—i.e., that living a good and happy life is being a good, moral person. That means being nice, kind, pleasant, respectful, and responsible, at work on self-improvement, taking care of one's health, and doing one's best to be successful. MTD is not a religion of repentance from sin, of keeping the Sabbath, of living as a servant of Jesus Christ, of steadfastly praying one's prayers, of faithfully observing holy days, of building character through suffering, of depending on God's love and grace, or of committing to a life of gratitude and the pursuit of social justice. Instead, MTD is about feeling good, happy, secure and at peace. Smith writes: "It is about attaining subjective well-being, being able to resolve problems, and getting along amiably

with other people.” Finally, MTD posits a God who exists, created the world, and defines our general moral order, but not one who is particularly involved in one’s affairs—especially “affairs in which one would prefer not to have God involved.” The God of this faith is one who keeps a safe distance: He is often described as “watching over everything from above” and “the creator of everything and . . . 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 on Him, mostly when they have some trouble or problem or bad feeling that they want resolved. Smith comments: “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.” He goes on to argue that in MTD, God designed the universe and established moral law but He is not trinity, “did not speak through the Torah or the prophets of Israel, was never resurrected from the dead, and does not transform through His Spirit. This God is not demanding. He actually can’t be, because 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 feel good about themselves, and does not become too personally involved in their lives.”

Smith makes clear that MTD is not an official religion or formal religious structure in America. Rather, MTD’s “typical embrace and practice is de facto, functional, practical and tacit, not formal or acknowledged as a distinctive religion. . . it seems it is also a widespread, popular faith among very many US 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.” MTD is a parasitic worldview that attaches itself to mainline and Catholic faith traditions, “feeding on their doctrines and sensibilities, and expanding by mutating their theological substance to resemble its own distinctive image.” Teens and adults can enjoy the specific, unique aspects of their own traditions but also reap the benefits of a shared, harmonizing, interfaith religion. For these reasons, teens and adults who embrace MTD in its broad aspects do not argue or have much conflict about religion. Through the interviews and research of Smith, he discovered that what dominates the language of America’s teens when it comes to their musings about life, including religious and spiritual life, “is primarily about personally feeling good and being happy.” For all these reasons, Smith and his associates posit a significant model for understanding the distinct levels of operative American religion. Here is a summary of this argument:

#### ***AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION***

[Public symbols and discourse oriented toward national civil solidarity and politically sacred meanings]

#### ***ORGANIZATIONAL RELIGION***

[Formal religious institutions and organizations, denominations, seminaries, divinity schools, camps, parachurch ministries, conference centers, etc.]

***MORALISTIC THERAPEUTIC DEISM***

[A widely shared, largely apolitical, interreligious faith fostering subjective well-being and lubricating interpersonal relationships in the local public sphere]

***INDIVIDUAL RELIGION***

[Idiosyncratic, eclectic, often syncretistic, popular “lived” personal beliefs and practices of individuals]

MTD is having a decidedly important influence on all levels of American religions reflected in this model. A more inclusive, diverse and syncretistic religious dynamic is emerging in America. The important and central doctrines of historic, biblical Christianity are being supplanted by the language of happiness, niceness and an earned heavenly reward: “Christianity is actively being colonized and displaced by a quite different religious faith.”

See Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, pp. 118-171.