



## **The National Study of Youth and Religion in a Nutshell Making Sense of Teens & 'Fake' Christianity**

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*Editor's Note:* On August 27, Kenda Creasy Dean and her book [\*Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church\*](#) were featured in a news piece by CNN. Five years ago, the [\*National Study of Youth and Religion\*](#) was published in [\*Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers\*](#), by Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton. This study diagnosed the anemic faith of teens. In *Almost Christian*, Dean offers a treatment plan. Below is a synopsis of the initial study written as part of a Lilly Foundation grant to the [Center for Youth Ministry Training](#) and [YMtoday.com](#).

### **The National Study of Youth and Religion**

#### **Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers (2005)**

##### **The Research in a Nutshell**

This landmark study on the faith lives of American teenagers reveals that while a majority identify with a religious congregation, many adolescents:

1. Lack the ability to speak articulately about their faith;
2. Believe that religion itself is not terribly important to daily life; and
3. Subscribe to a watered-down belief system that the authors call Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.

The study attempts to take stock of what American teenagers really believe and how they practice their faith while assessing the influence of parents, peers, churches, and other factors upon adolescent faith. For Christian youth ministry, the study may reveal ways in which current attempts at forming adolescent faith are either succeeding or failing miserably.

##### **The Study in Context**

Since 2001, a team of researchers headed by sociologist Christian Smith (University of Notre Dame) has been studying the spiritual lives of American adolescents in what is arguably the largest study ever conducted around youth and religion. The study has produced numerous articles and reports (available at [youthandreligion.org](http://youthandreligion.org)) in addition to two books summarizing the findings. *Soul Searching*, released in 2005 and the subject of this Lilly summary, details findings from an initial phone survey of 3,000 young people and their parents, along with data collected through extensive face-to-face interviews with a subset of study participants.

In 2009 Smith released a second book, *Souls in Transition*, which documents follow-up research on the same group of young people as they have entered college and the workforce. (This book will be considered in a future Lilly translation summary.) The overall goal of the project is to investigate both

the influence of religion on American teenagers and the practices that religious communities employ for the spiritual formation of young people.

## **Major Findings**

We don't have space to discuss all the findings of the NSYR (such as how faith is influenced by socio-economic and geographical factors), but we can summarize seven major findings that have direct importance for youth ministry.

### **[1] Most American teenagers have religious beliefs.**

The picture that emerges is somewhat different than the conventional wisdom that says teenagers are hostile to religion. In actuality, says Smith, roughly two-thirds of American teenagers believe in a god who is similar to the God of the Bible.<sup>[1]</sup> More than 84% of teenagers identify themselves as religious, and the vast majority of them (75%) claim to be Christian.<sup>[2]</sup> Half of American teenagers report that religion is "very important" or "extremely important" to them.<sup>[3]</sup> Forty percent of teenagers attend religious services weekly or more often.

### **[2] Organized religion doesn't matter much to most teenagers.**

The NSYR reveals that teenagers have ho-hum feelings about religion. For most teenagers religion is a "very nice thing," but not something to which they ultimately pay much attention. Religion is not a source of identity for most American teenagers and mostly resides at the edges of their lives and schedules. This apathy led Smith to describe the dominant teenage attitude toward Christianity as "benign whateverism." The visibility and significance of teen religion outside congregation and family is questionable. A majority of teenagers report that they have close friends with whom they have never discussed religion.

### **[3] For a significant minority of teenagers, faith does matter.**

While benign whateverism is rampant, Smith describes a minority of American teenagers he dubs the "highly devoted," for whom faith is an important guiding force. The average profile of these teenagers, among other factors, is that they are more likely to be evangelical or Mormon than mainline or Catholic. They are more likely to have married, highly educated parents who also attend religious services often. They are more likely to be girls than boys, and more likely to be younger teenagers than older. They are more likely to be involved in a youth group, and to have close friends involved in a religious group.

### **[4] Adolescents are incredibly inarticulate about their faith.**

The NSYR found that teenagers suffer from an impoverished ability to talk about their faith, possibly because they are rarely encouraged to critically think through their faith. Even those who reported that religion was important to them were often woefully unable to express what they believe or why it is important to them. In light of their articulacy when it came to other subjects, Smith suggests that this religious inarticulacy is due to churches "failing rather badly in religiously engaging and educating youth."<sup>[4]</sup>

### **[5] Religious vitality differs by tradition.**

Mormon youth were off the charts in terms of their articulacy and understanding of their faith (and the effects of that faith upon their lives and actions). Next down the line were conservative Protestants and black Protestant teenagers. Religious vitality among mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic teenagers was lower.

### **[6] Highly religious teenagers fare better than less religious teenagers.**

In terms of a variety of life outcomes, Smith found that highly religious teenagers are doing better across the board than their less religious peers. Whether they realize it or not, more religious teenagers fare better than less religious teenagers in terms of "risk behaviors, quality of family and adult relationships, moral reasoning and behavior, community participation, media consumption, sexual activity, and emotional well-being."<sup>[5]</sup>

### **[7] Teenagers mimic the religious devotion of their parents.**

The NSYR found that parents are the greatest influence on teenage faith. Teenagers tend to share beliefs similar to their parents, subscribe to the same religious tradition, and attend religious services with a similar frequency.<sup>[6]</sup> This is good news, but also deeply troubling in light the invasion of what Smith terms "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" into the American religious landscape.

### **America's Default Religion**

Smith's analysis of his own research is both provocative and sobering. After his team spent hundreds of hours conducting in-depth interviews with teenagers about their faith, Smith concluded that teenagers from all faith traditions are united by a common creed that he calls Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (sometimes called M.T.D.).

By moralistic, he means that teenagers espouse the belief that Christianity is mostly about being a person who is nice, kind, respectful and responsible. By therapeutic, Smith means that religion for many American teenagers is about feeling good about themselves. What is central for most teenagers, says Smith, is not repentance from sin, holy living, or God's grace, but rather "feeling good, happy, secure, at peace."<sup>[7]</sup> The term Deism expresses the belief that God is "primarily a divine Creator and Lawgiver," but also for most, a somewhat distant God who is "selectively available for taking care of needs." The god of M.T.D. isn't one who makes demands, but who is available on demand.

What should give Christian leaders the greatest pause is Smith's suggestion that M.T.D. isn't just a teenage phenomenon, but is actively colonizing whole churches and entire denominations. "It may be the new mainstream American religious faith for our culturally post-Christian, individualistic, mass-consumer capitalist society."<sup>[8]</sup> In other words, youth and adults—many of them members or participants in Christian congregations—are increasingly subscribing to a belief system that is only Christian on the surface. This has led theologian and youth minister Kenda Creasy Dean to describe the situation of youth and the American church as "almost Christian."

## **Implications for Youth Ministry**

The findings of the study suggest that youth ministry can make a difference. Smith found that religious youth group participation appears to significantly influence the faith of teenagers.<sup>[9]</sup> However, Smith also found that not all youth ministry is created equal. Like it or not, teenagers from churches with designated full-time youth ministers/directors fared significantly better than youth from churches with volunteer or part-time youth leaders. Overall, investment in ministry to youth seems directly related to the vitality of adolescent faith.

Smith is worth quoting at length when he says:

"Congregations that prioritize youth ministry and support for their parents, invest in trained and skilled youth group leaders, and make serious efforts to engage and teach adolescents seem much more likely to draw youth into their religious lives and to foster religious and spiritual maturity in their young members. This appears to be true of local congregations, regional organizations such as diocese and state conventions, and entire religious traditions."<sup>[10]</sup>

## **Implications for Parents**

Parents have more sway over the religious lives of their children than is often perceived. While many churches have focused on the educational content of Sunday school, youth group meetings, and small group Bible studies, the study suggests that the "hidden curriculum" of parental lives is the most powerful religious curriculum of all.

This isn't just about equipping parents to lead family devotions or attend church more regularly (though neither measure could hurt); rather, the faith of parents will most often predict the faith of teenagers as they mature into young adults. This is a sobering reality for parents who hope that youth group participation will somehow instill in teenagers some kind of faith that parents themselves either don't have or don't know how to communicate. Alas, it appears teenagers do become their parents (just like [The Breakfast Club](#) warned).

What's a parent to do? Recognize that your patterns of belief and behavior are likely to be replicated by your children regardless of your best efforts to the contrary. For some parents, this is good news; for others who themselves sport lackluster faith, it's a sobering reality.

## **Implications for Churches**

[Kenda Creasy Dean](#) has recently completed an analysis of the National Study of Youth and Religion viewed through a practical theological lens in a book called, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of American Teenagers is Telling the Church* (Oxford, 2010). In this first full-fledged treatment of the NSYR from a youth ministry perspective, Dean faults parents and congregations for passing on to teenagers an easily digested and discarded religion based upon personal fulfillment rather than a missional calling to share the love of Christ.

In analyzing the NSYR data deeper, Dean identifies four characteristics, or "joists" that seem to structure the lives of teenagers with consequential faith, and to which parents, youth ministers and Christian educators should pay attention:

1. Teenagers who evidence consequential faith have received a personal and powerful "God story" that imparts identity ("a creed to believe").
2. They've found significant belonging in the life of congregation ("a community to belong to")
3. They have a sense of divine vocation or purpose to their lives ("a call to live out").
4. They had a keen faith in the future ("a hope to hold onto").

Based on these findings, Dean proposes the need for churches to not merely offer these things to young people but also to embed these realities in the depth of congregational life. A total analysis of *Almost Christian* and its response to the NSYR will be the subject of a future Lilly translation summary.

## **Bibliography**

Smith, Christian, and Melinda Lundquist. Denton. [\*Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers\*](#). Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. [*This is the first major publication that resulted from the NSYR and details the findings of the project through 2004. The book is accessible in style, but can be dry reading because it summarizes the sociological research of the NSYR. Be ready for a lot of charts and tables.*]

Smith, Christian, and Patricia Snell. 2009. *Souls In Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [*This is the second major publication of NSYR research and reports findings from follow-up interviews with teenagers now that they have moved on from high school into college and the workforce. Like its predecessor, it's a summary of sociological research, so be ready for some dry reading and a lot of charts, tables, and numbers.*]