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# Soul Searching: The Religious And Spiritual Lives Of American Teenagers



## Synopsis

In innumerable discussions and activities dedicated to better understanding and helping teenagers, one aspect of teenage life is curiously overlooked. Very few such efforts pay serious attention to the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of American adolescents. But many teenagers are very involved in religion. Surveys reveal that 35% attend religious services weekly and another 15% attend at least monthly. 60% say that religious faith is important in their lives. 40% report that they pray daily. 25% say that they have been "born again." Teenagers feel good about the congregations they belong to. Some say that faith provides them with guidance and resources for knowing how to live well. What is going on in the religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers? What do they actually believe? What religious practices do they engage in? Do they expect to remain loyal to the faith of their parents? Or are they abandoning traditional religious institutions in search of a new, more authentic "spirituality"? This book attempts to answer these and related questions as definitively as possible. It reports the findings of The National Study of Youth and Religion, the largest and most detailed such study ever undertaken. The NYSR conducted a nationwide telephone survey of teens and significant caregivers, as well as nearly 300 in-depth face-to-face interviews with a sample of the population that was surveyed. The results show that religion and spirituality are indeed very significant in the lives of many American teenagers. Among many other discoveries, they find that teenagers are far more influenced by the religious beliefs and practices of their parents and caregivers than commonly thought. They refute the conventional wisdom that teens are "spiritual but not religious." And they confirm that greater religiosity is significantly associated with more positive adolescent life outcomes. This eagerly-awaited volume not only provides an unprecedented understanding of adolescent religion and spirituality but, because teenagers serve as bellwethers for possible future trends, it affords an important and distinctive window through which to observe and assess the current state and future direction of American religion as a whole.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Encyclopedic in scope and exhaustive in detail, this study offers an impressive array of data, statistics and concluding hypotheses about American teenage religious identity, with appendixes explaining methodology and extensive endnotes. Sociologists of religion at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, Smith and Denton cover a range of topics: e.g., "mapping" religious affiliations, creating new categories to describe teenage spirituality, exploring why Catholic teens are largely apathetic. All the book's findings derive from interviews conducted with teenagers for the National Study of Youth and Religion. Interestingly and against popular belief, Smith and Denton conclude that the "spiritual but not religious" affiliation thought to be widespread among young adults is actually rare among Americans under 18, and that the greatest influence shaping teens' religious beliefs is their parents. Despite the personal tone adopted in the first chapter and the topic's wide appeal, readers should be prepared to wade through lengthy presentations of research findings. Most helpful are summaries appearing in bullet form within several chapters, providing accessible and succinct overviews of the raw information and statistics. Regardless of whether this research will be "a catalyst for many soul-searching conversations in various communities and organizations" among parents and pastors, scholars will surely agree that this study advances the conversation about contemporary adolescent spirituality. (Mar.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

"We strongly recommend this book to those interested in the religiosity of American teenagers. Social scientists, religious leaders, youth leaders, and parents will find this an enlightening read."--Brigham Young University Studies  
"This book is, quite simply, the best book ever on the best study ever on the topic of adolescents and religion. It is exemplary social science, combining the best of qualitative and quantitative methods, not only empirically strong but theoretically rich."--Journal of Adolescent Research  
"Let this book challenge you as parents and church leaders

to evaluate what you are teaching the rising generation. More importantly, let it challenge you to examine your beliefs and practices and the teaching of the church." --Equip for Ministry

"For scholars as well as parents, teachers, relatives, mentors, and other persons interested in the well-being of teens, this is and will likely be the definitive book on teens and religion for years to come."--Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion

"This survey is 'the largest and most comprehensive and detailed study of American teenage religion and spirituality conducted to date.' All major religions and two, what the authors refer to as 'minority religious traditions, Mormonism and Judaism,' are covered...In the meantime, this book does place Mormons and Jews in context to the majority US religions and that is a valuable beginning."--Community, the Jewish Community Federation (KY) newspaper

"This book is a landmark study of the religious attitudes and practices of American teenagers. While the study demonstrates that there is a strong correlation between religious commitment and positive social behavior, there are also disturbing trends related to this theologically illiterate generation of teens who primarily think of God as their private butler. The authors offer a number of concrete suggestions in a concluding postscript that will be of value to youth workers and religious communities. Drawing on a national survey of teens and their significant caregivers, as well as several hundred in-depth interviews, this book is the most comprehensive study of teenage religiosity that has ever been done."--Donald E. Miller, author of Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium

"Soul Searching is a bombshell, and one that is long overdue. It convincingly demonstrates that many of our assumptions about youth and religion in the U.S. are well off the mark. Instead of finding hostility toward religion, we meet young people from every corner of the culture who echo their parents religiosity to an astonishing degree-but this, as it turns out, is hardly a formula for vibrant faith. Soul Searching puts American religious communities on notice: if religion matters, then we had better stop exposing young people to faith and start teaching it to them. Anyone who lives or works with teenagers simply must read this book. You won't be able to sit still after you do."--Kenda Creasy Dean, author of Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church

"This is an extremely important book. In presenting the results from the most ambitious national study ever conducted among American teenagers about their religious and spiritual lives, it sheds new light from start to finish. I highly recommend it."--Robert Wuthnow, author of America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity

"This book is a rich resource that Christian educators, church officers, and parents need to be aware of."--Ordained Servant, A Journal of Church Officers

"Fills an enormous gap in our knowledge about young people. If there is one book to read outside your discipline this year it is Soul Searching."--Worship

"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 Christian Century"Smith and Denton's findings beg for a response from those working in youth ministry."--The Christian Century"Demolishes the conventional wisdom....a must-read"--Andrew Greeley, National Catholic Reporter"With a mixture of good news and bad news that punctures many stereotypes about adolescent religious beliefs and behavior, this extensive study deserves attention for what it reveals across the full range of American religious groups."--Peter Steinfeld, The New York Times"Pioneering....a highly informative and provocative book....[that] is also readable, full of illuminating anecdotes and summaries from which the lively, often-touching personalities of teenagers emerge."--Chicago Tribune"Youth groups, role models, service activities and cultural rituals of religious institutions all seem to help youth lead more healthy, moral and happy lives. This book goes a long way toward explaining the extent of this phenomenon and which religions seem to be accomplishing these benefits most."--New York Post""Of course, it's not the point whether or not Smith and Denton believe in God. They believe in religion. They believe in teenagers. And for good reason. The data suggests that America would be better off if we all believed as they do."--The Revealer"No book in recent memory has as much potential to transform the practice of youth ministry...[T]he results overturn nearly every piece of conventional wisdom about teens and faith."--Christianity Today"Soul Searching represents social science at its very best."--Spiritus

Once again a Christian Smith book I find I could not be without. I am now retired, but when I was working with high school and college students this book was the best helper I could have. The information in this book comes from excellent research on young people of all faiths and no faith. What this book allows is for a thinking adult to strategize youth ministry in a way that lets us understand our students and how and why they think and speak as they do. It gives us a deeper connection with the student that we would not have on just our own experience and study. Dr. Smith has done the work for us. Now we just need to be familiar with the insights we get and apply them in a practical way to our particular situation. It helps us to become a more understanding and compassionate teacher or minister who is strengthened in our confidence that we can be a mentor that makes a difference. Many thanks to Dr. Smith and his colleagues.

I've known about the phrase "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" for some time but it wasn't until recently that I learned that the phrase was coined by Smith and Denton in *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. Once I learned that, this book jumped to the top of my reading list. I was primarily looking for a comprehensive description of the term from its "primary

source." In this quest I was not disappointed. What I didn't expect, but got anyway, was an accidental-guide to youth ministry. *Soul Searching* is written from a secular sociological perspective. In some respects, the book is simply a report on the results of a major survey of American teenagers (NSYR) on the topic of religion and spirituality. The book examines the results of this survey through a sociological lens. That said, the book is not neutral. The authors are, at least, sympathetic toward various religious traditions and seem to be concerned that, in regards to Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, have strayed so far from their doctrinal and historical roots. Near the end of the book the authors consciously stray from their sociological framework to offer advice to religious congregations. Such a diversion, while only consciously done at this place in the book, is not out of place. *Soul Searching* is an exceedingly influential book, not just about what it says about American youth in particular, but about what it says about American religion in general. The phrase coined in the book, "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism," (MTD) is an apt term for the form of religious thought popular in America today. It's essential that Religious families and leaders be able to recognize this parasitic pseudo-religious system. When I read this section in the book I highlighted almost everything. That's usually a sure sign that the book is good. MTD is just one of the many contributions of *Soul Searching*. Its presentation and analysis of the NSYR results are also very informative and relevant to anyone interested in reaching American teenagers. This is a must read (a phrase I won't use very often) for anyone involved in youth ministry. I would also highly recommend it for other pastors, since MTD is widespread, not just in among American teenagers, but among parents as well. I said in the introduction that this book was an accidental-guide to youth ministry. It is definitely not a guide in format. It's a sociology book. But, the issues it raises are relevant issues to all youth leaders. The findings of the NSYR research ought to make all of us think intentionally about youth ministry.

As a former youth minister and long-time priest and school teacher, I've read many books on youth, youth culture, and youth ministry. While many of these have been more practical in nature than "*Soul Searching*," this book by Christian Smith (with Melinda Lundquist Denton) provides the most up-to-date and careful research into "the religious and spiritual lives of American teens" (which is the subtitle of the book). This is an excellent work of sociology. If you're serious about what's really going on in the spiritual lives of our teens, then make sure to read this book along with any others you read. The major themes and findings of the book are worth reading and reflecting on. Here are some of the findings: 1. Religion is still a significant presence in the lives of American teens. 2. The characteristic religiosity of teens in the U.S. is extraordinarily conventional. 3. The single most

important social influence on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents is their parents. (This is supported by innumerable other books, and I wish parents would more fully grasp this truth!) In fact, it's uncanny how much the spiritual lives of teens reflect that of their parents, which suggests that if we want to change the lives of teens we must first change the lives of parents.<sup>4</sup> U.S. teens have a difficult time explaining what they believe.<sup>5</sup> A distinct faith which the authors call "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" has established a significant foothold in American youth, especially those whose engagement with their religious communities is weak. Moralistic Therapeutic Deism may be summarized by the beliefs that: 1) God created the world and watches over humans. 2) God wants people to be good, nice, and fair. 3) The central goal of life is to be happy and feel good about oneself. 4) God doesn't need to be involved in one's life except when there's a problem 5) Good people go to heaven when they die. This may sound good to many, but it is not, for example, the teaching of Christ and Christianity. In addition, the majority of American teenagers appear to espouse inclusive, pluralistic, and individualistic beliefs. In the U.S., teens aren't being secularized: rather, the Trinity, holiness, sin, grace, church, heaven and hell are being replaced with the language of happiness, niceness, and an earned heavenly reward. "Christianity is actively being colonized and displaced by a quite different religious faith."<sup>6</sup> There are significant differences between more and less religious teens in the U.S. In other words, while there is a lot of negative news out there, many U.S. teens are still strong in their faith. Smith and Denton have arrived at these conclusions, and others, through a rigorous process of sociological investigation. The book is a minefield of data and interpretation - more than most readers will want! For anyone interested in the spiritual lives of teenagers today, I can't recommend this book highly enough.

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