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HOW TO AVOID RAISING NICE TEENAGERS

by Kenda Creasy Dean

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SYNOPSIS

The massive National Study of Youth and Religion unveils a common “default” religiosity among the majority of American teenagers: Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD), the view that God helps you be nice and feel good about yourself, but otherwise stays in the background. Intended to create common ground between religiously diverse people, MTD instead perpetuates a self-serving spirituality among teenagers that risks placing one’s own happiness ahead of others. MTD inadvertently reinforces several myths associated with raising young people as Christians in our society. These myths need to be debunked. In the end, the most important strategy for strengthening adolescent faith is to strengthen the faith of the adults who love them.

Maybe you’ve heard this one: Mom is angling to get sixteen-year-old Tony to come to church on Sunday, and Tony will have none of it. “Don’t you get it?” he yells, pushing his chair away from the table. “I hate church! I am not like you! The church is full of hypocrites!” Dramatic exit, stage right.

This story sounds true, but it isn’t. In the massive National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), ongoing since 2005, teenagers mirrored their parents’ religious beliefs to a startling degree. Teens don’t fight about religion, partly because their parents believe pretty much the same things, and partly because they don’t care enough about it to make a fuss. As NSYR principal investigator Christian Smith put it, “Most churches’ problem is not teenage rebellion, but teenagers’ benign ‘whatever-ism.’”¹

The NSYR is the largest study of adolescent faith to date. Scores of researchers—myself included—interviewed more than thirty-three hundred teenagers and their parents, and researchers still return to an in-depth sample every five years. Interestingly, few NSYR findings surprise those working with teenagers. The study’s significance lies in the fact that it reframes the problems facing youth ministry as problems facing the church, and in so doing, it unmaskes several myths about teens and faith that deserve to be debunked.

SO WHAT’S THE PROBLEM?

There *is* good news in the NSYR: religion matters to many young people. Three out of four American teenagers between the ages of thirteen and seventeen say they are Christians.² Forty percent say their faith matters to them. They attend church at least as often as adults do, and large numbers participate in youth groups, camps, and other religious activities. Yet only eight percent seem to have been genuinely shaped by their faith, and view religion as a “life driver” (a variable that orients the choices, direction, and activities of their lives). Most teenagers (sixty percent), however, find religion inconsequential and

their numbers climb following high school graduation. Indeed, the fastest-growing religious preference in the United States is the “nones.” One in four young people between ages of eighteen and twenty-nine are unaffiliated with any religious tradition.³

What’s Wrong with It?

Yet these youth do adhere to a *de facto* religious creed—one that does not reflect Christian teaching, or any of the world’s major religions. Smith and his colleagues dubbed this default faith “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” (MTD), a view that religion is supposed to make us nicer people who feel good about ourselves while God stays in the background. While Mormons, conservative Protestants, and black Protestants are less likely to practice MTD than their peers, it appears in every religious community, and is most prevalent among mainline Protestant and Catholic teens, followed by Jews and nonreligious youth. Researchers were mum on MTD’s effects on non-Christian religions (the sample of non-Christian religious teenagers was too small to generalize), but they were unsparing when it came to churches. Smith called MTD the “dominant religion in the United States, having supplanted Christianity in American churches.”

This claim begs a question: What’s wrong with Moralistic Therapeutic Deism? Don’t we want people to be nicer and more satisfied? Didn’t Jesus want us to love people? Shouldn’t we be celebrating the fact that kids are not killing each other over religion? Affirmative to all that. Yet, despite appearances to the contrary, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism does not answer these crucial questions. In fact, by offering teenagers a distorted, self-serving version of Christianity, MTD risks making us *less* concerned about others, not more. So how do we get past this self-serving spirituality, and the myths about teenage faith that it perpetuates?

What Exactly Is Moralistic Therapeutic Deism?

There are notable exceptions, of course, but most American teenagers seem to believe that:

- A God exists who created the world and watches over human life on earth.
- God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
- The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about ourselves.
- God doesn’t need to be involved in our lives except when needed to resolve a problem.
- Good people go to heaven when they die.

It sounds vaguely Christian on the outside, doesn’t it? But place MTD alongside historic Christian teaching—the Apostles’ Creed, for example—and the telling distinction emerges. While the Apostles’ Creed is about *God*, MTD is about *us*.

THE MYTHS BY WHICH WE LIVE

Like civil religion, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is a way to play down particularities that could lead to discord. In the case of civil religion, the goal is public unity; in the case of MTD, the goal is smooth interpersonal relationships. Teenagers recognize that the fastest way to prevent tension with a religiously different friend is to bypass religious distinctives and go directly to shared democratic values—and express them in a publicly shared religious vocabulary.

MTD thus offers a handy solution to sticky relationships in a pluralistic culture. Interpersonally, the strategy is sound. Theologically, however, it carries big risks. Among other things, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism reinforces several myths about faith and young people—myths that find little resistance, and sometimes active support, in parents and congregations.

Myth #1: Raising Kids to Be Nice Is the Same as Raising Them as Christians

I'd like to think Jesus was a nice guy (the kids in the NSYR overwhelmingly thought so). But Jesus never mentions being "nice" in the Gospels. What Jesus talks about is kindness, compassion, justice, forgiveness, and loving your enemies—which are a lot harder than being nice. Most people equate being "nice" with being friendly and avoiding conflict, an approach that easily glosses over difference, and sometimes becomes a cheap substitute for love, forgiveness, grace, or appreciation.

So while there is nothing wrong with being "nice," there is much wrong with making "niceness" into a socially acceptable form of holiness—an unfortunate but common strategy that risks robbing religion of its truthfulness and its force, rendering faith impotent to address conflict or suffering. Holy communities have prophetic voices that call us back to God. In the Bible, holy people can be maddeningly truthful or disconcertingly weird. They routinely offend the powerful as they align themselves with the oppressed—and with God. MTD, on the other hand, creates "safe" communities, not holy or prophetic ones.

Myth #2: Jesus Wants Us to Feel Good about Ourselves

If anything, the biblical writers seem to have taken self-esteem for granted; loving God's creation obviously includes loving yourself as a part of God's creation. Jesus makes no bones about this: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31).⁴ (Apparently, He didn't think reminding us to love ourselves was necessary.) Both Hebrew and Christian scripture advocate an honest self-concept, along with a slow trigger when it comes to judging others. The gospel of Matthew warns us to take a good hard look at ourselves (Matt. 7:3–5), while Paul warns us not to get big heads (Rom. 11:20; 12:3). Jesus calls us to base self-worth on God's love for us, not on our love for ourselves: "Love one another, as I have loved you" (John 13:34).

One of MTD's central tenets, extremely prominent in the NSYR interviews, is that "the central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about yourself"—a position that comes close to turning religion into a divinely sanctioned sense of entitlement. When God exists to meet my needs and make me feel good about myself, then my happiness can come at the expense of yours. Some of the church's worst abuses came from people who thought God gave them permission to exploit others in order to protect their comfort and well-being (think slavery, Nazism, and apartheid—to start).

Equally serious is the fact that equating God's love with our happiness robs Christian faith of its ability to withstand "shipwreck"—Reinhold Niebuhr's term for the shattering of self that occurs when life hits the rocks. If religion exists to make me feel good, experiences of shipwreck toss religion into irrelevance. Religion does not help someone "feel good" about abuse (or call her to "be nice" to her abuser), nor should it. In times of shipwreck, making good feelings a sign of God's presence only convinces young people that God is mean, make-believe, or impotent.

Christians are not called to avoid suffering; we're called to move toward it. God's love willingly suffers on behalf of the beloved, so Christians also struggle deeply with the world's pain, and share the pain of others. When churches embody the dying-and-rising pattern of God's love for us, we participate in God's transformation of the world and of us. Through His life, death, and resurrection, Christ does not glue us back together; He redeems us and makes us new.

Myth #3: Raising Your Children as Christians Will Make Them Good American Citizens

Teenagers know that being a Christian in American culture is a tough fit, and not just because of church norms on sex. When we raise children in the church, we should acknowledge that we're asking them to do something that will ill-suit them for success. We're asking youth to engage in a very countercultural, even dangerous, way of life. They are right to be suspicious, for several reasons.

First, the "Jesus ethic" is an ethic of self-giving. As Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message*, "If your first concern is to look after yourself, you'll never find yourself. But if you forget about yourself and look to me, you'll find both yourself and me" (Matt. 10:39). This is hardly a formula for getting ahead; it runs counter to both the American dream of self-fulfillment and the human instinct for self-preservation. Nor does Christianity help youth survive consumerism's therapeutic impulse. In the gospel, joy comes

not from acquiring resources, but from sharing them. Add the gospel's emphasis on relationships and community, and you won't be equipped for postmodern society's self-focused individualism, either ("Anything is okay as long as it doesn't harm anyone else"). The early church leader Tertullian taught that Christians should live in such a way that the pagan world (fraught with conflict and bloodshed) would look at the church and exclaim, "See how they love each other, and how they are ready to die for each other?"

Given these conditions, the only possible explanation for desiring Christ is grace. If we think that raising youth as good citizens makes them Christians (or vice versa) we are in for a jolt. Few scenarios are more unsettling to parents than the possibility that our sons and daughters may actually want to be like Jesus. We would far rather they choose a safer way of life. We would far rather they become like us.

Myth #4: The Best Way to Instill Authentic, Other-directed Faith in Youth Is to Participate in Youth Groups and Mission Trips

If only it were that easy. There are many, many good reasons for teenagers to attend a religious youth group; they offer important sources of adult support, church connections, and moral values. Youth groups, however, are less effective as crucibles of faith. A better predictor is regular worship in a congregation, friendships with Christian adults, and—above all—parents who model what day-to-day Christian faith looks like.

Ditto mission trips. When the NSYR followed youth into their early twenties, two religious practices—only two—seemed correlated with faith that survived high school: prayer and reading the Bible. As Christian Smith told one interviewer, when it comes to Christian formation, mission trips don't seem to amount to "a hill of beans."⁵

I happen to think that church mission trips are a good idea, as long as the people in the community being served make most of the decisions. Like youth groups, these trips indirectly support adolescent faith by providing adult-youth relationships and decentering experiences that give youth new frames of reference. Mission trips, however, can't inspire teenagers to follow Jesus unless they recognize the trip's connection to the gospel—an awareness cultivated in practices such as prayer and Scripture reading.

Myth #5: Radical Faith Will Turn Teenagers into Religious Extremists

In a post-9/11 world, it's natural to be skeptical of religious passion and extremism. But we should distinguish between radical faith and extremism, since they are not the same thing. The word "radical" means *root*—radical faith points to the root of faith, which in the case of Christianity is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. To do something radical for Christ means to do something that is connected to the root message of Christianity—the passion of God in Jesus Christ—by loving others enough to suffer willingly, if necessary, in their stead.

Extremism, on the other hand, takes place—not at the root of faith—but at its edges. Edges are constantly in danger of erosion, so extremists are people determined to protect these unstable edges of principles, political systems, religious views, and so on. Extremism is a position of rational supremacy. If I am an extremist, the only way you can be right is to agree with me. What's more, I will defend the precarious edge on which I stand at all costs. As a result, extremism leads to a lot of collateral damage. The emphasis in extremism is not on loving the person, but on protecting the principle.

Every religion has both radicals and extremists. For Christians, focusing on Christ's life, death, and resurrection makes us radical because Jesus Christ is the root of our faith, the source of our growth, and the anchor of our being even as we reach out toward others. Radical Christians love God and neighbor as ourselves, which means sharing in their suffering. True love willingly suffers for the beloved. But true love never knowingly inflicts suffering. It is to our shame that churches throughout history have sometimes ignored this fact—and for this we can only beg forgiveness, and throw ourselves on God's mercy.

Myth #6: The Solution to MTD Is Getting Teenagers to Church More Often and Hiring a Youth Pastor

Actually, the only solution to Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is a more faithful church. Perfect attendance and a star-powered youth pastor can't counter a church focused more on its own well-being than on Christ's call to follow wherever He leads.

Yes: belonging to a faith community and having a youth pastor are strongly correlated with highly devoted faith. Furthermore, highly devoted teenagers are more likely than their peers to attend churches with a youth pastor. But since congregations often reinforce Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, going to church more often does not always help. And since even the best youth pastor withers quickly in congregations without infrastructure for youth ministry, most youth ministers don't stick around long enough to influence parents and congregations as well as teenagers themselves.⁶

The basic point is this: MTD is not youth ministry's problem, or teenagers' problem. It is the church's problem—which means we're not going to be able to instill authentic, life-giving, outward-focused faith in young people without getting serious about authentic, life-giving, outward-focused faith ourselves. As Clarence Jordan allegedly said: "Ya cain't raise live chicks under a dead hen."

Myth #7: I'm a Christian Parent but It Seems Like Nothing I'm Doing Is Good Enough

Take heart. Parents are not ultimately responsible for their children's faith; God is. Our job is to make faith part of the daily lives we share with them. That means that the best way to support adolescent faith is to invest in our own. If you're somebody who needs concrete ideas, try these:

1. Enjoy God's Company. Our friends Bud and Norma have enjoyed God's company together for more than sixty years. They share Scripture like it's their family scrapbook; they make room in their home to pray with others in God's presence. Bud and Norma's farm has been "holy ground" for our family. We've shared meals and prayers and tears in the outdoor chapel Bud built behind the barn. Bud and Norma go out of their way to welcome Christ into their home and lives—and as a result, so do we when we are with them.

To love God means enjoying God's companionship and creation (including other people). We don't have to build a chapel for that to happen, but it wouldn't hurt to ask ourselves: Have children seen us look forward to meeting up with God when we open Scripture? Have we thanked God for the young people in our lives—in front of them? Has my child seen me respond to a stranger out of Christ's lavish love rather than out of Christian duty? Do young people see me enjoying God's company?

2. Practice Joy. Moralistic Therapeutic Deism maintains a cheap standard of happiness: as long as everybody is nice, as long as I get my way, as long as God doesn't upset my plans, religion makes me happy. It is an attitude that depends on people (and God) doing what I want them to, which (besides being laughably self-centered) is doomed to disappoint us. True joy is a practice: it is the fruit of our deepening attunement to God and others, which is something we can learn and cultivate with the help of fellow Christians. To practice joy, we need to be aware of those actions that seem to clear away the debris between us and God, and therefore allow us to notice God's presence with us. What practices of Christian community most enliven us? Who are the people who make us more hungry for Jesus? Joy is contagious: the more we practice it, the more it spreads.

3. Stock Your Toolkit. Consequential faith in teenagers seems to be more likely when certain "cultural tools" are present: a God-story they can articulate, a faith community they belong to, a call they can live out, and a hope they can hold on to.⁷ Here's a tip: investing in these cultural tools strengthens our faith too. Ask yourself:

- Can I articulate my story with God? (*Cultural tool*: an articulated story about a personal and powerful God.)
- Am I deeply connected to a faith community? (*Cultural tool*: a community that helps us feel spiritually and interpersonally connected.)
- Does my faith give me a sense of purpose and direction? (*Cultural tool*: a sense of vocation.)
- Do I trust God with the future? (*Cultural tool*: a sense of hope.)

4. Make Jesus Part of the Family. Talk about faith at home, intellectually and personally. Make Jesus part of the family—part of normal daily conversation. Share how Christ guided you in making a decision, or how your faith informed your response to a difficult person at work. Discuss aspects of the Bible that you find intriguing, or puzzling. Talk about church, and why it matters to you. Above all, talk about these things with your children.

Loving God, like loving people, is hard to put into words, which is why so much of Christian faith is embodied in symbols, rituals, and metaphors. But conversation matters, too. Talking about God gives young people opportunities to eavesdrop on adult faith, and suggests a vocabulary for their own emerging relationship with Christ. But these conversations also help us sort out our own convictions. Language transforms intuitions into reality, which prepares us for action. The best way to pretend something doesn't exist is not to mention it. But the reverse is also true: faith matters more when we talk about it.

5. Decenter. Christian life means continually turning toward God. Conversion (from the Greek word *metanoia*) means to “turn around.” But turning toward God also implies turning away from something else—our idols, ourselves. All of the actions we associate with Christian life (solidarity with the poor, worship) are ways centuries of Jesus followers have learned help attune them to God and others. Decentering means tapping into these age-old practices of compassion and mercy, meditation and prayer, to shift our gaze away from ourselves and from the distractions that block God from view.

The bottom line is this: if we want faith to matter to young people, it must genuinely matter to us. Clearly, a first step is investing in practices that shape our own faith—reading the Bible, praying, participating in worship, acting justly, and holy friendship, to name a few. But we have a second responsibility as well: sharing with teenagers this good God, this Jesus, this radical God-man who thought youth were “to die for”—and did. How do we communicate that?

Here's what I've been telling myself: Do one radical, sacrificial thing for your faith. Do it in front of your children. Do it, not because you are a nice person, but because you follow Jesus, and because this is what people who love Jesus do. And tell all that to the kids. It's a start.

Kenda Creasy Dean is professor of youth, church, and culture at Princeton Theological Seminary.

NOTES

- 1 Christian Smith with Melinda Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford, 2005), 266.
- 2 Statistics are from Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*.
- 3 Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “Religion among the Millennials” (February 17, 2010), <http://pewforum.org/Age/Religion-Among-the-Millennials.aspx> (accessed May 26, 2011).
- 4 Scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.
- 5 Katelyn Beaty, “Lost in Transition: Interview with Christian Smith,” *Christianity Today*, October 2009, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/october/21.34.html> (accessed May 26, 2011).
- 6 See Mark DeVries' excellent book, *Sustainable Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008).
- 7 Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford, 2010), 45–60.