

Smith details referred to in *The Emerging Millennials*, 2009:183.

God, Religion, Whatever

In his recent, much-heralded research on American youth, University of North Carolina sociologist Christian Smith has argued that the teenage expression of religion in the United States today is very different from the past.

Smith maintains that “the de facto dominant religion among contemporary U.S. teenagers” is what he calls “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.” Core beliefs include the idea that one should be *a good moral person*; that religion provides *therapeutic benefits* for its adherents – allowing them to feel good, happy, and civil; and the notion that *God keeps a safe distance*, watching over everything, but accessible as needed.¹ Rather than originating with teens, it is absorbed from adults, he says, largely by osmosis.²

Smith sees Moralistic Therapeutic Deism as invading “many historical religious traditions and, almost without anyone noticing, converting believers...to its alternative religious vision of divinely underwritten personal happiness and personal niceness.”³ As it is spreads to diverse religions, it heightens commonality. “This helps to explain,” Smith notes, “the noticeable lack of religious conflict between teenagers of apparently different faiths.”⁴

Are there indications that such a “religion” has crossed the border and infiltrated Canadian religious groups, shaping religious content, and showing up in the lives of teens here as well?

In the 2008 survey, we included a number of items that allow us to explore the existence of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Following Smith’s exposition of its “creed,”⁵ the items used tapped (1) belief in the existence of a God who cares about me, (2) God’s expectation that we be good to each other, (3) the idea that the central goal of life is to be happy, (4) the belief that my life is shaped primarily by me, with God in the background, and (5) the belief that good people will be rewarded after they die. We also included a sixth item probing Smith’s observation that a correlate of such thinking is the acceptance of the validity of all religions.

These items are hardly exhaustive and – in the parlance of research methods – probably can be and need to be enhanced re: their levels of validity and reliability. But they provide a start in looking at Smith’s thesis in Canada.

If, as in the U.S., Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is becoming the “de facto dominant religion among contemporary [Canadian] teenagers,” these six beliefs should be widespread.

But the real indication of its presence should be seen, not so much in the adoption of individual beliefs – since some could be associated with genuine Christian commitment, for example – but rather in the inclination to hold all or most of these beliefs. The reason is that, taken together, they allegedly signal the presence of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. It therefore is important to use an index that takes into account the responses to all six items. The apparent pervasiveness of “MT Deism,” means it also should show up in good quantities, both outside and inside organized religion.

Such an examination finds limited support for the presence of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism among Canadian youth.

- The *individual items* receive the positive endorsement of a majority of teens – especially the idea that the central goal in life is to be happy. Four of the remaining five items receive top-heavy support from young people who are involved in religious groups.
- High scores on the *Moralistic Therapeutic Deism Index*, however, characterize only about 4 in 10 teens nationally – including about 40% of weekly attenders and 30% of those who never attend. Scores are higher for “monthlys” at 56% and “yearlys” at 47%.
- In the case of *weekly attenders*, scores on the Index slip primarily because many do not buy into the idea that God plays a passive role in their lives and that all religions are equally valid.
- In the case of teens who *never attend* services, scores on the Index slip primarily because God doesn’t come into play at all – caring about them or expecting them to be good to each other. Many also do not believe that good people will be rewarded after they die. It may well be that a critically important difference between American and Canadian youth at this point in history is the greater tendency for Canadians to *not* believe in God. As we have seen, the atheist figure “up here” is 17%; Smith – albeit with a younger sample of 13-to-17-year-olds – found the figure “down there” to be only 3%.⁶

In short, Canadian teens who are involved in religious groups at most lean toward a kind of *Moralistic Therapeutic Theism*, those who are not toward a kind of *Moralistic Therapeutic Atheism*. Those most likely to be into “MT Deism”? Occasional attenders.

	■ ■	■	■	■	■	■	■
	62%	Weekly	Monthly	Yearly	Never		
God or a higher power cares about you	62%	91	84	70	39		
God/higher power expects us be good each other	61	91	82	67	39		
The central goal in life is to be happy	81	69	86	88	83		
My life is influenced primarily by me, not God	53	15	36	56	73		
Good people will be rewarded after they die	61	76	77	68	47		
All world religions are equally valid	59	47	68	68	59		
MTD Index Scores							
Very High	6	10	5	14	14	10	
High	5	28	35	42	33	19	
Moderate	4	21	26	23	25	16	
Low	3	20	20	11	17	24	
Very Low	2-0	21	14	10	11	31	

NOTES

¹ Smith 2005:162-165.

² Smith 2005:170.

³ Smith 2005:171.

⁴ Smith 2005:166-167.

⁵ Smith 2005:162-163.

⁶ Smith 2005:41.