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Finding Faith

By Kyle Longest

How much do today's young people value religion? What is their view of God? The author, who has taught sociology at Furman since 2009, is part of a research team involved in the National Study of Youth and Religion. Under the primary direction of Christian Smith of the University of Notre Dame, the ongoing project is following more than 2,500 adolescents from their teenage years into their early 20s. By surveying these young people at different stages of their lives, the researchers are developing a comprehensive picture of how adolescents manage and interpret religion, and how this process changes as they make the transition into young adulthood.

The National Study of Youth and Religion

was motivated, in part, as a way to address several misperceptions about adolescents as propagated by popular media and news outlets. One of the most common misperceptions is that adolescents are no longer religious, and that their participation in religious activities and devotion to faith are dramatically dropping compared to generations past.

Yet that is not what our research shows. In fact, more than 80 percent of adolescents, defined in our study as 13- to 17-year-olds, say that religion is at least somewhat important in their lives, and more than 80 percent go to church at least a few times per year. More than 60 percent go many times a year, and more than 50 percent say they attend services at least once a month. Similarly, 65 percent claim to have read scripture in the last year and more than 85 percent pray, with 50 percent praying at least once a week. These numbers are comparable to the behavior we see among adults.

In fact, when we tried to find “not religious” adolescents — those who never attend worship services, don't think religion is important to their daily lives or don't identify with any religion — the number was only about 10 percent.

So in many ways adolescents are similar to adults in how they participate in religion. But they are far less similar in how they think about or define religion.

Adolescents tend not to emphasize specific doctrines, traditions or even beliefs when they discuss their personal understanding of religion. As one Mormon teen said when asked what religion is: “I believe in, well, my whole religion is where you try to be good and, if you're not good, then you should just try to get better. That's all.” We heard similar definitions throughout our interviews.

For teens today, religion boils down to trying to be good. If you're not being good, you try to get better. As one Protestant teen said, “[Religion] just makes me a nicer person, 'cause before I hated adults but now it's a lot easier just to be, like, lovable and caring to people.” Again, we did not hear much about specific rules for behavior, traditions to follow, or how to believe.

When we examined all the responses, we started to see a *de facto*, interdenominational tradition developing. Christian Smith calls it “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.” This is not something adolescents say they adhere to, but when we look across their responses, we see several common themes that, in a way, form a type of doctrine.



The belief system consists of four main parts. First, there is a God, or higher power, that created and watches over the world. Second, God wants people to be good and nice, which forms the primary (if not only) religious “requirement” adolescents perceive. Third, the central goal in life is to be happy, and as long as we are being good and nice and not interfering with others’ happiness, we have satisfied the goals of religion. Finally, teens see God becoming involved in their lives only when needed — primarily when they want to be happier. In the end, God is there to help people reach the ultimate goal of being happy.

One Protestant teen summarizes this set of beliefs when she says, “God’s all around you, all the time. He believes in forgiving people and what-not, and he’s there to guide us, for someone to talk to and help us through our problems. Of course, he doesn’t talk back.” Teens believe they can come to that higher power when they need it and receive help with their problems — mainly with being happier.

As Smith describes it, adolescents seem to think of God as a combination of a divine butler and cosmic therapist. God is always there, will help when called upon, and then goes away. And overall this helps people be nicer and happier.

To clarify, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD) is not a concept teens have come up with themselves. Rather, it is a reflection of the overall adult culture that adolescents absorb. Specifically, the trend to prioritize the individual has played a major role in the development of MTD. The individual has become the center of society, and therefore focusing on and developing ourselves as individuals is of utmost importance.

The predominance of MTD as a way of understanding religion does not necessarily mean adolescents are becoming less religious in terms of behavior or devotion. As I noted earlier, their actions are consistent with those associated with a relatively religious person. But they practice and understand religion in a qualitatively different way — from a tradition- or community-centered religion to a person- or individual-centered version of religion. According to teens, religion is not something that you give yourself up for, that you sacrifice yourself to for a higher power or particular church or specific denomination. Instead, it is something that is there to serve a person’s needs.

A second question our study addressed was how adolescents' religious identity changes as they begin to make the transition into young adulthood.

When we examine religiosity — assessed by attendance at worship services, frequency of personal prayer, and self-rated importance of religion — we find several interesting patterns. First, we observe a high level of stability. Around 45 to 55 percent of young adults look, religiously, just as they did as adolescents. So the religious trajectories adolescents follow during their teenage years often persist into young adulthood.

When we do see change, the primary direction is toward becoming less religious, as indicated by decreased attendance at services, limited prayer, and less emphasis on the importance of religion. About 50 percent of teens considered in the “upper levels” of religiosity as adolescents drop into one of the lower groups by the time they are young adults, between the ages of 18 and 22. Less than 30 percent experience the converse change, which indicates that there is little movement upward, a lot of people staying the same, and sizable shifts to a lower level of religiosity.

These patterns beg the question: What factors during the teenage years cause some to remain highly religious, and what factors drive others downward? After we examined a vast set of possible predictors, using a variety of analytic strategies, we consistently found three sets of factors that seemed especially important in leading to high levels of religiosity (or at least preventing a decrease) among young adults.

The first consists of internalized subjective religion, based on how important they believe religion is in their daily lives and their level of doubt about their faith when they were teenagers. The next set of factors is more a personal, or metaphysical, experience with religion — whether they felt they had experienced a miracle or had a prayer answered.

The last set of factors had to do with ties to others, primarily parents but also religious adults in their congregations. This group was the most influential in determining religiosity during young adulthood.

Parents who think religion is very important and who frequently attend worship services are much more likely to produce young adults who are highly religious. When we looked at the issue in a different way, we found that having highly religious parents was virtually a necessity for being a highly religious young adult. In other words, teens can't out-religious their parents. In this way parents essentially cap how religious the child is going to be, even as the child becomes a young adult.

As for the teenagers' own attendance at religious services, it does not seem to have much effect on their religious development during the transition to young adulthood. Although I try to avoid normative claims, I'm going to make one here: If I were talking to parents who were concerned about how religious their children are, I would stress that it is much more important that the parents themselves attend religious services, rather than try to force their adolescent children to go. Just seeing parents attend church instills a set of values that impacts religious behavior as a teen moves into young adulthood.



“Are we there yet?”



“Hey, that’s just one omniscient guy’s opinion.”

While these more objective aspects of religion are clearly important, our research team is also concerned with what happens to young people’s understanding of religion.

When we talk to young adults we find that Moralistic Therapeutic Deism tends to wane, or completely disappear. Many note that, in confronting challenges in their lives, MTD as a belief system is not up to the task. Yet, rather than turning to some external mechanism of moral authority, young adults become even more individualistic. When we ask about their ideas of what is right and wrong, one of the most common themes we hear is, “What seems right to me is the ultimate authority.”

For example, when one young adult female was asked how she knew what was right or wrong, she said, “It’s personal. It’s up to the individual. Who am I to say?” From this perspective, everyone is free to decide what is right and wrong for themselves. There is no external moral authority or mechanism to tell anyone what to do.

Even when our subjects were forced to consider how to handle a difficult situation, a typical response was, “I would do what I thought made me happy or how I felt. I have no other way of knowing what to do but how I internally feel.” In other words, young adults decide for themselves what is right or wrong. Of course, this also means that they are extremely hesitant to judge others, because others’ choices — and the moral fidelity of those choices — are completely up to the person making them.

This kind of thinking has a significant impact on how young adults view religion. When we ask them what religion is, or what the basis of their religious beliefs are, we hear responses such as “Myself. It really comes down to that. I mean, how could there be an authority to what you believe? Somebody could force you and say you need to believe this, but you really can’t force yourself to believe in anything.” So they do not rely on any external mechanism in establishing the meaning and foundation of religion; the basis is the individual.

It’s not that young adults are immoral. It’s that when they think

about what is right and wrong, they tend not to see a connection to a greater moral framework. Our research suggests that this lack of an external framework is primarily because they have not been provided adequate psycho-social resources to make this connection to a higher level of moral obligations.

We believe this type of thinking also has important consequences for how young adults address pressing social issues. If everything is up to the individual, then how today’s young adults think about such issues as healthcare or international conflicts may be systematically different than how older generations think. Having no connection to a civil or religious authority outside the individual puts questions of right or wrong back on each person. Everyone can decide for themselves.

Of course, the long-term impact of this shift in moral thinking has yet to be seen. Potentially, this moral individualism could be just a phase that young adults will outgrow as they make the full transition into adulthood. Or it may signal a more widespread cultural change.

We will be talking to these young adults again as they reach their late 20s. Hopefully their responses will provide further insights into these questions. |F|

Kyle Longest holds a Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina.

To learn more, consult Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers (Oxford University Press, 2005) and Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults (Oxford Press, 2009), both by Christian Smith (with Melinda Denton and Patricia Herzog-Snell, respectively).

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