What American Teenagers Believe

A conversation with Christian Smith.
Interview by Michael Cromartie

Christian Smith is Stuart Chapin Distinguished Professor of Sociology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. One of the most influential and widely cited sociologists of his generation, he is the author of many provocative books, including American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving (Univ. of Chicago Press); Christian America: What Evangelicals Really Want (Univ. of California Press); Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America (Oxford Univ. Press), coauthored with Michael O. Emerson; and Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture (Oxford Univ. Press). His latest book, due in March from Oxford, is Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers, coauthored with Melinda Lundquist Denton. Based on the National Study of Youth and Religion, an unprecedented survey conducted from 2001 to 2005, the book opens a window on the religious beliefs and practices of American teens. In November, Michael Cromartie of the Ethics and Public Policy Center met with Smith in Washington, D.C., to talk about his findings.

In the introduction to your book, you note that in the literature on adolescents and teens, there is a surprising lack of research about religion.

There has been work done in this area, but there is not a vast literature on what teenagers believe. There are good ethnographies, but in terms of the big picture of national representation there is just not a lot out there.

You say that "today's youth are depicted as disillusioned, irreverent, uniquely postmodern, belonging to something that is next and new." Indeed, "when it comes to faith and religion," we're told, "contemporary teenagers are deeply restless, alienated, rebellious and determined to find something that is radically different from the faith in which they were raised." And yet, you conclude, this largely unchallenged perception is "fundamentally wrong." Why is that?

Teenagers today (and I am talking about 13- to 17-year-olds) are invested in society as it is and in mainstream values. They are well socialized into the mainstream, they are committed to it, and they want to succeed in it. From the Sixties we've inherited the notion of the "generation gap," but that model simply isn't adequate to describe what we are dealing with today. For the most part, young people have a great deal in common with their parents and share their values. That may not be immediately apparent, but underneath, not too far below the surface, there is a lot of commonality.

You found that most of them are very conventional in their beliefs. Did you expect to find a more rebellious, anti-authoritarian youth culture?

Yes, I expected to find more resistance, more negative views of religion in general. Of course, there is so much yakking out there about spiritual questing, we've been conditioned to look for kids who can't stand traditional religion. But that's just not the case! Most kids are quite happy to go with whatever they are raised to believe; they are not kicking and screaming on the way to church. On the contrary: most teenagers have a very benign attitude toward religion.

This is a controversial point.

I presume it will be. Again, we are only making claims on 13- to 17-year-olds. It could be that when kids go to college, they engage in more spiritual seeking. But high schoolers and middle school kids are extremely conventional in their religiosity.

Lots of people think that a key category for young people is "spiritual but not religious."

What we found is that this concept is not even on their radar screen. But one thing that most teens emphatically don't want to be is "too religious." They want to be religious, but they don't want to be perceived as overzealous, uncool, embarrassingly intense about their faith. They have an image in their mind of one kid in their high school who walks around with buttons and badges all day carrying a Bible, and they think that that's wacko.

There is good news for the church in your study. But there is plenty of bad news as well. For example, you found in your in-depth interviews with teens that a vast majority of them are "incredibly inarticulate about their faith, their religious beliefs and practices." You found very few teens from any religious background who are able to articulate clearly their religious beliefs and explain how those beliefs connect to the rest of their lives.

One way to frame this problem is to think of the language of faith as something like a second language in our culture. And how do you learn a second language? You learn a second language by listening to others who know how to speak it well, and having a chance to practice it yourself. I don't know how much teens are hearing other people speak the language well, and it really struck us in our research that very few teens are getting a chance to practice talking about their faith. We were dumbfounded by the number of teens who told us we were the first adults who had asked them what they believed. One said: "I do not know. No one has ever asked me that before."

You point out that the very idea of religious truth is attenuated among teens, but in spite of that you found that few teenagers consistently sustain any kind of radical relativism.

Very few teens are hardcore relativists. In fact, they are quite moralistic. They will confidently assert that certain things are right or wrong. What they can't do is explain why that's the case, or what's behind their thinking. And again I think they've been given very little chance to practice thinking about *why* things are morally right or wrong. It's just asserted. To some degree, I think, public schools don't want to get into that. So what you have is a generation of young people who don't know how to explain why they think what's good and bad is good and bad.

You argue that "what legitimates the religion of most youth today is not that it is the life-transformative, transcendent truth, but that it instrumentally provides mental, psychological, emotional, and social benefits that teens find useful and valuable."

Yes, not only for the kids but also for their parents. The instrumental good has what you might call a public health justification. If I get my kid involved religiously, he will be less likely to do drugs, he'll get better grades, and will wear his or her seat belt. And I think a lot of parents are very interested in that, quite understandably.

In the United States we have a competitive religious economy. And I think a lot of religious organizations—consciously and unconsciously—make that instrumental pitch to families: we'll be good for you. Now it's an empirical fact that religious kids *are* doing better. There's nothing wrong with celebrating that. But when that becomes the key legitimation of what religion is all about, then that's a whole different matter.

Based on our findings, I suggest that the *de facto* religious faith of the majority of American teens is "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism." God exists. God created the world. God set up some kind of moral structure. God wants me to be nice. He wants me to be pleasant, wants me to get along with people. That's teen morality. The purpose of life is to be happy and feel good, and good people go to heaven. And nearly everyone's good.

The god of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, you write, "is primarily a divine Creator and Law

giver. He designed the universe and establishes moral law and order. But this God is not Trinitarian; he did not speak through the Torah or the prophets of Israel, was never resurrected from the dead, and does not fill and transform people through his Spirit. This God is not demanding. He actually can't be, since his job is to solve our problems and make people feel good. In short, God is something like a combination Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist."

Yes, there is very little particularity in this *de facto* faith. It's specifically designed, so to speak, to help people who are very different to get along with each other. You don't have to get too personally involved with this God. But when there is a problem—when you need him—he will solve it as soon as you snap your fingers or ring the bell. Many teens explain their faith in these terms: "you know, there is a god out there, and when I get in trouble I think about that." The rest of the time God's irrelevant. So the deism is qualified by the therapeutic.

This is true even among evangelicals?

A good proportion of conservative Protestant teens articulated just that.

They believe being religious is about being good and it's not about forgiveness?

It's unbelievable the proportion of conservative Protestant teens who do not seem to grasp elementary concepts of the gospel concerning grace and justification. Their view is: be a good person.

You found this across traditions no matter how conservative they were?

It's across all traditions. Mormons and conservative Protestants are somewhat less likely to talk this way. Catholics and mainliners are the most likely to. But large numbers of all groups use this language.

I guess your next book should explore whether young people ever grow out of such tendencies.

Actually, we are going to do a second study by following the same teens next summer. We want to be able to see how they change over time. To see if they grow out of it. But what are the chances of that, if a lot of the adults in their lives are in the same place?

They could be getting Moralistic Therapeutic Deism straight from their parents.

Yes, or the adults at church. It's not just the teens. That is one of the themes of this book: teens reflect the world more than they rebel against it.

You write that "religion clearly operates in a social-structurally weak position, competing for time, energy, and attention and often losing against other more dominant demands and commitments—particularly against school, sports, television, and other electronic media. If we conceive of adolescents' lives as bundles of finite time and energy, we find that religion is able to secure among them less time. Religion has quite a small place at the end of the table for a short period of time each week. Religion is not among the more advantaged players." Tell us what you mean by that.

You have to understand it sociologically. Consider teenagers' lives as finite bundles of time and energy, of resources, and we see that there are lot of institutions that are trying to get the attention and resources of teenagers. School, media, girl friends, the mall, sports, parents, volunteering, homework. And some of those institutions are quite powerful in the way they are situated in our social order. They can demand a lot from teenagers.

It turns out when you look at the structure of teenagers' lives, and their schedules, religion fits in a very small piece of all that. It's actually

amazing to me that religion has any effect in teenagers' lives. Part of the structure, too, is that what really matters to teenagers is their socially significant relationships. If teenagers have socially significant relationships that cross at church, that cross with other families of believers, then that helps out a lot. But many teenagers have their socially significant relationships almost exclusively through school; even if they have friends at church, the youth group is a satellite out there on the fringe of their life, rather than at the center.

Your summing up of this state of affairs is pretty grim: "we can say here that we have come with some confidence to believe that a significant part of 'Christianity' in the U.S. is actually only tenuously Christian in any sense that is seriously connected to the actual historical Christian tradition." You also say that "this has happened in the minds and hearts of many individual believers and, it also appears, within the structures of at least some Christian organizations and institutions."

From a Christian perspective some of the conclusions of this book are immensely depressing. Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is not just an inadequate version of Christianity. It's a different religion.

There's another area in which you found a disconnect between public rhetoric and actual practice: you say that although many Americans talk about what a pro-family, youth-loving society ours is, it is not at all clear that many of our practices and institutions support these claims.

I don't think our society is organized around what's best for our young people. They don't get enough sleep, and school is not set up optimally for what's best for their learning. It's set up for the convenience of other people, and social control, and so on. We shouldn't fool ourselves into thinking that we love our youth so much. Maybe we do, but we don't structure our society the way we should to translate that deep concern into meaningful action. We don't spend enough time together. Adults have their own issues and their own problems, which are understandable, and some adults are working through their own adolescent issues!

You have a wonderful point you make several times in the book about teenagers often being spoken of in popular culture as "alien creatures, strange beings from another planet, unpredictable animals driven by mysterious forces and motives."

The dominant framework out there is that teenagers are alien creatures. And I understand that for a lot of parents, that's exactly how it feels. But I don't think that model helps us. I think what's really needed is to see the commonalities, to make connections, and to work against such preconceptions of almost unbridgeable differences. Religious organizations certainly need to work against that and try to focus on establishing ties, seeing what youth and adults have in common, creating connections. You go to the bookstore, and most of the books are about how to survive your teenagers, not how to enjoy them.

One of your findings is that religious youth are different from non-religious youth. How are they different? Why?

Despite their abject failure at the level of conscious articulation of their faith, on every measure of life outcome—relationship with family, doing well at school, avoiding risk behaviors, everything—highly religious teens are doing much better than non-religious kids. It's just a remarkable observable difference. Somehow the religious teachings do sink in and make a significant difference in teens' moral worldview. And from a sociological perspective it makes tons of sense. People's lives are formed by practices and commitments that they may not be consciously able to articulate.

The worldview of religious teens structures their lives, it gives them practices, it provides a structure and framework and boundaries for teens. Instead of sleeping in, they get up and go to church on Sunday morning. And furthermore there are all sorts of other benefits from simply being connected to a religious organization—social capital, social ties, and so on—that empirically make a difference. That's not excusing the relative failure of religious educators, but the difference is there. Highly religious American teens are happier and healthier. They are doing better in school, they have more hopeful futures, they get along with their parents better. Name a social outcome that you care about, and the highly religious kids are doing better.

So the challenge for religious leaders is to explain to religious teens why they are doing better, to fill in the missing theological context.

One way to see it is this: Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is working. The question is, what is the interest of the Christian church? Is it to make kids wear their seat belts more often? Is that their goal? Or is there some higher commitment—to understanding the world, to practicing a way of life, Jesus' way, whether or not it makes you happier and healthier and gives you a longer life.

You suggest that the popular notion that "to be religious is to be heavenly minded and to be of no earthly good" doesn't hold up when you examine the behavior of religious teens. In fact, you found that "more religious teens appear to possess greater moral compassion and concern for justice than their non-religious peers." That's encouraging.

It's true. Non-religious teens are more likely to say, "who cares?" Who cares about suffering, who cares about old people? By every measure we have, religious kids are more likely to live out their faith in terms of volunteering and taking care of people. It's the more religious kids who are more involved in their communities, more civically active. So there are real differences.

You point out that the evidence clearly shows that the single most important social influence on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents is their parents.

Yes. This is one of the things that really hit us hard: that parents still have an enormous amount of influence on their kids' lives, even though I'm sure that's very hard for them to believe at times. Adolescents are not routinely coming to their parents and saying "thanks so much for steering me in the right direction. I really appreciate it. I really want you to know that you are a big influence." They don't say it, but it's still a fact. Parents have a lot more influence, and therefore responsibility, than they realize. Teenagers will never admit that they look to their parents for guidance, but most do. Here's another striking thing: We asked teenagers in interviews, what thing would you most like to change about your family, if anything? The most common answer was "I wish I was closer to my parents." When asked, why aren't you closer?, they said, "I don't know how to do it." There is genuine interest. I think parents often misread signals.

But this is true of religious educators as well as of parents. Most, though not all, religious educators in this country are failing. Most young people are not being formed primarily by their religious faith traditions; rather, they are being formed by other notions and ideologies. And in part this is because adults are afraid to teach. They are afraid of young people. They are afraid of not looking cool when they teach real substance.

And yet youth actually want to be taught something, even if they eventually reject it. They at least want to have something to reject, rather than an attitude of anything goes. Teens need an opportunity to articulate, to think and to make arguments in environments that will be challenging to their faith. And I don't think they are getting that. In general, religious traditions

that expect more and demand more of their youth get more. And those that are more compromising, more accommodating, more anything-goes, end up not getting much.

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