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Christian Smith, with Melinda Lundquist Denton.
*Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives
of American Teenagers.*
New York: Oxford University Press, 2005

Reviewed by Bruce A. Chadwick and Richard J. McClendon

Soul Searching is a very significant contribution to the sociology of religion. The book is of particular interest to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as it is the first national study that highlights LDS youth. Christian Smith and his colleagues at the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) have produced a benchmark study valuable to not only social scientists, but clergy, civic leaders, and family advocates as well. The project, which was funded by Lilly Endowment Inc. and conducted at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, is a six-year longitudinal study of the religiosity of American youth. Wave I, a telephone survey of 3,290 randomly selected youth across the nation, was collected in the summer of 2002. In addition, in-depth interviews with 267 youth from the original sample were completed during the summer of 2003. Wave II, which will be conducted during the next three years, will reinterview the youth from the original sample by way of telephone as well as conduct in-depth interviews of 150 of them. *Soul Searching* is the published results of Wave I and relieves the dearth of sociological research on the religious beliefs and behaviors of American youth.

Although Smith's idiosyncratic prose is sometimes difficult to follow, *Soul Searching* is packed, and we mean packed, with valuable information about the religious lives of American youth. From the introduction to the postscript, Smith does a remarkable job of "unpacking" a massive amount of data and theorizing about its meaning. He combines both quantitative and qualitative research methods to guide the reader through the breadth of generalizable facts as well as through personal expressions of youth about their religious lives.

Smith tells the life stories of two Baptist girls and three Catholic youths to paint a human face on the research. These stories illustrate the central themes that he and his colleagues found during their interviews: (1) there is “immense variety” in religious experiences and beliefs among teens across America; (2) a large number of teens are inarticulate about their religious beliefs; (3) religion competes against many other activities in the lives of kids and can easily be put on the back burner; and (4) parents are a powerful influence on the religious lives of their children—for better or worse (26–29).

The raw data from the survey is a treasure trove of information about the religious beliefs, values, and practices of American youth. Smith divides the 3,290 youth into seven groups based on their religious affiliation: “Conservative Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Black Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Mormon/Latter-day Saint, and Nonreligious [other religion, not religious, or indeterminate]” (35). Interestingly, the LDS youth are the most religious group on nearly every indicator. The conservative Protestants are not far behind, but then there is a wide gap between these two groups and the other five. A higher percentage of the LDS youth attend church services, pray, participate in youth groups, feel that religion is important in their lives, participate in family religious activities, have had spiritual experiences, and feel close to members of their congregation (37–60). For example, 71 percent of the LDS youth attend religious services at least once a week. Conservative Protestants follow with 55 percent, while 41 to 44 percent of the youth in the other four Christian groups attended that often (37). Over and over again Smith singles out the LDS as being the most religious youth. These findings had the Internet buzzing with “Mormon envy” in the months following the book’s release.

There is one interesting exception. When asked if they believe in God, 84 percent of the LDS youth replied yes. This compares to 97 percent of the black Protestants, 94 percent of the conservative Protestants, 86 percent of the mainline Protestants, and 85 percent of the Catholics (41). All of these are relatively high percentages, yet it seems strange that LDS youth are lower in their belief about God, especially considering that their other religious beliefs and practices are consistently higher. We believe this anomaly is not necessarily that Latter-day Saint youth don’t believe; rather, other denominations tend to emphasize “belief” as the sole fundamental component of salvation, whereas LDS doctrine tends to combine both belief and practice as salient to salvation. In this view, we are not surprised by this outcome.

One very important caution must be mentioned in celebrating the exceptional religiosity of LDS youth. Only 2.5 percent of the 3,290 American

youth surveyed were LDS, which means we are generalizing about their religiosity from about only eighty respondents. Given the uniqueness of the LDS youth, we are confident that Smith and his associates wish they would have over-sampled this interesting group.

LDS readers may be tempted to immerse themselves in the LDS data and neglect the religious landscape of American youth in general. To do so would be a mistake because the trends describing the religiosity of American youths are insightful. These trends are (1) that U.S. teenagers follow their parents' religious traditions; (2) that teens regularly express their religious faith by attending services, praying, and engaging in other practices; (3) that over half of the youth reported strong religious experiences; (4) that most teens are involved in religious youth groups and activities; (5) that congregations are important sites for youth to make contact with adults other than their parents; and (6) that the majority of U.S. teenagers express their religious feelings within their family life. At face value these are pretty encouraging findings. One troubling observation is that religion seems to be somewhat remote from the youths' interaction with their friends and from their school activities (30–71).

Relatively few of the nonreligious teens, 16 percent, are either atheists or agnostics (86). Most nonreligious youth, 75 percent, identified themselves as “just not religious” or they “don't know” what kind of a nonreligious person they are (86). Interestingly, over half of the nonreligious youth believe in God and about a fourth pray by themselves at least a few times a week. Three percent of all currently nonreligious youth were raised LDS, which is close to their percentage in the total sample (87). Of the entire sample, those youth who do not attend religious services have not been neglected by the believers as they receive frequent invitations from friends to join them in church. Over 40 percent of those who do not attend don't know why. Only 6 percent avoid church because of a bad experience or dislike of religion. The nonreligious teens “appear to be religiously disconnected for what seem to be rather vague or unremarkable reasons” (116).

Smith's methodical exploration of the 267 in-depth interviews collected by the author and his colleagues teases out forces that impact the religious beliefs and behaviors of American teens. First of all, Smith debunks the popular notion that there is a religious generation gap between teens and their parents. He found that the vast majority of teenagers accept and follow their parents' religious views and practices. They attend the same religious congregations as their parents and at the same frequency (120–24). Secondly, Smith found that teens, whether religious or not, believe religion is generally a good thing for society as a whole. Some view it as an anchor for social morality or that it provides motivation and

teaches ways to help people. Others believe it creates a sense of community, and that it connects people to the Divine (124–27). Thirdly, Smith found no evidence that teenagers are “spiritual seekers.” What their parents have taught them is “good enough” and thus, very few are driven to seek out other religious traditions (127–28).

In our opinion, the most fascinating insight in the book is Smith’s observation of an emerging “de facto dominant religion” among U.S. teens, labeled “moralistic therapeutic deism” (162). He explains that regardless of what religious community teenagers belong to and the differences in their creeds, most teenagers share a latent, yet commonly held view that religion is about general morality, therapeutic benefits, and a God who is “up there” somewhere. In other words, good and kind people go to heaven when they die regardless of their religion. Life’s goal is about feeling happy and attaining a “subjective well-being” (164). God is always ready to help when He is needed, yet keeps a safe distance and is not necessarily involved in people’s minute-by-minute lives. This is the creed of the “whatever” generation. As Smith puts it, most American teenagers see God as a combination of a “Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist” (165). He is the go-to guy when things get tough, but they prefer not to have Him too involved in their personal affairs, especially when it comes to dictating how they should live.

According to Smith, America’s culture of “individualism” has socialized most teens to see religion in the same way they see other social institutions in society—for their personal benefit. This is in direct contrast to the traditional model of religion in early America, which emphasized communitarian, penitent, and self-sacrificing tenets. As Smith puts it, “The very idea of religious truth is attenuated, shifted from older realist and universalist notions of convictions about objective Truth [which our forebearers believed] to more personalized and relative versions of ‘truth about me’ and ‘truth about you’” (144).

We found Smith’s introduction of moralistic therapeutic deism to be quite visionary. The few sentences here can’t begin to describe his insights into those forces in American society that have produced moralistic therapeutic deism. Self-fulfillment and self-actualization emerged as an important cultural value in the turbulent 1960s. The consequence is that among youth today, self-fulfillment is the purpose of life, and they look to the self as the source of moral knowledge. According to Smith, parents, pastors, priests, and lawmakers have been replaced by popular psychologists, social workers, talk show hosts, and other advice givers (173).

Smith argues that American youth have developed this moralistic therapeutic deism because of the cultural and institutional forces he has

described. He concludes that youth are struggling with the same problems as their parents since they actually share much more in common with adults than they do not (191).

Smith and his associates found that for every measure of risk behavior, quality of family and adult relationships, moral reasoning and behavior, community participation, media consumption, sexual activity, and emotional well-being, the more religious teens had more desirable scores than the less religious. He noted that even though the influence of religion was substantial, the youth were probably unaware of its impact. These findings are consistent with the many studies we have conducted with LDS teenagers and young adults. Active LDS high school students engage in less delinquency, do better in school and have stronger self-esteem than less-active students. In addition, active LDS young adults have stronger marriages, more education, higher occupational status, and stronger emotional health than those less active.¹ The possibility of reverse causation is discussed as Smith is aware that good kids may be attracted to religion, in contrast to religion producing good kids. After extensive analysis, he concluded that while the causation flows in both directions, religion has a major influence on life outcomes (233–40).

The book concludes by summarizing and interpreting findings. But most interesting is a “concluding unscientific postscript” that identifies several implications of the study along with practical suggestions for church leaders, parents, and youth advisors. Smith strongly encourages religious communities to stop generalizing and spreading “alarmist” myths about the moral and religious lives of teens (266). Most of the findings from this study did not corroborate these common assumptions. He called on parents and clergy to challenge teens to “make faith a more active and important part of their lives” (266). Smith sees teenagers as inherently willing participants in religious learning if they can only rub shoulders with highly committed parents, unafraid clergy, and sound religious doctrine. Given our own research on LDS youth, we highly concur.

We have a couple of concluding comments about the book. First, whether Smith consciously intended it to be, *Soul Searching* is not just about religion. It is a commentary on what is right and what is wrong with American society. Statistics are used to educate the reader on the harmful effects of modern and postmodern forces on religion among both youth and adults. Even though he tries to couch this commentary in an objective form by using the term “for better or worse” when explaining social effects (174), one gets the feeling that he believes the trend is mostly for worse. It is hard to argue against the idea that “mass consumer capitalism” and “the digital communications revolution” have been detrimental to American

religiosity (176, 179). They have transformed traditional, old-time religious values to the new moralistic therapeutic deism.

The second concluding comment pertains to secularization. Historically, sociologists have concluded that modernism and science have replaced religion. However, many social scientists have recently refuted this assumption and have identified evidence of a strong revival of religious belief and practice. Yet, after reading Smith's book, we began to rethink the secularization argument, not only in light of modernism, but through a postmodernist lens. Perhaps postmodernism is as much a culprit in the disarming of religious beliefs and practice in America as modernism. "Therapeutic individualism," although partly an outcome of modernism's "mass consumer capitalism," is also built on subjectivity. It is a hybrid of sorts, combining modernity's objectivity with postmodernity's subjectivity, which has produced a new theology that has not necessarily destroyed religious commitment, but rather neutralized it. A religious culture populated by youth who claim to be religious and participate in religious practices but who can no longer articulate their specific religious beliefs, who see religion as a psychological feel-good, get-it-when-I-need-it medicine, and who have abandoned their forefathers' traditional religious structures and ideology is a potent form of secularization. Moralistic therapeutic deism is cause for alarm.

In conclusion, 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.

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