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Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church

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Linda Creasy Dean. *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church*.

New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Reviewed by Cardell K. Jacobson

Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were pleased about the results of a landmark study of the religiosity of the nation's youth, called the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR). Conducted from 2003 to 2005 by Christian Smith and others, the study was first reported in *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, published by Oxford University Press in 2005. (To read the book review of *Soul Searching*, see *BYU Studies* 45, no. 2 [2006]: 167–172.)

The current book, *Almost Christian*, by Linda Creasy Dean, is a follow-up from the same study. Though Dean draws from the NSYR, her book is quite different from *Soul Searching*. As a youth minister, she takes on the task to “wrestle to the ground some of the findings relevant for Christian churches and pin down some hope for ministry with young people” (ix). As in the earlier book, Mormon youth stand out. Dean acknowledges that LDS youth score the highest on almost all measures of religiosity. But Dean's message is that if the Mormons can inculcate religion in their youth, so can other churches—mainline Protestants, Catholics, and the youth ministers who are the target audience of this book.

Dean, who interviewed some of the youth in the NSYR, borrows the title of *Almost Christian* from the mid-eighteenth-century writings of John Wesley and George Whitefield. Dean's argument is that many parishioners, both teenagers and their parents, follow an almost vacant form of Christianity; they never experience a full, passionate faith that motivates them to the good works of making the world more Christian. Instead, Dean describes the youth as having an arid approach to faith, a half-hearted spirituality, an “imposter faith that poses as Christianity that lacks the holy desire and missional clarity necessary for discipleship” (6). She quotes Whitefield's definition of being “almost Christian”: an individual who “is fond of the form, but never experiences the power of godliness in his heart.” For Dean, Christian faith means cleaving to the “God-man of Jesus Christ,”

joining the pilgrim journey with other lovers of Christ, following him into the world, and helping in “God’s plan to right a capsized world” (7). She envisions a consequential faith that envelopes the youth and provokes them to be strong advocates of Christ.

Her criticism, however, is not directed toward the youth of America’s churches, but rather to the parents who fail to display a vibrant, God-filled faith of their own. Parents matter most in shaping the religious lives of their children, and youth should be able to do “sacred eavesdropping” on the parents as the parents actively seek Christ. She notes that parents teach a variety of skills to their children—sports, dance, music, and so forth—but they merely expose them to religion. They do not teach them to defend their faith. The NSYR interviews found the youth to be articulate about a variety of topics, but when the conversation turned to religion, they stammered and groped for words.

Too often, Dean argues, church and religion are viewed by youth and parents as good things to be involved in as part of a well-rounded life, but only that. Most of these youth want to avoid personal friction with others who have dissimilar faiths or no faith at all. The result is what Dean and the authors of *Soul Searching* are warning about: a warmed-over teaching of the life-giving gospel that lacks a focus on Christ’s suffering love. It is a Christianity that requires little; it is a feel-better faith. Dean calls it a symbiote (a weak organism that siphons off the energy of the host), and Dean, Smith, and Denton in *Soul Searching* pinpoint the symbiote as “moralistic therapeutic deism,” a form of worship that believes in being good and moral toward others, but one where God no longer requires immanence or sovereignty in the daily lives of Christians.

Not surprisingly to the readers of this journal, the Mormon youth in the study were relatively good at describing their faith. They attached more importance to their faith and were the most highly devoted. The next highest groups were conservative Protestant and black Protestant youth, followed by mainline Protestants, Roman Catholics, Jewish youth and non-affiliated teenagers. The youth of mainline Protestant faiths were “among the least religiously articulate of all teens”—because no one has taught them how to talk about their faith. Dean states that Christian parents “can no longer treat Jesus like an embarrassing relative” (24).

Dean is well versed in mainline Protestant literature on religion and has a neutral presentation about LDS practices. However, she relies less on important sociological work on religion. Several social scientists have observed that strict churches, those that require deeper sacrifices of their members, grow and retain members better than others. A watered-down gospel requires little and gets little. Social scientists also observe that a

church must maintain a certain tension with society. If it requires no more than what society requires, it gains no special commitment from its members. On the other hand, if its practices or dogma are too unusual, it loses members to the mainstream. Thus, the religious groups that succeed (Latter-day Saints, Evangelicals, and Black Protestants) are those that require commitment but also skillfully manage this tension with the larger society. This skill at least partially explains why their youth have the highest commitment levels and are best able to articulate their faith traditions.

The religiously devoted in Dean's study (8 percent of the total sample) attend religious services weekly or more often, consider faith to be very or extremely important in their lives, are involved in a religious youth group, pray at least a few times a week, and read scripture at least once a week. Clearly, active Mormons score high on these items. LDS readers should not be surprised when Dean titles one chapter "Mormon Envy." The researchers measured devotion in a similar way to how Mormon bishops and youth leaders help youth stay on track—church talks, activity in youth programs such as Young Men and Young Women, attending church, going on missions, and temple marriage. While the Church's record on helping young people stay on this track is not always successful, the NSYR data show that Latter-day Saint youth fare much better than their peers in most religions.

Interestingly, Dean calls for more testimonies from adults and the churches; they need to remember how to say they believe. She also wants more activities that "de-center" youth from their self-absorption. That, she argues, is when youth will have liminal experiences. While Latter-day Saints may take pride that they do much of this already, they also realize that many who attend all their meetings may also sit on the "bleachers of a profound Christian life." Some, perhaps too many, LDS members also use religion as a "social lubricant" without fully bringing Christ and the Christ story into their lives. The Christ story, including his sacrifice for his people, must be central. As Dean argues, good members of churches must become Christ's envoys. They must "run from the tomb" to tell others that Christ has risen. LDS youth (and their parents) do this well. But as with other religious groups, Latter-day Saints also need to heed Dean's call to do better.

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