

## Soul Searching

Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). 346pp.

In a country regularly chastised for its inappropriate, even idolatrous obsession with youth, and particularly the “teenager,” it may come as a surprise to learn there is precious little out there that is truly helpful to Christians in understanding the dynamics of this modern phenomenon. Christian parents of teens, and those who minister to both parents and teens, would be greatly served by a capable study of this topic, and in my view we have an interesting, though somewhat startling, contribution in *Soul Searching*. This book is a study of, as the subtitle puts it, “the religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers.” The bulk of the book is devoted to social research by means of surveys and interviews, but the writers do a wonderful job at keeping the book from becoming a statistical manual. Instead, they refreshingly stick to their main concern: understanding the religious views of young people in this country. To this end, they interviewed hundreds of teens from widely different ethnic, geographical, religious, and economic backgrounds and contexts, and assessed this information in light of the findings of the National Study of Youth and Religion.

The result is a useful and recommended tool for interpreting American teenage culture. Beyond this general benefit, however, OPC members will find another, more distinctively Reformed reason for welcoming this book. If for no other reason, it is important for its stinging indictment on our eternal optimism as moderns about what’s *really* going on, behind those eyes, spiritually speaking, in this stage of personal maturation and development. We’re inclined, I think, to go along with our culture’s assumption that the teenager – ever-curious, ever-passionate, and ever-questioning – is a relatively uncommitted spiritual seeker. Like rushing water, the teen needs only to be guided in the right direction in order to be useful rather than destructive. But is the teen truly an uncommitted seeker, or is there more to the story of their wide-ranging religious sensibilities and interests? The authors of *Soul Searching* demonstrate compellingly that the answer to this question is not just surprising; it is also dark. Their thesis, based on wide ranging surveys and interviews, is that contemporary American teenagers have moved toward a faith which may be termed Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD), helpfully summarized on pp. 162-71.

Even after responsibly accounting for “adolescent inarticulacy about religion,” the authors are convinced there is indeed a discernible, definable body of belief that functions as the “de facto dominant religion among contemporary U.S. teenagers” (p. 162). They summarize its features along the three lines indicated by its name. It is a religion that is, first and foremost, deeply *moralistic*. The moral of the human story is to pursue the good of being happy, and for the average American teen this comes to the nice and the kind, the pleasant and the self-motivated. As such MTD is a deeply inclusivist religion, since all religions share this concern for the good, moral life. In addition to a basic moralism, though, MTD is also *humanitarian*. It is concerned for well-being, and, most

importantly, this is typically understood in *therapeutic* terms. The problems of life, most American teens apparently believe, have little or nothing to do with “sin,” classically understood, but with subjective wellness. In light of the surveys they conducted, the authors interestingly link the fact that “most teens are religiously inarticulate” to their common faith in the quest to feel happy (p. 164). It appears reveling in the ambiguities of personal subjectivity (“it just makes me feel good”) really does inhibit the Church’s traditional concern for a believer’s clear confession of faith. And this leads, rather naturally, to the third feature of MTD: it is *idolatrous*, having substituted the true God for a false one. “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism,” the authors write, “is a belief in a particular kind of God: one who exists, created the world, and defines our general moral order, but not one who is particularly personally involved in one’s affairs – especially affairs in which one would prefer not to have God involved. Most of the time, the God of this faith keeps a safe distance” (p. 164). For good reason, then, the authors have termed this faith a form of “Deism,” referring to the belief in a god who created the world, set it in motion, and then essentially withdrew from it, leaving it to operate mostly on its own. As the authors note, the thoroughly therapeutic bent of MTD (the god who is out there becomes involved in my life only as I need him) is a significant qualifier on the classical eighteenth-century deistic view.

I mentioned that the authors have concluded something which is not only surprising but also dark. The darkness enters when we learn the authors’ assessment does not have in view the faith-system of the unchurched only; instead, MTD “is visible among black and conservative Protestants, Jewish teens, [and] other religious types of teenagers” (p. 163). MTD, in other words, is the faith-system of many youth *within* American churches.

The authors’ MTD model resonates compellingly with Reformed Christians who, in the tradition of Cornelius Van Til, recognize that no matter what we are told (or may wish to believe), teenagers are not searching as essentially innocent, curious explorers. On a biblical, Reformed view, teens, like all human beings, are not really theologically *indifferent* and *uncommitted*. Instead, created as we all are in the image of God and confronted incessantly with his authoritative revelation, teenagers too respond, inevitably, with either a Spirit-enlivened faith/repentance or with idolatrous unbelief. Put differently, like all sinners teens think and act in terms of a truly religious commitment, one which the authors find is generally not to the traditions of their fathers and grandfathers but to a very different, very new faith. Indeed, if the authors are correct that MTD is a useful term for this new faith, it accents all the more how rejection of God and his revelation reduces consistently to a depraved idolatry of would-be autonomy that exchanges the truth of God for a lie (Rom 1:25). This will certainly not be a popular assessment of American youth, but we must recognize it to be the most biblically realistic.

What might all this mean for us? Among other probing questions this study raises, it needs to be asked if our confidence in the biblical, Reformed insistence on the depravity of every human heart has been compromised in some way by a quiet acquiescence to our cultural obsession with teen exuberance and optimism. If we have not acquiesced, we can praise the Father for his mercies in granting us light and life in the truths of his Word.

But if we have acquiesced, perhaps we will find the conclusions of this study sobering in a life-giving way. *Soul Searching* is a fascinating look at contemporary American religious life and an illuminating, if disturbing, exposé of the faith of American youth. It is a useful book for which we can be thankful, and is of course most relevant to ministers and parents of teenagers. But I hope it will find a much broader audience than this.

M.A.G.