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Are Your Children Christians or Practicing Moralistic Therapeutic Deists?

A recent study determined that the religion of the majority of teenagers in America is not Christianity, Muslim, Judaism or Catholicism. It is a little known hybrid of all the major religions called "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" or MTD. The reason it is such a fast-growing religion is because the adults and television characters that the majority of teenagers are exposed to are modeling Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.

Dr. Christian Smith did a multi-year, national study of the religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers, starting in 2002. What he discovered is that American teenagers tend to be "spiritual, but not religious." Nearly all American youth see themselves as "profoundly individualistic." There are two things the teenagers believe that they are supposed to do: 1) Have fun and 2) Don't fail or mess up your life.

American teenagers believe that it is okay to be somewhat religious, but it is also important not to be "too religious." Teens see religion as a means to an end. Religion is thought of as fostering morality, but it is also not necessary for morality. Religion helps you, but you don't need it. And, in most teens' views, it is almost impossible to be considered immoral. Everyone who is not a murderer, a bank robber or a rapist is considered moral by American teens. In other words, by their own definition, most teens are "moral."

Relatively few teens said that they were practicing their faith. They identified that they practice many things like music and sports, just not their faith. This was most apparent when most Christian teens said that they pray, but very few read their Bible. They are comfortable speaking about God, but they will not use the "J" word. Most U.S. teens indicated that they are not religious rebels alienated or disgruntled with their church, but neither are they sold out to their religious convictions. They are just going along with the flow. Or as Revelation 3: 15-16 describes it: "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth."

American teens view religion in a benignly positive light. Religion is considered good, but it operates in the background. MTD adherents believe in a mostly distant God. This normally distant God is selectively available for taking care of personal needs ~ which explains why teens pray but don't necessarily read the Bible. The central theme of MTD is about being good. It is good to be good. The goal is to be good, kind, nice and avoid conflict. Teens want to be able to resolve problems and get along amicably with others. This means that you would never challenge someone else's life style or version of morality. If they aren't immoral (murderer, bank robber or rapist), then the goal is to get along with them and avoid conflict. There is no standing up for one's beliefs. That goes against being a MTD. They are okay talking about God, as most everyone has a belief in God, but not Jesus ~ whose very name is polarizing.

The beliefs of someone who is a practicing Moralistic Therapeutic Deist include:

- God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth from a distance.
- God wants people to be good, nice and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
- The central goal in life is to be happy and feel good about oneself.
- God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life, except when He is needed to resolve a problem.
- Good people go to heaven when they die.

So how does this new religion of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism impact today's Christian families? Stay tuned to Part 2, in the next Quarterly Newsletter.