

ALMOST CHRISTIAN

*What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling  
the American Church*

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OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

2010

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# 1

## Becoming Christian-ish

We have come with some confidence to believe that a significant part of Christianity in the United States is actually only tenuously Christian in any sense that it is seriously connected to the actual historical Christian tradition. . . . It is not so much that U.S. Christianity is being secularized. Rather, more subtly, Christianity is either degenerating into a pathetic version of itself or, more significantly, Christianity is actively being colonized and displaced by quite a different religious faith.

—*Christian Smith with Melinda Denton*

I am personally not very much worried about the reduction in numbers where Christianity . . . [is] concerned. I am far more concerned about the qualitative factor: what kind of Christianity . . . are we talking about?

—*Douglas John Hall*

Let me save you some trouble. Here is the gist of what you are about to read: American young people are, theoretically, fine with religious faith—but it does not concern them very much, and it is not durable enough to survive long after they graduate from high school.

One more thing: we're responsible.

If the American church responds, quickly and decisively, to issues raised by studies like the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR)—the massive 2003–05 study on adolescent spirituality in the United States that served as the original impetus for this book—then tending the faith of young people may just be the ticket to reclaiming our own. As the following pages attest, the religiosity of American teenagers must be read primarily as a reflection of their parents' religious devotion (or

lack thereof) and, by extension, that of their congregations. Teenagers themselves consistently demonstrate an openness to religion, but few of them are deeply committed to one. As sociologists like Robert Wuthnow blame young adults' absence from American religious life, not on congregational practices but on demographic patterns like the postponement of marriage, the chance of churches becoming places that young people call their own seems like a distant, maybe even delusional, hope.<sup>1</sup>

I want to suggest another way to read this research, including the NSYR and the spate of smaller studies that largely echo its findings: they are not just about youth. Youth, after all, “tell ourselves,” which means that the significance of the NSYR does not lie in what it revealed about young people (very few of its findings surprise anyone working with teenagers). It is significant because it reframes the issues of youth ministry as issues facing the twenty-first-century church as a whole.<sup>2</sup> Since the religious and spiritual choices of American teenagers echo, with astonishing clarity, the religious and spiritual choices of the adults who love them, lackadaisical faith is not young people's issue, but ours.<sup>3</sup> Most teenagers are perfectly content with their religious worldviews; it is churches that are—rightly—concerned. So we must assume that the solution lies not in beefing up congregational youth programs or making worship more “cool” and attractive, but in modeling the kind of mature, passionate faith we say we want young people to have.

The National Study of Youth and Religion reveals a theological fault line running underneath American churches: an adherence to a do-good, feel-good spirituality that has little to do with the Triune God of Christian tradition and even less to do with loving Jesus Christ enough to follow him into the world. It is hard to read the data from the NSYR without the impression that many American congregations (not to mention teenagers themselves) are “almost Christian”—but perhaps not fully, at least not in terms of theology or practice. To be sure, this is hardly an original position. During the Great Awakening in England, both George Whitefield and John Wesley preached (different) sermons titled “The Almost Christian,” based on King Agrippa's reaction to Paul in Acts 26:28: “Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian” (KJV). Both sermons took aim at the half-hearted spirituality of the realm,

especially the inclination of Christians to obey church commandments without loving God and neighbor “as Christ loved us.” Wesley in particular identified with this arid approach to faith. “Suffer me to speak freely of myself,” he confessed. “I did go thus far for many years, . . . doing good to all men; constantly and carefully using all the public and all the private means of grace . . . and, God is my record, before whom I stand, doing all this in sincerity. . . . Yet my own conscience beareth me witness in the Holy Ghost, that all this time I was but *almost a Christian*.”<sup>4</sup> For Wesley, the difference between an “almost Christian” and an “altogether Christian” boiled down to love:

The great question of all, then, still remains. Is the love of God shed abroad in your heart? Can you cry out, “My God, and my All”? Do you desire nothing but him? Are you happy in God? Is he your glory, your delight, your crown of rejoicing? And is this commandment written in your heart, “That he who loveth God love his brother also”? Do you then love your neighbour as yourself? Do you love every man, even your enemies, even the enemies of God, as your own soul? as Christ loved you?<sup>5</sup>

The tremors of loveless faith still rumble through American Christianity. The philosopher James K. A. Smith suggests that these rumblings haunt contemporary Christian education in particular: “Could it be the case that learning a Christian perspective doesn’t actually touch my desire, and that while I might be able to *think* about the world from a Christian perspective, at the end of the day I love *not* the kingdom of God but rather the kingdom of the market?”<sup>6</sup> After two and a half centuries of shacking up with “the American dream,” churches have perfected a dicey codependence between consumer-driven therapeutic individualism and religious pragmatism. These theological proxies gnaw, termite-like, at our identity as the Body of Christ, eroding our ability to recognize that Jesus’ life of self-giving love directly challenges the American gospel of self-fulfillment and self-actualization. Young people in contemporary culture prosper by following the latter. Yet Christian identity, and the “crown of rejoicing” that Wesley believed accompanied consequential faith born out of a desire to love God and neighbor, requires the former.

The predicament described in this book—namely, that American young people are unwittingly being formed into an imposter faith that poses as Christianity, but that in fact lacks the holy desire and missional clarity necessary for Christian discipleship—will not be solved by youth ministry or by persuading teenagers to commit more wholeheartedly to lackluster faith. Most teenagers seem quite content with maintaining what the sociologist Tim Clydesdale calls a “semireligious” position after they graduate from high school, and most churches seem happy to leave it at that.<sup>7</sup> At issue is our ability, and our willingness, to remember our identity as the Body of Christ, and to heed Christ’s call to love him and love others as his representatives in the world.

## RELIGION IN AMERICA: A VERY NICE THING

Youth ministry is the de facto research and development branch of American Christianity, which is why attending to the faith of adolescents may help reclaim Christian identity for the rest of us as well. For that reason, this book focuses on Christian adults and congregations as well as on teenagers themselves. We are the ones charged with “handing on” the good news of Jesus Christ to the teenagers on our watch, but the reports from the front are not encouraging. We have successfully convinced teenagers that religious participation is important for moral formation and for making nice people, which may explain why American adolescents harbor no ill will toward religion. Many of them say they will bring their own children to church in the future (a dubious prediction statistically).<sup>8</sup> Yet these young people possess no real commitment to or excitement about religious faith. Teenagers tend to approach religious participation, like music and sports, as an extracurricular activity: a good, well-rounded thing to do, but unnecessary for an integrated life. Religion, the young people in the NSYR concurred, is a “Very Nice Thing.”<sup>9</sup>

What we have been less able to convey to young people is *faith*. In Christian tradition, faith is a matter of desire, a desire for God and a desire to love others in Christ’s name—which results in a church oriented toward bearing God’s self-giving love to others, embodied in a gospel-shaped way of life. Love gives Christianity its purpose and its meaning. Religion functions as an organized expression of belief, but

faith—to quote the theologian Douglas John Hall—is a “dialogue with doubt,” a personal reckoning with God’s involvement in the world, and investment in our own lives.<sup>10</sup> Hall reminds us that one of the great themes in twentieth-century theology was chronicling Christianity’s fall from faith to religion.<sup>11</sup> Yet Christianity has always been more of a trust-walk than a belief system. In Christian tradition, faith depends on who we follow, and that depends on who we love. Believing in a person—having utter confidence in someone—creates a very different set of expectations than believing in “beliefs.” For Christians, faith means cleaving to the person, the God-man, of Jesus Christ, joining a pilgrim journey with other lovers and following him into the world.

Christian formation invites young people into this motley band of pilgrims and prepares them to receive the Spirit who calls them, shapes them, and enlists them in God’s plan to right a capsized world. Teenagers with consequential Christian faith share a profound and personal sense of God’s love and forgiveness on this journey. They know that the family stories the church tells along the way include them. They are confident that Christ has a part for them to play in bringing about God’s purposes, and that the journey they are on contributes to God’s good direction for the world. But such consequential faith—faith that grows by confessing a creed, belonging to a community, and pursuing God’s purpose and hope—is not the faith that most American teenagers seem to have. The faith most teenagers exhibit is a loveless version that the NSYR calls Christianity’s “misbegotten stepcousin,” Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, which is “supplanting Christianity as the dominant religion in American churches.”<sup>12</sup> That is the issue the NSYR prods us to address.

But first: a story.

## WHY TWENTY-ONE IS THE NEW SIXTEEN

You’ve heard this one: A hot, hungry, strapping young fellow, all sweat and hair and muscle, looms in a doorway. He has been plowing fields and shearing goats and swatting off flies since dawn, and now he swoons at the smell of supper (Gen. 25–27). So Esau tells Jacob, his brother: “I’m dying of hunger. Give me some of that porridge.”

Jacob, the wily one, tosses out a condition: “First sell me your birth-right.” Just like that. First, go wash your hands. First, pass me that pomegranate. First, sign over your future. Too exhausted for another one of his brother’s mind games, Esau grunts the ancient equivalent of “Whatever” and seals his fate. Who knew Jacob was serious? Who knew that indifference before dinner could cost your inheritance? And really, who can blame Esau—a young man after a hard day—for thinking with his stomach?

Jacob may be the twin who gets the most press, but Esau is just as much like us. Like Esau, American Christians tend to think with our stomachs, devouring whatever smells good in order to keep our inner rumblings at bay, oblivious even to our own misgivings. Sociologists paint American Christians as restless people who come to church for the same reasons people once went to diners: for someone to serve us who knows our name, for a filling stew that reminds us of home and makes us feel loved, even while it does a number on our spiritual cholesterol.<sup>13</sup>

Ancient youth like Jacob and Esau grew up at a time when questions like “Who are my people? Why am I here? What gives my life meaning and coherence?” were answered, literally, by the faith of their fathers, not by theories of ego development. Yet these questions of belonging, purpose, and ideology remain at the core of human identity; while we have learned to think of them as psychological issues, such questions have historically fallen to religion to answer, ritualized in the traditions and practices of communities that seek to embody a particular story of identity. The developmental theorist Jeffrey Arnett reminds us that becoming adult requires coming to terms with questions that address our place and purpose in the cosmos, and that evoke a governing ideology that gives life meaning. Whether young people view themselves as “religious” or not, human beings “invariably address religious questions as part of our lives,” writes Arnett. “Forming religious beliefs appears to be a universal part of identity development.”<sup>14</sup>

Of course, identity development was not a problem for Jacob and Esau. Until the early twentieth century, you were either a child or an adult; there was no transitional period of “becoming” in between, unless you were among the privileged few who could afford the moratorium offered by travel or formal education. Adolescence is an invention of the



Industrial Revolution, a social pattern devised to keep young workers out of the factories so as not to displace older employees. By the twentieth century, thanks largely to access to public education, the “moratorium” associated with adolescence had become widespread. The resulting age-stratification of American society (which allowed advertisers to target youth as a “market”) created the crucible in which the American “teenager”—a post–World War II youth with free time and disposable income—was born.

Today, adolescence continues to be a moving target. Puberty starts sooner and adulthood starts later; fertility and adolescence no longer go hand in hand. Scholars now posit emerging adulthood as a youthful life stage of its own, since the developmental tasks once associated with identity exploration (and therefore with adolescence) are increasingly postponed. Most young Americans eschew the title of “adult” until their late twenties or early thirties.<sup>15</sup> We have learned to accept twenty-one as the “new sixteen.” Today, adolescence functions as a lifestyle as well as a life stage, a state of consciousness as well as a period of life that young people can and often do prolong, with the full cooperation of American culture.

## DOES CHURCH STILL MATTER?

In the midst of these swirling currents, teenagers—like centuries of young people before them—find themselves in search of a faith, religious or otherwise, that they can call their own.<sup>16</sup> In fact, the faith teenagers develop during adolescence serves as a kind of barometer of the religious inclinations of the culture that surrounds them, giving parents, pastors, teachers, campus ministers, youth pastors, and anyone else who works closely with teenagers fifty-yard-line seats from which to watch America’s religious future take shape. For most of the twentieth century, we studied the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents in order to answer the question, “How can we keep young people in church?” Today, our question is more pressing: “Does the church *matter*?” Religious stories are told for the sake of forming identity, and Christian communities, like all religious communities, seek to embody them. The account of Jesus Christ’s life, death, and

resurrection—the story that gives Christianity its life-and-death urgency and that insists on the Holy Spirit’s living presence in the world today—goes to the heart of profoundly human questions about belonging, purpose, and meaning. So when the NSYR points to American churches’ inability to meaningfully share the core content of Christian faith with young people, it points to a church that no longer addresses the issues of being human, and whose God is therefore unimportant.

Instead, churches seem to have offered teenagers a kind of “diner theology”: a bargain religion, cheap but satisfying, whose gods require little in the way of fidelity or sacrifice. Never mind that centuries of Christians have read Jesus’ call to lay down one’s life for others as the signature feature of Christian love (John 15:13), or that God’s self-giving enables us to share the grace of Christ when ours is pitifully insufficient. Diner theology is much easier to digest than all this—and it is far safer, especially for malleable youth. So who can blame churches, really, for earnestly ladling this stew into teenagers, filling them with an agreeable porridge about the importance of being nice, feeling good about yourself, and saving God for emergencies? We have convinced ourselves that this is the gospel, but in fact it is much closer to another mess of pottage, an unacknowledged but widely held religious outlook among American teenagers that is primarily dedicated, not to loving God, but to avoiding interpersonal friction.<sup>17</sup> There are inspiring exceptions, of course, but for the most part we have traded the kind of faith confessed and embodied in the church’s most long-standing traditions for the savory stew of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. And, for the most part, young people have followed suit.

## A NEW GAME IN TOWN

Three out of four American teenagers claim to be Christians, and most are affiliated with a religious organization—but only about half consider it very important, and fewer than half actually practice their faith as a regular part of their lives.<sup>18</sup> Sociologists and church leaders tend to draw opposite conclusions from these findings. The sociologists involved in the NSYR hailed this as good news for American religion:

significant numbers of young people think faith is important. Church leaders, on the other hand, greet these statistics with enormous ambivalence. As a Christian pastor and seminary professor, I place myself in the latter group. The NSYR's blunt assessment that many churches are "failing rather badly in religiously engaging and educating youth" names what many pastors and parents already know: whatever the strengths of American congregations, we struggle mightily when it comes to handing on faith to young people.<sup>19</sup> Most professional church critics—myself included—have tended to blame teenagers' lukewarm religiosity on the church's warmed-over teaching of a life-giving gospel. But this is not the whole story. Youth ministers today are better educated, better resourced, better paid, and "longer lasting" in their positions than ever before.<sup>20</sup> Some young people we encounter in ministry come away with life-changing faith, but many (perhaps most) do not. Why?

The answer may simply be that most youth ministry is not accomplished by youth ministers. Neither young people nor youth ministry can be extracted from the church as a whole, any more than the musculature of the Body of Christ can be separated from its circulatory system. We have known for some time that youth groups do important things for teenagers, providing moral formation, learned competencies, and social and organizational ties.<sup>21</sup> But they seem less effective as catalysts for consequential faith, which is far more likely to take root in the rich relational soil of families, congregations, and mentor relationships where young people can see what faithful lives look like, and encounter the people who love them enacting a larger story of divine care and hope.

Overall, the challenge posed to the church by the teenagers in the National Study of Youth and Religion is as much *theological* as methodological: the hot lava core of Christianity—the story of God's courtship with us through Jesus Christ, of God's suffering love through salvation history and especially through Christ's death and resurrection, and of God's continued involvement in the world through the Holy Spirit—has been muted in many congregations, replaced by an ecclesial complacency that convinces youth and parents alike that not much is at stake.<sup>22</sup> In the view of American teenagers, God is more object than subject, an Idea but not a companion. The problem does not seem to be

that churches are teaching young people badly, but that we are doing an exceedingly good job of teaching youth what we really believe: namely, that Christianity is not a big deal, that God requires little, and the church is a helpful social institution filled with nice people focused primarily on “folks like us”—which, of course, begs the question of whether we are really the church at all.

What if the blasé religiosity of most American teenagers is not the result of poor communication but the result of excellent communication of a watered-down gospel so devoid of God’s self-giving love in Jesus Christ, so immune to the sending love of the Holy Spirit that it might not be Christianity at all? What if the *church* models a way of life that asks, not passionate surrender but ho-hum assent? What if we are preaching moral affirmation, a feel-better faith, and a hands-off God instead of the decisively involved, impossibly loving, radically sending God of Abraham and Mary, who desired us enough to enter creation in Jesus Christ and whose Spirit is active in the church and in the world today? If this is the case—if theological malpractice explains teenagers’ half-hearted religious identities—then perhaps most young people practice Moralistic Therapeutic Deism not because they reject Christianity, but because this is the only “Christianity” they know.

## CHRISTIAN PARASITOLOGY

Let me venture an analogy. By the time our son, Brendan, was eight, he had amassed an impressive array of Spiderman action figures, including a few of Spidey’s over-appendaged adversaries, each of whom could imperil human existence but not find its way back to the toy box. I picked up a garish humanoid spray-painted with a black and white bodysuit, whose grin had all the charm of a T. rex. “I don’t like this guy,” I muttered.

“You’re not s’posed to like him,” said Brendan. “That’s Venom. He sucks out all your life energy. I want to be him for Halloween.”

It turns out that Venom (stay with me here) came from a *symbiote*, a parasitology term that Marvel Comics co-opted in 1984 for its newest Spiderman nemesis. In the comic books, the symbiote—an alien

creature unable to survive on its own—struck a bargain with the devious Eddie Brock: the symbiote would give Brock its power in return for Brock’s “life energy.” But (newsflash!) symbiotes from outer space cannot be trusted. Once the symbiote inhabited Brock, it absorbed his “life energy” and morphed into the evil Venom.

It was Faust à la Marvel Comics, the oldest story in the book: a snake in a fruit tree, a pretty promise, a cataclysmic outcome. Beguiling and helpful, the symbiote did not appear dangerous. On the contrary, the symbiote seemed like a near-perfect copy of Spiderman himself, an accommodating “I’ll-help-you, you-help-me” kind of guy. What could be more neighborly? What could be more American? Here was a villain who preyed on our deepest desires by helping us realize our fondest hopes—all the while sucking out our souls while we weren’t looking.

Parasitologists define a symbiote as the weaker of two organisms inhabiting the same space, so that the weaker can draw life from the stronger. In the most dramatic cases, by the time the host notices, the symbiote has siphoned off its nutrients, guaranteeing the symbiote’s survival but leaving the host seriously weakened. Venom’s symbiote occupied its hapless victims while inhaling their souls so completely that they became hideous creatures themselves: human beings whose depleted souls left them too weak to resist the symbiote’s beguiling allure. Once, the symbiote even inhabited Spiderman, leaving a trace of Venom behind, so it was often impossible to tell them apart. The result? When the imposter threatened to supplant the original, no one was the wiser.

Has a symbiote taken up residence in American Christianity without our knowledge? This is the view expressed by Christian Smith with Melinda Denton, the principle investigators for the NSYR, who see in the Moralistic Therapeutic Deism of American teenagers an “alternative faith that feeds on and gradually co-opts if not devours” established religious traditions. This alternative faith “generally does not and cannot stand on its own,” so its adherents are affiliated with traditional faith communities, unaware that they are practicing a very different faith than historic orthodox Christianity. If teenagers wrote out this common religious outlook, it would look something like this:

### GUIDING BELIEFS OF MORALISTIC THERAPEUTIC DEISM

1. A god exists who created and orders the world and watches over life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God is not involved in my life except when I need God to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, say Smith and Denton, seems to be “colonizing many historical religious traditions and, almost without anyone noticing, converting believers in the old faiths to its alternative religious vision of divinely underwritten personal happiness and interpersonal niceness.”<sup>23</sup> For Smith and Denton, this is a moral indictment on American congregations, not teenagers, which leads them to draw an astonishing conclusion: Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is supplanting Christianity as the dominant religion in the United States. Smith and Denton feel confident enough about these conclusions to write:

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is, in the context of [teenagers’] own congregations and denominations, actively displacing the substantive traditional faiths of conservative, black, and mainline Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism in the United States. . . . It may be the new mainstream American religious faith for our culturally post-Christian, individualistic, mass-consumer capitalist society.<sup>24</sup>

While Smith and Denton refrain from describing how this “colonization” affects other religious traditions, they are forthright about asserting its influence on Christianity: “We have come with some confidence to believe that a significant part of Christianity in the United States is actually only tenuously Christian in any sense that it is seriously

connected to the actual historical Christian tradition, but has rather substantially morphed into . . . Christian Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.”<sup>25</sup>

In short, the National Study of Youth and Religion provides a window on how well American young people have learned a well-intentioned but ultimately banal version of Christianity offered up in American churches. Most youth seem to accept this bland view of faith as all there is—nice to have, like a bank account, something you want before you go to college in case you need to draw from it sometime. What we have not told them is that this account of Christianity is bankrupt. We have not invested in their accounts: we “teach” young people baseball, but we “expose” them to faith. We provide coaching and opportunities for youth to develop and improve their pitches and their SAT scores, but we blithely assume that religious identity will happen by osmosis, emerging “when youth are ready” (a confidence we generally lack when it comes to, say, algebra). We simply have not given teenagers the soul-strength necessary to recognize, wrestle, and resist the symbiotes in our midst—probably because we lack this soul-strength ourselves.

Fortunately, it is not all up to us. Because Christians believe that transformation belongs to God, Christian formation—the patterning of our lives and our communities after Christ’s own self-giving love—requires grace, not determination. The church’s job is to till the soil, prepare the heart, ready the mind, still the soul, and stay awake so we notice where God is on the move, and follow. It is in following Jesus that we learn to love him; it is in participating in the mission of God that God decisively changes us into disciples. Whenever ministry settles for less than this, the church becomes vulnerable to symbiotes, and risks “morphing” into a community that is almost Christian.

## WAKE-UP CALL FOR THE CHURCH

In the course of conducting interviews for the NSYR, I spent hours talking to young people in malls, bookstores, and neighborhood pizza parlors as they told me about—well, about almost everything *but* faith, as it turned out. Remarkably articulate young people stammered and groped for words when the conversation turned to religion, as if no one had

ever asked them these questions before, or as if we were asking questions in another language. Many youth said religion was important, though when pressed they generally could not say how; almost all of them thought religion was a good thing, though most could not describe the difference it made to them personally.

Correlation is not causality, and just because teenagers fail to recognize how religion shapes them does not mean it has no effect. Decades of research consistently links high levels of adolescent religiosity with prosocial behavior and success in both academics and social and familial relationships.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, it matters that American teenagers are largely immune to religion's existential claims and unaware of religion's effects on their daily lives. Most religious traditions set out to impress human beings at precisely these points: identity and practice. Time and time again in our interviews, we met young people who called themselves Christians, who grew up with Christian parents, who were regular participants in Christian congregations, yet who had no readily accessible faith vocabulary, few recognizable faith practices, and little ability to reflect on their lives religiously. There were exceptions, but not many. Not surprisingly, the script that emerged about teenage spirituality in the United States read like a B-movie: entertaining at points but ultimately forgettable. Exposing adolescents to faith, as it turns out, is no substitute for teaching it to them.

## THE PROJECT'S CONTOURS

The National Study of Youth and Religion (conducted from 2002 to 2005) is the most ambitious study of American teenagers and religion to date, involving extensive interviews of more than 3,300 American teenagers between the ages of thirteen and seventeen (including telephone surveys of these teenagers' parents), followed by face-to-face follow-up interviews with 267 of these teenagers. The study also involves an ongoing longitudinal component that has so far revisited more than 2500 of these young people to understand how their religious lives are changing as they enter emerging adulthood.<sup>27</sup> My assignment as part of the research team was to help conduct the original round of face-to-face interviews with teenagers, and to interpret the study's findings for churches.



As a longtime youth minister, an ordained United Methodist pastor, and a professor who teaches youth ministry and Christian formation at a mainline Protestant seminary, I am hardly a disinterested bystander. My husband, Kevin, and I are the parents of two adolescents who make us ridiculously proud—but whose own faith sometimes dangles on the ropes despite almost twenty years of (what seems to them to be) excruciatingly intentional Christian education. This book is for people like us, people who care that the teenagers we love, love God—and who are in “youth ministry” by virtue of the fact that we are Christians who promise, with each and every baptism, to help raise each other’s children as followers of Jesus.

The primary findings from the first wave of the National Study of Youth and Religion appear in Appendix A and B. For the sake of our current discussion, let me briefly outline five findings from the NSYR’s first wave data that are most important for the book you are reading:

### **1. Most American teenagers have a positive view of religion but otherwise don’t give it much thought**

The good news is that teenagers are not hostile toward religion. That surprised some of the researchers in the study, who expected to find teenagers rebelling against religion—arguing with parents, looking for more “authentic” kinds of religious expression, trying to be “spiritual” but not “religious.” None of these patterns showed up in the teenagers we studied. According to Smith and Denton, “The vast majority of U.S. teens view religion in a benignly positive light.”<sup>28</sup> Teenagers tend to view God as either a butler or a therapist, someone who meets their needs when summoned (“a cosmic lifeguard,” as one youth minister put it) or who listens nonjudgmentally and helps youth feel good about themselves (“kind of like my guidance counselor,” a ninth grader told me).<sup>29</sup> Most young people (even nonreligious ones) believe that religion has much to offer, and those who attend church tend to feel positively about their congregations even when they are critical of religion in general. Almost all teenagers say that religion benefits individuals or society or both.

The bad news is the *reason* teenagers are not hostile toward religion: they just do not care about it very much. Religion is not a big deal to them. People fight over things that matter to them—but religion barely

causes a ripple in the lives of most adolescents. Butlers and lifeguards watch from the sidelines until called upon; therapists and guidance counselors offer encouragement and advice. The NSYR defined spiritual “seeking” not as the developmental longing for meaning described by Jeffrey Arnett, but as an active cobbling together of spiritual beliefs and practices taken from multiple religious traditions. This kind of spiritual seeking was almost invisible among the thirteen- to seventeen-year-olds we interviewed. Teenagers gladly grant people the right to explore other religions, or to construct their own eclectic spiritualities, but they are not doing it themselves. So while religion is seldom a source of conflict for teenagers, it is also seldom a source of identity, as we will see in chapter 2.

## **2. Most U.S. teenagers mirror their parents’ religious faith**

Perhaps parents and teenagers do not argue much about religion because they seem to believe almost the same things. Contrary to popular opinion, teenagers conform to the religious beliefs and practices of their parents to a very high degree. The “breaking away” from authority figures associated with the teenage years comes later in adolescence, but the thirteen- to seventeen-year-olds in the NSYR were highly conventional, content to adopt their parents’ religious inclinations.<sup>30</sup> By and large, Smith and Denton concluded, parents “get what they are” religiously.<sup>31</sup> This theme is taken up in detail in chapter 6, for overwhelming every other finding of the National Study is one recurrent theme: Parents matter most when it comes to the religious formation of their children. While grandparents, other relatives, mentors, and youth ministers are also influential, parents are by far the most important predictors of teenagers’ religious lives.

## **3. Teenagers lack a theological language with which to express their faith or interpret their experience of the world**

The vast majority of U.S. teenagers, to quote Smith and Denton, are “*incredibly inarticulate* about their faith, their religious beliefs and practices, and its meaning or place in their lives” (emphasis original).<sup>32</sup>

When asked to describe what they believed, many youth defaulted and just said they had no religious beliefs, or they unknowingly described beliefs that their own churches deem heretical (for a comparison of theological versus therapeutic terms used by teenagers in the interviews, see Appendix E). These patterns were consistent even in teenagers who regularly attend church, with mainline Protestant young people being “among the least religiously articulate of all teens,” and Catholic youth following close behind.<sup>33</sup> It is easy to wonder whether this religious inarticulacy may have been a function of research methods that fail to plumb deeply held beliefs (more on that in chapter 7). For now we need only point out that for most of the youth in the study, religion was not a deeply held belief, at least no more deeply held than beliefs about money, family, sex, or relationships—and teenagers had plenty to say about each of these subjects.

Smith and Denton make a pointed observation here. “We do not believe that teenage inarticulacy about religious matters reflects any general teen incapacity to think and speak well,” since many youth interviewed were impressively articulate about other subjects. Rather, Smith and Denton hypothesize that the youth we interviewed were inarticulate in matters of faith because no one had taught them how to talk about their faith, or provided opportunities to practice using a faith vocabulary. For a striking number of teenagers, our interviews seemed to be the first time any adult had asked them what they believed, and why it mattered to them.<sup>34</sup>

#### **4. A minority of American teenagers—but a significant minority—say religious faith is important, and that it makes a difference in their lives. These teenagers are doing better in life on a number of scales, compared to their less religious peers**

Forty percent of all young people deem religion important enough to practice regularly—a minority, but a very significant minority. One in twelve (8%) can be described as “highly devoted” (e.g., they attend religious services weekly or more, they feel very close to God, they participate in a religious youth group, they read Scripture, pray frequently, and say

faith is very important in their lives). These were the teenagers I studied most closely for this book, in order to learn why faith is more significant for them than for their peers.

Mormon teenagers attach the most importance to faith and are most likely to fall in the category of highly devoted youth, a phenomenon explored in chapter 3. In nearly every area, using a variety of measures, Mormon teenagers showed the highest levels of religious understanding, vitality, and congruence between religious belief and practiced faith; they were the least likely to engage in high-risk behavior and consistently were the most positive, healthy, hopeful, and self-aware teenagers in the interviews. After Mormon youth, the greatest religious understanding, vitality, and salience appeared in conservative Protestant and black Protestant teenagers, followed (in order) by mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic, Jewish, and nonreligious teenagers.<sup>35</sup>

On the whole, teenagers who say religion is important to them are doing “much better in life” than less religious teenagers, by a number of measures.<sup>36</sup> While religious youth do not avoid problem behaviors and relationships, those who participate in religious communities are more likely to do well in school, have positive relationships with their families, have a positive outlook on life, wear their seatbelts—the list goes on, enumerating an array of outcomes that parents pray for.<sup>37</sup>

Here we must insert two caveats: (1) participating in *any* identity-bearing community, religious or otherwise, improves young people’s likeliness to thrive; and (2) human ideas of “doing better” usually require conforming to social norms that sometimes contravene religious teachings. Using religion to anesthetize teenagers in order to make them nice or compliant enough to fulfill adult expectations, or involving them in a youth group to take advantage of religion’s prophylactic benefits against risky behavior, could be confused with doing much better in life (even while compromising the gospel’s prophetic nature). Spiritually sensitive youth often cause trouble in their communities (religious or secular) *because* of their alertness to the sacred. It is hard to imagine researchers, interviewing Jesus after he turned over the tables in the temple, ascribing the act to religious maturity—but in Christian theology it is a story of righteousness and divine purgation.

Smith and Denton recognize these risks and warn against encouraging children to participate in religion for instrumental reasons. When they find “sizable and significant differences in a variety of important life outcomes between more and less religious teenagers in the United States,” they identify a wide swath of social scientific research associating religion with healthy outcomes that include, but far exceed, safety.<sup>38</sup>

**5. Many teenagers enact and espouse a religious outlook that is distinct from traditional teachings of most world religions—an outlook called Moralistic Therapeutic Deism**

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, a tacit religious outlook that is quite distinct from Christianity, Judaism, Islam, or any of the world’s major religions, helps people be nice, feel good, and leaves God in the background. It serves as the “default position” for adolescent religiosity in the United States. This is especially true when religious communities’ engagement and education of youth is weak. But there is more to the story: young people seem to be barometers of a larger theological shift that appears to be taking place in the United States. The qualities of this “new mainstream faith” are taken up in chapter 2, and explored throughout the remainder of this book.<sup>39</sup>

**THE TERRAIN AHEAD**

The deepest dimensions of faith always elude measure; sociology leaves the task of theological reflection on religious research to practical theologians, people brazen enough to jump from certainty into hope. This book represents precisely that leap of faith. Whatever else they accomplish, religions offer teenagers paths to ultimate purpose, stories of self-transcendence, and ways to relate to others, both human and divine—fields for working out questions of love, work, and ideology that contribute to the integrated identity of adulthood. For Christians, identity is not an achievement but a theological as well as a developmental gift, the result of the Holy Spirit’s work in and through teenage

brains and human communities. What is missing from the National Study of Youth and Religion is the central interest of *this* book: how can the twenty-first-century church better prepare young people steeped in Moralistic Therapeutic Deism for the trust-walk of Christian faith?

The pages that follow will explore that question in three sections. Part 1, “Worshipping at the Church of Benign Whatever-ism,” explores the NSYR’s contention that American Christianity is being “colonized” by a substitute religious outlook that most American teenagers implicitly practice and that functions as the unacknowledged creed of American culture. Part 2, “Claiming a Peculiar God-Story,” places the sociologist Ann Swidler’s cultural toolkit theory in conversation with some of the most highly devoted teenagers in the study, who seem to share a consistent set of cultural tools that make faith meaningful. Specifically, highly devoted teenagers have an articulated God-story (their stated or unstated “creed”), a deep sense of belonging in their faith communities, a clear sense that their lives have a God-given purpose, and an attitude of hope that the world is moving in a good direction because of God. These tools seem to help young people resist Moralistic Therapeutic Deism and supply scaffolding for “consequential” faith—a faith that matters enough to issue in a distinctive identity and way of life.

For Christians, however, consequential faith cannot be reduced to the work of cultural tools. Christians view faith as God’s gift, and the church’s cultural tools help us own and consolidate our identities as people who follow Jesus Christ, and who enact his love for the world. In Christian tradition, mature faith bears fruit. But this kind of generative faith requires a missional imagination, which is strikingly absent from Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Historically, the spread of Christianity itself enacts the missional rhythms of the gospel, causing the missiologist Andrew Walls to see the Incarnation’s *indigenizing* and *pilgrim principles* reflected in the transmission of the gospel across cultures. Yet these missional principles describe the way we ferry faith across generations as well. In fact, the church’s ministry with adolescents suggests that a third missionary principle may be discerned in the Incarnation—what I call a *liminal principle*—which is revealed with particular poignancy in the lives of teenagers.

Part 3, “Cultivating Consequential Faith,” explores broad sets of practices that help congregations cultivate mature faith in young people—faith that is so infused with desire for God and love for others that it becomes generative. Here I introduce three categories of practices from missionary history that have become rusty from disuse in Christian formation, but that can help us refocus self-indulgent Christianity in the direction of missional faith: practices of *translation*, *testimony*, and *detachment*. Throughout Christian history these practices have served as vehicles that carry God’s saving grace into the world “incarnationally”—i.e., through human lives—as we cross geographic, cultural, and even generational boundaries with God’s infinitely abundant love. Of course, young people cannot add these practices to their cultural toolkits unless they see adults use them first.

*Translation* provides us with a working model of catechesis, the “handing on” of lived faith from one generation to the next. Translation begins with those already integrated into “a community of practice” (in this case, adults in a congregation) who share their lives with youth to help them become familiar with the church’s language and practices, so young people can participate as fully integrated members of the faith community. *Testimony* helps young people articulate and confess their identity as Christians in the presence of those who are “other.” Testimony confesses; it does not convert. It points out God’s grace in the world without seeking to co-opt it. *Detachment* is an old word from ascetical Christianity that describes the experience of being de-centered by practices like outreach, hospitality, and prayer. De-centering practices open us to the Other, human or Divine, and cultivate empathy and reflexivity as we learn to focus on Christ instead of on ourselves.

## THE EMPEROR’S UNDERWEAR

So here is a reckless claim. If churches practice Moralistic Therapeutic Deism in the name of Christianity, then getting teenagers to come to church more often is not the solution (conceivably, it could make things worse). A more faithful church is the solution to Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. That is going to take more than hiring a youth minister, though that is an excellent place to begin. Since the National Study of Youth

and Religion repeatedly points to adolescents' tendency to mirror the religious lives of their parents, nurturing faith in young people means investing in the faith of their parents and congregations. Christian adults can no longer treat Jesus like an embarrassing relative, someone we introduce with apologies to alleviate others' (or is it our?) discomfort—that is, if we introduce him at all. To be sure, God needs no introduction; in Jesus Christ, God burst through the membrane separating heaven and earth and is “on the loose” among us (and usually in spite of us).<sup>40</sup> So some teenagers recognize God's fingerprints in their lives even without the usual advantages of religious parents, active youth programs, attentive pastors, or functional congregations. God finds a way, with or without our help. But American churches do not seem to be offering much assistance, maybe because we are serving the stew of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism to teenagers in the name of Christianity—maybe because we can no longer tell the difference.

To treat adolescents as a separate species instead of as less experienced members of our own was one of the twentieth century's largest category errors. Teenagers, obviously, are people too, and youth ministry is as much about being the church as it is about working with adolescents. If teenagers consider Christianity inconsequential—if American young people find the church worthy of “benign whatever-ism” and no more—then maybe the issue is simply that the emperor has no clothes, and young people are telling churches that we are not who we say we are. If we fail to bear God's life-altering, world-changing, fear-shattering good news (which, after all, is the reason the church exists in the first place)—if desire for God and devotion to our fellow human beings is replaced by a loveless shell of religiosity—then young people unable to find consequential Christianity in the church absolutely *should* default to something safer.

In fact, that is exactly what they are doing.