

SERIOUS TIMES

MAKING YOUR LIFE MATTER IN AN URGENT DAY

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Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

The National Study of Youth and Religion, conducted from 2001 to 2005 and perhaps the largest research project on the religious and spiritual lives of American adolescents, catalogued the demise of a Christian worldview *among Christians*. While the vast majority of U.S. teenagers identified themselves as Christian, the “language, and therefore experience, of Trinity, holiness, sin, grace, justification, sanctification, church, Eucharist, and heaven and hell appear, among most Christian teenagers in the United States..., to be supplanted by the language of happiness, niceness, and an earned heavenly reward.”

Principal investigator Christian Smith writes, “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 a quite different religious faith.”

Smith and his colleagues call this new faith “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism,” a belief system that embraces the existence of a God who demands little more than to be “nice,” with the central goal of life to be happy and feel good about oneself. God is not particularly needed in daily life except to resolve various problems that might come our way (think “Divine Butler” or “Cosmic Therapist”). And regardless of religious convictions, beliefs or commitments, good people go to heaven when they die.

When Mark Noll wrote that the scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind, his lament was largely that the mind possessed by Christians was not being applied. The research of Smith reveals a more frightening scenario – the loss of the most basic content of Christian thought and belief itself.

The Christian faith is not simply a defined worldview, but a faith which claims to be based on *revelation*. Unlike a political system or body of humanly-produced legislation, the Christian faith contends that God has chosen to reveal Himself and truth about Himself - through Scripture and supremely in Christ - which could not otherwise be known. The very meaning of the word "revelation," from the Latin *revelatio*, is to "draw back the curtain," to reveal to us that which would have remained hidden had God not chosen to engage in the act of revelation.

Thinking in light of God's existence, and His self-revelation, is what it means to have a Christian mind. Or as Flannery O'Connor would refer to herself, it is being a "Christian Realist," which reflected her conviction that she lived in the presence of certain theological truths, such as the doctrine of Creation, the Fall, and Redemption. These were not simply matters of subjective belief; they were part of the nature of Reality, as solid as the laws of physics.

For O'Connor, the Christian faith could not be something without substance, without meaning, without an absolute rooting in reality. As she wrote in her essay, "Novelist and Believer":

It makes a great difference to the look of a novel whether its author believes that the world came late into being and continues to come by a creative act of God, or whether he believes that the world and ourselves are the product of a cosmic accident. It makes a great difference to his novel whether he believes that we are created in God's image, or whether he believes we create God in our own. It makes a great difference whether he believes that our wills are free, or bound like those of other animals.

So what has influenced these young people toward such an emptying of content in regard to their faith? How have we moved from O'Connor's "Christian Realism" to "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism"? Alarmingly, three out of four students say that their beliefs simply mirror those of their parents.

So what is shaping the parents? It would seem that increasing numbers of Christians are having their theology shaped more by the surrounding culture than the revealed Word of God. Noll puts the matter bluntly: "If evangelicals do not take seriously the larger world of the intellect, we say, in effect, that we want our minds to be shaped by the conventions of our modern universities and the assumptions of Madison Avenue, instead of by God and the servants of God."

James Emery White

Sources

Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*.

Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*.

Flannery O'Connor, *Spiritual Writings* (ed. by Robert Ellsberg)

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