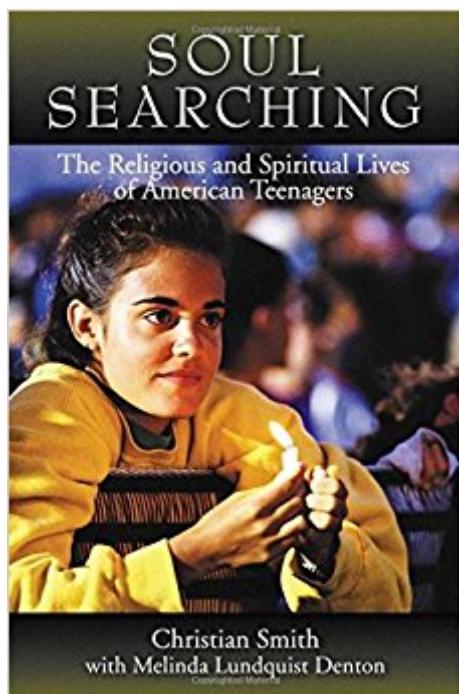


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Soul Searching: The Religious And Spiritual Lives Of American Teenagers



Synopsis

In innumerable discussions and activities dedicated to better understanding and helping teenagers, one aspect of teenage life is curiously overlooked. Very few such efforts pay serious attention to the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of American adolescents. But many teenagers are very involved in religion. Surveys reveal that 35% attend religious services weekly and another 15% attend at least monthly. 60% say that religious faith is important in their lives. 40% report that they pray daily. 25% say that they have been "born again." Teenagers feel good about the congregations they belong to. Some say that faith provides them with guidance and resources for knowing how to live well. What is going on in the religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers? What do they actually believe? What religious practices do they engage in? Do they expect to remain loyal to the faith of their parents? Or are they abandoning traditional religious institutions in search of a new, more authentic "spirituality"? This book attempts to answer these and related questions as definitively as possible. It reports the findings of The National Study of Youth and Religion, the largest and most detailed such study ever undertaken. The NYSR conducted a nationwide telephone survey of teens and significant caregivers, as well as nearly 300 in-depth face-to-face interviews with a sample of the population that was surveyed. The results show that religion and spirituality are indeed very significant in the lives of many American teenagers. Among many other discoveries, they find that teenagers are far more influenced by the religious beliefs and practices of their parents and caregivers than commonly thought. They refute the conventional wisdom that teens are "spiritual but not religious." And they confirm that greater religiosity is significantly associated with more positive adolescent life outcomes. This eagerly-awaited volume not only provides an unprecedented understanding of adolescent religion and spirituality but, because teenagers serve as bellwethers for possible future trends, it affords an important and distinctive window through which to observe and assess the current state and future direction of American religion as a whole.

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Customer Reviews

In response to "Truth Seeker"'s review, a few basic points:1. Muslims are not ignored in the book. The data include a full national sample of Muslim and other minority religion teens. As the book explains, however, because Muslim teens are so relatively few in number, only a handful show up in any national sample. Nevertheless, detailed attention is paid to Muslim (and Hindu and Buddhist) teens on pp. 315-317, based on the data we do have.2. The analytical categories used (comparing conservative, mainline, and black Protestants with Catholics, LDS, and not religious) is state-of-the art method in the sociology of religion. These are the major religious traditions in the U.S., and most readers want to know how teens in those traditions are faring. Of course it is possible to focus on specific subgroups (e.g., Catholic school attenders) and get more highly specified results (see point #4 below), but the basic comparisons in the book are entirely valid and routinely employed in sociology of religion.3. The book makes perfectly clear that the teens portrayed in the Catholic chapter are not "typical" Catholic teens, but representatives of those Catholic teens who are not doing well religiously. They are explicitly situated in the overall and clear finding that Catholic teens as a whole are not doing well religiously. Of course there are some very solid, committed Catholic teens, but they are not the norm, they are the minority. Whether or not (truth seeking) Catholic readers want to hear that unpleasant fact is another story. My request is simply: Don't shoot the messenger because of the message.4. The NSYR [...] project from which this book comes has also collaborated with the National Federation of Catholic Youth Ministry and The Ministry Source to publish a special report focused exclusively on Catholic youth, which goes into greater depth in analyzing different kinds of Catholic youth. That report can be purchased at [...] The Instituto Fe y Vida is also writing a book using NSYR data focused exclusively on Hispanic Catholic and Protestant teens. I hope these points help to clarify some matters raised in Truth Seeker's review. I think a fair reading of the book shows that the charge of "LOPSIDED, BIASED AND ANTI-CATHOLIC" is simply false.

Christian Smith and Melinda Denton have produced a wonderful analysis of the religious condition of teenagers (ages 13-17) in the USA. They collected survey data on 3290 teenagers and then followed up with more extended interviews of 267 of those surveyed. The initial survey gave an overall picture of the religious character of these teenagers including their affiliations, participation, beliefs and experiences. The interviews provided an in-depth exposure of what these teens really believe. As it turns out, the seeming wide-spread acceptance of religious life by teens (only 16% were "not religious") is largely to a vague, self-defined religion which the authors defined as: Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. The teens believed in a generally disinterested divine power who supervised a system to provide personal peace and prosperity for nice people, or perhaps to help them be nice. They adhered to a religion that is helpful, but not entirely necessary. While there were those who could be described as believers in Christianity as defined by the Bible, and also those who denied any religion, the clear majority favored MTD. The book is a "must read" for any who would like to better understand the status of the spiritual interests of youths. It also is valuable for all who would generally understand American culture. While the authors make no such claim, it is likely that the youths' view of religion is likely the common view of our age. At the least, it surely will be the increasingly dominant religion as these youths enter adult life. For parents and youth workers who are interested in true spiritual life for their children, it shows the arena in which their own youths reside. It should stimulate good thinking and discussion of how properly to intervene in what turns out to be a huge spiritual void in the lives of professing spiritual/religious youths. This is an excellent book.

This book is based on the most thorough survey of American teenagers that has ever been done. Funded by the Lilly Endowment, the author draws on extremely nuanced data that includes a national survey with teens and significant caregivers as well as in-depth interviews with a sample of the population that was surveyed. Although questions about religious behavior have been included on a variety of surveys, ranging from Gallup Polls to surveys of teenagers and drug use, there is no study that compares with this one in terms of the multidimensional character of the research. I highly recommend it.

I would like to add to Dr. Christian Smith's clarification, as one of the authors on the Catholic report on the data he mentions (authored by Ministry Training Source and published by the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry). Soul Searching is not anti-Catholic. The researchers used advanced research techniques to produce a truly representative sample, and consulted Catholic

youth ministry leaders in the development of the survey. The authors make sure to point out that while Catholic youth are the most inarticulate about their faith, they are merely the leading edge of a trend much larger than any one denomination. I have been across the country sharing this data with Catholic youth ministry leaders, who find that the results ring true with their experiences. While the comparisons among denominations are sometimes difficult, they are none the less helpful and important. Looking at the Catholic data without comparing to other denominations is important in and of itself, and I would encourage "Truth Seeker" to seek out the Catholic report and read it. Soul Searching is an amazing work, which was undertaken by professional researchers with no bias. They have contributed greatly to our understanding of youth and religion and I thank them for their work. To suggest anything to the contrary is simply unfounded conjecture.

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