

The Christian Century*Thinking Critically. Living Faithfully.*

COVER STORY

Faith, nice and easy

The almost-Christian formation of teens

Aug 03, 2010 by Kenda Creasy Dean

In 1984, Marvel Comics created a new nemesis for Spider-Man. The character would be a symbiote, inspired by what parasitologists call the weaker of two organisms inhabiting the same space. The weaker organism can draw life from the stronger, and in the most dramatic cases it siphons off its host's nutrients before the host realizes what's happening. The symbiote survives, but the host is seriously weakened.

Once Marvel Comics had a new symbiotic character, that character needed a host. It struck a bargain with another character named Eddie Brock: the symbiote would give Brock its power in return for Brock's life energy. But of course symbiotes from outer space cannot be trusted. Once the symbiote had inhabited Brock, it absorbed his life energy and morphed into the evil Venom.

Has something similar happened in American Christianity? Has a symbiote taken up residence without our knowledge? Yes, say Christian Smith and Melinda Denton, who are principal investigators for the National Study of Youth and Religion (a study of congregations in seven denominations). They're seeing an alternative faith in American teenagers, one that "feeds on and gradually co-opts if not devours" established religious traditions. This faith, called Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, "generally does not and cannot stand on its own," so its adherents are affiliated with traditional faith communities but unaware that they are practicing a very different faith than historic orthodox Christianity. If teenagers wrote out the creed of this religious outlook, it would look something like this:

- A god exists who created and orders the world and watches over life on earth.
- 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 of life is to be happy and feel good about yourself.
- God is not involved in my life except when I need God to solve a problem.
- Good people go to heaven when they die.

Smith and Denton claim that MTD is "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." This, they add, is a moral indictment not of American teenagers, but of American congregations. They go on to say:

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.

While Smith and Denton refrain from describing how this "colonization" affects other religious traditions, they are blunt about its influence on Christianity: "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."

In short, the study provides a window on how American young people have learned a well-intentioned but ultimately banal version of Christianity that's been offered to them in American churches. Most youth seem to accept this bland view of faith as all there is—as something nice to have, like a bank account, something you have in case you need to draw from it in the future. What Christian adults 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 and will emerge "when youth are ready" (a confidence we generally lack when it comes to, say, algebra). The result? Teenagers who don't have the soul strength necessary to recognize, wrestle with and resist the symbiotes in our midst—probably because we lack this 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 self-giving love—requires grace, not determination. It is in following Jesus that we learn to love him; it is in participating in the mission of God that God changes us into disciples. Whenever ministry settles for less, a church becomes vulnerable to symbiotes and risks "morphing" into a community that is almost—but

AUTHOR

Kenda Creasy Dean

Kenda Creasy Dean is associated with church and culture at Princeton Seminary.

MORE FROM THIS ISSUE

**Aug 10, 2010**

Vol. 127 No. 16

Kenda Creasy Dean and faith, John process though living with can

RELATED ARTICLES

What teens believe**Jesus isn't cool****After youth group****Slime-master****After teen suicides, gay or inward**

SUPPORT THE CHRISTIAN CI

The *Century's* work relies primarily on donations. Thank you for supporting our journalism.

[Subscribe](#)
[Donate](#)

You can also support us by shopping at IndieBound.

not quite—Christian.

Often adults in church bemoan the absence of teens in worship. But if churches practice MTD in the name of Christianity, then getting teenagers to come to church more often is not the solution (it could make things worse). The solution to MTD is not more faithful attendance, but a more faithful church. This means more than just hiring a youth minister, although a youth minister is an excellent place to begin. Since the study 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. Yes, some teenagers recognize God's presence in their lives even without the advantages of religious parents, active youth programs, attentive pastors or functional congregations. God finds a way. But American churches aren't offering much assistance, maybe because we are serving up MTD to teenagers in the name of Christianity and can no longer tell the difference.

Teens are left thinking only "nice" thoughts about their churches. They criticize the church in general, but few complain about their own churches. They may call people in other churches judgmental and hypocritical, but in their own congregations people are "nice." Few teenagers experience religion as a source of family conflict, but they do not view it as a source of identity either. Faith is not a boundary either to claim or repudiate. American teenagers, according to the NSYR, "tend to view religion as a Very Nice Thing"—meaning that religion may be beneficial, even pleasant, but does not ask much of them or even concern them greatly. As far as they can tell, it wields very little influence in their lives.

Despite all this "niceness," MTD's pleasantness is superficial, and it pales beside Christian teaching on hospitality and compassion. In Judeo-Christian teaching, God is far less concerned with religion than with identity and relationship: Do we know ourselves to belong to the One who made us, who loves us too much to lose us, and do we live as though this matters? The God of Abraham and Mary is personally and morally concerned about creation and desires—not just our obedience but our love. As we discover the God who came among us but who is also radically "other" than us, we learn that we are God's beloved, "other" than God and adored as such. For this reason Jews and Christians have always viewed faith as a way of life born out of love for God rather than as a set of religious propositions to which we subscribe.

In Chaucer's day the word *nice* meant ignorant or foolish, an etymology that cuts both ways for Christians. If we approach nice like Dr. Seuss's Thidwick (the big-hearted moose)—if the church accommodates all manner of sycophants without asserting its own identity because "a host above all must be nice to his guests"—then we inevitably become a haven for symbiotes who take up residence in our antlers. In this case, the church's accommodating impulse does not stem from God's call to us to share our lives with the stranger or to share God's love with others. Instead, it grows out of our need as a church to be liked and approved.

On the other hand, if we approach nice as the foolishness of the cross, then Chaucer's definition may suit us after all. Becoming "fools for the sake of Christ" (1 Cor. 4:10) requires an identity grounded in God's accommodation to human culture, not ours—namely, God's choice to become human in Jesus Christ. Foolish faith comes from the security of knowing that we live in God's embrace, and with that knowledge comes a peculiar kind of courage. Foolish faith flies in the face of the self-fulfilling norms of consumerism and addresses issues of identity and openness not by avoiding the cross, as MTD would have us do, but by clinging to it. As G. K. Chesterton pointed out, "A man who has faith must be prepared not only to be a martyr, but to be a fool." MTD prepares young people to be neither.

Catholic theologian Jean-Luc Marion says that "the ethic of giving" is the telltale sign that God's image is under construction in us. The evidence that God's image is being restored in individuals and in church is our giving—we give Christ, who established the church to bear his fruit in the world. We are flimsy boughs for such abundant fruit. Yet scripture repeatedly describes God's preferential option for the unlikely. God calls people not for what they have but for what they lack. Empty hands receive, empty wombs are filled, empty tombs proclaim resurrection—and the unformed selves of adolescents make room for Christ in ways that are difficult for adults' hardened, formed egos. God does not ask us to give ourselves to others. God asks us to give Christ—who transforms us, dwells within us and fills us with his self-giving love. "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me," says Paul (Gal. 2:20).

Churches in which young people exhibit highly devoted faith look and act differently than those colonized by MTD. Structurally, they are more likely to have full-time youth ministers, a variety of programs for teenagers and opportunities for youth to participate in religious practice and leadership. But the differences are theological as well. According to the Exemplary Youth Ministry study (a national study of congregations in seven denominations funded by the Lilly Foundation and completed in 2003), these congregations are also more likely to:

- portray God as living, present and active
- place a high value on scripture
- explain their church's mission, practices and relationships as inspired by "the life and mission of Jesus Christ"
- emphasize spiritual growth, discipleship and vocation
- promote outreach and mission
- help teens develop "a positive, hopeful spirit," "live out a life of service" and "live a Christian moral life"

These congregations view young people not as moralistic do-gooders but as Christ's representatives in the world. Teenagers in faith-supporting congregations do not describe God as a Pez dispenser that delivers good feelings on demand but as a "living and active presence" in their lives. Adults in these congregations till the soil for consequential faith in young people. Pastors and adult leaders model "the transforming presence of God in life and ministry," and parents engage "in conversations, prayer, Bible reading, and service that nurture faith and life." These congregations invite, cultivate and nurture faith that bears fruit, yielding new life in and beyond the church.

Young people will not develop consequential faith simply by being absorbed into a so-called Christian culture as an alternative to the culture at large; churches are quite capable of developing deformative cultures of their own, while washing down the gospel with large gulps of rationalization. Consequential faith is the result of *doing* ministry, and not simply being ministered to. Missionary historian Andrew Walls explains, "Christ sends his people as he was sent: to be the light to the world, to give healing and hope to the ill, the weak and the unwanted, to suffer, perhaps unjustly, on behalf of others." Faith so conceived turns a self-focused spirituality like MTD on its head.

In the end, the NSYR may simply demonstrate that young people are not the religious relativists we make them out to be. It may simply be that Christianity—or what passes for Christianity, as teenagers see us practice it—does not merit a primary commitment. It may be that the only time young people see churches point to Christ is when we raise the flag on Jesus to claim him for ourselves, like Antarctica for the queen. Teenagers are right to give little credence to such distortions of the gospel: whenever "Christianity" suggests that some people are more welcome before God than others, this pseudogospel must be rejected. The historic teachings of the church side with teenagers over and against the religious claims and practices of many American congregations. The particularity of Christ is exactly what prevents the church from being an exclusive club, and the life, death and resurrection of Christ is precisely the act of God that makes it possible for every human being to stand before God.

What can we learn from those faith communities in which young people consistently demonstrate consequential faith? First, we learn that it can be done. MTD does not colonize churches—people do. To a large extent, we can determine the degree to which our congregations choose to imitate Christ and participate in the divine ethic of giving, or practice a risk-averse gospel of self-fulfillment.

Second, religious formation is not an accident. Teenagers with high degrees of religious devotion did not get that way on their own; their faith is the legacy of communities that have invested time, energy and love in them, and where the religious faith of adults (especially parents) inspires the faith of their children.

Third, certain tools associated with consequential faith are available in every Christian faith community. Those that appeared regularly in the repertoires of highly devoted teenagers in the NSYR included a creed or a "peculiar God-story" that spoke to both God's personal and powerful nature, a deep sense of interpersonal and spiritual belonging to a faith community, and a divinely directed sense of purpose and hope.

Fourth, consequential faith has risks. The love of Christ is love that is worth dying for. Congregations are far more reluctant to ask this kind of faith of teenagers than teenagers are to respond to it. Churches help young people develop consequential faith best when they focus not on who they are—or on the theological brand they want young people to perpetuate—but by focusing on who Christ is calling young people to become as his envoys in the world.

Fifth, we are called to participate in the imagination of a sending God. A God-shaped imagination is bent on the redemption of the world and not just the church—which places self-serving spiritualities like MTD on notice. The single most important thing the church can do to cultivate missional imagination in young people is to develop one as a church, reclaiming our call to follow Christ into the world as envoys of God's self-giving love.

Earlier this year my telephone rang and Lizzie sang out a hello. Lizzie is on the leadership team for a large denominational youth conference in Montreat, North Carolina. She called to tell me that she had arrived and that the place was "awesome." Lizzie and I attend the same church, which is as full of MTD as any I know; yet at 16 Lizzie's faith has an intensity that lights her up from the inside, thanks to—well, to what, exactly? I got to eavesdrop on Lizzie's life briefly during the year I spent as her confirmation mentor. Without question, her faith is shaped by her devout family, by adults in our congregation who encourage her, by the deep investment of her youth pastor, and by unusually large doses of existential intelligence and reflexive skills that help Lizzie gravitate toward things of the spirit.

But I know dozens of teenagers with similar tools who do not have Lizzie's robust faith. Lizzie is on familiar terms with God (a name she uses more easily than "Jesus"). She adores her home congregation but prefers the galvanizing, pulsating energy of the Montreat youth conference as a way to experience the Holy Spirit. "Here I can *feel* God," Lizzie tells me. Her church's recognition of her creativity and leadership, combined with substantial opportunities to use both, have forged in Lizzie a powerful sense of call. She believes that her life has a purpose, and a divinely created one at that. This purposefulness gives her hope; she believes that God will use her for something good—"to change the world," as she puts it—and in doing so she is certain that she is following Christ, helping to bring God's will to fruition.

A creed, a community, a call, a hope—all cast in a particular story through which Jesus confronts Lizzie at home and at school and sends her out to love the world on his behalf.

What I get to do—and I get to do this for a living, which after all these years still humbles and astonishes me—is to walk young people like Lizzie into God’s plans for them. My role in their faith journeys is embarrassingly small: naming a God sighting, inviting them to pray or serve. Mostly what I do is show up and get to know them, and respond to them as the incredible creatures God made them to be, while trying to be a faithful Christian adult alongside them.

As a Christian adult, I have an advantage that Lizzie doesn’t have: mileage. I know she is more than the scripts that society has given her. I know God has made her to be more than a consumer, more than an airbrushed image in an ad, more than a victim of her economic or family circumstances, more than an applicant to the college of her choice. What Christian adults know that teenagers are still discovering is that every one of them is an amazing child of God. Their humanity is embedded in their souls as well as their DNA. Their family is the church, their vocation is a grateful response for the chance to participate in the divine plan of salvation, their hope lies in the fact Christ has claimed them and secured the future for them. If we, the church, lived alongside young people as though this were true—if we lived alongside anybody as though this were true—we would be the community that Christ calls us to be.

*This article is based on Kenda Creasy Dean’s new book, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church*, published by Oxford University Press; used by permission of the publisher*

Join the Conversation

COMMENTS

Letter from Michael McBride

Posted by Letters to CC on Sep 29, 2010 - 04:41 pm.

I agree with Kenda Creasy Dean that today’s youth are often fed a diet of “gospel lite” (“Faith, nice and easy,” Aug. 10). But her offered solution is not the real solution.

What is missing from bland, nice Christianity is not service (the youth I am around are very service-minded) or a better understanding of the “otherness” of a holy God, although that is getting closer to the truth. What is missing is the very heart of the gospel: that all humans fall short and thus are in need of a Savior— that all of us are sinners, destined to a literal hell if we do not accept Jesus’ death as the propitiation for our sins.

Dean notes that the unstated creed of teenagers is less than fully Christian. What is needed is one of the church’s three historic creeds. The Apostle’s Creed, for example, has long been used by Christians as a concise statement of belief. Let’s simply believe and teach that. Then we can show our belief in this Holy God in our lives, safe in the knowledge that, as believers of the historical tenets of the Christian faith, our account is paid in full by what Jesus accomplished on the cross, not by anything we could ever accomplish on our own. That is the true life-changing and life-saving message of the gospel— truly good news and worthy of being taught to and lived out by people of all ages.

Michael McBride
Fort Worth, Tex.

Letter from L. D. Spears

Posted by Letters to CC on Sep 29, 2010 - 04:41 pm.

Dean sees teenagers as empty rather than half-full of religious maturity. Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is a clever and catchy term, but to describe teens’ faith with that term dismisses the significant growth of teens in personal morality and self-image and does a disservice to teens and their mentors.

The normal and healthy condition of teens is to be half-full. The fact that they are not yet fully adult should not be marked as a criticism of them or their mentors. Rather than criticize their religious communities, we should celebrate teens’ progress on their path toward maturity within their communities.

L. D. Spears
Bismarck, N.D.

Letter from Claralice Wolf

Posted by Letters to CC on Sep 29, 2010 - 04:42 pm.

We could all tell stories of what our religion (or no religion) was like when we were young and of the journeys we’ve been on in the Christian life. I grew up in a very orthodox and conservative family, devoted to saving people who had never heard of Jesus. Early in life, the creed I would have written for my concept of Christianity would have looked like this: “God is our Creator and demands certain behavior and beliefs. If we don’t please him, he will zap us. Good people go to heaven, bad people go to hell. Those who don’t believe the right things are bad. The Bible is God’s Word, and every word is to be believed.

The central goal of life is to believe the truths taught me, to memorize verses, to obey my parents, to tell the truth and to be polite to all people according to their customs. Jesus loves everyone, maybe especially children. He taught us how to treat each other."

In my teens, I learned more about God and I began to relate to Jesus more personally, but God was still the zapper.

It was many years before I began to recognize the God that Jesus taught about. Next I began to want to have a relationship with that God. Now I have it, a daily Presence and Conversationalist. Jesus is still a close friend and teacher.

The journey is not over. I'm 89, and my church is still helping me to grow in understanding. And I see our youth pouring their energies into doing things for God and people, into studying and learning. I marvel that they have so much time while they are still in school.

So I'm not worried about today's young people. They are still at the beginning of the journey. The culture is always changing and has been since the day of Jesus' resurrection, and it will change some more before I die. God will still be here accompanying us on our journeys.

Claralice Wolf
Bluffton, Ohio

Kenda Creasy Dean replies:

Posted by Letters to CC on Sep 29, 2010 - 04:47 pm.

I want to clarify that the term Moralistic Therapeutic Deism was coined by Christian Smith to describe the dominant pattern of teenage religiosity evident in interviews with more than 3,300 American teenagers as part of the 2005 National Study of Youth and Religion. I was one of the researchers in the NSYR, but my work probes the study's theological as well as sociological significance for churches.

Two other points: First, helping teens to develop a missional imagination goes beyond teaching them compassion. Missional churches believe that Christ calls churches to exist for the world and not just for ourselves. The pervasiveness of self-serving spiritualities like Moralistic Therapeutic Deism suggests that this view is not prominent.

Second, I would regret very much being seen as pessimistic about American teenagers. While I was frequently disappointed by what churches seemed to be teaching teenagers, the teenagers themselves consistently gave me hope. Sometimes that was because vital faith was evident-- in spite of what the research was finding. But I even came to see the role of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism as a backward kind of good news for the church. Teenagers tended to confuse this bland, watered-down spirituality with Christian teaching, but otherwise they didn't give it much thought. I came to think of these teenagers as refreshingly honest. Instead of perpetuating MTD, they accorded it exactly the amount of attention it deserved: not much.

© 2010. All rights reserved.