Christian Smith on the National Study of Youth and Religion

By Tracy Schier

(This is the second of three interviews with researchers who have looked at issues concerning youth and church involvement. The first interview was with Carol Lytch. The third is with Brad Christerson.)

Christian Smith is the William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Sociology and Director, Center for the Study of Religion at the University of Notre Dame. Formerly the Stuart Chapin Distinguished Professor of Sociology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, Smith has authored and co-authored numerous books. His most recent work (with Melinda Lundquist Denton) is Soul Searching: the Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers (Oxford University Press, 2005). This book reports the findings from National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), the largest and most comprehensive study of teenage religion and spirituality conducted thus far. Through phone surveys and in-depth face-to-face interviews, the study captured a broad range of U.S. teens, keeping in mind differences in religion, age, race, sex, socioeconomic status, rural-suburban-urban residence, region and language. The study addressed all of the major American religious traditions and two minority ones, Mormonism and Judaism. This major work, Smith’s most recent, follows his well-received American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving and Christian America? What Evangelicals Really Want. Other books include: Moral Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture; and (with Michael O. Emerson) Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America, among others.

This conversation focuses on the NYSR work and is edited.

Q. Your research and resulting book were a response to the widespread neglect of adolescents’ religious and spiritual lives. Why
do you think this important aspect of teens’ lives has been so ignored?

A. There are multiple factors, but I can say that the situation is changing. Up to the present, the influence of secularization in academia played a big part. There was an attitude on the part of many researchers that there is no point in studying something that is dying. As we know, academics disproportionately are not religious. Also, within the field of Sociology of Religion, adolescents are considered to be of lower status for serious study and thus the bulk of studies have been of organizations and institutions and movements that are considered more important. I don’t think there was intentional exclusion of adolescents, but with the prevailing attitudes among researchers, teenagers often just fell through the cracks.

Q. You acknowledge that, religiously, American teens are “all over the map.” However, have you found that there are any religious traits that are more universally held than others?

A. I would call these aspects rather than traits. One is that there is a benign positive attitude generally held by teens toward religion in general, very little sense of antagonism toward religion. Also, very many teens pray—although we would qualify that with a “now and then.” Third, there is what we call “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” shared by very many teens, a kind of de facto outlook that cuts across all religions. I can talk about that later on. Further, among teens we found that inarticulacy about religion is widespread. Many of them simply cannot talk about what they believe or what is distinctive about it or what difference it makes in their life. However, we did find teens who could talk articulately. They are the ones who have been intentionally and consistently communicated with by the adult world on matters of faith. I view this inarticulacy as a socialization thing, not a developmental thing just because teens are young. Even young teens can be articulate when they have been engaged and socialized and educated well.

Q. You found that, contrary to popular belief, most American teens are not “seekers” or “questers.” Why do you think this misperception is so widespread?

A. It could be that seeking is more prevalent among youth in their 20s, among older youth. People may make the mistake of projecting that back on younger teens, who for the most part go along with their parents’ religious traditions and beliefs. A lot of the “quest” talk comes out of the media and I believe that members of the media are into questing themselves, more than the typical person, and they project this out of their own experience. It resonates with where they would like to see things going, and frankly, it makes for a more interesting story to say that people are questing than that people are
doing the same old established religion. Films do this also. I also think this could be a generational difference. The baby boomers who now are authorities in the knowledge class were more likely to be seekers. But that generational wave is past and they may be projecting their experience upon the younger generation.

**Q. What are some findings in the NYSR study that shattered your own preconceived notions?**

**A.** For one thing, I started off with the widespread assumption that teens are rebellious. Granted they can be difficult, and I am sensitive to parents saying that their kids are giving them a hard time. But generally, we did not find teens to be rebellious. A variation on that theme is that I came into this work thinking that most teens would be hostile to church. We found that they are not, that they are generally benignly positive about religion, and that they think it is a good thing, a nice and positive thing.

I also bought into the stereotype that teens are fundamentally different from adults, that they are like a tribe apart or aliens that cannot be understood. This is the common stereotype and so I was surprised to find that this is simply not true. It sounds trite to say this, but teens are basically human beings who want the same things that adults want: recognition, love, security and so on. I think this stereotype is a hangover from the “generation gap” talk of the 1960s, an inappropriate application of something from another era. And of course, parents do have anxiety about their teens, and there is enough difference for parents to have their anxiety reinforced. I found that there is a huge structural disconnect when it comes to social interaction between teens and adults. There are very few opportunities for teens and adults to share ideas and have real conversations. I went into the study thinking that parents become less influential as teen peers take over. But this is false. Psychologists have been telling us for fifteen years that the “storm and stress” model doesn’t hold, generally. Parents have been sold a destructive mythology about their teens, and they need to realize how important they still are in their teenager’s lives and how much their teens do look to them and value their opinions. We also need to recognize that much of 20th century knowledge about teens came from therapists who were working with a small percentage of youth who were especially troubled. But they were not representative of the typical. It is true that a lot of teens are hurting, but so are a lot of adults. What’s most important is for teens to be connected to adults; that’s what they need, not separation.

**Q. What would you say to parents that would help them understand the importance of their role in shaping their teens’ lives?**

**A.** I would say that, when you are in the thick of it, it is easy to lose perspective. However, it is perfectly clear to us who approach this as scholars that most parents still have a strong influence over their teens, for better or worse. I would say to a parent that what you do, what choices you make, do matter to your teen. What you say...
matters to your teen and time will show that this is true. I would give a helpful reminder to parents that there are lots of pressures for them to focus on their teens’ behaviors and to keep behavioral outcomes in mind. This is very important. But I want to add that what is even more important than this stress on behaviors is the quality of the relationship between parents and teens. To put this in religious language, what is important is what is going on in their hearts. Kids need to know that their parents really care about what they are dealing with in terms of thinking, desires, and emotions at a deeper level. Not just their external behaviors. Parents who understand this and who can communicate with their teens at such a level can be a very positive force in their children’s lives, even as they get older.

Q. You find that U.S. youth religiousness seems related to a positive propensity toward broader social involvement. What are the implications of that for churches, teachers, and parents who want to encourage religiousness?

A. Social involvements hang together and work together. They are not competing. People who are involved in many things tend to be involved in religion too. We found that with the most religiously engaged teens, the religious dimension of their lives has connections with other parts of their social lives. These teens have overlapping networks of involvements—sports, school, volunteer activities, and church. What this means is that their religious life or church life is not an isolated satellite. All of the aspects of their lives work together and these teens are stronger in their life of faith. Adults in youth ministry should not see other “secular” activities as necessarily a threat to their church involvement. Negatively, those teens who are disconnected from anything religious also tend to be disconnected from other activities as well.

Q. If you could make suggestions to someone aspiring to be a youth minister, what would those be?

A. First, be prepared to stick with this for a long time and don’t see it as a stepping stone to other ministries. There is way too much turnover among youth ministers which is bad for teens. The better the youth minister is, the harder it is when they leave a year or two later. Then, make sure the congregation leadership is on board with the youth ministry vision and mission. Sometimes youth ministers see themselves as working against the pastor and parents—but youth ministry must be an integral part of the whole congregation. And further, the youth minister must focus on spending time building relationships and not just presenting teens with a lot of fun programs. Teens need mature people in leadership who know and invest in them. Youth ministers need to get a lot of other mature adults involved also—the youth ministry cannot be just a satellite program run by an isolated “camp counselor” model of youth leader. Remember what I said before about teens really needing adults who are willing to invest time in conversation and in understanding their concerns and ideas.
Q. Can you tell if seminaries are picking up on your work and using it?

A. The large issue here is that models of ministry for youth increasingly seem to be problematic. The more we learn about it, the more we see that youth ministry needs to be seen in organic, holistic, family-based terms. The standard seminary education program is structured in compartmentalized ways—even when a seminary invests in youth ministry, it is often as a separate track, a specialization, not part and parcel of church ministry.

Q. Did you pick up on any “best practices” on the part of congregations—practices that were successful in attracting and retaining teens in their programming?

A. We did not study congregations directly, but we did learn that youth ministry must work with parents and not against them. And we learned that youth ministry based on a lot of adult-teen relationships as opposed to a satellite program as I said before will be more successful. Having a paid youth minister does make a real difference in a congregation. The leadership of the congregation must be intentional and purposeful about engaging teens, it has to be a priority.

Q. When you explained teen inarticulacy about religious matters you say you had the distinct sense that for many your interviews were the first time that an adult had ever asked them about what they believe and how it matters in their lives.

A. That is right—mature adults in a congregation and in youth ministry have the responsibility to realize the need of making intentional efforts at engaging teens. The teens are not going to take the first steps. But they will usually respond because they, like adults, have basic elemental human relationship needs.

Q. I would like to get back to your summation of teen religious faith and practice as “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.” Can you just delineate the main points of this for our readers?

A. Essentially there are five points. The first is that the teens believe God exists. And they believe God wants people to be nice and fair to one another. They also believe that the purpose of life is to be fulfilled and happy. At the same time they think that God doesn’t need to be actively involved in their lives unless they are in trouble. And finally, they believe that good people go to heaven. Those are the basics of Moralistic
Therapeutic Deism and they are widely held among teens in the U.S. It is not the worst religion one could imagine, by any means, but suffice it to say that it is not historically orthodox Christianity.

Q. In all that you have learned about U.S. teens, can you say that you find any signs of hope?

A. What we learned that gives us hope is that improving things isn’t impossible, it is not rocket science. It mostly boils down to relationships, caring, talking with teens, making time for them. These things can make huge differences and any mature adult can do this. Interestingly, when we interview teens one of the first things we talk about is family. We ask them what about their family they would change if they could. And one of the most common answers is, “I wish I was closer to my parents.” That tells us something important. Another hopeful sign is that there is a national discussion now going on across denominations about rethinking the standard model of youth ministry and youth programming. While this beginning conversation doesn’t guarantee solutions it is at least a beginning and that is hopeful. Constructive changes seem to be in the works.

Q. Youth ministers have typically short tenure in their positions—do you have suggestions to help them stay the course?

A. It has to be the congregation that makes it important. The congregation has to say this is a real priority and respected enough to pay for it. Youth ministry cannot be done on the cheap. I know that there are youth ministers who are passionate about their work but cannot live and support a family on a small salary. So a lot of it is about resources. But also, there needs to be recognition that youth ministry is a valid ministry in and of itself—that it is not just a stepping stone to other, “more important” ministries. Also, there needs to be a mentality change that a youth minister has to be in his early twenties with an earring and scruffy face who plays guitar to be “able to relate” to youth. Some of the finest and most successful youth ministers don’t fit that stereotype at all. Also, parents need to be willing to pay for good youth ministry. Parents spend tons of money on sports and camps and other activities—there is need for a real mental shift here if they care about the faith lives of their children. Perhaps ultimately the best thing churches can do for the faith lives of teens is to strengthen the faith lives of parents.

Q. Your work should be a catalyst for further study and understanding of American youth and their religious/spiritual lives. What areas of potential research are really urgent?

A. There is need to track students as they get older. We need to have a long-term look at how teens mature or don’t mature in their faith as they arrive in their twenties.
We could use more ethnographies like Carol Lytch’s study that resulted in her book, *Choosing Church: What Makes a Difference for Teens?* If I can be a bit more abstract, for the future I see that parents and faith communities need to look at the future and try to ascertain what success with teens would look like. What is the goal, actually? What does doing it well look like? And this raises key questions about adults’ own religious lives.

**Q. I think our readers will be interested in what you plan to do to continue this important work—are more books coming, more research, what?**

**A.** Lilly Endowment has just approved a grant to fund a third wave of NSYR data collection among our respondents who will soon be 18 years old and older. That will keep us busy for some more years tracking and surveying youth as they develop into emerging adulthood. Those results are going to be fascinating and potentially very important, I think. We are also working now on a second book based on our second wave of data. And our students are working on a lot of other articles and dissertations and reports from NSYR that will help to better understand the religious lives of youth. So, there is a lot more great stuff yet to come where *Soul Searching* came from. Stay tuned.