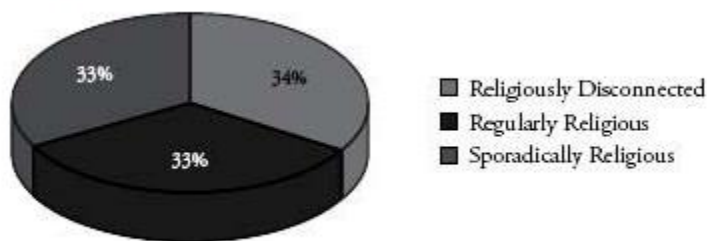


The following is quoted from the forward to the book, Think Christianly, by Jonathan Morrow

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“THE RELIGIOUS LIVES OF AMERICAN TEENAGERS

There are approximately 33 million teenagers in America today. In 2005, the National Study of Youth and Religion undertook the largest and most detailed study of teenagers and religion that has ever been done. The findings of this study were published in *Soul Searching* by Christian Smith and Melinda Denton. Basically, American teenagers break out into thirds: 33 percent are regularly religious, another 33 percent are sporadically religious, and the final 34 percent are religiously disconnected. The spectrum of religions covered the whole gamut.



Researchers found that students were remarkably inarticulate about their faith. They could talk with precision and detail about pop culture, social media, and other topics, but when it came to talking about the basic tenets of their faith — what they actually believed — they were not able to say much at all.

One theme, however, did emerge with great clarity. The dominant religion of today’s American teenager is Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD), a concept developed by Smith and Denton. Not Protestantism, Catholicism, Islam, Judaism, or Buddhism. Regardless of their professed religion, here is what God looks like to the majority of American teenagers (and again this sample includes those in conservative Protestant and evangelical churches): 5

- A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human 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 to feel good about oneself.
- God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life, except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
- Good people go to heaven when they die.

God is sort of a nebulous combination of divine butler and cosmic therapist. Smith summarized the approach to life that flows out of this belief system as “be nice and call on God if you need him.” 6 It

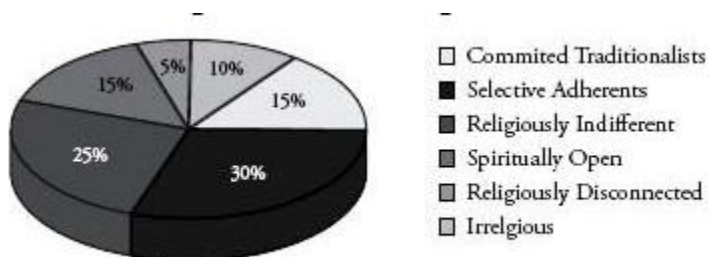
should go without saying that it is impossible to navigate the pressures and challenges of adolescent or adult life with such a feeble worldview. More importantly, this is hardly the vision for life that Jesus offers his would-be followers.

And then there is the growing trend that teenagers seem to be graduating from God. A good number of high school students either will walk away from their Christian faith after high school or simply drift away from a faith they had never actually embraced to begin with. 7 The reasons are always complex and person-specific, but two prominent factors emerge from the research. First, as Chap Clark has documented in *Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers*, teenagers are relationally hurting and disconnected . They experience isolation and are often quarantined from the adult relationships they so desperately need (his term is "systemic abandonment"). Second, teenagers have not been grounded in a robust Christian worldview and taught how to think and arrive at truth. They are also not being given safe opportunities to doubt and honestly explore why they believe what they believe. Smith and Denton document that 32 percent of the teenagers who walked away from God did so because of intellectual skepticism . 8 " University -level questions" are puncturing their "Sunday school-level faith." 9 We will explore how we can reverse this trend in chapter 3.

THE CONFUSING WORLD OF EMERGING ADULTS

Given the rapid changes in the landscape of American industry and life, a new social category now exists: "emerging adults." Just as adolescence came on the scene with modernization and the industrial revolution, so this group of eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds is caught in a world of perpetual change. Along with more time for education, better technology, the explosion of social media, and experimentation with various jobs, emerging adults are waiting longer to settle down, get married, have kids, and figure out what they want their lives to really be about and who they want to be when they grow up.

In *Souls in Transition*, Christian Smith applied to the religious lives of this group the same rigorous sociological analysis found in *Soul Searching*. Here is how emerging adults break out into general categories:



- 15 percent are what Smith calls committed traditionalists, those emerging adults who have a strong religious faith that they actively practice and for which they can articulate core beliefs.
- 30 percent are selective adherents, those who pick and choose when it comes to certain aspects of their faith.

- 25 percent are religiously indifferent, neither practicing nor opposing religion.
- 15 percent are spiritually open and have at least a mild interest in religious matters.
- 5 percent, the religiously disconnected, aren't really exposed to or connected with religious people, ideas, or organizations.
- 10 percent are irreligious, those who are skeptical and critical of religion and who reject and argue against personal faith. 10

Five years after the Soul Searching study, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is alive and well among emerging adults. Admittedly, there are some differences manifested in increasing diversity of personal expressions, and the irreligious have become more outspoken with age, but the basic vague contours of their worldview — developed as teenagers — still persist. 11 Moreover, a Barna study determined that “young adults rarely possess a biblical worldview” and that “less than one-half of one percent of adults in the Mosaic generation — that is, those aged 18 to 23 — have a biblical worldview.” 12 Just let the implications of that percentage sink in for a minute.

The Barna Group's assessment is consistent with and corroborated by the conclusions of Christian Smith. Take note of his sobering and heartbreaking conclusion: Very many emerging adults simply don't know how to think about things, what is right, what is deserving for them to devote their lives to. On such matters, they are often simply paralyzed, wishing they could be more definite, wanting to move forward, but simply not knowing how they might possibly know anything worthy of conviction and dedication. Instead, very many emerging adults exist in a state of basic indecision, confusion, and fuzziness. The world they have inherited, as best they can make sense of it, has told them that real knowledge is impossible and genuine values are illusions. 13

A twin riptide of skepticism and relativism exists in American society today that is very difficult to break free from, and many young people have exhausted themselves trying to — usually standing alone. On a personal note, these aren't just statistics to me. Right now, I can picture the face of one emerging adult I know who is on the verge of walking away from God — and everything and everyone he has known and loved — because he no longer believes.

THE CONSUMER-DRIVEN WORLD OF ADULTS

Before we are too hard on the teenagers and emerging adults, we need to take a long, hard look in the mirror. Researchers are concluding that the next generation becomes what we are. “In most cases teenage religion and spirituality in the United States are much better understood as largely reflecting the world of adult religion, especially parental religion, and are in strong continuity with it.” 14

The simple fact is that core Christian beliefs, that is, a biblical worldview, are not guiding the vast majority of adult Christians. The numbers have not changed over the past thirteen years (for example, four national surveys in 1995, 2000, 2005, 2009). Only 9 percent of all American adults have a biblical worldview. And to be honest, these next six statements, which define a “biblical worldview,” are a thin substitute for the robustness of historic Christianity. ... “

So where on earth, you ask, would teenagers and emerging adults get the idea that God is a cosmic butler and therapist? Well, when we look closely at how approximately 150 million adult “casual Christians” are approaching life, the answer emerges: Because they are actively seeking a pleasant and comfortable life, they concentrate on those elements of the Christian faith that fit within those parameters. Rather than allowing the Christian faith to shape their minds and hearts, they have chosen to fit Christianity within the box they have created for it. The outcome is a warm, fuzzy feeling about their faith of choice because it has been redefined according to their desires. 16 ... “

“Perhaps churches need to hit Reset and start at the beginning: What do Christians believe? Why do they believe it? Why does it matter?”

“In her outstanding book, Total Truth, Nancy Pearcey makes this penetrating observation:

Our lives are often fractured and fragmented, with our faith firmly locked into the private realm of the church and family, where it rarely has a chance to inform our life and work in the public realm. The aura of worship dissipates after Sunday, and we unconsciously absorb secular attitudes the rest of the week. We inhabit two separate “worlds,” navigating a sharp divide between our religious life and ordinary life.” 21

A church of “Sunday morning only” Christians will not have the influence that we are called to have and our world desperately needs.”

“RESOURCES FOR ENGAGING YOUR INTERSECTION ...

1. Soul Searching : The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers by Christian Smith with Melinda Denton
2. Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults by Christian Smith with Patricia Snell
3. Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young Adults Are Leaving the Faith ... and How to Bring Them Back by Drew Dyck
4. unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity— and Why It Matters by David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons
5. American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us by Robert Putnam and David Campbell
6. Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity by Nancy Pearcey ...
7. www.youthandreligion.org —National Study for Youth and Religion
8. www.pewforum.org —The Pew Forum for Religion and Public Life
9. www.barna.org —Barna Group
10. www.edstetzer.com —LifeWay Research Blog
11. *Soul Searching*, DVD
12. *They Like Jesus But Not the Church*, DVD”

Morrow, Jonathan (2011-11-01). *Think Christianly: Looking at the Intersection of Faith and Culture* (Kindle Locations 350-366). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.