

## Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

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When people jettison faith in the Biblical God, they will replace Him with something else. Our modern culture has evolved its own substitute religion.

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*“In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judg. 21:25).*

*“Through deceit they refuse to know Me” (Jer. 9:6).*



Have you ever wondered what kind of religious beliefs are embraced by today’s young Americans?

Sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton wondered about that too, so they conducted surveys and interviews with thousands of teenagers to find out. The results of their research were published in their 2005 book, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. They summarized the prevailing belief system of young Americans with the label “moralistic therapeutic deism.” The term has been adopted by other scholars, who see it as an accurate description of the spirituality of a major segment of our population, not just the young.

The label captures three key components in this system of belief. “Deism” is simply “belief in a deity.” This deity may or may not be the God of the Bible—or of any other major religion. The details of this deity’s character are vague and subject to interpretation by each individual. It merely acknowledges the existence of an all-seeing Higher Power “out there” in another realm.

“Moralistic” suggests that this deity prefers that humans possess some kind of moral vision. Here, too, the details are sketchy and prone to personal definition. Usually “moralistic” means little more than “be nice to others.” The fuzziness of this moral outlook leaves plenty of wiggle room for a variety of personal choices.

Finally, “therapeutic” highlights the practical purpose of this belief structure: it makes us feel better. It affirms our personal choices and feeds our self-esteem. All that really matters is that we are happy and contented in life, and this spiritual perspective delivers. What more do we need in life?

The attraction of this worldview is not hard to understand. It requires very little in the way of intellectual effort or personal integrity. It is easily adaptable to almost any lifestyle I choose to embrace. It borrows just enough theology from traditional religion to “feel” right, but not enough to challenge my comfort zone. It is the ultimate cafeteria-style religion, the ideal refuge for a post-modern generation that recognizes no absolute Truth.

And therein lies the fatal flaw in this approach to spirituality. By leaving most of the details up to one’s own interpretation and application, moralistic therapeutic deism elevates the god of Self above an external standard. I decide what is right or wrong for me, and my nebulous, vaguely defined deity nods approvingly in the background.

But this dubious spiritualism has implications across the social landscape. As more and more people adopt this approach to ethical decision-making, the differences among us become more difficult to adjudicate. How can we determine right and wrong, when everyone operates on their own personal definition? The result is chaos and conflict, and governance eventually devolves upon whoever gains the power to impose their will on everyone else.

The Judeo-Christian God of the Bible is a complex entity whose involvement in history can be difficult to sort out. But if history teaches us anything, it reveals that humans are incapable of guiding their own steps apart from His direction. We need an objective, external standard to illuminate our path, and God’s word has proven to be the most reliable source of that guidance. It is only in pursuing a deeper understanding of the Bible that we can know a God who whose counsel will save us from ourselves.

— David King