

National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR)

Method: Phone survey with teens (13-17) & parents (N = 3290) and in-person interviews with teens (N = 267)

Most teens are Christians. Protestant (52%), Catholic (23%), Mormon (2.5%), Jewish (1.5%). Not religious (16%). Two different faiths (2.8%).

Most have similar beliefs (and importance of beliefs) as parents. Very similar to mother's beliefs (41%), somewhat similar (37%). Parents are the most important influence on adolescent religious beliefs.

Almost half report regularly attending religious services. More than once a week (17%), once a week (24%).

Most report that religion is important in shaping daily life. Extremely important (20%), very important (31%), somewhat important (31%).

Most teens believe in God (84%), view God as “a personal being involved in the lives of people today” (65%), and believe in “a judgment day when God will reward some and punish others” (71%).

Many teens have had religious experiences. Made “personal commitment to live life for God” (55%), had “experience of spiritual worship that was very moving and powerful” (51%), “experienced a definite answer to prayer or specific guidance from God” (50%), witnessed or experienced “miracle from God” (46%).

Most teens have been involved in a religious youth group. (69% ever, 38% currently).

Most teens “espouse rather inclusive, pluralistic, and individualistic views about religious truth”: 60% say that “many religions may be true.”

However, teen religiosity is conventional: Few are exploring options outside their own (“seekers”) and few consider themselves “spiritual but not religious.”

Most “nonreligious” teens aren't antagonistic toward religion: 16% total (atheist, 1.4%; agnostic, 1.4%; just not religious 9.6%). 52% of nonreligious believe in God.

God, Religion, Whatever (Smith, chapter 4)

Teen religiosity is “exceedingly conventional” and a source of little conflict with parents

Teens view religion positively

However, religion operates “in the background”

“We suggest that there seems to be among many or even most teenagers a lot more unfocused, “invisible” religiosity than focused, “intentional” religiosity at work in their actual lives. As such, teenagers’ responses and reactions to many of our questions and issues regarding religion often seemed quite tepid, not particularly energized or animated or engaged.” (p. 130)

Most teenagers are “incredibly inarticulate about their faith, their religious beliefs and practices, and its meaning or place in their lives.”

Many teens are worried about appearing “too religious”

Teens believe that “everyone decides for themselves”

Teens are “nearly without exception profoundly individualistic, instinctively presuming autonomous, individual self-direction to be a universal human norm and life goal.”

Religious is assumed to be an individual choice (concepts of “commitment, duty, faithfulness, obedience, calling” etc. are absent).

Since teens don’t believe anything should influence them, they view religious as “something one chooses to ‘use’ ... not something to which one devotes oneself or gives away one’s life.”

Teens don’t believe in judging other people’s beliefs

Teens have an “instrumental view of religion”: religion helps them feel happy. It helps people be good, but isn’t necessary, since right and wrong are “common sense,” not requiring “much thought or discernment.”

Teens don’t live in a “morally significant universe”: they don’t live “within a larger, morally meaningful order that provides significant direction and purpose to one’s thoughts, feelings, and actions.”

Teens are shaped by cultural scripts about “age-appropriate” religion and expectations of civility and pluralism.

“Moralistic therapeutic deism” is the de facto religion of American teenagers

1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.

MTD is “colonizing” many religious traditions and congregations”

Few teenagers are learning the “traditional substantive content and character” of their own religious traditions.

“It is not so much that U.S. Christianity is being secularized. Rather, more subtly, Christianity is either degenerating into a pathetic version of itself or, more significantly, Christianity is actively being colonized by a quite different religious faith.”