

This is a book which is vast in scope, potentially very influential in its conclusions and yet lacking in nuance and apparently overlooking theoretical possibilities. The book is based on data gathered from the National Survey of Youth and Religion, a nationally representative study of American teenagers, aged 13 to 17, and their parents which included 3370 telephone interviews which were followed up with 267 in-depth personal interviews from amongst those that had completed the telephone survey. The study would have been further enhanced by participant observation of teenagers either in religious or secular situations such as teenagers' churches, schools, homes and formal and informal social activities.

Smith and Denton's findings may surprise those who think that teenagers have dropped out of religion or those that have not are diverse and unconventional in their beliefs and that many teenagers are engaged in religious or spiritual seeking or use practices from faiths other than the one they were raised in. The results of their study show that religion is a significant presence in the lives of American teenagers and many remain active participants in their families' faith communities. A large minority of teenagers (40 per cent) practice their religious faith weekly or more often and the vast majority (84 per cent) are theists. American teenage religiosity is extraordinarily conventional and very few (about 3 per cent) under the age of 18 are perusing 'spiritual not religious' personal quests; most haven't encountered the concept of 'spiritual not religious' and don't know what it means. Although they grant others the right

to explore and practice multiple religions, they are not interested in doing this themselves. American teenagers are not religiously diverse; the majority identify as Christian, and non-Christians identify mostly as non-religious, Jewish or Mormon. Teenagers are not religious rebels; the single most important social influence on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents is parents. Relatively few American teenagers reflect a religion that is centrally important in shaping their lives but religion does seem to make a significant difference in the lives of teenagers and there are significant differences in the outcomes between highly religious and non-religious teenagers, and religiously active teens fare better than religiously disengaged teens.

Smith and Denton describe adolescent religion as 'Moralistic Therapeutic Deism' (MTD) which they summarise (p. 162) as being about inculcating a moralistic approach to life; central to living a good and happy life is being a good and moral person. Being moral in MTD means being the kind of person other people will like (p. 163). MTD is also about providing therapeutic benefits for its adherents, about attaining subjective well-being. The God of MTD created the world and defines our general moral order but is not particularly present, except in times of need. He is a combination of divine butler and cosmic therapist (p. 164). Smith and Denton argue that MTD is 'colonizing many established religious traditions and congregations in the US' (p. 164). MTD is, according to Smith and Denton, the faith of therapeutic individualism. It is the result of the definition of the individual self as the source and standard of authentic moral knowledge and authority (p. 173), of an individualistic culture where moral decision-making is self-referencing and individual subjective feeling establishes for individuals what is right and wrong (p. 173), and of growing cultural pluralism (p. 174). Therapeutic individualism is, they argue, a reaction against an alienating public sphere which simultaneously fulfils the needs and interests of the US mass-consumer capitalist economy. In therapeutic individualism, 'individual self-fulfilment is the preoccupying purpose of life' (p. 173). However this is not a modern phenomenon in American culture, given that the Declaration of Independence signed in 1776 accords individuals the rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Smith and Denton argue that therapeutic individualism is the collective cultural product of a historical complex of social and institutional forces that generated and sustained its ethos. Given this it is surprising that Smith and Denton are so quick to dismiss the idea that MTD represents a secularisation of American Christianity but instead operates as a 'parasitic faith' (p. 166). They argue that American Christianity is either 'degenerating into a pathetic version of itself or, more significantly, Christianity is actively being colonised and displaced by a quite different faith'. Smith and Denton highlight the influence on therapeutic individualism and, in turn on MTD, of the 'most sacred of all American values' (p. 189), the inviolability of the individual, a value that they state is derived from liberal individualism and a distrust of institutions of authority. Simultaneously they ignore the pervasive influence of Christianity on the American psyche, rooted in the belief of the Pilgrim founders that the community they created in America was, they believed, specially ordained by God to 'be as a city upon a hill' (http://www.winthropsociety.org/doc_charity.php, accessed 30 September 2006), mirroring the Sermon on the Mount and significantly re-emphasised by President Reagan in 1988 as 'a tall proud city built on rocks

stronger than oceans, wind-swept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace' (<http://www.reaganfoundation.org/reagan/speeches/farewell.asp>, accessed 1 October 2006).

Smith and Denton argue that therapeutic individualism has social and institutional sources and simultaneously attempt to argue that the faith that results from this is not the result of a process of secularisation. They seem to ignore issues of American particularity, including the ongoing influence of religious institutions of social life, politics and education, and the possibility that the process of secularisation that is taking place there is different from that in other countries.

Smith and Denton deny that American teenagers are spiritual seekers who mix elements and practices of other faiths with their own, yet argue that adherents of MTD 'get to enjoy whatever particulars of their own faith...that appeal to them, whilst also reaping the benefits of the shared, harmonising interfaith religion' (p. 166). This seems to suggest that there is a 'supermarket spirituality', where faiths respond to market forces. Indeed Smith and Denton argue that 'youth may demand religious expressions and experiences that resonate with the symbols, images, language and practices of popular youth culture' (p. 186) and that 'this may in turn shape the religious programming that religious institutions offer to youth altering the texture of the religious tradition itself' (p. 186). However, they do not consider that it may be religious institutions that initiate these changes in order to attract more teenagers, that it is the churches that are changing rather than being changed by a 'parasitic' force.

The other main criticism comes after the conclusion where Smith and Denton state a desire for religious communities to reconnect with adolescents and say that the book is in part a stimulus for religious organizations to consider the implications of the research findings (2005: 265). They step out of their role as academic sociologists and offer suggestions of what these institutions and individuals can do, without declaring their own religious affiliation and potential bias.

This research may be relevant for the field of Quaker studies in a number of ways.

First, this study and other recent research (Collins-Mayo *et al.* 2006) suggests that adolescent Quakers are even more particular. 23.9% of adolescent British Quakers identified themselves as spiritual, and in interviews identified their beliefs and the personal beliefs of the group with the concept of 'spiritual not religious'. This may be a result of the 'absolute perhaps' and the certainty of Quaker theology as a search without a destination (Dandelion 2004: 231).

Secondly, and most significantly, there are similarities between how MTD operates in relation to other levels of religion in America. Smith and Denton (p. 169) identify MTD as being on a level between individual religion, the idiosyncratic, lived personal beliefs and practices of individuals, and organizational religion of formal religious institutions and denominations. This can be equated with customary religion which consists of 'beliefs and practices which are derived from official religion but which are not subject to continued control by the churches' (Hornsby-Smith *et al.* 1985: 247). Just as this customary or popular religion is continually interpreting and redefining orthodoxy, establishing a 'neo-orthodoxy' (Dandelion 1996: 24), so MTD helps to organise and harmonise individual beliefs below it and feeds on and shapes the religious doctrines and practices at the organisational and institutional level above it.

Finally, this study and its findings are interesting and offer a possible model for secularisation where individuals remain involved in religious activity and identify as committed to a particular religious group and yet belief becomes individualised and people no longer claim that their own beliefs and morals are superior or should necessarily apply to anyone else. I suggest this is similar to the post-Christian model of liberal-Liberal Quakerism identified by Dandelion (1996).

The National Survey of Youth and Religion is comprehensive and reliable research and will be central for the consideration of teenage spirituality and religion and a starting point for future research. The book offers interesting insights and may well become the definitive volume of this subject however it is diminished by Smith and Denton's reluctance to consider fully the possibility that this represents a particularly American form of secularisation or the consequences of this for American society and religion.

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