

# What Is Moral Therapeutic Deism (MTD)?

Based on the findings of the National Study of Youth & Religion, led by Dr. Christian Smith, Professor of Sociology at Notre Dame

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 he is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.

## MORAL

- Being good
- Nice
- Kind
- Pleasant
- Respectful
- Responsible
- Self-improvement
- Care of one's health
- Successful

## THERAPEUTIC

- Feeling good
- Happy
- Secure
- At peace
- Subjective well-being
- Resolving problems
- Getting along amiably with others
- Feeling good about oneself
- God is "always there for you"

## DEISM

- God exists
- Creator
- Defines moral order
- Law-Giver
- Not personally involved
- Keeps a safe distance
- Watches over us
- Rarely intervenes
- Distant but available

*"This God is not demanding. He actually can't be, since his job is to solve our problems and make people feel good. In short, God is something like a combination of Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist—he is always on call, takes care of any problems that arise, professionally helps his people feel better about themselves, and does not become too personally involved in the process.... God, being distant, does not directly verbally answer our prayers...but he also does not offer any challenging comebacks to our arguments about our requests. Perhaps the worst the God of Moral Therapeutic Deism can do is to simply fail to provide his promised therapeutic blessings, in which case those who believe in him are entitled to be grumpy." — Christian Smith, describing the theology of MTD*

Above the Plane: U.S. civil religion

## **The Plane: Organized Religious Institutions & Traditions**

**Moral Therapeutic Deism →**

Below the Plane: Individual beliefs — eclectic, idiosyncratic, syncretistic

## **More Quotes from Christian Smith about Moral Therapeutic Deism (MTD)**

“We are also not saying that anyone has founded an official religion by the name of Moral Therapeutic Deism, nor that most U.S. teenagers have abandoned their religious denominations and congregations to practice it elsewhere or under another name. Rather, it seems that the latter is simply colonizing many established religious traditions and congregations in the United States, that it is merely becoming the new spirit living within the old body.”

“Indeed, [MTD] appears in this way to operate as a parasitic faith. It cannot sustain its own integral, independent life. Rather, it must attach itself like an incubus to established historical religious traditions, feeding on their doctrines and sensibilities, and expanding by mutating their theological substance to resemble its own distinctive image.”

“...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. Few teenagers today are rejecting or reacting against the adult religion into which they are being socialized.”

“...it seems that [MTD] is also a widespread, popular faith among very many U.S. adults. Our religiously conventional adolescents seem to be merely absorbing and reflecting religiously what the adult world is routinely modeling for and inculcating in its youth.”

“This helps explain the noticeable lack of religious conflict between teenagers of apparently different faiths. For, in fact, we suggest that many of them actually share the same deeper religious faith: Moral Therapeutic Deism.” What is there to have conflict about?”

“What we hardly ever heard from teens was that religion is about significantly transforming people into, not what they feel like being, but what they are supposed to be, what God, or their ethical tradition wants them to be.”

“Many teenagers know abundant details about the lives of favorite musicians and television stars or about what it takes to get into a good college, but most are not very clear on who Moses and Jesus were. This suggests that a strong, visible, salient, or intentional faith is not operating in the foreground of most teenagers’ lives.”

“In many ways, religion is simply happily absorbed by youth, largely, one might say, ‘by osmosis.’.... However, it appears that only a minority of U.S. teenagers are naturally absorbing by osmosis the traditional substantive content and character of the religious traditions to which they claim to belong. For, it appears to us, another popular religious faith—Moral Therapeutic Deism—is colonizing many historical religious traditions and, almost without anyone noticing, converting believers in the old faiths to its alternative religious vision of divinely underwritten personal happiness and interpersonal niceness.”

“...we can say that we have come with some confidence to believe that a significant part of “Christianity” in the United States is actually only tenuously connected to the actual historical religious tradition, but has rather substantially morphed into Christianity’s misbegotten step-cousin, Christian Moral Therapeutic Deism.”

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

## What Others Have Written about Moral Therapeutic Deism

“Indeed, the God of MTD sounds like the “cool parent” teenagers adore.” — Collin Hansen, *Christianity Today*

“...a watered-down, anemic, insipid form of Judeo-Christianity.” — Damon Linker, blogging for *The New Republic*

“Nobody finds the courage to face down police dogs and Klansmen in the vapid mewlings of MTD. MTD Christians don’t sing ‘We Shall Overcome’; they trill ‘We Shall Accommodate.’” — Rod Dreher, blogging for *Beliefnet*

“...mushy, muddle-headed theology...self-centered, sentimental, and panglossian....” — Ross Douthat, blogging for *The Atlantic*  
(He called President George W. Bush’s second inaugural address “Moral Therapeutic Deism Goes to War”)

“For the purposes of restraining sin and promoting the common good, MTD is useless.... If orthodox Christianity gives way to MTD, American public life may further degenerate into a feel-good free-for-all. No merely civil religion, especially one shaped by MTD, can long sustain a free republic by itself. A nation committed only to liberty and the pursuit of happiness will be left wondering why life is so unfulfilling.” — Collin Hansen, *Christianity Today*

“This radical transformation of Christian theology and Christian belief replaces the sovereignty of God with the sovereignty of the self.... All this means that teenagers have been listening carefully. They have been observing their parents in the larger culture with diligence and insight. They understand just how little their parents really believe and just how much many of their churches and Christian institutions have accommodated themselves to the dominant culture. They sense the degree to which theological conviction has been sacrificed on the altar of individualism and a relativistic understanding of truth. They have learned from their elders that self-improvement is the one great moral imperative to which all are accountable, and they have observed the fact that the highest aspiration of those who shape this culture is to find happiness, security, and meaning in life.... We face a succession of generations who have transformed Christianity into something that bears no resemblance to the faith revealed in the Bible.”

— R. Albert Mohler, Jr., president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, writing for *Christian Post*

*A wealth of information about the National Study of Youth & Religion,  
including a listing books and articles published by members of the research team,  
is available at [www.youthandreligion.org](http://www.youthandreligion.org).*

## Quotes about Religion from Real Teenagers

*"I believe in, well, my whole religion is where you try to be good and, ah, if you're not good then you should just try to get better, that's all."*

*"It's just whatever makes you feel good about you."*

*"Religion is very important, because when you have no one else to talk to about stuff, you can just get it off your chest, you just talk [to God]. It's good."*

*"[God] just kind of stays back and watches, like he's watching a play, like he's a producer. He makes the play all possible and then he watches it, and if there's something he doesn't like, he changes it."*

*"Well, God is almighty, I guess. But I think he's on vacation right now because of all the crap that's happening in the world, cause it wasn't like this back when he was famous."*

*"God is an overall ruler who controls everything, so like, if I'm depressed or something and things aren't going my way, I blame it on him. I don't know why."*

Non-Religious	Jewish	Roman Catholic	Mainline Protestant	Black Conservative Protestant	White Conservative Protestant	Mormon (LDS)
<b>Least Religious Involvement</b>				<b>Most Religious Involvement</b>		

## Key Statistics from "Soul Searching: A Movie About Teenagers and God"

- There are roughly 33 million teenagers in the United States.
- About 85% of them say they believe in God.
- About a third of them say they attend worship and/or religious education weekly.
- About a third of them say they attend worship or religious education sporadically.
- About a third of them say they do not attend worship or religious education, and/or describe themselves as "non-religious."