

Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers  
by Christian Smith

Reviewed by Deborah McKinley

Her picture haunted me while I read *Soul Searching*; the beautiful young woman pictured on the cover. Eyes wide and bright and expectant, her attention is focused. She looks hopeful, the edges of her mouth very slightly turned upward in what is almost a smile. She holds a small candle which appears to have been burning for at least a little while. What is she focused upon? What captures her attention? For what does she hope? What does she seek? What draws her forward in her life? These are some of the questions answered in *Soul Searching*.

*Soul Searching* is a valuable and insightful book relaying information gained from a national survey of youth. The authors set out ambitiously, “to describe and evaluate the shape and texture of American religion broadly by viewing it through the lens of the religious and spiritual practices of religious and non-religious American youth.” (page 6)

The National Study of Youth and Religion ([www.youthandreligion.org](http://www.youthandreligion.org)) is a multi-year research project studying religious lives of American young people, following those same young people into their young adult years. *Soul Searching* reports and interprets data from the first of three waves of interviews, conducted both on the phone and in-person with teenagers, ages 13-18. The blending of statistical data with stories and transcripts provides a nice balance. The stories and transcripts help bring the data alive, reminding the reader that real people are represented in the numbers.

Readers will be relieved, thrilled, glad to hear that most U.S. teenagers are active in their spiritual lives and that, far from rebelling against the beliefs of their parents, the vast majority are exceedingly conventional in their faith practices. The same readers may be deflated to read that those same teenagers are not very articulate about what they believe or why. Faith really does matter to young people, but it’s not on the front burner of their lives. It’s more taken-for-granted; a presence in the background. Still, ironically, faith has a tremendous impact on how teens live their lives.

Over and over again, Smith emphasizes the tremendous influence parents and other adults (especially parents) have on the spiritual lives of teenagers. It’s difficult to imagine Smith making a stronger case for this. Essentially, the religious lives of teenagers mirrors that of their parents. If the parents are actively involved in the life of a congregation, the teenager will be. If the parents have strong, multi-dimensional, active lives of faith, their sons and daughters probably will as well.

The chapter entitled “God, Religion, Whatever” outlines the general thesis growing from the study. Smith suggests that the dominant religion among U.S. teenagers is what he calls “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.” In short, religion is to make people happy, teach them how to be good people and ensure that they will go to heaven when they die. At first I rebelled against this thesis, having just poured through the statistics and stories about the active faith of young people. Then, as I pondered the thesis, especially in light of the congregations I’ve served in 27 years of parish ministry, I realized, he’s right. There are those congregants who are captured by the gospel of Jesus Christ, who are deeply formed in faith, whose lives are dramatically transformed by the activity of God in their lives. Still, many see Christian faith primarily as a vehicle for happiness, fortitude in the fact of difficulty, and morality for daily life. Their faith stays on the top, veneer level of life, rather than penetrating too deeply into the inner reaches of the heart. I realized that as this is true for many adults, it’s also true for many young people.

The chapter just referred to, along with the Conclusion and ‘Concluding Unscientific Postscript’ are worth the price of the book. Those who are interested in statistical data (namely: sociologists and baseball fans) will enjoy the chapters outlining the data of the study, which also draw interesting conclusions from the data. For those whose eyes glaze over when confronted with such numbers, will not be disappointed. There is plenty

in this book for readers to chew on. The Concluding Unscientific Postscript provides helpful suggestions for how congregations can strengthen their ministries. As a pastor, I found the book stimulating my thinking about the context and shape of the ministry of the entire congregation, not simply the youth ministry.

This is a valuable resource for leaders of congregations in America today as we struggle with how to form people in Christian faith, enabling them to articulate the Christian faith in today's world. The book outlines the difficult struggles faced by young people in the United States today and the congregations which serve them. Rather than 'throw up our hands' in despair that the Church has any relevance for young people today, the book ends on a hopeful note: "Religious congregations and other religious organizations are *uniquely* positioned in the array of social institutions operating in the United States to embrace youth, to connect with adolescents, to strengthen the ties between adults and teenagers." (page 264 *emphasis mine*)

The young woman on the cover of the book still speaks to me. She calls out for her congregation to be authentic in living the faith they profess. She reaches out for a congregation which will not shy from forming her in a dynamic, demanding Christian faith. She calls out for deep connection with the adults in that congregation. She's hopeful, facing the future equipped with a faith that will not necessarily ensure her happiness, but one that assures her that God is active in the world, walks with her each step of the way, prodding her to "do justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with her God." *Micah 6:8* *Soul Searching* gives us a window into the lives of teenagers just like her. Will we, as church leaders, be brave enough to not only look through the window, but to walk through the door, engaging the lives of these young people?

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