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Faith, nice and easy

The almost-Christian formation of teens

by Kenda Creasy Dean

In 1984, Marvel Comics created a new nemesis for Spider-Man. The character would be a symbiote, inspired by what parasitologists call the weaker of two organisms inhabiting the same space. The weaker organism can draw life from the stronger, and in the most dramatic cases it siphons off its host's nutrients before the host realizes what's happening. The symbiote survives, but the host is seriously weakened.

Once Marvel Comics had a new symbiotic character, that character needed a host. It struck a bargain with another character named Eddie Brock: the symbiote would give Brock its power in return for Brock's life energy. But of course symbiotes from outer space cannot be trusted. Once the symbiote had inhabited Brock, it absorbed his life energy and morphed into the evil Venom.

Has something similar happened in American Christianity? Has a symbiote taken up residence without our knowledge? Yes, say Christian Smith and Melinda Denton, who are principal investigators for the National Study of Youth and Religion (a study of congregations in seven denominations). They're seeing an alternative faith in American teenagers, one that "feeds on and gradually co-opts if not devours" established religious traditions. This faith, called Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, "generally does not and cannot stand on its own," so its adherents are affiliated with traditional faith communities but unaware that they are practicing a very different faith than historic orthodox Christianity. If teenagers wrote out the creed of this religious outlook, it would look something like this:

- A god exists who created and orders the world and watches over life on earth.
- God wants people to be good, nice and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
- The central goal of life is to be happy and feel good about yourself.
- God is not involved in my life except when I need God to solve a problem.
- Good people go to heaven when they die.

Smith and Denton claim that MTD 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." This, they add, is a moral indictment not of American teenagers, but of American congregations. They go on to say:

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is, in the context of [teenagers'] own congregations and denominations, actively displacing the substantive traditional faiths of conservative, black, and mainline Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism in the United States. . . . It may be the new mainstream American religious faith for our culturally post-Christian, individualistic, mass-consumer capitalist society.

While Smith and Denton refrain from describing how this "colonization" affects other religious traditions, they are blunt about its influence on Christianity: "A significant part of Christianity in the United States is actually only tenuously Christian in any sense that it is seriously connected to the actual historical Christian tradition, but has rather substantially morphed into . . . Christian Moralistic Therapeutic Deism."

In short, the study provides a window on how American young people have learned a well-intentioned but ultimately banal version of Christianity that's been offered to them in American churches. Most youth seem to accept this bland view of faith as all there is—as something nice to have, like a bank account, something you have in case you need to draw from it in the future. What Christian adults have not told them is that this account of Christianity is bankrupt. We have not invested in their accounts: we "teach" young people baseball, but we "expose" them to faith. We provide coaching and opportunities for youth to develop

and improve their pitches and their SAT scores, but we blithely assume that religious identity will happen by osmosis and will emerge "when youth are ready" (a confidence we generally lack when it comes to, say, algebra). The result? Teenagers who don't have the soul strength necessary to recognize, wrestle with and resist the symbiotes in our midst—probably because we lack this strength ourselves.

Fortunately, it is not all up to us. Because Christians believe that transformation belongs to God, Christian formation—the patterning of our lives and our communities after Christ's self-giving love—requires grace, not determination. It is in following Jesus that we learn to love him; it is in participating in the mission of God that God changes us into disciples. Whenever ministry settles for less, a church becomes vulnerable to symbiotes and risks "morphing" into a community that is almost—but not quite—Christian.

Often adults in church bemoan the absence of teens in worship. But if churches practice MTD in the name of Christianity, then getting teenagers to come to church more often is not the solution (it could make things worse). The solution to MTD is not more faithful attendance, but a more faithful church. This means more than just hiring a youth minister, although a youth minister is an excellent place to begin. Since the study repeatedly points to adolescents' tendency to mirror the religious lives of their parents, nurturing faith in young people means investing in the faith of their parents and congregations. Yes, some teenagers recognize God's presence in their lives even without the advantages of religious parents, active youth programs, attentive pastors or functional congregations. God finds a way. But American churches aren't offering much assistance, maybe because we are serving up MTD to teenagers in the name of Christianity and can no longer tell the difference.

Teens are left thinking only "nice" thoughts about their churches. They criticize the church in general, but few complain about their own churches. They may call people in other churches judgmental and hypocritical, but in their own congregations people are "nice." Few teenagers experience religion as a source of family conflict, but they do not view it as a source of identity either. Faith is not a boundary either to claim or repudiate. American teenagers, according to the NSYR, "tend to view religion as a Very Nice Thing"—meaning that religion may be beneficial, even pleasant, but does not ask much of them or even concern them greatly. As far as they can tell, it wields very little influence in their lives.

Despite all this "niceness," MTD's pleasantness is superficial, and it pales beside Christian teaching on hospitality and compassion. In Judeo-Christian teaching, God is far less concerned with religion than with identity and relationship: Do we know ourselves to belong to the One who made us, who loves us too much to lose us, and do we live as though this matters? The God of Abraham and Mary is personally and morally concerned about creation and desires—not just our obedience but our love. As we discover the God who came among us but who is also radically "other" than us, we learn that we are God's beloved, "other" than God and adored as such. For this reason Jews and Christians have always viewed faith as a way of life born out of love for God rather than as a set of religious propositions to which we subscribe.

In Chaucer's day the word *nice* meant ignorant or foolish, an etymology that cuts both ways for Christians. If we approach nice like Dr. Seuss's Thidwick (the big-hearted moose)—if the church accommodates all manner of sycophants without asserting its own identity because "a host above all must be nice to his guests"—then we inevitably become a haven for symbiotes who take up residence in our antlers. In this case, the church's accommodating impulse does not stem from God's call to us to share our lives with the stranger or to share God's love with others. Instead, it grows out of our need as a church to be liked and approved.

On the other hand, if we approach nice as the foolishness of the cross, then Chaucer's definition may suit us after all. Becoming "fools for the sake of Christ" (1 Cor. 4:10) requires an identity grounded in *God's* accommodation to human culture, not ours—namely, God's choice to become human in Jesus Christ. Foolish faith comes from the security of knowing that we live in God's embrace, and with that knowledge comes a peculiar kind of courage. Foolish faith flies in the face of the self-fulfilling norms of consumerism and addresses issues of identity and openness not by avoiding the cross, as MTD would have us do, but by clinging to it. As G. K. Chesterton pointed out, "A man who has faith must be prepared not only to be a martyr, but to be a fool." MTD prepares young people to be neither.

Catholic theologian Jean-Luc Marion says that "the ethic of giving" is the telltale sign that God's image is under construction in us. The evidence that God's image is being restored in individuals and in church is our giving—we give Christ, who established the church to bear his fruit in the world. We are flimsy boughs for such abundant fruit. Yet scripture repeatedly describes God's preferential option for the unlikely. God calls people not for what they have but for what they lack. Empty hands receive, empty wombs are filled, empty tombs proclaim resurrection—and the unformed selves of adolescents make room for Christ in ways that are difficult for adults' hardened, formed egos. God does not ask us to give ourselves to others. God asks us to give Christ—who transforms us, dwells within us and fills us with his self-giving love. "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me," says Paul (Gal. 2:20).

Churches in which young people exhibit highly devoted faith look and act differently than those colonized by MTD. Structurally, they are more likely to have full-time youth ministers, a variety of programs for teenagers and opportunities for youth to participate in religious practice and leadership. But the differences are theological as well. According to the Exemplary Youth

Ministry study (a national study of congregations in seven denominations funded by the Lilly Foundation and completed in 2003), these congregations are also more likely to:

- portray God as living, present and active
- place a high value on scripture
- explain their church's mission, practices and relationships as inspired by "the life and mission of Jesus Christ"
- emphasize spiritual growth, discipleship and vocation
- promote outreach and mission
- help teens develop "a positive, hopeful spirit," "live out a life of service" and "live a Christian moral life"

These congregations view young people not as moralistic do-gooders but as Christ's representatives in the world. Teenagers in faith-supporting congregations do not describe God as a Pez dispenser that delivers good feelings on demand but as a "living and active presence" in their lives. Adults in these congregations till the soil for consequential faith in young people. Pastors and adult leaders model "the transforming presence of God in life and ministry," and parents engage "in conversations, prayer, Bible reading, and service that nurture faith and life." These congregations invite, cultivate and nurture faith that bears fruit, yielding new life in and beyond the church.

Young people will not develop consequential faith simply by being absorbed into a so-called Christian culture as an alternative to the culture at large; churches are quite capable of developing deformative cultures of their own, while washing down the gospel with large gulps of rationalization. Consequential faith is the result of *doing* ministry, and not simply being ministered to. Missionary historian Andrew Walls explains, "Christ sends his people as he was sent: to be the light to the world, to give healing and hope to the ill, the weak and the unwanted, to suffer, perhaps unjustly, on behalf of others." Faith so conceived turns a self-focused spirituality like MTD on its head.

In the end, the NSYR may simply demonstrate that young people are not the religious relativists we make them out to be. It may simply be that Christianity—or what passes for Christianity, as teenagers see us practice it—does not merit a primary commitment. It may be that the only time young people see churches point to Christ is when we raise the flag on Jesus to claim him for ourselves, like Antarctica for the queen. Teenagers are right to give little credence to such distortions of the gospel: whenever "Christianity" suggests that some people are more welcome before God than others, this pseudogospel must be rejected. The historic teachings of the church side with teenagers over and against the religious claims and practices of many American congregations. The particularity of Christ is exactly what prevents the church from being an exclusive club, and the life, death and resurrection of Christ is precisely the act of God that makes it possible for every human being to stand before God.

What can we learn from those faith communities in which young people consistently demonstrate consequential faith? First, we learn that it can be done. MTD does not colonize churches—people do. To a large extent, we can determine the degree to which our congregations choose to imitate Christ and participate in the divine ethic of giving, or practice a risk-averse gospel of self-fulfillment.

Second, religious formation is not an accident. Teenagers with high degrees of religious devotion did not get that way on their own; their faith is the legacy of communities that have invested time, energy and love in them, and where the religious faith of adults (especially parents) inspires the faith of their children.

Third, certain tools associated with consequential faith are available in every Christian faith community. Those that appeared regularly in the repertoires of highly devoted teenagers in the NSYR included a creed or a "peculiar God-story" that spoke to both God's personal and powerful nature, a deep sense of interpersonal and spiritual belonging to a faith community, and a divinely directed sense of purpose and hope.

Fourth, consequential faith has risks. The love of Christ is love that is worth dying for. Congregations are far more reluctant to ask this kind of faith of teenagers than teenagers are to respond to it. Churches help young people develop consequential faith best when they focus not on who they are—or on the theological brand they want young people to perpetuate—but by focusing on who Christ is calling young people to become as his envoys in the world.

Fifth, we are called to participate in the imagination of a sending God. A God-shaped imagination is bent on the redemption of the world and not just the church—which places self-serving spiritualities like MTD on notice. The single most important thing

the church can do to cultivate missional imagination in young people is to develop one as a church, reclaiming our call to follow Christ into the world as envoys of God's self-giving love.

Earlier this year my telephone rang and Lizzie sang out a hello. Lizzie is on the leadership team for a large denominational youth conference in Montreat, North Carolina. She called to tell me that she had arrived and that the place was "awesome." Lizzie and I attend the same church, which is as full of MTD as any I know; yet at 16 Lizzie's faith has an intensity that lights her up from the inside, thanks to—well, to what, exactly? I got to eavesdrop on Lizzie's life briefly during the year I spent as her confirmation mentor. Without question, her faith is shaped by her devout family, by adults in our congregation who encourage her, by the deep investment of her youth pastor, and by unusually large doses of existential intelligence and reflexive skills that help Lizzie gravitate toward things of the spirit.

But I know dozens of teenagers with similar tools who do not have Lizzie's robust faith. Lizzie is on familiar terms with God (a name she uses more easily than "Jesus"). She adores her home congregation but prefers the galvanizing, pulsating energy of the Montreat youth conference as a way to experience the Holy Spirit. "Here I can *feel* God," Lizzie tells me. Her church's recognition of her creativity and leadership, combined with substantial opportunities to use both, have forged in Lizzie a powerful sense of call. She believes that her life has a purpose, and a divinely created one at that. This purposefulness gives her hope; she believes that God will use her for something good—"to change the world," as she puts it—and in doing so she is certain that she is following Christ, helping to bring God's will to fruition.

A creed, a community, a call, a hope—all cast in a particular story through which Jesus confronts Lizzie at home and at school and sends her out to love the world on his behalf.

What I get to do—and I get to do this for a living, which after all these years still humbles and astonishes me—is to walk young people like Lizzie into God's plans for them. My role in their faith journeys is embarrassingly small: naming a God sighting, inviting them to pray or serve. Mostly what I do is show up and get to know them, and respond to them as the incredible creatures God made them to be, while trying to be a faithful Christian adult alongside them.

As a Christian adult, I have an advantage that Lizzie doesn't have: mileage. I know she is more than the scripts that society has given her. I know God has made her to be more than a consumer, more than an airbrushed image in an ad, more than a victim of her economic or family circumstances, more than an applicant to the college of her choice. What Christian adults know that teenagers are still discovering is that every one of them is an amazing child of God. Their humanity is embedded in their souls as well as their DNA. Their family is the church, their vocation is a grateful response for the chance to participate in the divine plan of salvation, their hope lies in the fact Christ has claimed them and secured the future for them. If we, the church, lived alongside young people as though this were true—if we lived alongside anybody as though this were true—we would be the community that Christ calls us to be.

*This article is based on Kenda Creasy Dean's new book, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church*, published by Oxford University Press; used by permission of the publisher.*

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