

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

An Evaluation from the Theological Perspective
of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

History, Beliefs, Practices

Identity:

Moralistic therapeutic deism (MTD) is a worldview or set of beliefs in which God is thought to be undemanding, simply wanting people to feel good about themselves and to be morally upright, happy and successful. According to MTD, God created the world but generally does not involve Himself in the lives of individuals, although He is available for help if called upon.

Founder(s):

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is not an organized group or sect and has no founding teacher. It is a religious mindset that is found in many groups and denominations.

Statistics:

Moralistic therapeutic deism may be a widely held worldview among teens and adults in the United States, but no exact statistics are known. The authors of *Soul-Searching* comment that MTD “is simply colonizing many established religious traditions and congregations in the United States, that it is becoming the new spirit living in the old body ... Furthermore, we are not suggesting that Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is a religious faith limited to teenage adherents in the United States. To the contrary, it seems that it 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.”¹

History:

The term moralistic therapeutic deism was coined by Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton in their book, *Soul-Searching*. The book is based on the results of a nation-wide random telephone survey of parents and teens conducted from July 2002 to March 2003 by the National Study of Youth and Religion. Researchers followed up with in-depth personal interviews of 267

¹ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 166. Smith and Denton comment that when “the engagement and education of youth by their religious communities is weak, then the faith of the teenagers in those traditions tends to degenerate into Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.” Smith and Denton, 262.

telephone survey respondents. Individuals interviewed came from 45 states and represented Christian and non-Christian faiths as well as those who claimed no particular religion.

Various contributing factors are suggested in the rise of moralistic therapeutic deism. From its beginnings, America was shaped by the idea of individual freedom and personally held beliefs—in politics and religion. For example, Virginia’s state constitution, drafted in 1776, proposed a bill of rights guaranteeing that “all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion according to the dictates of conscience, and that it is the mutual duty of all to practice Christian forbearance, love and charity toward the other.”² MTD is “the culmination of a long tradition of the secular authorities tolerating religion so long as it is not threatening and religion adapting to this climate by becoming non-threatening.”³

In the United States, many people are increasingly comfortable with the idea that there is no absolute truth and that religious beliefs are best held privately, as personal opinions. MTD helps people to live peacefully among the many faiths and worldviews surrounding them because the God of MTD is very tolerant and does not challenge the various religions and lifestyles advocated in American society. In his book, *The Juvenilization of American Christianity*, Thomas Bergler writes that “too many Christians are inarticulate, indifferent, or confused about their theological beliefs. They view theology as an optional extra to faith, and assume that religious beliefs are a matter of personal preference...they are particularly resistant to church teachings that impose behavioral restrictions.”⁴

Many adults also embrace moralistic therapeutic deism. In her book, *Almost Christian*, author Kenda Creasy Dean asks: “Why do teenagers practice Moralistic Therapeutic Deism? Not because they have misunderstood what we have taught them in church. *They practice it because this is what we have taught them in church.* In fact, American teenagers are barometers of a major theological shift taking place in the United States.”⁵ The worldview is “colonizing” Christianity; people do not need to leave their congregations in order to embrace MTD. Teens very likely learned the MTD worldview from their parents who, according to research, are the primary influence on teen beliefs.⁶

Moralistic therapeutic deism “cannot exist on its own. It requires a host, and American Christianity has proven to be an exceptionally gracious one.”⁷ Thomas Bergler writes, “As they listen to years of simplified messages that emphasize an emotional relationship with Jesus over intellectual content, teenagers learn that a well-articulated belief system is unimportant and might even become an obstacle to authentic faith.”⁸ The author of *Almost Christian* agrees: “The most likely explanation for Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is simply that we reap what we sow.

² A. James Reichley, *Religion in American Public Life* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1985), 86.

³ Will Wilson, “Americans Don’t Get Religion,” *First Things* (November 23, 2009), available at <https://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2009/11/americans-don’t-get-religion>, accessed September 2, 2009.

⁴ Thomas E. Bergler, *The Juvenilization of American Christianity* (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans, 2012), 225.

⁵ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 29 (italics in the original).

⁶ Smith and Denton, 56.

⁷ Dean, 30.

⁸ Bergler, 220.

We have received from teenagers exactly what we have asked them for; assent, not conviction; compliance, not faith. Young people invest in religion precisely what they think it is worth—and if they think the church is worthy of benign whatever-ism and no more, then the indictment falls not on them, but on us.”⁹

Texts:

None

Beliefs and Practices:

The authors of *Soul-Searching* used information from their interviews to develop a “creed” for moralistic therapeutic deism. Those who hold this worldview generally believe the following ideas:

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.¹⁰

Moralistic

According to the *moralistic* views of MTD, God wants people to be good, moral individuals who try to be successful in life and who seek to improve themselves. Christian Smith comments, “Most emerging adults view religion as training in becoming a good person. And they think that they are basically good people. To not be a good person, you have to be a horrible person. Therefore, everything’s fine.”¹¹

In this worldview, moral decisions are not always decided on the basis of religious teachings, culture or natural law. Each individual may decide, based on personal feelings and experiences, what is right or wrong. Those who embrace MTD do not think their beliefs or moral decisions necessarily apply to others. They do not wish to violate convictions held by other people, who are also free to make their own decisions regarding faith and morality.

Therapeutic

⁹ Dean, 37.

¹⁰ Smith and Denton, 162-163.

¹¹ Christian Smith, “Lost in Transition,” interview with Katelyn Beaty, *Christianity Today* (October 2009), at <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/october/21.34.html>, accessed September 3, 2019.

In its *therapeutic* aspect, MTD emphasizes the idea that God is useful because He helps people feel better about themselves and their problems. Teachings about sin and repentance are avoided as unhelpful and self-defeating. The God of MTD is not demanding. The authors of *Soul-Searching* comment, “In short, God is something like a combination Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist; he is always on call, takes care of any problems that arise, professionally helps his people to feel better about themselves, and does not become too personally involved in the process.”¹²

The therapeutic beliefs of MTD have found their way into Christian teachings. Mark Galli of *Christianity Today* writes, “I’ve heard the following in sermons and read it in books by respectable evangelists: ‘You are unique and valuable. You were worth so much to God that he was willing to die to redeem you, so you could be in his family.’ And this: ‘We are worth the price God paid for us, the death of his Son.’ But of course this gets it exactly backwards.”¹³

Deism

According to the *deism* aspect of moralistic therapeutic deism, God exists. He created the world and keeps watch over it. He is available if someone should call on Him for help, but otherwise He does not involve Himself in the lives of individuals and does not hold them accountable for their actions. Individuals interviewed in the survey described God as nice, kind, pleasant and respectful, but He remains in the background. Smith and Denton comment, “Most of the time, the God of this faith keeps a safe distance.”¹⁴

A Lutheran Response

Those who subscribe to the views of moralistic therapeutic deism have their own unspoken and personally determined creeds. Lutherans confess the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed. These three creeds present the historic, orthodox Christian faith, a faith very different from the beliefs of MTD. The three articles of the Apostles’ Creed provide a framework for addressing MTD errors.

Moralistic

In the third article of the Apostles’ Creed we confess, “I believe in the Holy Spirit.” God does want us to be good, moral people, and no doubt many who embrace MTD make every effort to be good and moral. However, while we may lead morally upright lives in the eyes of world around us, it is impossible for anyone to be good or moral enough to earn God’s favor or to place

¹² Smith and Denton, 165.

¹³ Mark Galli, “Love Needs No Reason,” *Christianity Today*, March 18, 2010, at <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/marchweb-only/21-41.0.html>, accessed September 3, 2019.

¹⁴ Smith and Denton, 164.

themselves in a right relationship with Him. As Scripture says, “None is righteous, no, not one” (Rom. 3:10) and “By works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight” (Rom. 3:20). The Holy Spirit calls us by the Gospel, enlightens and sanctifies us. Only the Spirit “preserves faith and salvation in us. Good works are a testimony of his presence and indwelling.”¹⁵ Morality is not determined by personal feelings and choices, but by the will of God as expressed in His Word, through which the Holy Spirit is at work in our lives: “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). As people redeemed by Christ Jesus, our goal in life is not simply to feel good about ourselves, but to worship and serve the true God and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:29-31).

Therapeutic

In the Apostles’ Creed we confess our belief “in Jesus Christ, [God’s] only Son, our Lord.” According to the views of MTD, God is not involved in the lives of individuals, except when He is called upon for help. God certainly does hear and answer prayers, but He is, and always has been, very much involved in the lives of the people He created in His own image. In Eden He promised that an offspring of the woman would crush the serpent that tempted our first parents to sin. Throughout the centuries God worked in and through the lives of His chosen people of Israel to fulfill His promise. Then, “when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Gal. 4:4-5). God did not wait to save us until we were morally good enough to deserve His salvation, but “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). God is very much involved in our lives, so much so that He chose us in Christ “before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him” (Eph. 1:4).

Those who embrace moralistic therapeutic deism do not wish to impose their beliefs on others. We know that it is not simply “good” people who go to heaven, but only those who trust in Christ alone for salvation. So while we do not *impose* beliefs on others, we are called to be witnesses for Christ Jesus, proclaiming repentance and the forgiveness of sins in His name (Luke 24:47). We are always to be prepared to defend the hope that we have in Christ, and to do so “with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15).

Deism

We confess in the Apostles’ Creed, “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.” Unlike the God of moralistic therapeutic deism, who made the world and then who, for the most part, remains uninvolved in His creation, the God who reveals Himself in Jesus Christ and in the pages of Holy Scripture—the Triune God—created all things and continues to uphold all that He has made (Heb. 1:3; Col. 1:17). He cares for His creation and daily provides

¹⁵ Epitome of the Formula of Concord, Article IV, *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 499.15.

for its needs: “You make springs gush forth in the valleys . . . You cause grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate” (Ps. 104:10, 14). God remembers even the sparrows and knows us so well that He numbers the hairs on our heads (Luke 12:6-7). By His grace, through faith in Jesus, our names “have been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain” (Rev. 13:8).

Those who hold the beliefs of moralistic therapeutic deism view God as kind and undemanding, yet remote and aloof, a God who keeps His distance unless called upon for help. MTD represents what Lutherans call a theology of glory; it focuses on human capacity and God is only invoked namelessly to affirm human imagination and potential. God is seen as ensuring some kind of order of morality and is thought to provide healing for mental distress but He is not confessed as the biblical Lord who kills and makes alive. MTD works without the cross of Christ. It really has no capacity to answer the big questions of sin, suffering, and death.

The one true God, the Triune God, though He “dwells in unapproachable light” (1 Tim. 6:16), has come near to us in Christ Jesus, in whom “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (Col. 1:19). He has redeemed us and daily forgives our sins and provides for our needs. “All this He does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me. For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him. This is most certainly true.”¹⁶

For Further Reading

Bergler, Thomas E. *The Juvenilization of American Christianity*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012.

Dean, Kenda Creasy. *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Smith, Christian and Melinda Lundquist Denton. *Soul-Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Links and Websites

www.youthandreligion.org

¹⁶ Martin Luther, Explanation to the First Article of the Apostles’ Creed, *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 16.