

God is Not Your Divine Butler and Therapist! Countering “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” by Teaching Children the Art of Theological Reflection

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Sociologist Christian Smith recently published a groundbreaking study of the religious beliefs and practices of American adolescents. Based on phone interviews with 3,290 randomly selected young people and their parents and personal follow-ups with 267 teenagers, Smith discovered that Americans between the ages of 13 and 17 have a simplistic and narcissistic understanding of God. Their religious and social enculturation has generated a theology that is highly moralistic in tone and values the therapeutic benefits of happiness, security, and goodness associated with religious adherence. They imagine a God who functions as a divine butler and therapist for humanity, a deity who exists to serve humankind rather than the gracious and omnipotent God celebrated in classical Christianity.

American teenagers did not come to this problematic theological stance as adolescents. Their perspective has been shaped by both the dominant cultural norms of life in the United States and their exposure to congregational children’s ministries that promote moralistic proclamations and therapeutic piety rather than the cultivation of theological reflection skills and contemplative spiritual practices among children. In part, the failure to engage children in these latter tasks is the byproduct of misguided notions of “mature faith” (as existing only in adults rather than being manifest in different forms according to one’s age/stage of life) and of “theology” (as the province of scholars rather than the responsibility of all Christians). The Church has not recognized the need or its responsibility to cultivate the theological agency of children in relation to their developmental capabilities.

This paper explores theological and pedagogical rationales for teaching children the art of theological reflection and related spiritual practices necessary for critical contemplation of and engagement in Christian life. It considers the relationship between models of human development and “doing theology with children” in effective and age-appropriate ways. It redefines the concept of “mature faith” to accommodate a pedagogical perspective deeply rooted in a strong theology of divine incarnation and *imago dei*. Thus, it seeks to offer an approach to ministry with children that will, over time, alter the “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” theology that currently dominates the religious lives of American adolescents and provide children with the means to be theologians who contribute to the faithful embodiment of the gospel in congregational life.