

## American Culture and The Catholic Vote

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19 December 2018

## **Introduction**

This paper argues that there has been a significant shift American culture since the year 1960 that is reflected in the Catholic vote. This can be seen through Catholic voting patterns, social issues that shifted modern politics, and an opposition to the Catholic church brought about by said controversial social issues.

Setting the stage for the idea of a “Catholic vote” was Al Smith; the first Catholic nominee to run for president, and he ran as a Democrat, in 1928.<sup>1</sup> Al Smith was noticed as a candidate, but his Catholic identity was, to many, a reason to write him off as a serious contender for the presidency. Even with such skepticism surrounding his Catholic beliefs, Al Smith finished as the last Democratic candidate and he ran against Republican Herbert Hoover in the 1928 election. Support grew for both sides, but when the election ballots were counted, Hoover came out on top.<sup>2</sup> The first ever Catholic candidate to run for president had lost, but hope was not lost. Al Smith took away more votes from Hoover than the critics had ever expected. This number of votes that Al Smith received, brought about the first usage of “the Catholic vote” as a term in politics. This is by no means a common term, and for good reason. Because after Al Smith, there wasn’t another Catholic presidential candidate for another 32 years, but it wasn’t another 32 years before Catholics were politically relevant again.

### **Franklin D. Roosevelt gains Catholics trust**

In November 1932, Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected into office for the first of four terms, within the depths of the Great Depression. By March there were 13,000,000

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Dr. Julie Yarwood, 11-5-2018.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Dr. Julie Yarwood, 11-5-2018.

unemployed, and almost every bank was closed.<sup>3</sup> Roosevelt knew even before he started campaigning that his main focus absolutely must be pulling the United States out of depression. He began work to do so immediately, in his first “hundred days,” he proposed, and Congress enacted, a sweeping program to bring recovery to business and agriculture, relief to the unemployed and to those in danger of losing farms and homes, and reform, especially through the establishment of the Tennessee Valley Authority. By 1935 the Nation had achieved some measure of recovery.<sup>4</sup> Though Congress was the real brains and heavy lifters behind the New Deal, Roosevelt’s face became the face that has been associated with the New Deal policies for decades.<sup>5</sup> The New Deal brought relief and sustenance to many, thousands of people, Catholics being a substantial part of that group, and that wasn’t by accident; Roosevelt particularly targeted the Catholic vote. Roosevelt and the New Deal usher in a period of time, and a group of people which people will call the “New Deal Coalition”. The New Deal Coalition is a term used to label a group of people who began identifying themselves with the Democratic party during Roosevelt’s presidency, and remain loyal into the middle and late 20<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>6</sup> This group is made up primarily of Catholics, African Americans, poor whites from the south, women, and laborers. The kinds of policies and social programs (Social Security, The Works Program) that gave to people in need, became directly associated to Roosevelt and the New Deal, which came from Democratic

<sup>3</sup> "Franklin D. Roosevelt." The White House. Accessed November 13, 2018.  
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/presidents/franklin-d-roosevelt/>.

<sup>4</sup> "Franklin D. Roosevelt." The White House. Accessed November 13, 2018.  
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/presidents/franklin-d-roosevelt/>.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Dr. Julie Yarwood, 11-5-2018.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Dr. Julie Yarwood, 11-5-2018.

ideology. This is a period where one can point to and say, “Catholics are Democratic because of Roosevelt.”, declaring not only Catholics primary political identity, but also that their religion orders their political beliefs, and Catholic beliefs direct them towards identifying with the Democratic party. Moving through the 20<sup>th</sup> century there starts to be questions arising about if the Catholics still need to be subject to an allegiance to the Democratic party.

### **Political Platforms Change After Great Depression**

The time following the recovery from the Great Depression brought about new kinds of questions coming from Catholics regarding their political identification. Finding a way to pull the United States out of depression was no longer the number one priority, nor was it an issue anymore, and there were different matters that became prominent in the social, cultural, and political realms. There are times in history – such as when Roosevelt took office – where one can look back and see the specific platform that a political party based itself on during that time. These platforms and beliefs many times come from a need, and from that need comes a party’s platform. With that being said, this means that a party’s main focuses or platforms do not always stay the same. Now, as new social, cultural issues emerge, parties have to respond to them. During the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, there are many social and cultural shifts that happen in the United States. Each of these new shifts introduce questions about government and policy, so political parties then must take up a position on these serious issues that weren’t even an issue 10 years ago.<sup>7</sup> What happened in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is a chain of events that leads to a huge shift in political identity for people across the nation, especially Catholics. New social and then cultural issues create new stances regarding each of said issues, which then in turn create new political platforms, and

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Dr. Julie Yarwood, 11-5-2018.

then new policies. All of these things are factors that have a serious influence on voters. Things just got more difficult for Catholic voters in America.

These new policies have thrown a wrench in voter's typical political identification because their political parties have now shifted the platform on which they base themselves. The reasons for which Catholics previously pledged their identity to primarily the Democratic party, are no longer hot topics in politics. The kinds of hot topics being referred to are things like gay rights, abortion, and women's rights, but these aren't the only topics that are creating nuance in politics. Education reform, foreign policy, and taxation were also a part of this cultural shift, but it is easy to see how gay rights, abortion, and women's rights are the overarching topics for discussion. These issues aren't merely arguments on policy and money, these are issues that have a basis in morality, which sets them apart. So, in the 1960's everything changes for voters across the nation. They are now faced with a dilemma in identifying their political allegiance. They must now choose whether they are going to stick to their guns, being the party their beliefs have aligned them with in the past, or they will vote based on how party's stances on specific new policies align with their own.<sup>8</sup> The reality of this situation is that there is a lot of things happening that all influence this political shift, and what it does is blur the line between Democrat and Republican. It's not easy to tell anymore which one to choose because who the parties are is changing. In 1950 one didn't need to have a stance on abortion, but in the 1970's it was a serious topic for debate. Now a particularly difficult problem arose for Catholics; it was almost impossible for Catholics in this situation to satisfy their "informed conscience".

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Dr. Julie Yarwood, 11-5-2018.

## **John F. Kennedy and the Catholic Vote**

The Catholic church and its clergy will never tell the laity how they ought to vote. They do though, do their best to inform their followers of the moral truth behind different social issues and new government policies. Catholics are then completely free to vote for whom and what they want to, but the church does their part to educate their followers as to what is right and wrong; they had their hands full during this time. John F. Kennedy's speech in Houston in 1960 may have made things easier, but not in a righteous type of way. In the beginning of his speech he remarks: "So it is apparently necessary for me to state once again not what kind of church I believe in — for that should be important only to me — but what kind of America I believe in. I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute"<sup>9</sup>. In this quote one can see John F. Kennedy stating where his priorities lie, and bending to the way in which the nation has obscured his campaign. In this quote, he explains that what is most important to him is not his faith, but it is the presidency. He intends to keep his Catholic faith completely separate from the decisions he makes in the oval office. He goes on to say, "where no Catholic prelate would tell the president (should he be Catholic) how to act"<sup>10</sup>. He states this in a manner which assumes that this, this is John F. Kennedy's way of being a Catholic president. When in reality, the church would never do that in the first place. Kennedy was stating the church's own policy. it's the church's policy. The Catholic church does not tell their people how to vote or force them to act in any certain way, but they will ensure that those who follow the Catholic faith have an informed conscience. Conscious

<sup>9</sup> "Transcript: JFK's Speech on His Religion." NPR. December 05, 2007. Accessed November 06, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16920600>.

<sup>10</sup> "Transcript: JFK's Speech on His Religion." NPR. December 05, 2007. Accessed November 06, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16920600>.

of the moral truths behind the candidates they have the liberty of voting for. Kennedy then makes a statement that brings this clearly into the light:

“I believe in a president whose religious views are his own private affair, neither imposed by him upon the nation, or imposed by the nation upon him as a condition to holding that office.... Whatever issue may come before me as president — on birth control, divorce, censorship, gambling or any other subject — I will make my decision in accordance with these views, in accordance with what my conscience tells me to be the national interest, and without regard to outside religious pressures... But if the time should ever come — and I do not concede any conflict to be even remotely possible — when my office would require me to either violate my conscience or violate the national interest, then I would resign the office; and I hope any conscientious public servant would do the same.”<sup>11</sup>.

Here it becomes obvious that Kennedy has indeed prioritized his career above his Catholic beliefs. Why? That isn't what Catholics believe. Catholics believe that your faith ought to order the decisions you make in every aspect of this God-given life. John F. Kennedy was a kind, young, charismatic candidate for the presidency, but he did not embody the Catholic way of life. What he did do, was provide an escape route for Catholics who were having a hard time deciding between their faith and their political party during a very controversial and nuanced period of American history.

What John F. Kennedy did through his speech in Houston was provide a source for Catholics to point to and say “look, here is John F. Kennedy, who almost everyone loves, a highly-respected man, saying that it is okay to be Catholic and put some things over what your Catholic belief says”.<sup>12</sup> This is a problem for Catholics, because it looks like Kennedy is giving permission to Catholics across the nation to have a “cafeteria” kind of faith, and that it is okay to do so. A cafeteria Catholic is a term used to describe one who simply picks and chooses which parts of the faith they like and are going to believe in and live out. But John F.

<sup>11</sup> "Transcript: JFK's Speech on His Religion." NPR. December 05, 2007. Accessed November 06, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16920600>.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Dr. Julie Yarwood, 11-5-2018.

Kennedy was still the golden boy, for many Catholics, and it showed in the polls. In the 1960 presidential election, 83% of white Catholics voted Democrat, for Kennedy.<sup>13</sup> Following the election of 1960, though, politics changed again.

In 1962, the Supreme Court ruled in *Engel v. Vitale* that the recitation of a state-composed prayer was unconstitutional. The prayer in question – endorsed by Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish clergy – reflected a nondenominational, Judeo-Christian consensus that Americans had promoted. Senator Barry Goldwater denounced the Court for ruling “against God.”, and public disgruntlement was so strong that president Kennedy felt that he had to protect the reputation of the Supreme Court by making a public appeal for Americans “to pray a good deal more at home” rather than protest the school prayer decision and to “support the Constitution and the court’s responsibility in interpreting it.”, and that’s not even the worst of it. Kennedy did so even though a poll taken immediately after the supreme court ruling showed that 79% of the nation’s citizens supported the practice of religion in public schools.<sup>14</sup>

Kennedy introduced a kind of relativistic attitude that wasn’t a part of most people’s political opinions in the past. Catholics noticed this, and so did the rest of the country. In 1972 when *Roe v. Wade* was passed to legalize the abortion of an unborn child, the Catholics who identified with the Democratic party was still at 49%. The percent of Catholics who identified as Independent shifted from 21% in 1960 to 36% in 1972. The Democratic

<sup>13</sup> Wilson, J. Matthew. *From Pews to Polling Places Faith and Politics in the American Religious Mosaic*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2007.

<sup>14</sup>Williams, Daniel K. *Gods Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right*. Oxford: Oxford University Press USA, 2012



advantage had dropped from 46% in 1960 to 34% in 1972<sup>15</sup>, which is notable, but not as notable as a Catholic might think. Abortion was and still is a monumental moral issue in the United States, and the Catholic church believes wholly that it is inherently wrong, and is very clear in their stance on this subject. By looking at these statistics, one can see that it would be a major oversimplification to say that the Catholic vote had shifted and was no longer Democratic, so why hadn't Catholics rejected the Democratic party?

### **Roosevelt and Kennedy accidentally work together to create a shift in politics**

There are two reasons: the first being the group called the New Deal Coalition which was addressed earlier. Many Catholics who had been saved by Democratic president Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal policies, remained loyal to him and the Democratic party, despite the major changes in society and politics that had happened since, because Roosevelt and the Democrats saved their families lives during the depression.<sup>16</sup> The second reason is that John F. Kennedy accidentally granted permission to Catholics to pick and choose which parts of their faith were important enough to influence the rest of their lives. "Cafeteria Catholics" now didn't seem like such a farfetched idea, because John F. Kennedy was elected as president, and it didn't seem like he put the faith above all else. Catholics were faced with the dilemma of voting with the party they had historically aligned with, or voting based on what their faith and conscience informed them was the right decision. This was by no means an easy thing to decide. A loyalty and trust even had been developed to one party, that also aligned with their faith, but that changed. This wasn't something that was easy to accept or conform to by any means. Despite the very serious issues on the table during this time.

<sup>15</sup> Wilson, J. Matthew. *From Pews to Polling Places Faith and Politics in the American Religious Mosaic*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Dr. Julie Yarwood, 11-5-2018.

Following the election of president John F. Kennedy, conservative protestants realized that they had lost their influence in the nation's capital, and began to devise their own "protestant strategy for the sixties"<sup>17</sup>. Billy James Hargis sought to unify and broaden the anti-Kennedy coalition in the United States, by launching a nonpartisan political campaign in 1962 that worked to elect conservative candidates to congress throughout the nation. Hargis's efforts did far less than he had expected, even in politically conservative Arkansas, he had far less influence than he had expected. Even though Hargis's campaign had not succeeded in the short term, but it had the important effect of introducing the concept of "conservatism" as a rallying cry for fundamentalists. Hargis then went on to continually endorse what he called "conservative" candidates, as well as describing his own program and efforts as conservative. Hargis went on to make a bold claim, saying that "Christ is at the heart of the conservative cause"<sup>18</sup>. This is a notable remark from Billy James Hargis, who established his movement in the first place to broaden the "Anti-Kennedy Coalition" – aka anti-Catholic - yet he claims that Christ is at the center of his movement against Kennedy. Historically there seems to be a theme of protestants being anti-Catholic, trying to disprove the Catholic faith whenever they can. But most Catholics do not feel the same need in regard protestants denominations, Catholics and protestants in fact see eye to eye on many topics. Christ being the heart of the conservative cause is what caused Bob Jones Jr. to describe the University's new conservative political activities as "entirely natural", because "a good, Bible-believing Christian is by nature a good, patriotic American"<sup>19</sup>. Which is odd, because Catholics believe wholly in the scriptures, but also very fitting. Because conservatives today are very patriotic,

<sup>17</sup> Williams, Daniel K. *Gods Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right*. Oxford: Oxford University Press USA, 2012

<sup>18</sup> Williams, Daniel K. *Gods Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right*.

<sup>19</sup> <sup>19</sup> Williams, Daniel K. *Gods Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right*.

even nationalist. It is here then, that the shift in popular politics can be seen, the shift from identifying not as Democrat or Republican, but as Liberal or Conservative, according to one's belief on certain popular social issues.

### **From Democrat vs. Republican to Liberal vs. Conservative**

The contrast between liberal and conservative makes sense only if we employ it to work as the struggle of the underdog against the establishment. The liberals, at least in their self-image, are opposed to existing authority, and favor greater freedom and rights for some oppressed group. This usage ties the concept to the mobilization of conflict irrespective of its content.<sup>20</sup> Conservatives and liberals alike often use Supreme Court decisions and legislation to argue whether their side is winning or losing. But often the cultural zeitgeist is expressed through cultural artifacts. Film, art, literature, and music act as a barometer, signaling a society's prevailing attitudes before they ever trickle into the public square.<sup>21</sup> What does that mean for our society? The shift in cultural artifacts from the late 20th century to now illuminates America's changing moral framework. Popular music in 1990s, for example, was marked by a live-and-let-live mindset voiced by musicians such as Kurt Cobain. Today's top-40 charts look much different.<sup>22</sup> This article is pointing out how postmodernism, defined as a late-20th-century style and concept in the arts, architecture, and criticism that represents a departure from modernism and has at its heart a general distrust of grand theories and ideologies as well as a problematical relationship with any notion of "art", has affected our culture as a whole.<sup>23</sup> Humans alternately

<sup>20</sup> Liberals and Conservatives, Religious and Political: A Conjunction of Modern History

<sup>21</sup> Merritt, Jonathan. "The Death of Moral Relativism." *The Atlantic*. March 25, 2016. Accessed October 22, 2018.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.,

<sup>23</sup> "Dictionary.com." *Dictionary.com*. Accessed December 19, 2018. <https://www.dictionary.com/>.

overestimate our capacity for free will or equate brains to inorganic machines like computers.<sup>24</sup> Allowing ourselves to fall into shallow thinking although many hold so strongly to those beliefs because they are convinced that they have achieved higher thinking. Within the definition of postmodernism, one can see the relation to the aspect of establishment vs. underdog.

Postmodernism at its heart having a general disgust of grand theories and ideologies, meaning that at the core of postmodernism, is a rebellion against the establishment. These establishments from which the liberal movement wants to rebel from can be many different things, including fundamental facts regarding human life.

### **How Social issues influenced a change in culture, then a shift in politics**

Abortion is still today a very difficult moral issue to interpret correctly, and it isn't by any means easy to understand the truth within the abortion debate and act accordingly. Nor would it have been easy for president Kennedy to keep his faith at the center of his life like his faith called him to, while he was president, and so he didn't. Many people, some Catholics included, also chose not to side with the church and the factually logical stance on abortion, because it is hard. It is easier to save oneself from the emotional stress and social embarrassment from nine months of unplanned pregnancy and end a life who's face you have never seen, than it is to endure the hardships that come with an unplanned pregnancy. Emotion and convenience, placed over a right to life. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights reads "Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person."<sup>25</sup> yet abortion is easily accessible in the United States.

Those Catholics who remained loyal to their faith during this time of political turmoil,

<sup>24</sup> Jasanoff, Alan. *The Biological Mind: How Brain, Body, and Environment Collaborate to Make Us Who We Are*. New York: Basic Books, 2018.

<sup>25</sup> "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." United Nations. Accessed December 05, 2018. <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html>.

understood this, and they understood that the Democratic party were the ones working to keep Roe v. Wade alive and well, and they wanted to change that.

Catholics began immediately to speak out about the reality of abortion and the ugly truth behind it. By 1974 there was a march on Washington called the “March for Life”. Because abortion is such a personal yet fundamentally humanistic argument, there are intense emotional ties to both sides of the argument. The pro-life movement was overwhelmingly Catholic<sup>26</sup>. Just as there are such emotional ties in the same-sex marriage debate; it isn’t easy for Catholics who may have very close friends or relatives who are homosexual, to remain loyal to the church and confident in their teachings, that same-sex marriage is wrong. Beginning in 1970, an increasing number of same-sex couples began applying for marriage licenses. Laws went back and forth from 1970-1999 regarding same-sex marriage, many of them ending with a ban on same-sex marriage. Through the eyes of a Catholic, marriage is, was, and always will be the union of a man and a woman in a faithful and fruitful union<sup>27</sup>. Catholics believe that marriage provides the beautiful opportunity for procreation, and bringing life into the world. In any same-sex marriage, such action is not physically possible, and no act of legislature can change that.

It is challenging to convey the magnitude of these two social issues. They have been portrayed to the public as another part of the civil and women’s rights movements, like the movement against racial oppression, and women’s right to vote. But that doesn’t get at what these issues really are, because if one is to go back and understand those racial issues on a past culture’s terms, they are able to find that things were much different culturally - social constructs

<sup>26</sup> Williams, Daniel K. *Gods Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right*. Oxford: Oxford University Press USA, 2012

<sup>27</sup> "Catholic Action for Faith and Family." Catholic Action for Faith and Family. Accessed December 10, 2018. [https://www.catholicaction.org/same\\_sex\\_marriage](https://www.catholicaction.org/same_sex_marriage).

were so much different and so were social norms - and that's why it was accepted. Never before had millions of people demanded the freedom to behave in ways that nearly every civilization around the globe defined as morally evil and a threat to the future of the race.<sup>28</sup> Catholics saw this, and those who were strong held firm in their beliefs.

### **Catholic Opposition**

From these firm beliefs, Catholics developed a deeply skewed reputation for being insensitive, cruel, and paternalistic. Since 1970 and the passing of *Roe v. Wade*, the abortion debate has become more and more of a topic of debate, and so has the gay marriage debate. Since 1970 increasing numbers of gay people “came out”, and even went so far as parading signs that read “gay is good”,<sup>29</sup> adding to the pile of those who oppose Catholics and what they believe. Ben Shapiro’s coined phrase “facts don’t care about your feelings” seems to be fairly fitting for their stances against gay marriage and abortion that Catholics uphold and defend. Catholics quickly racked up an opposition that is almost unimaginable, coming from their desire to stand up for every single human being’s right to life, despite the implications that may come from it, as well as upholding the sacramental purity of marriage. It was the Democrats who were trying to keep the bible out of our schools<sup>30</sup>, and the “gay liberation front” was, at its inception, an expressly left-wing project<sup>31</sup>. Both of these topics can become intensely emotional subjects for some to talk about and debate. The opposition toward the Catholic’s stance on both issues being centralized in the left just makes it even easier for the hate to breed. But why, and how did this

<sup>28</sup> Kazin, Michael. *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011

<sup>29</sup> Kazin, Michael. *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation*.

<sup>30</sup> Williams, Daniel K. *Gods Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right*.

<sup>31</sup> Kazin, Michael. *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation*.

change come about?

### **A shift in culture influenced by a movement away from rational belief**

People's belief systems are different today than they have ever been before. Young people and the "progressive" movement towards the left seem to have, maybe unknowingly, developed and adopted their own kind of religion which Christian Smith has summarized into a term called Moral Therapeutic Deism. In much of modern theology, religion is considered something that evolves with the times, or not. If it does, it remains "relevant", if it doesn't, as in traditional Catholicism, it is now seen as a dark force, holding back progress<sup>32</sup>. Moral Therapeutic Deism is what this new age progressive movement in has brought, effecting both politics and religion. In his work titled: *On 'Moralistic Therapeutic Deism' as U.S. Teenagers' Actual, Tacit, De Facto Religious Faith*. Christian Smith re-summarizes he and his fellow authors observations in venturing a general thesis about teenage religion and spirituality in the United States. We advance this thesis somewhat tentatively, as less than a conclusive fact but more than mere conjecture. Namely, we suggest that the de facto dominant religion among contemporary teenagers in the United States is what we might call "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism." The creed of this religion, as copied from what emerged from our interviews with U.S. teenagers, sounds something like this:

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.

<sup>32</sup> Knight, Robert H. *The Age of Consent: The Rise of Relativism and the Corruption of Popular Culture*. Dallas, TX: Spence Pub., 2000.

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.<sup>33</sup>

Note that no teenagers would actually use the term "Moralistic Therapeutic Deist" to describe or define their moral opinions or religion. That is Mr. Smith and his fellow authors summarizing term for what they have observed. It is easy to imagine that very few teenagers would lay out the points of its creed as clearly and concisely as in this article from Christian Smith. But when one sifts through and digests hundreds of discussions with U.S. teenagers about religion, God, faith, prayer, and other spirituality, what seems to emerge as the dominant, de facto religious viewpoint turns out to be some version of this faith. Smith says that they could literally call for another chapter of this book with more quotes from teen interviews illustrating Moralistic Therapeutic Deism and exploring its nuances and variants.

First, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is about inculcating a moralistic approach to life. It believes that central to living a good and happy life is being a good, moral person. That means being nice, kind, pleasant, respectful, and responsible; working on self-improvement; taking care of one's health; and doing one's best to be successful. One seventeen-year-old white Mormon boy from Utah said this very clearly: "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." Being moral in this faith means being the kind of person who other people will like, fulfilling one's personal potential, and not being socially disruptive or interpersonally obnoxious. As more than one

<sup>33</sup> Christian Smith. "On 'Moralistic Therapeutic Deism' as U.S. Teenagers' Actual, Tacit, De Facto Religious Faith." in *Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture, 2005* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Theological Seminary, 2005).



teenager summarized morality for us: "Just don't be an asshole, that's all." Such a moral vision is inclusive of most religions, which are presumed ultimately to stand for equivalent moral views. Note that throughout these answers there is a theme. An appeal to emotion, feeling good, and being likable.

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is also about providing therapeutic benefits to its adherents. This is not a religion of repentance from sin, of keeping the Sabbath, of living as a servant of a sovereign divine, of steadfastly saying one's prayers, of faithfully observing high holy days, of building character through suffering, of basking in God's love and grace, of spending oneself in gratitude and love for the cause of social justice, etc. Rather, what appears to be the actual dominant religion among U.S. teenagers is centrally about feeling good, happy, secure, at peace. It is about attaining subjective well-being, being able to resolve problems, and getting along amiably with other people

It is important to be very clear with Mr. Smith and his fellow author's thesis or aim within this work. He is not saying that all U.S. teens are adherents of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Some teens are simply disengaged from anything religious or spiritual, and other teens embrace substantive religious beliefs and practices that effectively repudiate those of this revisionist faith. Some teens do appear to be truly very serious about their religious faith in ways that seem faithful to the authoritative or orthodox claims of the faith traditions they profess. They are also not saying that anyone has founded a social religion by the name of Moralistic 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. It's typical embrace and

practice is de facto, functional, practical, and tacit — not formal or acknowledged as a distinctive religion. Furthermore, we are not suggesting that Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is a religious faith limited to teenage adherents in the United States<sup>34</sup>. 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 reacting religiously what the adult world has routinely modeled for and inculcating in its youth.

## **Conclusion**

From the year 1972 to the year 1984 the Democratic advantage among white Catholics had dropped again, this time to 18%. And by 2004 it had disappeared; the Democratic advantage was at -2%.<sup>35</sup> This long, slow, and complex change in American culture can indeed be seen through the shift of the Catholic vote. The movement towards the left has pinned many new aged politicians and voters against establishments and ideologies that had been previously widely believed as true. One of these main establishments being the Catholic church and its moral teachings. Since 1960 American culture has changed, and moved towards a subjective kind of moral compass in which the belief of “what is true for me isn’t necessarily true for you”, runs rampant. On top of that, a new kind of subconscious religion, Moral Therapeutic Deism, has arisen out of a prioritized desire for one to feel good about oneself. Which is a direct opposition to the Catholic church, as one of the greatest writers in the Christian faith, C.S. Lewis, sums up in saying: “I didn’t go to religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of Port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don’t recommend

<sup>34</sup> Christian Smith. "On 'Moralistic Therapeutic Deism' as U.S. Teenagers' Actual, Tacit, De Facto Religious Faith."

<sup>35</sup> Wilson, J. Matthew. *From Pews to Polling Places Faith and Politics in the American Religious Mosaic*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2007.

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