

Cultural Research Center



American Worldview Inventory 2021

Release #02: Introducing America's Most Popular Worldview—Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

Dr. George Barna, Director of Research, [Cultural Research Center](#)

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Everyone has a worldview.

Nobody has a pure worldview.

The most common worldview among Americans is Syncretism, which isn't a true worldview but rather a collection of disparate worldview elements blended into a customized philosophy of life.

And the latest insight from the nation's largest, ongoing worldview research project reveals that the worldview Americans are most likely to draw from is unknown to the people who turn to it—a relatively new and obscure philosophy of life known as Moralistic Therapeutic Deism—or MTD.

Broadly Embraced

New research from the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University demonstrates that adults in the United States are more likely to lean on the beliefs and behaviors drawn from MTD than those adopted from any of the other worldviews examined. In total, nearly four out of 10 adults (38%) draw either heavily or moderately from the smorgasbord of beliefs represented by MTD, even though just 2% have MTD as their life-determining, dominant worldview.

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD) is a worldview initially identified and named by sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton. They introduced their findings and conclusions in their book, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, published in 2005 and which was based on national research among the teenagers of the turn of the millennium. At that time Smith and Denton identified several core beliefs that characterized the thinking and behavior of the group. Those components included:

- belief in a God who remains distant from people's lives
- people are supposed to be good to each other (i.e., moral)
- the universal purpose of life of being happy and feeling good about oneself
- there are no absolute moral truths
- God allows "good people" into Heaven
- God places very limited demands on people.

Consistent with other worldview research, the current Cultural Research Center findings confirm that even though those perspectives developed two decades ago, during the preteen years of that generation (a group we now call Millennials), they have held on to those beliefs as they have aged.

That follows the well-established worldview developmental pattern. Research conducted by George Barna, and subsequently others, over the past quarter-century has shown that a person's worldview develops when they are very young, is refined during their teens and 20s, and then serves as a decision-making foundation for the duration of a person's life. Without conscious retraining, it is unlikely that worldview will change during a person's lifetime.

Called “Christian” but Certainly Not Biblical

Although three out of four people (74%) who lean substantially on MTD for life guidance consider themselves to be Christians, numerous beliefs held by MTD-reliant adults conflict with biblical teaching. For instance, among those whose lives are most heavily influenced by MTD:

- 95% do *not* consider success in life to be described as consistent obedience to God
- 92% do *not* believe that the wealth they have has been given to them by God to manage for His purposes
- 91% do *not* believe that people are born into sin and need to be saved by Jesus Christ
- 88% say they get their primary moral guidance from various sources other than the Bible
- 87% do *not* believe that the ultimate purpose of human life is to know, love, and serve God with all of their heart, mind, strength, and soul
- 76% contend that good people earn a place in Heaven through their good behavior
- 75% do *not* believe that God is the basis of all truth
- 74% believe in Karma
- 73% say that having some type of religious faith is more important than which faith is embraced
- 71% do *not* believe that the Bible is the true and reliable communication from God

Other errant beliefs possessed by a majority of adults who are substantially influenced by MTD include the fact that they do not hold an orthodox, biblical understand of God; they do not believe in the creation story; they reject the existence of absolute moral truth; they deny the existence of the Holy Spirit; and they do believe it is possible to reach complete spiritual maturity in their lifetime.

The research also revealed that the behavioral choices of those who are most influenced by MTD typically conflict with core biblical teachings. For instance the choices considered to be either morally acceptable, or not a moral issue, include having premarital sex with someone you expect to marry (83%), breaking the speed limit (67%), having an abortion because raising the child would be stressful (59%), lying to protect one’s personal reputation (58%), and claiming undeserved tax deductions that they are certain would not be detected (51%).

Although three-quarters of those substantially influenced by MTD claim to be Christian, only one-sixth (16%) qualify as born-again based on their theology (i.e., say they will go to Heaven only because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior).

Highs and Lows

The *AWVI 2021* data regarding MTD discovered that people drawn to this worldview are more likely to engage in biblical faith practices than they are to hold biblical beliefs. *AWVI 2021* evaluates people’s beliefs and behaviors in relation to eight categories of thinking and action. That analysis shows that among the people who rely most heavily on MTD as their worldview, 13% engage in a series of faith practices that are robustly biblical. In national context, however, even that high-water mark for MTD proponents is less than half the proportion of all adults. The practices measured include reading the Bible, praying to God, confessing personal sins, pursuing God’s will for their life, worshipping God.

The areas of belief and behavior in which MTD proponents are least likely to exhibit biblical ideals and actions relate to their lifestyle and personal relationships, as well as their sense of purpose and calling. The *AWVI 2021* reported that most Americans are weak in the area of Bible, truth, and morals, but adults who are prone to pursuing MTD principles are substantially worse off in this dimension than the typical American. It is rare to find MTD proponents who consistently accept biblical principles related to truth, morality, lifestyle, and personal relationships. Less than 1% of adults in the MTD segment typically endorse biblical teaching and follow through on those matters.

Percentage of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism Adherents Who Possess Beliefs and Behaviors in a Category That Parallel Those of a Biblical Worldview			
	% of Adults Whose Beliefs and Behaviors in the Category Qualify as a Biblical Worldview		
Substantive Category of a Worldview	All Adults	MTD Adherents	Difference
Faith Practices	29%	13%	16 points
Lifestyle, Behaviors, Relationships	23	*	22
Family, Life, Values	20	4	16
Purpose and Calling	20	2	18
Sin, Salvation, God Relationship	15	2	13
God, Creation, History	15	8	7
Human Nature and Character	12	6	6
Bible, Truth, Morals	10	*	10

Note: "MTD Adherents" refers to people who have substantial reliance on MTD as a worldview.
Source: *American Worldview Inventory 2021*, conducted by the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University, N=2,000 adults, February 2021.

Who Is Drawn to Moralistic Therapeutic Deism?

As noted, a large majority of those who are attracted to MTD consider themselves to be Christian—and almost half of those are Catholics, with the next largest chunk associated with churches that are traditionally black, Protestant congregations.

Among racial and ethnic segments, Hispanics showed the greatest alignment with MTD, with a majority of them (52%) drawing heavily or moderately from MTD perspectives. CRC noted that because a large share of Hispanics is Catholic—more than four out of 10—this outcome was not surprising.

There was a significant age gap evident, too, as people under age 50 were more than twice as likely as the 50-plus to find MTD appealing. That is also to be expected given the genesis of the worldview itself: research among teenagers at the start of the new millennium.

The *AWVI 2021* also found that about six out of 10 LGBTQ adults are consistently engaged with MTD. Although relatively few spiritual Skeptics buy into elements of MTD, individuals who are associated with Islam and Judaism were more likely than average to adopt many MTD tenets.

The Appeal of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

Dr. George Barna, who directed the *American Worldview Inventory 2021* research for the Cultural Research Center, described Moralistic Therapeutic Deism as “fake Christianity.”

“Young adults have grown up with a culturally adulterated version of the Christian faith,” the veteran researcher explained. “They have adopted a softer, twisted version of genuine Christianity. The good news is practitioners of MTD are not anti-religion or anti-Christianity. They just are not willing to surrender themselves to authentic Christianity’s demands—or to believe that a real faith would even make such demands of them.”

Based on the research, Barna noted that MTD is a generally optimistic, comforting form of religious faith. “In this distorted version of Christianity, the emphasis is on self rather than God, and on emotion rather than truth.”

He explained, “Those who adopt Moralistic Therapeutic Deism believe in innate human goodness and kindness. They view God as a powerful but dispassionate observer who remains detached from human experience unless circumstances make Him the solution of last resort. They believe that life is about individual happiness and that action producing positive personal outcomes gives meaning and purpose to life.”

Barna continued, “MTD is more about believing in and promoting the best interests of self based on currently popular cultural thinking. Its proponents are not likely to prioritize knowing, loving, and serving a transcendent God.”

According to the bestselling author, “In their view the local church exists primarily to offer supportive and upbeat community rather than worship, service, guidance toward holiness, or a genuine relationship with God. And MTD is abundantly pluralistic, encouraging people to do whatever works or feels good rather than that which fits with biblical principles.”

As such, Barna contends that MTD is a worldview that is defined and driven by current culture more than by historic religious truths or a comprehensive and coherent doctrine. Consequently, this approach to spirituality asks little of its followers while providing the comfort, convenience, and community that those followers long for.

“The fact that a greater percentage of people who call themselves Christian draw from Moralistic Therapeutic Deism than draw from the Bible says a lot about the state of the Christian Church in America, in all of its manifestations,” Barna lamented. “Simply and objectively stated, Christianity in this nation is rotting from the inside out.”

But Barna also offered some guidance for repairing the damage. “The findings show us that we can help the people attracted to MTD to gain a better understanding of the basics of the Christian faith.”

Barna said such relearning should focus on developing a deeper understanding of the reliability and personal value of the Bible; embracing the view that absolute moral truths do exist, and are valuable for them personally; developing a true understanding of the love and engagement of God; and recognizing that our behavioral choices can reflect more authentic ways of “being good” and “doing right.”

“This might point those under the sway of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism back in the right direction,” Barna said. “It seems that most of these folks want to do the right thing; they simply have been led down the wrong paths toward achieving that end.”

About the Research

The *American Worldview Inventory 2021 (AWVI)* is an annual survey that evaluates the worldview of the U.S. adult population (age 18 and over). Begun as an annual tracking study in 2020, the assessment is based on several dozen worldview-related questions drawn from eight categories of worldview application, measuring both beliefs and behavior.

AWVI 2021 is the first-ever national survey of biblical and competing worldviews. It was undertaken in February 2021 among a nationally representative sample of 2,000 adults, providing an estimated maximum sampling error of approximately plus or minus 2 percentage points, based on the 95% confidence interval. Additional levels of indeterminable error may occur in surveys based upon non-sampling activity.

About the Cultural Research Center

The [Cultural Research Center \(CRC\) at Arizona Christian University](#) is located on the school’s campus in Glendale, Arizona, in the Phoenix metropolitan area. In addition to conducting the annual *American Worldview Inventory*, CRC also introduced the *ACU Student Worldview Inventory (SWVI)* in 2020. That survey is administered to every

ACU student at the start of each academic year, and a final administration among students just prior to their graduation. The *ACU SWVI* enables the University to track the worldview development of its student body and to make changes to that process as recommended by the research.

The Cultural Research Center also conducts nationwide research studies to understand the intersection of faith and culture and shares that information with organizations dedicated to transforming American culture with biblical truth. Like ACU, CRC embraces the Christian faith, as described in the Bible, but remains inter-denominational and non-partisan. Access to past surveys conducted by CRC, as well as additional information about the Cultural Research Center, is available at www.arizonachristian.edu. Further information about Arizona Christian University is available at www.arizonachristian.edu.