Do you treat God as if he is your cosmic therapist and divine butler? Among Christian college alumni (2006, 2008, 2010) and undergraduates (freshmen, seniors), surveyed by Dr. Cook and her research teams, we have been exploring religious denominational commitment and descriptions of God. We thought, after reading Arnett & Jenson (2002) and Smith (2005, 2009), that after graduation there would be a shift away from religious communities to which participants once belonged. We found however, that college graduates maintained their faith four years after graduation (97%), with 40% graduating in the same denomination and 44% in a similar one. We also focused a lot on Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD). Smith (2009) predicts that MTD is common; we found that expressions of trust in God and ownership of one’s faith were more common.

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, or God as a Divine Butler

Smith (2005, p. 162), says a parasitic, watered-down faith has emerged which views God as “something like a Divine Butler and Cosmit Therapist: he’s always on call, takes care of any problems, professionally helps people feel better about themselves, and does not become too involved in the process.” The three aspects of MTD can be described as:

- Moralistic (God as a source of moral rules): God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions. Good people go to heaven when they die.
- Therapeutic (God as a problem-solver): The central goal of life is to be happy and feel good about oneself.
- Deist (God as distant): A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on Earth. God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when needed to resolve a problem.

Emerging Adulthood

Emerging adulthood is a unique stage of transition which takes place between the ages of 18 to 25 and allows individuals to “examine the life possibilities open to them and gradually arrive at more enduring choices in love, work, and worldviews” (Arnett, 2000). Religious beliefs held during childhood and adolescence are often put into question during this stage of life.

Conclusions

For the most part, participants (97%) stayed with their denominations. If they did change their denomination they stayed within the same category of conservative, not moving toward mainstream denominations, or out of the church. We did not find a shift toward Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, a parasitic and watered down form of religion, contrary to Smith (2005, 2009). Instead, participants were much more likely to describe faith in classic terms, and to describe their trust in God and ownership of their own faith. Although MTD perceptions were not common, among the participants, a therapeutic perception was most common. Undergraduates expressed more classic statements about faith whereas alumni expressed more statements about ownership of faith and trust in God. There were no differences by gender.

References available on handout