

Church Departures, Postsecular Catholicism, and their Lessons for a 21st Century Faith

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Rachel is a young adult who refers to herself as "Catholic-ish." She grew up in a thoroughly "Catholic" environment. Her father is a deacon in the church, and her mother is a long-standing catechist in her parish. She attended Catholic schools throughout her life and participated in her parish, along with her family. But like many of the millennial and younger generations, Rachel no longer finds a home in the church practice of her religious tradition. Nevertheless, she appreciates her Catholic faith and what she has learned over the years, particularly the commitment to justice and peace and her prayer tradition. She still considers herself Catholic in some ways, but not in the same way her parents do.

For a growing population, being religious today in Great Britain and North America is no longer necessarily about belonging to a particular church, mosque, or temple. In a sense, how belief in God is understood and how one participates in church tradition and sacramental practice has become one option. As a result, many Catholic families may find themselves caught in between their commitment to their parishes and the demands of the broader secular culture, increasingly perceived as conflictive. On the other hand, many of their children and grandchildren gravitate not toward the parish for a sense of spirituality and meaning, as they did as children, but toward the broader *pluralism of choices* of faiths and spiritualities, relationships and lifestyles they do not find in the parishes. The dividing line is generational and has increasingly been so since the 1950s.

Even though we speak from the US context, the changes in the religious landscape in Great Britain have also gone through immense changes during the last fifty years. These changes are not simply because of growing secularization (a master narrative no longer universally accepted) but more pluralism, complexity, and internationalization. The publication of Stephen Bullivant's study on Catholic disaffiliation in Britain and America is worth looking at to see some Catholic identity issues beneath the numbers from a post-Vatican II perspective.¹

I contend that the Catholic Church's commitment is to negotiate the tensions between the forces of tradition and those of shifting social, cultural, and religious

¹ Stephen Bullivant. *Mass Exodus: Catholic Disaffiliation in Britain and America Since Vatican II*. (London, Oxford University Press, 2019).

landscapes.² However, depending on where the church is, this negotiation has not gone well for many Catholics. How past generations experience and express community, identity, and meaning are challenging for our younger and not-so-young generations. In the background of Catholic disaffiliation, the tensions and the possibilities between religious and secular worldviews find great prominence.

Postsecular Catholicism

Michele Dillon, a noted sociologist of religion, speaks of post-secular Catholicism as the church navigating secular realities infused with sacred meaning. Dr. Dillon asks: "Can the Church give a new voice to its strongly embedded commitment to the common good? And can it forge new directions in language, doctrinal thinking, and institutional practices that find greater resonance with the lived experiences of increasingly secularized Catholics?"

Postsecular Catholicism recognizes that in ordinary life, Catholic families and friends are constantly engaged with each other and the multi-religious and multi-secular society they live. Everyday Catholic life contains an ambiguous regular theological play between normative practice and non-normative belief and practice. Nevertheless, the theological space to speak openly and frankly about common faith and practice and the doubts accompanying them is always there. Whether it meets official expectations or not, it is this space where Catholic ideals and Catholic realities blend in convergence and divergence and where the *whole* of Catholic identity may be more fully understood.³

Unbundling Faith

An excellent example of how we understand this religious/secular engagement is in the work of *Springtide Institute*, an American research center that does extensive work with young people (13-25 years old) who are exploring issues of faith, spirituality, and religion outside of traditional, institutionalized spaces. In their most recent study, *The State of Religion and Young People: Navigating Uncertainty (2021)*, young people face extraordinary uncertainty issues, and many are not turning to religion to cope. Rather than relying on one's religious identity, practice, community, and language in one traditional institution, more and more young people are piecing together their inner life by drawing on various traditions, familial lineages, and wisdom sources.

² Michelle Dillon. *Postsecular Catholicism: Relevance and Renewal*. (New York: Oxford University Press, New York, 2018), 1.

³ Tom Beaudoin and J. Patrick Hornbeck II. "Deconversion and Ordinary Theology: A Catholic Study." Chapter Four. In *Exploring Ordinary Theology : Everyday Christian Believing and the Church*. Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2013. ProQuest eBook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/fordham-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1114098>. Created from Fordham eBooks on 2018-07-03 13:54:17, 34.

Young people are attempting to integrate the existing religious and secular realities that they live in by finding ways to piece together their varying family histories, cultural contexts, personal interests, and sensibilities to experience *wholeness and connection*. "It is of no surprise that young people resist a fixed definition about what it means to be religious today. Just as gender expressions, sexualities, and racial identities are now understood on a diverse spectrum and grounded in intersectionality."⁴

Faith unbundled in this sense is a way to describe how young people increasingly construct their faith by combining elements such as beliefs, identity, practices, and community from various religious and secular sources. Using the analogy of *Spotify*, this experience features opportunities to buy certain tracks without purchasing the whole album, creating a personal playlist. Genuinely, this is a metaphor for meaning-making.

One way unbundling faith occurs is through the experience of *curiosity*. Younger people are exposed to many faith and secular traditions with shared values and concerns, not feeling bound to the church or parish. Their curiosity provides other resources to work out what they believe about suffering, stress, existence, and much more. Curiosity is a driving characteristic that often transcends prescribed boundaries. The great mystics, prophets, and founders of religious congregations and other faith traditions also surpassed their traditional boundaries in their own spiritual and religious curiosities. Can we harness the wisdom of the Catholic tradition to encourage curiosity that drives the questioning of young people?

Finally, unbundling faith is also a search for *wholeness*. They want to feel their whole self is welcomed and celebrated within their faith community or parish, rather than feel they need to change, fix, or hide parts of themselves. It does not mean they are not interested in growth, but authenticity and integrity are more valuable than conformity. If young people do not feel free to be themselves in our parishes, they may find it challenging to explore how the Catholic faith might help them search for wholeness. They are unwilling to see parts of themselves that don't "fit" in the institutional norms, so we need to dialogue with them in particular, in these issues where they feel it is valuable to remain engaged in some way.

Religious Secular Dialogue

Another area where Postsecular Catholicism is experienced is in the engagement of religious and non-religious friends. We value dialogue and collaboration with other faith traditions as Catholics. As Xaverian Missionaries, we engage with this dialogue as a contemporary expression of the "Missio ad Gentes" of the church through a project of

⁴ Navigating Uncertainty: The State of Religion and Young People. (Winona, MN: Springtide Institute), 9.

our congregation in Great Britain and the United States called *Common Ground*, organized at the Xaverian Center, Conforti Institute in Coatbridge in 2013. We gathered with *Humanists UK*, *Humanist Society Scotland*, *Interfaith Scotland*, and others.

This dialogue was not new in the church, even though it is rarely formal in ordinary Catholic life. Early on, soon after Vatican II in 1965, Saint Pope Paul VI created the *Secretariat for Non-Believers* to deepen the dialogue of the church with the modern world, particularly with atheism. Saint Pope John Paul II eventually brought this work into the *Pontifical Council for Culture* as an intercultural dialogue with modernity. Finally, Pope Benedict XVI, in 2005, through this same Commission, established the Vatican initiative of *Courtyard of the Gentiles* that began developing international conferences gathering religious and non-religious adults, which continues to this day.

In the various programs and blog writing that followed both in Scotland and the United States through the Xaverian Missionaries, we in the US held special meetups with religious and non-religious friends that continue to this day. Mary Aktay, the coordinator of the New Jersey Meetup, explains: "Our conversations have been conducted online via Zoom for over a year and a half and now include over 175 people of all ages and walks of life from all over the United States and Canada. It is growing with the addition of millennials. Sometimes people show up without becoming members. We are very flexible and informal groups. The doors are metaphorically "opened" for all who wish to participate."⁵

Conclusion

One of the most common ways that the life dialogue between religious identity and secular life realities is in the Catholic's exercise of "interpretive authority" when engaging their tradition, and "lived religion" means a process that is never disconnected from the flow of people's everyday secular lives. Some religious meanings in spiritual understanding, values, and religious practices may be evocative, and others may be deemed less so. Catholics feel pretty competent to draw from certain aspects of the overall Catholic tradition while leaving other elements for other Catholics, *compartmentalization*.⁶ This reality is a way of shaping and re-shaping religious culture in the day-to-day Catholic life of individuals.

⁵ Mary Aktay, Communications Director of the Xaverian Missionaries USA is a founding partner of the Common Ground Project that continues in both the United Kingdom and the United States. She shared her experience as coordinator of the Common Ground Meetup in New Jersey.

⁶ Ibid, Kindle Edition, 554. The term I use here, compartmentalization, a type of cordoning off more important beliefs and practices from less important ones, is a dynamic I have seen run through many of my interviews with both generations, parents, and children.