

## CHAPTER I

### THE MULTILAYERED CONTEXTS OF THE CATHOLIC FAMILY EXPERIENCE OF DISAFFILIATION

This study argues that the family dynamic is the essential element of disaffiliation. The Catholic experience of disaffiliation entails a significant degree of complexity. Catholics in general, nor the families where their initial faith experience, merely absorb ideas from pulpits and religious education classes. They negotiate with them. In this sense, the *Catholic Church's Catechism* says little about what Catholics know or think about their faith, nor how it is experienced in the family.<sup>1</sup>

Catholics exercise “interpretive authority” when engaging their tradition, and “lived religion” means a process that is never disconnected from the flow of people’s everyday lives. Some religious meanings available to them 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, a kind of *compartmentalization*.<sup>2</sup> This reality is a way of shaping and re-shaping religious culture in the day-to-day life of individuals, and in this case, of their families. Some call this cafeteria Catholicism, and I contend that most Catholics engage with their faith this way.

In this sense, Catholic families interact with layers of religious and secular cultural contexts or ecologies, which help shape how they find identity and inspiration with the Catholic faith and the tensions they also produce.<sup>3</sup> One way to understand the interactions of these elements is to see how families interact in this complex web of people, meanings, and relationships, all affecting each other in demography, culture, and organization. These include the changes in the Archdiocese of Boston and the parish(s) they are associated with, certain pivotal issues within the Catholic institution, the opportunities, and anxieties of pluralism, and how that pluralism plays out in Catholic families.<sup>4</sup> Let us

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<sup>1</sup> Jerome P. Baggett. *Sense of the Faithful: How American Catholics Live Their Faith*. Kindle Edition, 553-554.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> Jerome P. Baggett, Kindle Edition 579 of 4320. Culture here refers to the “historically transmitted repertoires of symbols that shape people’s perceptions of reality and, at the same time, render that reality meaningful to them.”

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

Chudy, Carl, D.Min. *Postsecular Catholicism: Toward a Renewed Understanding and Pastoral Praxis in Catholic Families with Disaffiliated Children in the Archdiocese of Boston*. Hartford International University for Religion and Peace. May 2021. DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.26787.58409.

look at these contexts more closely where outlooks on faith, church, and spirituality that navigate in the larger secular culture.

The Western Region of the Archdiocese of Boston

The Archdiocese of Boston, as of 2017, had 288 parish communities, and in 2007 the Catholic population was estimated at 1.8 million.<sup>5</sup> The western region of the archdiocese is where this study takes place, in southern Middlesex County and western Norfolk County. There are sixty-seven parishes in this region, one Catholic College, Regis College, and three Catholic high schools. The auxiliary bishop for the five regions and the bishop of the western part is Bishop Robert P. Reed. The bishop of the overall diocese is Cardinal Sean O'Malley. In select parishes in this region and other parts of the archdiocese, I had opportunities to listen and learn from the faith life narratives of both parents and their adult children in how they experience disaffiliation.

The participants of *generation one* are affiliated parents and grandparents of the disaffiliated. Those of *generation two* is the disaffiliated children (most not children of the parents interviewed) coming from some local parishes and other parts of the state. For both generation sets, our primary source includes St. Mary's Parish in Holliston, St. John the Evangelist Parish in Hopkinton, St. Cecilia Parish in Ashland, and Sacred Heart Catholic Community in Hopedale. Others come from other parts of the archdiocese.

A prominent feature in the archdiocese that has developed in the last twenty years is the experiences of church closures and mergings. More than two hundred parishes have been affected by this.<sup>6</sup> In conversations with priests, some mergers have been successful, and others have not. There are many reasons for these changes, particularly demographic changes and priest shortages that make staffing difficult, but also because of disaffiliations and shrinking and aging congregations. In the archdiocese of Boston, those who left the church reflect overall national figures to some extent. There are twenty states where no religious group comprises a more significant share of residents than the religiously disaffiliated. These states tend to be more concentrated in the western U.S., although they also include a couple of New England states, namely, Vermont and Massachusetts. In the early 2000s, Catholics still constituted the most significant single Christian denomination at thirty-four percent, but the disaffiliated cohort is right behind, at thirty-three percent. Since then, things have changed dramatically, and the non-churchgoers outnumber churchgoers.<sup>7</sup>

As of 2005, Boston and the surrounding dioceses comprised the fourth-largest diocese in the United States compared to Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago.<sup>8</sup> However,

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<sup>5</sup> There is an ongoing process of closing and amalgamation of parishes and schools, and it continues to this day, so the number of parishes may be different than what I indicated, but the difference would not be big. See: <http://www.thebostonpilot.com/article.asp?ID=179672>.

<sup>6</sup> Closures and Mergers of Parishes in the Archdiocese of Boston: <https://www.bostoncatholic.org/sites/g/files/zjfyce811/files/2019-12/RCAB-ParishesSuppressed-Merged-WelcomingParishes-2017.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Robert P. Jones, Daniel Cox. *America's Changing Religious Identity: Findings from the 2016 American Values Atlas*. Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) (Washington D.C.: PRRI, 2017), 8.

<sup>8</sup> David M. Cheney, 1996-2005; code: v2.3.4, 17 Nov 05. USA Statistics by Province of the Catholic Population. <http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/country/spcus1.html>.

the changes in Boston's Catholic culture show former Catholics now constitute the largest (non) religious bloc in the Boston area. Some ex-Catholics have joined other religious bodies. Others take no interest in religious affairs. Still, others think of themselves as Catholic, but they neither practice their faith in church nor follow its teachings. As the journalist, Philip Lawler observes: "In the opening years of the twenty-first century, practicing Catholics are once again a small minority in Boston."<sup>9</sup>

The share of Massachusetts Catholics dropped nine percentage points since the last survey in 2007, while the unaffiliated grew sixteen percent. The Pew Study puts the percentage of Catholic disaffiliation in the northeast at 36% for white Catholics and Hispanics at a much lower level, 18%.<sup>10</sup> This changing parochial structure that will continue ironically seems to provoke little interest among parish leadership to understand the dynamics of disaffiliation and how it affects families.

### The Institutional Catholic Sub-Context

As a Catholic interfaith leader, my interest in disaffiliation came through interfaith dialogue that includes non-religious voices. Many of these nonreligious voices left institutional faith traditions. For this reason, I wish to frame this research around a religious dialogical model with secular spirituality and aspirations as part of our commitment as Catholics in a post-secular environment. As the Catholic Church of Boston, our roles as religious men and women who belong to different religious orders differ from the diocesan priests and lay who collaborate with the bishop in most parishes. While the authority for public ministry comes from the bishop, our lifestyle and focus of work are under our leadership structures and historical tradition of our religious charism and purpose. Catholic community development through parishes and the social ministry of the archdiocese is the focus of diocesan clergy and lay leadership, although some religious congregations manage parishes.

The Xaverian Missionaries' religious institute<sup>11</sup> dedicates itself to dialogue and connection among different faiths and secular worldviews as a Christian understanding of mission. We, therefore, have a responsibility to enhance the work in the local church with the necessary commitments in interfaith dialogue and religious-secular dialogue that experience disaffiliation. This experience gives us some independence from church parish structures that allow a wider latitude. This dialogue and its evolving intuitive understanding of Catholicism began through Vatican II and post-conciliar pastoral practice. As a result, we understand our call our charismatic gift to the peripheries of faith communities and drawing different religious and secular voices together in dialogue and collaboration.

The experience of both legacy and loss in Catholic disaffiliation is a particular place where the responsive dynamics to pluralism affects the institution profoundly in the

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<sup>9</sup> Stephen Bullivant. *Mass Exodus: Catholic Disaffiliation in Britain and America since Vatican II*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Nate Cohn. "Christian Numbers in US Tumbling: Share of Catholics in Mass." *New York Times*, May 13, 2015. (accessed January 4, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> Historically, the founding of our congregation occurred in Italy in 1895 with the exclusive purpose at that time to work in China. In the last 126 years expanding to work in 21 different countries globally, our work has increasingly focused on interfaith and intercultural dialogue.

religious departure of young people.<sup>12</sup> There are some factors at play in their leave-taking in part because of their ecclesial experience: the Catholic institutional crisis (closing and amalgamation of parishes), changes in families that affect church practice, issues around LGBTQ members and their children, issues around women and leadership, particularly for the clerical state, what it means to be Catholic today (Identity) in the mix of life, the clergy sexual abuse crisis, and traditional models of leadership that find it difficult in meeting new needs in the evolving religious culture. Along with this is the Catholic polarity experienced in social issues from abortion, immigration, and global climate change that most often run along partisan lines.

## The Anxiety of Pluralism

The backdrop of the experience of disaffiliation is considering a *pluralism* of views among Catholics about what it means to be Catholic today, or what we call Catholic identity. Peter Berger defines pluralism as the social milieu where peoples of different ethnicities, worldviews, and moralities live together in a positive relationship. For pluralism to unleash its full dynamic, there must be a sustained conversation, or what he calls *cognitive contamination*. It refers to the fact that if people keep talking with each other, they will influence each other.<sup>13</sup> Cognitive contamination relativizes polarized perceptions as people encounter realities that contradict previously believed, say in religious/secular relationships.

There are two kinds of pluralism, and each requires interaction with the other. First, there is religious pluralism as commonly understood: several religions co-existing peacefully in the same society. Then there is the religious-secular pluralism experienced in many parts of the world where religious and non-religious worldviews live side-by-side, such as the separation of church and state in our nation's constitutions. Second, there is a co-existence, often uneasy, between religious and powerful secular discourses, initially rooted in modern science and technology and expanded meanings of spiritualities in more contemporary times.<sup>14</sup> Navigating these contexts with faith requires different responses to moderate the anxiety that pluralism causes. It can be envisioned as many points as possible between two opposite reactions: a conservative retrenchment to hold on to the past and to undergird certainty, a kind of fundamentalism, and on the other side, a trend toward relativization that attempts to embrace diversity in some way but compromising fundamental truths. Both polar reactions respond to the angsts of pluralism.<sup>15</sup> Much of the institutional Catholic Church in Boston respond closer to the conservative pole.

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<sup>12</sup> The Duke University study by Sharon Sandomirsky and John Wilson states: "When it comes to explaining why people would choose to leave their religion of origin, especially if they elect to do this soon after they enter adulthood, we believe that attention should focus on the family. The reason for this is that religion and the family are the least differentiated of all social institutions." (Harrison & Lazerwitz 1982).

<sup>13</sup> Peter L. Berger. *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age*. (Boston: Walter de Gruyter, Inc., 2014), 1-2.

<sup>14</sup> Kaye V. Cook, ed. *Faith in a Pluralist Age* by Peter L. Berger. (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, an Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018). Kindle Edition, 285 of 3195.

<sup>15</sup> Berger, 10-12.

## Pluralism Plays Out in Catholic Families

The ongoing changes in America's religious identity are seen, for example, in a recent study of the Public Religion Research Institute's (PRRI) 2017 report, *America's Changing Religious Identity*, directed by Daniel Cox, Ph.D., and Robert P. Jones, Ph.D. Similarly, Joseph Baker and Buster Smith's *American Secularism: Cultural Contours of Nonreligious Belief Systems* shows how changes to American society have fueled shifts in the non-religious landscape and examines the diverse and dynamic world of secular Americans. This dialogue also reveals that religions and secular worldviews are embedded in all dimensions of human experience and cannot be understood apart from their political, economic, social, and cultural moorings.

Many millennials of Catholic families are deeply aware of the realities of pluralism, more so than any generation before it.<sup>16</sup> Their friends often identify themselves in multiple ways: in other religious traditions that may be affiliated but minimally, those who may be termed nonreligious, and various multi-belongings. They may relativize their own Christian and Catholic uniqueness in this mix as they struggle to distinguish their unique identity from others. Their prevailing cultural view can be more secular than religious. It may be why many disaffiliated see a distinction between their Catholic understanding and new spiritual insights that may have little relation to the church. It also may be why there can be utter bewilderment on the part of affiliated Catholic parents who themselves see the church and spirituality in such diverse ways than their children.

Secular principles and norms undergird our legal, economic, political, and social institutions, as well as the conduct of everyday life. Yet, religion has not disappeared but is a salient force.<sup>17</sup> Despite the influence of secularization in families, a University of Minnesota study calls the centrality of religious rooted moral boundary-making. The idea that morality is exclusively religious is tension and contradiction that young generations experience with their parents. Catholic families perceive the disaffiliated negatively by and large. Parents and grandparents become worried that their children weaken their moral compass without a meaningful relationship with the church. Yet, they feel the contradiction because they know their children to be good, righteous people. They anchor these sentiments in moral concerns that bring up family relationships that are often unspoken or poorly articulated. Since religion has historically been the locus of social identity and ethical consideration, some can see non-religiosity as a moral threat.<sup>18</sup>

Robert Wuthnow argues that the connection between the institutions of family and religion has become extremely fragile, increasingly diverse, and unhinged in a pluralism of lifestyles (Wuthnow, 1999, 219). The first issue is how do Catholic families engage with each other in this diverse reality? That engagement is not only with their loved ones exiting the religious institution, but it is an engagement with the secular niches where

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<sup>16</sup> Arzina Zaver, "Pluralism and Social Media: Cultivating a New Outlook?" The State of Formation, August 8, 2014, <https://stateofformation.org/2014/08/pluralism-and-social-media-cultivating-a-new-outlook/>.

<sup>17</sup> Michele Dillon. *Postsecular Catholicism*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018). Kindle Edition, 4.

<sup>18</sup> Penny Edgell, Douglas Hartmann, Evan Stewart, and Joseph Gerteis. Atheists and Other Cultural Outsiders: Moral Boundaries and the Non-religious in the United States. *Social Forces*, Vol. 95, No.2 (December 2016), pp. 607-638. Published by Oxford University Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26166844>. (Accessed: 10-02-2020).

their children may be finding community, inspiration, and opportunities to be effective. The second issue may be how the sustained dialogue in the matrix of disaffiliation shapes and reshapes how they perceive one another regarding faith. Finally, if the passing of faith in the family becomes less the way faith traditions and morality endures, what are the implications for the church and its families?

*Postsecular Catholicism*, or any religious tradition, navigates the tensions of faith traditions in the context of secular realities. Catholicism in the Archdiocese of Boston, and indeed throughout the country, are lived secular realities infused with a sacred meaning. This encounter requires an ongoing interchange between religious ideas and secular realities. As Michele 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?” This question confronts every Catholic family in the modern world.<sup>19</sup>

Catholic disaffiliation that begins within families is understood in the overlapping contexts where they navigate their lives. The Archdiocese of Boston’s changing cultural realities that impact its life and membership and how the phenomena of pluralism affect Catholic families reveals the complex nature of understanding Catholicism and faith today. It also helps us see the understanding of the institutional church as a cultural reality and a home for faith. Now I wish to turn to the theological significance of deconversion, not as a failed attempt toward religiosity, but a different and valid understanding of Christian discipleship.

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<sup>19</sup> Dillon, Kindle Edition location 67 of 5448.