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The Thinker and the Guide: A Conversation concerning Religious Disaffiliation from the Catholic Church

James Michael Nagle

P R E C I S

The rise of religious disaffiliation represents one of the most significant events of the last 100 years in religious history. Catholicism in the United States has experienced the greatest “losses” associated with this movement, but Catholic theology has not been curious enough about what sorts of people disaffiliating Catholics are becoming. Scholars such as Tom Beaudoin and Patrick Hornbeck have proposed new directions for theological research by tracking not just what “brokers of official Catholicism” count as normative but also what ordinary and disaffiliating Catholics take to be normative out of their own formation and everyday life. This essay explores the experience of disaffiliation through a research portrait of a conversation between one affiliated religious educator and his disaffiliated former student. The study provides a compelling way into the larger contested conversation concerning disaffiliation. These two perspectives—of the affiliated religious educator and of the disaffiliated former student—offer insight on a growing but underrepresented experience in contemporary theological research. The essay suggests that positive religious life and learning can lead beyond affiliation with the Catholic Church and that, when disaffiliated persons are engaged in conversation, we can learn from them. The purpose of this study, however, is not to find a solution to the “problem” of disaffiliation but to propose a more affirming way to speak of and with persons and groups disaffiliating from conventional religious communities.



Introduction

Saint Mary's Press, in collaboration with the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, demonstrated significant first steps in an alternative approach to improving the Catholic Church's understanding of religious disaffiliation by engaging with disaffiliated Catholics. *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics* went beyond statistical data by offering personal narratives of young adults, aged 15–25, who once self-identified as Catholic but no longer so identify.¹ The study asked what appears to be a simple research question: “Do we know who Disaffiliates are?” The admission embedded in this modest inquiry implies that the answer has been “no.” The study then made an even more provocative and humble query, “Do we miss them when they are gone?” The suggestion again is that the answer has been “no,” but should be “yes.”

The rise of religious disaffiliation represents one of the most significant events of the last 100 years in religious history. According to a 2016 Public Religion Research Institute study, one-quarter of North Americans claim no formal religious identity. This group is now the single largest “religious group” in the United States.² Roman Catholicism has experienced the greatest “losses” associated with this movement.³ There are 6.5 “former Catholics” in the U.S. for every new member.⁴ For a denomination canonically difficult to leave, many North American Catholics are migrating beyond the

¹Robert J. McCarty and John M. Vitek, *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics* (Winona, MN: St. Mary's Press, 2017).

²Betsy Cooper, Daniel Cox, Rachel Lienesch, and Robert P. Jones, “Exodus: Why Americans Are Leaving Religion—and Why They’re Unlikely to Come Back,” The Public Religion Research Institute, 2016; available at <https://www.prii.org/research/prii-rns-poll-nones-atheist-leaving-religion/>.

³See “About the Religious Landscape Study,” Pew Research Center, 2014; available at <https://www.pewforum.org/about-the-religious-landscape-study/>. Roughly the same number of Americans identify as Catholic today as in the 1970's, but the effects of migration obscure the larger trend away from standard affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church. See “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Religious Affiliation,” The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2008, at <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/2008/02/25/us-religious-landscape-survey-religious-affiliation>; and Caryle Murphy, “Half of U.S. Adults Raised Catholic Have Left the Church at Some Point,” Pew Research Center, 2015, at <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/09/15/half-of-u-s-adults-raised-catholic-have-left-the-church-at-some-point/>. Disaffiliating Catholics now make up 10.1% of the overall adult population (“Religious Landscape Study”).

⁴“About the Religious Landscape Study.”

institution's immediate influence. The religious patterns associated with this experience represent a somewhat cohesive movement influencing not just Catholicism but the whole of religion in the U.S.

The questions explored by *Going, Going, Gone* concede that a blind spot has limited the Catholic discourse surrounding this movement. Theologians and leaders have been slow to learn who disaffiliates are and what the tradition and communities are missing as they quietly exit. Why? The assumption has been that disaffiliates and their experiences represent a problem that must be solved. They have "fallen away." They are "lapsed." They are "nonpracticing" Catholics. The Saint Mary's study, and in some ways the recent Synod of Catholic bishops,⁵ demonstrate a more positive curiosity that invites closer, more affirming empirical research.

Tom Beaudoin and Patrick Hornbeck proposed one such approach for theological research by tracking not just what "brokers of official Catholicism" count as normative expressions of faith but also what ordinary and disaffiliating Catholics take to be normative out of their own formation and everyday life.⁶ Like their work, the present study explores the different ways of constructing meaning, or ways of being religious, involved with disaffiliation. Disaffiliation, I suggest, has more to do with leaving than losing. In the words of the disaffiliate portrayed in this essay, a "Catholicness" remains.

That emerging "Catholicness" or "religiousness" appears to flow in multiple directions and through once consequential boundaries without losing coherence to the religious persons themselves. Careful examination of the lives of disaffiliating young adults does reveal that their religious lives are more complicated than a narrative of loss suggests. Many young disaffiliated Catholics do, in fact, reflect on the meaning that pervades

⁵ Pope Francis dedicated the 15th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops to addressing the related theme of "Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment." The documents produced for and by the unprecedented gathering promised to listen to young adults "without exception" in order to accompany them better on their journeys to religious maturity. However, while the Synod noted disaffiliated young Catholics as "priority one" to listen to and to learn more about their changing attitudes and practices, the documents produced maintain a pejorative narrative of loss that represents a significant barrier to that dialogue. Moreover, disaffiliated young Catholics were not present in this conversation. The effort remains a listening *with exception*.

⁶ See Tom Beaudoin, "Deconversion and Disaffiliation in Contemporary U.S. Roman Catholicism," *Horizons* 40 (December, 2013): 255–262; and J. Patrick Hornbeck, "Deconversion: What, Who, Why, How?" *Horizons* 40 (December, 2013): 262–274.

their lives; they do live lives of significance, and they continue to develop spiritually and faithfully as they turn away from the Church in those pursuits. Moreover, it is not only the religious lives of disaffiliates that reflect this movement but also the educators who teach them religion. As this process and experience of disaffiliation continue to influence religious practices and participation, it will be increasingly important for theologians to understand what it is that is moving, what it is that is resisting that movement, and who or what is directing the flow.

Generous and respectful conversations between affiliated and “lapsed” Catholics, such as the one presented in this study, offer a promising alternative approach to instrumental research seeking a solution to a “problem.” This alternate and practical motivation guided my work from the beginning. As a theologian and educator, I hope to contribute to a more affirming way to speak of and with persons and groups disaffiliating from conventional religious communities. With this goal in mind, the reader will witness below a dialogue that can help generate new theories where inadequate explanations currently exist. The ability of the religious educator portrayed in this study to count his former disaffiliated student “as a win” has much to teach other religious educators and leaders in and beyond Catholicism. Positive religious educational experiences and relationships that resulted in disaffiliation do exist. Some disaffiliates have learned to leave the church for religious and moral reasons, and many of these “non-practicing” Catholics still practice something.

That said, the portrait presented here does not solve or reduce the complexity of disaffiliation. It does make that complexity more comprehensible and offers a better understanding of the impact religious education can have on a disaffiliate’s life during and after disaffiliation. In that effort, the essay first introduces the methods of this study—the methodology of portraiture as a unique form of research in dialogue—and then presents the portrait itself. The conversation between Eliot Chance and Michael Keene⁷ across the boundary of affiliation that separates them demonstrates how contemporary cultural circumstances have opened a new space in-between where people can live, move, and make meaning. The conversation reveals

⁷I have given each of the research participants pseudonyms to keep their identities confidential. All the proper names of places and people given during their interviews have similarly been changed. All interviews and observations were conducted in New York City, April–June, 2017.

the faithful but critical praxis that Eliot shared with his thoughtful student and that has guided them both to live and learn outside the established boundaries of conventional religious expectations. Based on this conversation, the conclusion offers questions for further research and dialogue in related fields.

I. Methodology: One Portrait, Many Conversations

The following portrait is one of a series that explores one “place” where the religiously affiliated and religiously disaffiliating regularly meet—Catholic secondary schools. I asked four religious educators to name a former student whom they had a positive experience teaching but who no longer is an affiliated member of a Catholic faith community. I conducted a sequence of in-depth interviews and participant observations with each of the educators and interviewed their former students over the same time period and in a similar series of interviews. These teacher-learner pairs were then brought together for a conversation to discuss the teaching and learning that had occurred during and since their time together. During these interviews, I situated myself alongside both the teachers and their former students, making the conversations more collaborative than interviewer-driven. Although I came to each meeting with a basic question to structure our time together, due to the grounded nature of research portraiture the participants themselves guided the interviews as I responded to participants’ answers with questions of clarification and requests for stories. The particular adaptation of ethnographic methods in research portraiture offered an inspiring way to approach the phenomenon of religious disaffiliation.

Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot, the creator of portraiture, argues that humanistic research has a tendency to document pathology and failure rather than goodness and resilience. Doing so produces distorting results that often confirm majority opinions and silence the voices of marginalized groups.⁸ Instead, her responsive social science methodology blends

⁸ See Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, “The Good High School: Portraits of Character and Culture (New York: Basic Books, 1983); and Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffmann Davis, *The Art and Science of Portraiture* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002), pp. 8–9. Much of the existing research regarding religious disaffiliates confirms this claim, with the exception of the St. Mary’s study and the growing body of deconversion literature (see James Michael

analysis and aesthetics to answer the questions: What is happening here? What is working? And why?⁹ Research portraiture, then, provides a compelling way into this particular conversation because, as the methodology's creator suggests, researchers who ask first "what is good here?" will uncover a very different reality than those "on a mission to discover the source of failure."¹⁰

Lawrence-Lightfoot's innovative methodology involves an iterative process and adaptation of traditional ethnographic methods that demand an ongoing dialectic between process and product to document social processes, human interaction, and meaningful experience so that the researcher can "paint" a thick and intentionally generous descriptive phenomenology in historical, social, and cultural context that affirms research subjects as the best authorities on their own experiences. In portraiture's blend of research and art, the research topic and participants are explicitly encountered through these "brush strokes" of the researcher. Therefore, the researcher herself becomes both central and peripheral to the process and final product. Lawrence-Lightfoot has argued paradoxically that negotiating this tension helps both researcher and reader engage the subject of study authentically.¹¹ Although the researcher will sketch what she sees in light of her own experiences, presenting an ongoing dialogue between the hand of the artist portraying what the subjects say, live, and do, and the voice of the researcher discussing what she thinks she can see balances the analytical and aesthetic whole.¹²

As such an interpretive and co-constructed exercise, portraiture hinges on reflexivity in the many encounters and conversations involved: the researcher with the research participants, the participants with the researcher, and that of the reader with the final portrait itself. Portraiture

Nagle, "How We Get Somewhere Religiously: Religious Education and Deconversion," *Religious Education* 112 [May–June, 2017], pp. 255–263; Beaudoin, "Deconversion and Disaffiliation"; J. Patrick Hornbeck, "The Formal Act of Defection and U.S. Catholic Deconversion," *American Catholic Studies* 127 [Spring, 2016]: 1–23; Heinz Streib, *Deconversion: Qualitative and Quantitative Results from Cross Cultural Research in Germany and the United States of America* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009]; and John D. Barbour, *Versions of Deconversion: Autobiography and the Loss of Faith* [Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1994]).

⁹ See Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, *The Art and Science of Portraiture*, p. 142.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹¹ See *ibid.*, p. 96.

¹² See *ibid.*, p. 35.

always, then, involves these various dialogues. In this particular portraiture, the study was also designed to portray literally two participants in dialogue.

The methodology's combination of systematic description, iterative analysis, and an aesthetic whole allowed analytical categories to emerge as this study unfolded. As the portraitist/researcher, I moved back and forth from these categories and new ethnographic data in order to develop new frameworks—and eventually a new theory of disaffiliation. I have omitted from this essay some of the analysis that goes along with the series of portraits in order to preserve the dialogical elements of this single portrait for the reader to encounter. This portrait and this study do not claim to be exhaustive, but I believe there is much here with which scholars can engage. In this abbreviated form, I believe there is value in sharing the story, or aesthetic whole, without a heavy analytical and theoretical layer. Of course, there are traces of that analytical work in the “brush strokes” of the researcher. The reader will encounter both a process and conversation through which to explore the complexity of theology and pedagogy that shape the everyday lives of religious educators and learners today. My hunch is that many teachers and theologians will see elements of themselves reflected in the following portrait.

II. A Little about the Portraitist

When I began formation as a vowed religious, the educators responsible for my classmates and me stated explicitly, “even if you decide to leave this community, we believe you will benefit from the process—and so will the world.” I did leave the vowed religious life. However, as my formators suggested, I believe my religious education was successful. Similarly, I believe the rise of religious disaffiliation may represent something more than seductive secular culture, young-adult narcissism, or a failure of education or evangelization. Charles Taylor has suggested that contemporary cultural circumstances include an “explosion of third ways” between orthodoxy and atheism for people to live and learn.¹³

¹³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 302.

Research suggests that more and more people occupy this space “in between” conventional participation, and they come into regular contact by shaping religious life and learning today as an ongoing choice.¹⁴ Elizabeth Drescher has used the terms “Somes” and “Nones” to describe this contemporary religious pattern. Her language and findings suggest that “Nones” and “Somes” are not opposites. “Somes” are not “Tons” or “Totally Ins,” so to speak. They have some particular religion—and some other stuff, too. As a researcher and portraitist, I occupy a similar space.

Through my own personal and professional encounters with “Somes” and “Nones,” I feel accountable to both groups. As a Catholic practical theologian and educator, I hope to deepen and clarify tradition by contributing to a discourse that can operate with more than a narrative of loss or deficit when speaking of and with those outside the boundaries of normative Christian or religious identity. This effort can begin by asking for and offering opportunities for “Nones” and disaffiliating Catholics to share clearly the choices they have made and the reasons they made them. I am committed to these interfaith relationships and conversations that include the nonnormative identities in order to advance the engagement of religious communities with a pluralistic world. With that commitment in mind, I offer the advice of John Dewey. In *Experience and Nature*,¹⁵ he warned educators to distrust simplifications that make judgments easy and action appear simple. Instead, he encouraged discovering and wrestling with the complexity of a thing. Religious disaffiliation, I suggest, is just that sort of thing.

III. The Thinker and the Guide: An Initial Sketch

When I met with Michael Keene, thirty-two years old, and Elliot Chance, fifty-six years old,¹⁶ I was curious how the pair would discuss the potentially uncomfortable topic of disaffiliation that had developed since their time together as teacher and student. The elder Eliot grew up in what he described as a typical Catholic family of his generation. An alumnus of an all-boys Catholic high school in the area, he earned advanced degrees in

¹⁴ Elizabeth Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America's Nones* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 11.

¹⁵ John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Co., 1925), p. 33.

¹⁶ See note 7, above.

theology and explored a vocation as a priest. Eliot has taught religion in Catholic high schools for thirty years. The younger Michael also spoke positively of his Catholic childhood. He works for a consulting firm, lives with his fiancé, and does not attend Mass regularly. He and his fiancé are not planning a Catholic wedding. Michael concedes he does not have “a good label” for who he is religiously.

Knowing these details, the two appeared an unlikely pair—even more so sitting side-by-side. Over six feet tall with a baritone voice, Eliot commands attention. Michael is short and soft-spoken. The surface differences, including their religious affiliations, obscure the more intangible elements that make up these two men. What they shared in common quickly became apparent and brought into focus what I had learned about Eliot as an educator and Michael as a learner. They both like to talk about things that matter. As we sat down together, there was an immediate and easy banter between like-minded men.

IV. Meeting Eliot Chance

Eliot possesses a disarming swagger that can only be characterized as that of a man with a secret that he is completely willing to share. In our first interview, he quoted a mentor and described his own *je ne sais quoi* indirectly: “If you want someone to give up their life for this thing you call your religion, I better see a hell of a lot of joy in your face, not the sourpuss. . . . Joy may be too strong a word on most days, but I try to live that. It provides me meaning.” Eliot presents Catholic tradition in a persuasive way that only authenticity can produce. He is, for lack of any better descriptor, “evangelical” in the best sense of that term. Eliot has *evangelion*, “good to be made known.”¹⁷

Eliot was interested in the study from our first phone call. We agreed to meet at the New York Public Library. The stories Eliot shared about his hopes for his students and his own formative experiences provide insight into the practical religious knowledge and critical sense of tradition he hands on to his students.

¹⁷ Before the Greek word “*evangelion*” became synonymous with the Christian Gospels, it was used more broadly to describe good news and tidings to be shared. Tom Beaudoin has used the helpful translation, “good to be made known,” in his courses on Evangelization, Faith, and Culture at Fordham University.

A. A Critical Reflection: "The Church as It Is"

As a young student, Eliot thrived in his theology classes at the traditional all-boys Catholic high school he attended. He encountered progressive content and outstanding teachers. He expressed gratitude and admiration for his religion teachers' openness to questioning. Eliot recalled how they would take students' questions and "just run with it." How the religious brothers treated him in school, not just what they taught him, made them significant teachers. Their lessons included the reality that religious life is complex and imperfect. A number of these teachers, including the principal and vice-principal, left the school and their order during Eliot's first year. "Not only did they leave, they left and married their secretaries! The Brothers who stayed had a hard time processing it. We all did . . . It taught me again that the church is not a monolithic, consistent community that can live by rules alone. It was absolute chaos . . . yet, somehow there was an important thread that continued."

While watching some brothers walk away from their vows was traumatic, Eliot added that he has met some of those brothers over the years in their new lives. "They are wonderful! It's okay that they left. . . . They're not traitors." He explained that during this time he learned to "recognize the Church as it is"—not eternal and unchanging, but human and limited. That knowledge is not a deal breaker for Eliot. "Even flawed human beings can surprise you and do something where you realize you may just be witnessing the Spirit at work." Eliot suggested that this humility and openness are part of growing up religiously. This maturity guides Eliot's life, and his teaching.

B. A Practical Theology: "When in doubt, I lean towards being open. Absolutely."

As an educator myself, I believe the physical space where you teach is meaningful. My own classrooms have always reflected my approach to religion so that, even if a student did not listen to a thing I said but just stared at the walls for a period, there was a narrative they could not help but absorb and remember. When I walked into Eliot's classroom, I smiled and began staring at the walls.

Eliot's classroom is equal parts chapel and man-cave. The room is small, with little empty space on the walls. They are covered with Da Vinci

sketches, religious icons, and photographs of cathedrals, along with framed posters of Jerry Garcia, the Beatles, and meaningful sport pages from Met's History. A large banner centrally located on the far wall organizes the assemblage. What the attention-deficient student in his classes walks away with, at the very least, is religion = "Finding God in All [*these*] Things." Similarly, talking about his goals as an educator, Eliot shared: "My hopes for my students are that they see that religion is relevant to their lives and to the questions that every life ought to engender, and that despite some of the mistakes the Church has made historically, there's still a treasure chest of wisdom that I think includes the best of the human tradition, philosophy and the arts, and the like."

During our conversations about his students, Eliot shared that his own children, ages twenty-five and twenty-three, have begun disaffiliating from the institutional Catholic Church. I awkwardly asked, "If *your* kids are disaffiliating, what do you think that means?" He smiled, accepting the implied compliment, and responded with clarity that indicated that this was not the first time he had wrestled with the question:

I don't know if it's rationalization, but this is between them, God, and the Holy Spirit . . . I've been humbled by how little I have known that's turned out to be true in my life, and even more humbled by what I thought was absolutely true in my life and has turned out not to be. That openness, I think . . . comes from when I see Jesus in the scriptures, and experience Him in the Mass. That is the God I resonate with. That it is ok. He says, "I want you to work your ass off, and I want you to be humble, but I want you to have a sense of humor, and I want you to care about every single person that's in need because everyone is an instance of my son or my daughter." Some days that's easier than others . . . but when in doubt, I lean towards being open. Absolutely.

Eliot learned this humility both within and outside of his formal religious education.

C. A Formative Experience: "Being Right vs. Being Good"

Though Eliot told this next piece of his story without a smile, the tale is not dark. It is one of many experiences in his religious life and learning that formed the rich template that influences his practice as a teacher of religion

and theology. He shared that, around the age of eight, he began to notice his father came home “a little out of focus.” “I can still hear it, the pop of a Schmidt’s beer bottle. Whether it was 11 a.m. or 12 a.m., that just marked that it was going to be a different day. So, I would make myself scarce . . . He never laid a hand on us, never got fired, but just that change, it was not desirable for anybody.”

Eliot has given retreat talks about being the child of an alcoholic and shares it in his classes when teaching the Paschal Mystery. He often framed the value he places on theological reflection in terms of getting through the “crap storms that are sure to come, if they haven’t already, and will come again and again.” He explains to his students that they will suffer like everyone else. They may even suffer for taking a stand for justice. He asks them, “But, do you believe that through Good Friday there is an Easter Sunday coming after? If the answer is yes, and there is a community to share that grief within dialogue with tradition, you can receive graces that you otherwise would not receive through suffering.” This faith was tested early on in Eliot’s life.

Eliot’s parents eventually separated due to the pain his father caused. He recalled noticing a lump on the side of his father’s neck during his visits. “Long story short, oncologist, lymphoma, radiation, and then they finally called us in and said, “There is nothing we can do. So it’s time to prepare.” Eliot shared the life-changing way his mother helped him and his family prepare:

My mother called my brother, sister, and I into the living room and said, “We’re going to bring your dad home.” We set up a hospital bed in my bedroom on the first floor. I slept on the couch and took care of him for two months. . . . He was sober the whole time. . . . Those were the best two months that I can remember . . . For my mom to be able to want to do that, to bring him home, that is the most formative experience of my life. . . . She taught me an important distinction, one that I wish more people understood: There is a difference between being right and being good. It’s important to know what the right thing to do is, but there’s sometimes a higher calling in a situation.

I mention this story because Eliot teaches with this level of gravitas. He embodies the teaching that hangs centrally located in his classroom. One

of the reasons Eliot hoped Michael would choose to participate in the study with him was that he thought Michael was one of the few students in his thirty-year career who had understood what he does as a teacher.

V. Meeting Michael Keene

Michael Keene was responsive in making time to speak with me despite what was clearly a busy period between work and wedding planning. We met in the middle of the business day in midtown Manhattan. Michael looks a young thirty-two years old. He wears glasses, and his hair is cropped short. Michael was well dressed in a suit and tie. He arrived early and politely would not let me buy him a cup of coffee, and, before I realized it, he paid for my bottle of water. What struck me in meeting Michael was what I experienced as a dissonance between the suit and the man with whom I was speaking. I also work in midtown Manhattan. In that context, one is not accustomed to the thoughtfulness with which Michael communicates. We both leaned into an engaging exchange concerning his religious life and learning.

I was curious about Michael's upcoming wedding and wondered whether he and his fiancé's choice not to have a Catholic wedding was hard for his family. He explained that, while there was no judgment from his family, he thought Mr. Chance might have an opinion about it. (Eliot had, in fact, mentioned it with concern.) Michael explained his view:

We made a decision, and I am ok with it. . . . The religiosity of [our wedding] does not come from being in a church necessarily or needs to be provided by a priest. I think it's about the event itself. . . . Instead of the religious quality being given externally, it is coming from a more internal expression of us . . . I am not going to get married by someone I don't have a relationship with. We are both not church-goers, so we will have someone who knows us well and have a thoughtful ceremony that means something to us. That seems more appropriate, but you are going against tradition.

Despite how it might sound, tradition matters to Michael.

A. A Disaffiliating Identity: "Proudly Catholic"

Michael explained in our first interview that he identifies proudly as Catholic, but "Catholic sociologically." I followed up to clarify this

distinction. I was curious how he understood the difference between being Catholic sociologically, religiously, and spiritually. To Michael, “religiously” meant “going to church.” Being “spiritually Catholic” included Catholic belief. Identifying as “Catholic sociologically” meant the religious culture that continues to shape him. When I asked what was keeping a sociological Catholic from joining the community, he laughed at the irony and replied:

The reason that I don't go to church is that as much as it's been a habit to go, it's become a habit to not go . . . Although I don't go to church anymore, I love the Triduum . . . I really love Good Friday, Holy Thursday, the whole Triduum. To me, it's what all the rest of Catholic ritual is based upon. . . . I find the historical progression of the Pagan religions, into the early church, and Muslim influences fascinating. I feel the Catholic Mass captures a lot of the collision of those traditions . . . When I go to Mass, that's what I think about . . . I learned that in Mr. Chance's class. . . . The Church was not stamped out as one thing. . . . I don't go anymore because I have lots of frustrations with the Church: Its resistance to move forward and all the obvious abuses.

While Michael has developed a new habit of not going to church, he repeated often that he has not “departed” his relationship with God or tradition. He articulated an expansive theology learned from exposure to diverse points of view, including those presented in his formal religious education. “My mindset is not exclusive,” he asserted. “I don't feel like I have left anything because there's nothing to leave from. It [“Catholicness”] is a relationship with God. It is not “we are in this box, and you're not.” We are all together and the boxes don't matter in the end.”

B. A Religious Education: “A Practical Approach”

Michael shared that as a child, although he did not understand difference, he was aware religious difference existed. His uncle was Jewish, and one of his aunts had converted to an Evangelical form of Christianity. In high school, Michael began to learn what it meant to be Catholic or not. Rather than narrowing his notion of religiousness, he explained that this education prepared him for when he would encounter religious others. Michael's teachers revealed to him that other religions not only existed but also had always mixed with each other throughout history. Religious life,

then, was more than adherence to one view. This level of honesty spoke to Michael. “The class was taught by someone who was in the middle of this struggle trying to help us make sense of what appears to be a bit of non-sense. So how do you handle that? How have people for the past 2,000 years handled that? It was a practical approach to religion and history. What does it all mean? What do the sacraments mean in relation to life? What are they telling you? Why are they important?” Michael learned from Eliot how to ask the questions “any life ought to engender.”

The year Michael spent in Eliot’s class was significant in light of those questions it provoked. It was 2001 in New York City. In addition to the collective trauma of September 11th, two of Michael’s classmates committed suicide. Eliot described those months after 9/11 as a series of challenging moments where he hoped to “adjust [his students’] image of God in a way that would serve them well for the rest of their lives.” It was in that class that Michael was shown how to do theology himself. His motivation, Eliot observed, was not academic but the desire for an encounter with the material and the theological reflection being demonstrated. Michael confirmed that his education had prepared him for the next steps in his adult religious life.

After graduation, Michael attended college where he met Evangelicals and atheists and encountered a conventional Catholicism in contrast to the “sense of tradition”¹⁸ he had learned. The experience prompted more reflection:

I wondered what being Catholic meant exactly? There is so much dogma in the Catholic tradition and so much precedent that if you were to be a strict Catholic, your life would be pretty constrained. The way we each have gotten around that is that we each kind of have our own belief system. Right? That’s how it really plays out . . . Strict adherence was not something I had ever experienced as being Catholic. . . . That wasn’t the religious curriculum I learned in high school . . . I learned a very broad thought process and a very deep philosophical tradition.

¹⁸David Hansen has used this language to distinguish between “traditionalism” and a more living and evolving “sense of tradition” (David T. Hansen, “Cosmopolitanism as Education: A Philosophy for Educators in Our Time,” *Religious Education* 112 [May–June, 2017]: 216). In my own work, as it emerged in the language of my research participants, I used the language of convention *vs.* a sense of tradition to identify a similar felt distinction.

After college, this young religious thinker chose to live in the Holy Land because “he wanted to better understand religious conflict.” Michael worked for a small Christian international development company and lived with a Palestinian family. As one might imagine, the experience was transformative, but Michael searched for appropriate language to explain it:

Maybe it was a religious experience, but not in a *religious* way . . . There were months of having nothing to do but think, write, and try to understand what was going on. There was a lot of time for reflection. . . . I don’t know how to describe it, but it felt like being at the center of something . . . A lot of my thinking on the social construction of religions started when I was in the Holy Land. You can’t help but think people thinking about the same thing in just slightly different ways have been killed over that difference . . . I think I learned a lot about myself and my approach to things. When I was in the Holy Land, I feel like *I* defined who I was. What made *me* tick and who I was as an adult. I don’t think I knew that at the time, but I left there with something fundamental. It was growing up, I guess. That was the internal take-away. Externally, I learned you can’t always take for granted how religious things are presented.

C. A Religiousness that Remains: “Reflection and Relationship”

Michael shared one feature of contemporary culture that influences him and others like him: Whether it is craft beer or artisan shaving instruments, those who can afford to think in those terms have a desire for innovation that creates a more preferred future.¹⁹ Michael compared this “hipster culture” to religious disaffiliation. “You’ve been exposed to a broad range of ideas, philosophies, religions, cultures; you can’t help but select the things you like and not the things you don’t.” Michael has mixed feelings about this practice but believes it fits contemporary experience. Within this tension, he chooses significant elements of “Catholicness” to organize his life. He still prays, for example. “My prayer is reflection and

¹⁹What Michael called “hipster culture” has much in common with “design thinking,” an engineering methodology to find desirable solutions in an action-oriented way to create a better future. The process involves iterative prototyping and evaluation (see Bernard Roth, *The Achievement Habit: Stop Wishing, Start Doing, and Take Command of Your Life* [New York: HarperBusiness (HarperCollinsPublishers), 2015]).

the repetition of prayers that I've been saying forever. My prayer is a discourse with God." Michael's sense of tradition is also expressed in more creative ways.

His affinity for ritual shows up in the kitchen, garden, and more. Michael and his fiancé do not attend church, but have initiated a new meaningful ritual. They cook soup together on Sundays.

We decided to stop doing anything after a certain time and just hang out together . . . It became a thing we do. . . . It's not explicitly religious. . . . It's just this event to be together. The soup takes a while to make, and the smell of the soup rises up like an offering, like it says in Hebrew Scriptures. . . . It's not a date night. There is no pressure to find a place to go. It is a let's have a glass of wine and just hang at home with no agenda. We fold laundry. I'll call my folks. She'll call hers . . . It has become a ritual . . . That is probably why we do it. And that's why church is church.

This consistent embodiment of a complex but coherent religious life represents what Michael and his fiancé do want to share as they start a family.

Going to church as a habit is not there anymore. But the relationship has remained. I would like to pass that on to our children. When I was growing up, my mother would pray with me. Then we'd just talk. Prayer at home always included open discussion. . . . That is one beautiful thing about church, I think. You share something. That is the point of the conversation. And it is also the point that you are supposed to come to your own understanding . . . I think that experience would be nice to share with children.

Michael admitted that planning the next phase of his life has reminded him of what prepared him to take these steps. He particularly identified the inclusion of nonreligious concepts into his practice of theological reflection and discernment of God in all things. Michael explained that his religious education taught him to be comfortable with "going outside of religion to find religious answers. . . . or even going outside of being Catholic to find spiritual answers." He shared, "My teachers never actually said that, but it is something I learned from them." I shared with Michael that his comments were striking because Eliot had said something very similar.

Michael: "That's funny because he probably never said it that way in class, ever, but I heard it. I guess that's the point." [laughing] "That's very interesting."

Interviewer: "Indeed, it is."

VI. The Thinker and the Guide: "Put It in the Win Column"

Before Michael and Eliot met with me to discuss the experience they shared, Eliot said he often wished he could meet former students as part of a reunion weekend to listen to where they were and "hit them with a couple more lessons." Sitting in Bryant Park, on his school's reunion weekend, Eliot had something like that opportunity. As the three of us spoke, Eliot described the younger man across from him as a deep-thinking student who integrated perspectives and practices from any tradition if he could see their value and relevance. "So, it was on me to communicate tradition in a compelling manner." If Eliot felt it was up to him to guide Michael through a broad and applicable meaning of Catholicism in a compelling manner, he did so. Michael's appreciation of tradition and ritual is a testament to this. But, in many ways, it was a collaborative educational encounter.

Eliot shared with Michael that his typical evaluation of a student included initially determining what it was that each particular learner needed to grow. Eliot felt he was able to, and ought to, relate to the younger Michael as himself (Eliot) from the start. As a fellow educator, I felt this revealed an integral piece to a very different type of teaching religion. What occurs in such a teaching and learning relationship is unpredictable and transformative for both subjects in the encounter and for the subject of study. Michael spoke of Eliot as a trusted guide because he taught from the authority of his own experience and modeled ongoing critical reflection. Michael felt his guide was preparing him for a similar process of his own.

As a religious educator, Eliot is the product of his own experiences and a resulting practical religious knowledge. He invites his students to develop a similar praxis. Eliot shared, "I have a job to teach what the Church teaches. That said, I want to hear [my students'] reaction to that . . . That's the best part of the job." Eliot's commitment to openness invites learners to pose questions and propose new perspectives. Doing so involves shared

deconstruction and reconstruction of existing views for the sake of something new. As a learner, Michael was shown how to do this theological reflection and construct his own religious practice and belief. The result in this case was a faithful but critical sense of tradition that, according to Michael, has prepared him to do theology himself.

During our conversation, Eliot nodded often as Michael explained what he had learned in his classes; he added that what Michael was describing “marks the difference between authentic religious formation and education in some other Catholic schools where it pushes tradition into a student and expects the students to act like sponges and absorb it.” Eliot’s approach involves presenting a viewpoint, “in a manner that encourages learners to make their own decisions and informed choices.”²⁰ Sarah Tauber suggests that teaching in this way, what she calls the “teacher-as-guide,” involves developing an awareness of the direction in which a learner needs to move for growth to occur. A teacher-as-guide cultivates a familiarity with the strengths and weaknesses of a learner and ultimately trusts that the learner can complete the challenge ahead.²¹ As a guide, Eliot invites his learners into a reflective and interpretive religious process of relating tradition with their lives. If he did not, he shared, “It would be a colossal waste of time.”

Michael did not believe his religious education was a waste of time. Teachers such as Eliot taught him the depth and value of Catholic tradition and prepared him to be able to “have conversations like this,” Michael said with a smile—meaning the questions we were exploring together in this study. “To understand what I believe, regardless of whether it is line with Church dogma. My religious education got me ready for the next steps of learning in my life. Regardless where it took me, it got me ready for the context I live in and am comfortable with.”

Despite his ambiguous relationship with the institutional Church, Michael characterized his religious education as “successful and effective.” He did note the dissonance that may cause for some: “I don’t think that Church leaders would say the same thing, but I would say it was successful.

²⁰ Sarah M. Tauber, *Open Minds, Devoted Hearts: Portraits of Adult Religious Educators* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015), p. 112.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Absolutely.” Eliot and I both exchanged glances during this conversation. He knew the question would return to him. I had asked Eliot in an earlier conversation if affiliation is important to him as a result for his students. He hesitated and realized the tension that could surface, but he admitted more quickly than I anticipated, “That’s a good question. My gut is no, it’s not.” He went on to qualify his response:

I believe that we’re all on a quest to find that which will still the restlessness of our heart. I have found it for the most part, not completely, in the Catholic faith and being affiliated with the Church, but I recognize that most of the great saints have gone through times when they’ve struggled with the Church, or Church authority, or even Church teaching. So to wander away from it at some point for some length of time does not freak me out. . . . I guess what would scare me more is a loss of that desire to find those meanings. I sometimes worry about the kids who are gung-ho affiliated. What are the reasons they are, and how does that translate into the way they live their life and the way they live their marriage and their parenting and their relationships with others who don’t share that experience? I’d probably have much more in common and have a few more laughs and sweet moments with somebody who’s disaffiliated but searching than I would with somebody who’s affiliated for the wrong reasons.

Eliot added that he has a real faith that, in and through young people like Michael and the Holy Spirit, the Church might be “laboring into a new era of understanding which may be more Christian when we come out on the other end.” That said, he still has concerns. “I teach this stuff because it has worked for me. I worry my kids’ generation won’t have a tradition to lean on.” Both his concern and trust exemplify the range and depth from which he draws. Eliot’s deeply embedded value of “finding God in all things” appreciates this complexity and indicates his faith in the revelation that may be occurring outside his—and the tradition’s—control.

When I asked Eliot if Michael’s religious education had been successful, he and Michael smiled at each other—not an awkward I-cannot-tell-a-difficult-truth kind of smile. The shared moment fit the rest of the engaging and respectful conversation. With the smile still stretching across his face, Eliot nodded and drew a sports metaphor that reminded me of his man-cave-chapel: “You gotta put this one in the win column.”

VII. Questions for Further Study and Conversation

There is indeed an important conversation to be had concerning the religious lives of young adults such as Michael. This study was designed with that conversation in mind. I found in portraiture a compelling way to allow disaffiliates to be the best authorities of their own experience and invite theologians and Church leaders to speak of and with disaffiliates in a more affirming way. The single portrait presented here suggests some of the ways that persons and elements of religious traditions pass through conventional boundaries without losing coherence to the person—maybe even without losing coherence to the tradition.

Michael has an ambiguous relationship with the conventional or institutional Catholic Church. His life, choices, and conversation with his affiliated former teacher, however, reveal that Michael is not a disconnected individual adrift in an amoral universe. The religiousness that continues to organize Michael's life is worthy of study because it continues to connect him with affiliated Catholics such as Eliot who agree on the importance of some inherited religious elements, even as they struggle to define what they mean in their everyday lives. The portrait of Eliot and Michael reveals that beneath their difference of affiliation, these two men share a faithful but critical lived religious praxis. The sense of tradition taught and learned in their formal religious educational relationships formed the basis of both the difference and shared meaning observed in their conversation. The conversation *personified*, if you will, significant challenges and questions that represent a rich area for further study.

Eliot, and maybe the reader also, wrestled with such questions as: Is returning to the Church the only faithful option for his students? What is the religiousness that he as a religious educator cares about handing on? Can religiousness remain in and through the disaffiliation process and continue to develop? If so, what concepts and models are usable in Christian traditions to get out of the affiliated and disaffiliated binary to discuss religious life and learning today?²² These questions promise to shed light on an educational and theological intersection where a praxis-over-propositional

²²In other work, I offer “deconversion” as a helpful framework to understand better this alternative path of ongoing religious life and learning. Deconversion literature and language draw from conversion studies to engage with and learn from disaffiliating persons such as Michael (see Nagle, “How We Get Somewhere Religiously”).

approach to teaching religion may be more and more common. If teaching and learning religion today can and does result in nonnormative religious identities, the challenge will be to find ways to understand those teaching-learning relationships as successful when it does.

Despite the positive curiosity suggested in recent efforts such as *Going, Going, Gone*, a hegemonic continues to restrict this contested conversation. A number of scholars have written on this problematic that defines religion as bound territories of belonging separated by clear boundaries; that being religious is belonging to a bound territory based on adherence to a set of beliefs; and that these territories of religion are internally consistent and, therefore, one cannot belong to more than one.²³ I refer to this assumption that separated affiliated religious identities are the norm and only legitimate possibility as a theology of affiliation.²⁴ This bias not only represents a sociological view, but it also represents a logic of consensus derived from a static and possessive sense of revelation that attempts to define boundaries against multiplicity and reform.²⁵

The corresponding narrative of loss or deficiency that dismisses disaffiliated religious identities that violate the expectation of affiliation risks confining understanding to religious domains defined by affiliation at a time when more and more people are not living there. Rather than this theology of affiliation or a banking method of teaching, Eliot chooses to guide his students toward profound and more adequate forms of spiritual life and a deepened sense of tradition, through an exchange with various sources, norms, and traditions. That journey begins with finding God in all things—including how God is being revealed in their lives. “Otherwise,” Eliot explains, “it would be a colossal waste of time for both of us.”

²³ See Paul Hedges, “Multiple Religious Belonging after Religion: Theorising Strategic Religious Participation in a Shared Religious Landscape as a Chinese Model,” *Open Theology* 3 (January, 2017): 48–72; Jeannine Hill Fletcher, “Religious Pluralism in an Era of Globalization: The Making of Modern Religious Identity,” *Theological Studies* 69 (June, 2008): 394–411; and Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*, *Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

²⁴ See Nagle, “How We Get Somewhere Religiously.”

²⁵ Mathew Scruggs has written and presented on this bias in theology as another example of Whiteness that must be disrupted in light of diverse voices that are finally being heard in the academy (Mathew Scruggs, “Symbolic Performativity and Contesting Whiteness: A Latinx Perspective on Popular Religiosity and Religious Education,” paper presented at the Religious Education Association Annual Meeting, November 2–4, 2018).

What I admire about this teacher-learner pair, and what I think tradition could come to appreciate, is that the active, reflective, and disaffiliated religiousness Michael learned with Eliot was, indeed, not a waste of time. The conversation between these two men suggests a transformation at the level of lived religion.²⁶ By this I mean, it appears that the religiousness that Eliot taught and Michael learned takes tradition seriously but also raised Michael's critical consciousness so that it was no longer the church doing the defining of who and what is an authentic Christian faith. The ease with which Eliot could respond and count Michael "as a win" embodies the inspiring unpredictability of teaching theology, and it presents a challenge to theologians and educators to find ways to conduct research with different starting points than affiliation alone. Leaving conventional religious communities does not necessarily mean relinquishing concern with religious praxis. Good religious education prepared Michael for an alternative path of ongoing religious life and learning. The portrait of Michael and Eliot in conversation also suggests a need for new language to describe this experience of learning to leave the Church. That language has not yet emerged—but it might do so in dialogue with disaffiliating persons.

When Eliot, Michael, and I stood to say our goodbyes, I walked away first and looked back to see that they had sat back down together to continue their conversation. It is the sincere hope of this researcher that we can do the same.

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²⁶ I use this concept of "lived religion" in the sense that Maynard, Moschella, and Hummel deploy the term: "The everyday practices through which character is formed, communities are strengthened or subverted, and religious meaning is made" (Jane F. Maynard, Leonard Hummel, and Mary Clark Moschella, eds., *Pastoral Bearings: Lived Religion and Pastoral Theology* [Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011], p. 4).

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