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Faith and Doubt in a Secular Age

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"I am large, I contain multitudes" | WALT WHITMAN

Introduction

The contexts of institutional religions in the United States and the shifting sands of how congregations and religious institutions have been dramatically changing involve a variety of factors: fluctuating demographics, shifting family patterns, varying cultural mores, and the ongoing movements from cultural religiosity to a plethora of choices that may or may not involve membership in a congregation, or belief in God. In response to this, many young and enthusiastic church planters in the evangelical tradition are throwing themselves in amid these changes and are attempting to reinterpret faith and church in postmodern times.

I can imagine some of these evangelists may have thought that they come with the answers to the unanswered questions that these "secular" people are wrestling with. But it may not have taken long for them to understand that the questions were not only unanswered; they were unasked. There were no questions at all. These seekers, untethered from religious congregations, were not looking for something missing from their soulful maps. In fact, they had completely different maps. Instead of longing questions about God and the afterlife, they are instead orientated by many sorts of other longings and search for meaning. There does not seem to be anything missing from their life in this sense. They instead have constructed many alternative webs of meaning that provide a great deal of worth for them.[1]

They inhabit a world that Charles Taylor calls an "immanent frame"[2]; they are no longer concerned about the God question as a need that propels them in life, or never were. They are humanists, a way of being in the world that offers meaning without transcendence. They do not feel as if anything is absent. So, what does it mean to be a person of faith, and what does mean to be a community of faith in this pluralistic mixture of religion and secular conviction? Do we abide in our parallel universes with no meaningful connection? If not, then how do we bridge both religious and secular voices and express the value of interconnectivity that is both religious and secular? This paper is meant to explore these questions in some practical ways.

First, I want to layout, in a schematic way, some of the sociological research on why Americans are leaving religion, some overarching factors, and the perspective of the Catholic Church which has many similarities and some important differences. This will point to a new culture of choice that many of the newest generations are navigating as they turn away from traditional familial and cultural practices of religiosity. I next want to offer some thoughts of

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[1] James K.A. Smith. How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor. (William B. Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids Michigan), 2014, p. 29.

[2] Charles Taylor, The Secular Age. (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts), 2007, pp. 542-557.

how the bridge between the religious and the secular are already being constructed. Each offer a particular perspective of three underling foci that are distinct and act independently of one another: inclusivity, dialogue and pluralism, and a shared purpose in the world. Yet, together in their attempts of dialogue, they give rise to a new way to perceive what it means to be religious and secular. Finally, all of this is to bolster the argument that institutional religion needs to re-think what it means to evangelize, form community, and share both faith and doubt in a secular age.

The Complexities of Being Religious & Secular

Let me first explain what I mean when I use the terms religious and secular. As one can imagine, as the differentiation and parsing of these terms have developed over time, there is a certain amount of complexity to both. Being religious today for many in the northern hemisphere is no longer a monolithic belongingness to a particular religious tradition, particularly Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Other religious traditions such as Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and more have a different relationship to the secular which is much more congruent than the traditional Abrahamic faiths. Sam Harris, for example, an atheist who is rather anti-religious, wrote a very popular book called *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion.* In it, he relies on Advaita Vedanta (branch of Hinduism) and Buddhism a great deal, at least his own version.[3] There are also hyphenated religious identities where people are choosing certain religious practices, but not necessarily what religions believe in. Certainly, when my nephew tells me that he is spiritual, not religious, he is referring to a disconnect from any traditional religious institution, by and large.

Secularity, secularism, and secularization are distinct realities with a great deal of interrelation. In the Middle Ages, *secular* referred to priests who worked out in the world in local parishes, and not as monks in monasteries. To this day, we call Catholic priests who work under local bishops in parishes secular priests. During the Reformation, *secularization* referred to the seizure of Catholic Church properties by the state and their conversion for non-religious use. This happened in a number places such as France, the Soviet Union, China, Mexico. In the centuries that followed, the secular began to separate itself from religious authority definitively. The two revolutions of the 18th century, the American and the French, produced two intellectual and constitutional traditions of *secularism,* or separation of church and state. In this paper, I will be referring not to secularism, but to *secularity*, which involves individuals and communities in their philosophical convictions about their lives and the world, unattached and loosely attached to any cultural religiosity. How they relate to communities and national entities affects secularism and secularization, but their secularity is about their personal identity.[4]

Being secular in the United States can have multiple meanings. The Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture created a useful tool for understanding the broad

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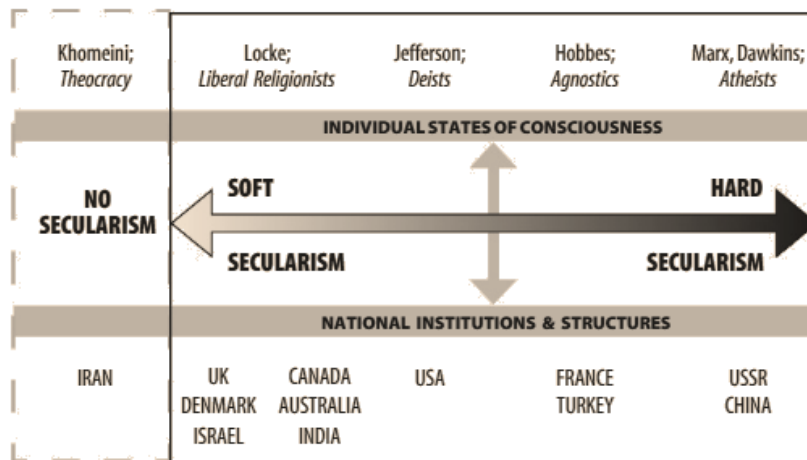[3] Sam Harris. Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014)

[4] Dr. Barry Kosmin & Ariela Keysar, eds. *Secularism and Secularity: Contemporary International Perspectives*. (Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture, Trinity College, Hartford, CT), 2007, pp. 1-3.

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spectrum of secularism that expresses itself in individuals and in national institutions and structure, from *soft secularism* to *hard secularism*.[5] Across the top of the image below, the spectrum from soft secularity to hard secularity, represented from some significant figures in philosophy, politics, and science. The meeting points of religiosity and secularity considered here range from liberal religionists to agnostics for the most part, with some exceptions.

Figure 1
A Typology of Secularism

Some of the labels include atheist, seekers, agnostics, nones, unaffiliated, secular religionists (e.g. atheist Christianity), humanist, aweists, and those who refuse any label whatsoever. These run the gamut from complete disbelief in God and any type of supernatural cosmology, to those who are open to the possibility if the situation presents itself, to those who adopt certain religious ritual and practice without necessarily believing in its doctrine or belief system. At the same time, within this group we see those who have never had a religious background and those who left religion for a variety of different reasons. Although the atheist population is comparatively small in the United States, along with the others, particularly the unaffiliated, they represent a growing a significant group of adults, dramatically rising in population to about 23%. This figure is rising.[6]

The Religious Bleed: Shifting Lines of Faith/non-Belief

The religious bleed is a term I use to consider the changes occurring in religious institutions and the "exodus" of many young and older adults from institutional religions. In this

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[5] Ibid, pp. 3-7.
[6] Pew Research Center. The Factors Driving the Growth of Religious 'Nones' in U.S. 2016: http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/09/14/the-factors-driving-the-growth-of-religious-nones-in-the-u-s/

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section I would like to offer some results of sociological studies from the *Public Religion Research Institute* (PRRI) that was conducted in partnership with *Religion News Service* (RNS).

The second study is a Catholic perspective taken predominately from the Jesuit, Thomas P. Pausch, who relies on Dean R. Hoge and his associates, *Young Adult Catholics: Religion in the Culture of Choice*. It also includes information from the following studies: The Search for Common Ground (Davidson 1997), Notre Dame Study (Notre Dame 2004), National Catholic Reporter Survey (NCR 2005), and the University of North Carolina Study (UNC 2005).

PRRI/RNS Study on the Unaffiliated

What every indication shows, and the *greying* of congregations and churches nationwide point out, is that our nation's youth and young adults are disengaging themselves from institutional religion in ever increasing numbers. This trend began in the early 1990's, with low numbers of the unaffiliated that remained pretty stable for the previous 20 years (6%). Then things began to change. Today, one quarter (25%) of Americans, across the many Christian lines, consider themselves with no formal religious identity, making this the single largest "(non) religious group" in the US.[7]

Most of those among the unaffiliated comes from some type of religious background. Only 9% report coming from non-religious household. What the report calls "religious switching" sees the lion share of those who exit from religious traditions coming from some type of religious upbringing. Among the very few who were raised outside of a religious tradition, also show no sign of entering one. The biggest declines are among white Protestants and Catholics, with the Catholics experiencing a ten-percent point loss overall, a larger decline than those of Protestant communities. Overall, more than 41 million Americans consider themselves ex-Catholics, with mainline Protestants experiencing a more modest degree of loss.[8]

Why Americans are leaving religion cut across three major factors: age, cause, and family dynamics. The age of departure is rather young, by the time they reach their 18th birthday, which often coincides with their entrance to college or university. Departures also happen afterward, particularly in their twenties or thirties, but in lower rates. It is in these age groups that a diminishment in belief occurs, a departure from their childhood religion. On one level, this seems to be quite understandable, since commitment to religion must be based on an adult sense of religiosity and choice, attending for their own reasons. Social and sexual perspectives held by religious bodies, along with clergy sexual abuse are also reasons Americans have left religion. Religiously mixed families also tend to have children that are more likely to become unaffiliated.[9]

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[7] Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) and Religious News Service (RNS). *Exodus: Why Americans are Leaving Religion – and Why They're Unlikely to Come Back*. (Washington DC, September 22, 2016) p. 2. I cite this report several times but my intention is not to share the entire results, but just those more germane to this paper.

[8] Ibid, p. 4.

[9] Ibid, pp. 7-8.

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Catholics in a Culture of Choice

When I asked my nephew why he does not go to church anymore, the response was, "I'm spiritual, not religious." This disconnection of spirituality from religion is all about the unaffiliated choosing their own religious identities. A new study surveyed 3,680 undergraduates from 46 colleges and universities with optimistic findings. It reported a high level of spiritual engagement and commitment among college students. Here some indications:

- 77% say they are spiritual beings
- 71% trust in a "higher power"
- 1/3 of the respondents said they prayed, discussed religion and spirituality with friends
- 30% The ultimate spiritual quest is to be a better person
- 14% To know what God requires of me
- 13% To know my purpose in life.[10]

On the religious side, as the previous studies indicated for many others, the practice and membership in a Catholic Church diminished much more dramatically. Thomas P. Pausch, S.J. wonders if the discrepancy between spirituality and religious practice is, in part, about researchers who define spirituality too broadly, even uncritically. If religion is narrowly described as formal and institutional, while spirituality is personal and experiential, are social scientists creating this binary as mutually exclusive?[11]

Considering this, Pausch instead focuses his study on *Catholic identity*. Young adult Catholics (Ages 20-39) share many of the same features as non-Catholics in these studies on unaffiliating. The bonds that tie them to the institutional church diminished considerably, if it was there at all. Two issues come to the fore in the Catholic Church: a) Large number of young Catholics have a very "thin" sense of their unique Catholic identity; b) A small but significant group who come across very conservative seek to define their Catholic identity in ways that re-live much more traditional practices and theology. Also, Catholic teenagers are behind Protestant peers as much as 25 percentage points in such standards as religious belief, practice, experiences, and commitments. This sense of diminished Catholic identity is in part seen in the gap between what the Churches teaches and what Catholics believe and do. It seems, according to Hoge, that Catholicism tends to be accidental to their relationship with Christ. The uniqueness of their Catholic faith is perceived no different than any other form of Christianity and the authority of what is said and taught less credible.[12]

Some contributing factors for a weakened Catholic identity that Pausch draws from the Hoge study and others are:

a) *Religious individualism*: Pervasive religious individualism of postmodern America has

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[10] Thomas P. Pausch, S.J. Being Catholic in a Culture of Choice (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota), p. 1.
[11] Ibid, p. 2.
[12] Ibid, p.6.

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been well noted by Robert Bellah.[13] Individual conscience becomes absolute. The influence of Protestantism in Calvin's suspicion, for example, of the Catholic sense of sacred in the world led to an emphasis on the "radical transcendence of God", pushing him out of the world and emphasizing the autonomous self.

b) *A Culture of Voluntarism*: Religious identity is more about personal choice and much less about a core identity that has a history and wisdom beyond personal experience. Self-constructed identities draw from the free market religious economy where a plethora of choices are available, much more so for this generation than any other generation.

c) *Loss of a Catholic subculture*: Demographic changes, like of those of Protestant congregations have contributed greatly to a breakdown in a local religious subculture. In the Catholic community, this change was dramatic, particularly in urban centers where Catholicism thrives most.

d) *A Crisis of Credibility:* There is a gap between the authority of bishops, priests, and others in several areas such as sexual ethics, the insistence on "culture wars" and the rifts between the right and left, the role of women, and same sex marriage, among other issues.

e) *Theological illiteracy*: The Notre Dame study points to young Catholics who seek out common ground in a pluralistic world and perhaps had a religious education that engaged the emotions but did not challenge the intellect. The lack of grounding in their own faith sees no way to dialogue with other faiths and to give a coherent grounding for what they really believe.[14]

What to Make of the "Religious Bleed"?

Considering the studies of PRRI, Hoge, Pausch, and others enumerates with detail many common indications and factors involved in the exodus of Americans from institutional religion. There are additional factors that have importance too, such as the link of religion to personal morality which has weakened as well. More religious people feel they can be good without religion. Greg Epstein of the *Humanist Hub* at Harvard University wrote a very popular book, Good Without God: What a Billion Non-Religious Do Believe. Distorted religious thinking that only religious people are capable of good reveal how little some religious believers understand these growing secular dynamics in people.

I was struck by the PRRI/RNS study that did not find a strong distinction between being spiritual and being religious. They said: "The survey finds little evidence of a separate mode of "spirituality" distinct from "religiosity," either among religious or religiously unaffiliated Americans. Rather, measures of traditional religiosity are positively correlated with self-identification as a "spiritual person."[15] The Pausch study found a strong disconnect between being religious and spiritual in this population, primarily because of a weak or non-existent religious identity. The distinctions between Protestants and Catholics in this area is quite

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[13] Robert Bellah lecture: Individualism and Commitment in America
(http://www.robertbellah.com/lectures_4.htm)
[14] Thomas P. Pausch, S.J., pp. 9-18.
[15] PRRI/RNS Study, p. 17.

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interesting.

The Pew Research Center, in its own study says: "As the ranks of the religiously unaffiliated continue to grow, *they also describe themselves in increasingly secular terms*. In 2007, 25% of the "nones" called themselves atheists or agnostics; 39% identified their religion as "nothing in particular" and also said that religion is "not too" or "not at all" important in their lives; and 36% identified their religion as "nothing in particular" while nevertheless saying that religion is either "very important" or "somewhat important" in their lives."[16] The crossover from belief to non-belief has become much easier in light of weak religious identities and the view of things more and more from a secular standpoint. God and religion are an option among many more, and the playing field is more even than ever.[17]

Three Institutional Attempts of Bridging the Religious and the Secular

The discussion thus far has focused on the massive changes in churches, synagogues, mosques, temples, in other words, religious institutions nationwide. Who are leaving and a little about why they are leaving has also been the discussion up to this point. It is abundantly clear that religious institutions must take this reality very seriously and respond in a way that gathers, rather than fragments our communities in changing times. The outgrowth of mega-churches has been one response to these changes. Faith and the churches that gather communities of faith live in a secular age where doubt about our religious institutions is fermenting. What then is our response?

I would like to present three models among religious traditions that are attempting to bridge religiosity and secularity, each in different ways. The first is the most historical efforts in the American religious landscape, The *Unitarian Universalist Association*. I would term their model of this bridge as *Inclusivism Model*. The second example comes from the *Roman Catholic Church*. This work since Vatican II and the first movement forward in this dialogue with secular culture began in 1965. This model I would call the *Cultural Dialogue Model*. The third model lies in the wider field of interfaith dialogue in the United States through the work of *Interfaith Youth Core* who provides space and connections for religious traditions, those with secular/religious identities, and secular humanists to dialogue and connect in meaningful ways. I would call this model the *Common Good Model*. Chris Stedman, who works with the IFYC in religious/secular dialogue is author of *The Faitheist*. He represents an important movement in secular humanist communities reaching out to religious communities.

Each of these models in my view offer unique efforts in the need to bridge the widening gap between the religious, religious/secular, and secular, to be authentically religious and authentically secular we all need to talk to one another, open our hearts to differences, seek commonalities, learn from each other. Each of these models are worth listening to, even though there are both successes and challenges to all of them. None of them are a panacea. Embracing

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[16] Pew Research Center. America's Changing Religious Landscape:
http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/
[17] Charles Taylor, pp. 3-6.

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our pluralism has always been a work in progress and multiple models are required because of our extraordinary diversity.

Unitarian Universalist Association: Inclusivism Model

Unitarian Universalism is a liberal religion characterized by a "free and responsible search for truth and meaning". The Unitarian Universalist (UU) Association does not have a creed. Instead, UUs are unified by their shared search for spiritual growth expressed in the seven principles.[18] As such, UU congregations include many agnostics, theists, and atheists among their membership. The roots of UU are in liberal Christianity, specifically *Unitarianism* and *Universalism*. Unitarian Universalists state that from these traditions come a deep regard for intellectual freedom and inclusive love. Congregations and members seek inspiration and derive insight from all major world religions and non-religions. The beliefs of individual Unitarian Universalists range widely, including atheism, agnosticism, pantheism, deism, Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Neopaganism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, Humanism, and more.[19]

"The world needs the message of our liberal faith. There are so many voices crying out for the UU message of inclusion, democracy, and justice." This is the consensus which is further expressed in the UU sense of "intersectionality": As Unitarian Universalists who share a respect for the dignity of every person, we strive to see individuals as whole (holy) beings, rather than as a collection of identities.[20] Contemporary Unitarian Universalism may not have a common doctrine or creed, religious beliefs, scripture, cosmic story, or distinctive liturgical tradition (except remnants of Puritan minimalism), but what they do share is a connection to a common past. So much of the commitment to bring religious and secular communities together in some fashion is very much wrapped up in their historical heritages.

The UU Association is heir to two histories. *Unitarianism* was a Christian movement beginning in Transylvania in the mid-16th century that saw belief in God who is one entity, opposed to Trinitarian theology and Jesus as human, but not divine. It moved to the United States through New England at King's Chapel in Boston in 1784. *Universalism* believes that religion is a universal human quality, emphasizing the universal principles of most religions and accepting other religions in an inclusive manner, believing in a universal reconciliation between humanity and the divine. Universalism has had a strong influence on modern Hinduism, in turn influencing western modern spirituality.[21]

The Unitarian and Universalist movements emerged and evolved separately during the formative years of the American Republic. Universalism, centered on the doctrine of universal salvation, was organized as a separatist church, in a manner like that of early Baptists and Quakers. In contrast, what came to be called Unitarianism in America was from its beginnings

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[18] http://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles

[19] Unitarian Universalism on Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unitarian_Universalism

[20] A Preliminary Report on Class in the Unitarian Universalist Association: Commission on Appraisal, Unitarian Universalist Association, Boston, MA. June 16, 2015, p. 12.

[21] Unitarianism and Univeersalism: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universalism; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unitarianism

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less focused theologically; it evolved for a long time as a tendency less than as a doctrine, a growing rejection of the Calvinist orthodoxy of the Puritan-Congregational churches of New England, especially in eastern Massachusetts.[22] In 1961, the American Unitarian Association (AUA) was consolidated with the Universalist Church of America (UCA), thus forming the Unitarian Universalist Association. In the same year, the Canadian Unitarian Council (CUC) formed.

In the mid-1800s, Universalists were one of the fastest-growing denominations in the United States. Their distinctive message of the final harmony of all souls with God and of God as love was widely appealing, especially along the Eastern seaboard and in the Midwest.[23] Although that distinctiveness has slipped in many ways today, their efforts to bring together disparate views, religious and non-religious is extraordinary, particularly in a time when the ever-increasing consciousness of our diversity is dividing many of us. Yet, they struggle with this. The report on Theological Diversity states: "Conversations with UUs across the continent lead us to wonder: Is our theological diversity getting in our way? These conversations lead us to believe that our theological diversity is not as much of a problem as UUs' inability to do the hard work of finding common ground to build a strong, effective religious voice."[24]

The theological and philosophical diversity of the UU Association has not been easy to sustain over changing times, but the resoluteness to find ways to value and live out their diversity cuts through much of the tensions and difficulties this has entailed. Some of the ways they are developing this common ground where religious and secular members may find themselves are: a) Focus on articulating a modern theology as an association; b) Develop common worship resources; c) Encourage theological literacy among its members; d) Promoting spiritual practices with those who feel the need; e) Protect theological diversity in the congregations; f) Make peace with the religious past; g) Affirm theological diversity among Ministers; h) Foster theology in religious education; i) Serve the needs of youth and young adults; j) Affirm the cultural, theological, and spiritual diversity of each congregation.[25]

Roman Catholic Church: Cultural Dialogue Model

The best starting place to understand this cultural dialogical model of Catholicism with secular culture is with Vatican II Council. Since 325 A.D., this is the 21st "ecumenical" council. Like the others in previous history, it was meant to gather representatives of the Church worldwide to take on the pressing issues of the times. Vatican II Council was called in January 1959 and ended December 8, 1965. Vatican II was born after a culmination of almost one hundred years of dramatic changes in theology, Christology, and ecclesiology, ecumenism, and interfaith dialogue, as well as the rise of secular culture and rapid cultural changes, particularly 20 years prior to Vatican II. It began a complete re-orientation regarding the relationship of

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[22] Engaging our Theological Diversity: Commission on Appraisal, Unitarian Universalist Association, Boston, MA. May, 2005, p. 18.
[23] Ibid, p. 33.
[24] Ibid, p. 2.
[25] Ibid, pp. 135-154.

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Catholics with culture, other faiths, all of this as implication to changes in what it means to be Church, what the mission of the Church is, and Catholic relationships outside of itself. Post-conciliar reflection evolved our notions of interfaith dialogue and the relationship with an ever-changing culture.[26]

The "Catholic tradition" of dialogue with non-believers began with the institution of the *Secretariat for Non-Believers* by Pope Paul VI in April, 1965, one of three new secretariats to address our dialogue with the world that is not Catholic, nor Christian, including the Secretariats for Christian Unity and with other religions.[27] In 1968 an important, but often overlooked document of the secretariat was published by Franziskus Cardinal Konig, President, Secretariat for Non-Believers, entitled *Dialogue with Non-Believers*.[28] It outlined both a theology and practical guidelines for this dialogue. Pope John Paul II brought this important work into the *Pontifical Council of Culture* to re-look at the evangelization of culture with renewed interest in secularity. Pope Benedict XVI instituted the *Courtyard of the Gentiles* to gather believers and non-believers in conferences around the world, beginning in 2005 and continuing to this day.[29]

Finally, Pope Francis reminds us in the *Joy of the Gospel*, that this dialogue is key to our partnership and collaboration with all the world for peace and reconciliation. He states:

> *"As believers, we also feel close to those who do not consider themselves part of any religious tradition, yet sincerely seek the truth, goodness and beauty which we believe have their highest expression and source in God. We consider them as precious allies in the commitment to defending human dignity, in building peaceful coexistence between peoples and in protecting creation. A special place of encounter is offered by new "areopagi" such as the Court of the Gentiles, where "believers and non-believers are able to engage in dialogue about fundamental issues of ethics, art and science, and about the search for transcendence". This too is a path to peace in our troubled world."[30]*

Considering this, I would like to offer a few conclusions from the Catholic perspective:

a) I consider Pope Paul VI the "grandfather" of dialogue in the Church. In his first teaching or encyclical in 1964, he talked of the need for Catholics to be in dialogue with the world around us, in every respect. At the time this was new and daunting. Vatican II was also a sign that the world was changing faster than the Church could comprehend and this was an opportunity for the Church, in a sense, to catch up with the world. This dialogue was important because we needed to have meaningful relationships in the culture and we had

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[26] Some pertinent documents are: Decree on Ecumenism, Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Declaration on Religion Freedom, Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity, Decree on the Instruments of Social Communication.

[27] Catholic Culture: https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/dictionary/index.cfm?id=36362

[28] Dialogue with Non-Believers: https://www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/PCIDNONB.HTM

[29] Pontifical Council for Culture: http://www.cultura.va/content/cultura/en/dipartimenti/ateismo-e-non-credenza/che-cos-e-il-cortile-dei-gentili--.html

[30] Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation. *Joy of the Gospel*, #257.

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much to learn from others. Also, it is an affirmation that the Catholic voice has a significant contribution to share with others.

b) John Paul II focused dialogue with non-believers as an issue of cultural dialogue in the early 1980's, as he also placed interfaith dialogue at the center of evangelization. This came after issues and conflicts in the mission fields and local dioceses, in difficult attempts to understand the relationship between "proclamation" and "dialogue." Dialogue with non-believers is understood within the framework of interfaith dialogue, but even more specifically, it is also a work of intercultural dialogue, if the result is a contribution to cultural transformation.

c) Some of the most significant contributions, because of this history, are the ongoing programs of the *Courtyard of the Gentiles*. What I find fascinating about this is not only the attempt to move past the believer/unbeliever dialectic, but also a refusal to make scientism the sole whipping boy: there is a bracing recognition here that religion itself can be reduced to a utilitarian ideology. *The real divide today is no longer between those who believe and those who do not believe in God, but between those who want to defend humanity and life, and those who want to suffocate them through fundamentalism, which could be material or even spiritual.* Is the boundary perhaps not between those who recognize the gift of culture and history, of grace and gratuity, and those who found everything on the cult of efficiency, be it science or sacral?

d) Finally, interfaith dialogue and dialogue with secular culture is little known universally in the Catholic Church, except among some leadership, theologians, and some pastors. The biggest obstacle is the gap between what is taught universally and what is adopted locally in dioceses and parish church, as well as local organizations. In the United States, our work in religious/secular dialogue is little known, despite our efforts to resolve this problem. Also, there is a disorder called "expertism." What I mean by this is that the official Catholic Church sees dialogue in this area as a matter of experts. Even in the Courtyard of the Gentiles, it is a gathering of believers and non-believers to listen to bishops, theologians, philosophers, and other experts. The important impetus to make this a grassroots movement is almost non-existent now. We hope to change this.

Interfaith Youth Core: Common Good Model

I have been associated with IFYC since 2009 on one level or another. Among other interfaith experiences that propelled me in the direction of interfaith and religious/secular dialogue, *Eboo Patel*, founder of the Interfaith Youth Core was also an important influence on me. His book at that time, *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation*, helped me understand more deeply the unique interfaith challenge for the United States and in particular, my relationship with my brothers and sisters of other faiths. It helped me concretize the unique challenges of dialogue in the post-modern American context that I was becoming re-acquainted with after many years working in the Philippines.

Their website begins with this ethos: "In a time when people of different faith

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backgrounds are interacting with greater frequency than ever before. We hear the stories of people who seek to make faith a barrier of division or a bomb of destruction all too often. Instead, we view religious and philosophical traditions as *bridges of cooperation. Our interfaith movement builds religious pluralism*. We define religious pluralism as a world characterized by: *a) Respect for people's diverse religious and non-religious identities, b) Mutually inspiring relationships between people of different backgrounds, and c) Common action for the common good.*"[31]

Jeff Pinzino, a friend of Eboo Patel began the first inklings of Interfaith Youth Core after working with Eboo in an interfaith Habitat for Humanity program in Hyderabad, India, seeing firsthand how service builds understanding among people of different backgrounds. Service is often the common ground for us all. He returned to Chicago, quit his job at Stone Soup and laid the groundwork for what would become *Interfaith Youth Core*: the Chicago Youth Council, and designated a special day for interfaith youth service, which brought together hundreds of youth of different faiths. Eboo came to continue Jeff's work a year later as he moved on, and over the years Interfaith Youth Core has become a major movement to create a whole new generation of interfaith leadership among young adults in colleges and universities nationwide.[32]

For IFYC, interfaith leadership is accomplished through two pathways: *The science of interfaith cooperation*: by creating positive, meaningful relationships across differences, and fostering appreciative knowledge of other traditions, attitudes improve, knowledge increases, and more relationships occur. These three are mutually reinforcing and backed by social science data, what they call the "interfaith triangle". *The art of interfaith leadership*: people who create and foster opportunities for positive knowledge and opportunities for engagement move others around the interfaith triangle and lead to a community marked by pluralism.[33]

The *Common Good Model* is a model where relationships and service come together across interfaith lines becomes the core experience that creates "pluralism." This bridge was also extended to include the *Secular Student Alliance* on college campuses in many places.[34] Chris Stedman, author of the book, *Faitheist*, and until recently, director of the Yale Humanist Community, assisted IFYC in bringing religious and secular voices together.

In *Faitheist*, Stedman draws on his work organizing interfaith and secular communities, his academic study of religion, and his own experiences to argue for the necessity of bridging the growing chasm between atheists and religious believers. It advocates a way for atheists and religious to find common ground and work together to make this world—the one world we can all agree on—a better place. He makes a passionate argument that atheists should engage religious diversity. IFYC and Chris, among many others, are placing secular voices squarely

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[31] Interfaith Youth Core: https://www.ifyc.org/about

[32] Eboo Patel. *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation*. (Beacon Press, Boston) 2007, pp. 156-157.

[33] Eboo Patel. *Sacred Ground; Pluralism, Prejudice, and the Promise of America*. (Beacon Press, Boston) 2012, pp. 65-103.

[34] The Secular Student Alliance: https://secularstudents.org/

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within the frame of interfaith dialogue and collaboration.[35]

Both Eboo Patel and Chris Stedman were part of the inspiration for our religious congregation, the Xaverian Missionaries USA, as we created a fledgling project called *Common Ground*. Its purpose is to bridge secular and religious voices, particularly in the northern hemisphere (Europe & the USA). Dialogue with atheists, secular humanists, and the religiously unaffiliated takes on the similar dynamics of interfaith dialogue, and includes a growing population of the non-religious who are expected to be the third largest group globally, under Christianity and Islam.[36] If interfaith dialogue is about creating a diverse global exchange for sharing and collaboration, it must also include secular voices. This is particularly important because of the interplay between religions and secularity that has great impact on how we shape our society together. At the same time, there are non-religious people truly interested in connecting with religious believers, especially the millennial generation.

We held two conferences in this regard; one in Coatbridge, Scotland (2013), and the other at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey (2015) entitled: *Common Ground: Conversations Among Atheist, Humanists, and Religious Believers*. Our collaboration with the British Humanist Association, the Humanist Association of Scotland, and the American Humanist Association has been crucial to both of these conferences. We run two meetup groups in New Jersey and Massachusetts where religious and non-religious people gather for dialogue on a monthly basis. Along with this I blog for an non-religious blog on *patheos.com* called Secular Spectrum.

Challenges for Religious Institutions

The *Inclusiveness Model* of the Unitarian Universalist Association is one of the few religious institutional models that attempts to hold its diversity with honor, and find ways to come together as a community, not without difficulty. One UU friend said that is akin to: "herding cats sometimes." It is a model many traditional mainline traditions may not attempt, but the UU Association, with its unique history, provides a place for those who do not find their place anywhere else. The *Cultural Dialogue Model* of the Catholic Church does not attempt to include the non-religious within its own identity, but as in interfaith dialogue, wishes to engage and connect meaningfully to those of another belief or conviction to understand and build up the culture we all share. The *Common Good Model* of the Interfaith Youth Core focuses on shared service to humanity. Each of these models are uniquely different and important ways of thinking how religious and secular lives can be bridged. Each model provides a unique contribution to this need.

We can walk away from faith and how we connect with the institutional part of it. Many do as this paper states for important reasons. Religious faith is a tidal motion, an ebb, and a

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[35] Chris Stedman. Faitheist: How an Atheist Found Common Ground with the Religious. (Beacon Press, Boston) 2012. Also: https://yalehumanists.com/speakers-bureau/chris-stedman/

[36] Pew Research Center, *The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2015*. http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/

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surge, a push, and a pull. Open eyes, closed eyes. Belief and disbelief. Between the emotive faith of a young evangelical and the decisive cutting of atheists and humanists from the possibility of belief is a space of *doubt and tension*. It is where millions of Americans dwell, living in a kind of spiritual mix and match, blending many traditions, and adhering strictly to none.[37] It is that space between that religious congregations and institutions need to pay careful attention to, to the ways we attract and repel, to our authenticity and our hypocrisy, to our embrace, and our indifference. It is God between the lines. It is this space between where I would like to outline some specific challenges.

Dialogue & Our Stories

The first challenge for religious institutions is to find ways to start and sustain a dialogue in the many ways it is possible outside of their churches, mosques, or temples. The three models of dialogue presented here between the religious and non-religious, are all important and repeatable. Each portray the stance of a religious tradition that has a vision beyond the walls of their churches and mosques, beyond the boundaries of their faith traditions, that sees a community waiting to gather, hungry to talk, needing to understand.

Whether it is a dialogue between the religious and non-believer, or within the larger frame of interfaith dialogue, for a mutual re-understanding of each, or for a common action and purpose, we are building the culture of humanity. In my work in interfaith and inter-secular dialogue, we know that our diversity is not a problem to fix, but a mysterious part of our collective humanity whose meaning must be unearthed in conversation with each other, a careful paying attention to what matters. We are not religious and secular ideas or abstractions competing with one another, but human beings who hold beliefs and convictions in very imperfect ways. They are the signposts of our life journeys.

We all have stories, a history mixed with often unexpected learning, burdens that are hard to articulate, wounds that yearn to be healed. A friend of mine tags each of her emails with this thought: "Engrave this upon your heart: there isn't anyone you couldn't love once you heard their story." The snippets of life stories I have heard from my secular friends have opened my eyes to the misconceptions and stereotypes I and my faith colleagues hold to. Even more, notwithstanding the differences, how we all impact the common good in surprising, unexpected ways. Here is one place dialogue may take us:

Rethinking Belongingness

Dialogue here can lead to a sense of more fluid boundaries of church and community where there is a sense of connection of faith to those who are not "official members" but wish to have some link to the congregation or community, or an individual in the faith community, something akin to a satellite community. This need arises in the dialogue, depending on the

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[37] Kaya Oaks. *The Nones Are Alright: A New Generation of Believers, Seekers, and Those in Between*. (Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY) 2015, pp. 8-9.

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individuals, and meetup groups, for example, serve that purpose. Can a congregation have a peripheral ministry that has a few of these meetups?

The reason this comes up is because of an important dynamic in the dialogue: the first thing that changes are our *minds* about each other. We see each other in a different light after confronting our distorted images of each based on insightful conversation. Rene, an atheist, and part of our meetup group in New Jersey for three years now stays with the group because she says, "I am learning so much." Her first time with the group, motivated by a curiosity of what a religious/secular dialogue could be, changed her mind about things. She was candid with me on day one and asked, "Are you trying to convert people to Catholicism?" I quickly answered, "I can hardly convert myself, let alone anyone else!"

In secular communities, we spoke of "multiple belongings" of people who live with a mix and match of secular and religious thinking and practices. Multiple *religious* belonging is an important discussion today in the wake of great strides taken in interreligious dialogue.[38] While multiple belongings is an organic response to decisions of faith and non-belief for many, institutional religions are still grappling with what this means. The issue is indeed complex, but if there is theological foundation for multiple religious belongings, why not for multiple religious/secular belongings. The underlining common ground here is community and connection in a culture of fragmentation.

At its best, religion provides, in our deepening relationship to the Divine Ultimate, a profound and abiding sense of consolation, support, strength for our compassion. At its worst, it can hurt, dispel trust, and alienate families, as well as exasperate political tensions. Yet, many who walk away from religion do so with some regret. Instead of becoming firm non-believers, they abide in a space of sustained questioning. NPR broadcasted a program, "Losing Our Religion."[39] Melissa Adelman, raised a Catholic, shared this: "Moving away from Catholicism for me was a loss, a negative thing, rejection of a set of beliefs. It left a space you can fill with lots of really good things. Yet, there is still a sense of loss (tradition and community).[40] The path of doubt, those who are still belonging but not believing, and those outside of the church walls who carry some semblance of religion, or none at all, seek connection and in particular, trust. Wendell Berry's Jayber Crow puts it, "The questioning would not give me up." [41]

Rethinking belongingness says that our religious institutions are not very good at accompanying those on this path of doubt, and so we fail to meet the needs of those struggling with faith. One Jewish writer sums up this phenomenon by saying:

"Rather than write off Jewish Nones, I'd create a Jewish *Nonery*, a school for Jewish Nones that focuses on culture, language, progressive/prophetic politics, and the genius

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[38] Peter Feldmeier. *Perils and Possibilities of Multiple Religions Belonging: Test Case in Roman Catholicism*. (De Gruyter Open: Online Journal) 2016. https://www.degruyter.com/downloadpdf/j/opth.2017.3.issue-1/opth-2017-0006/opth-2017-0006.xml

[39] NPR Morning Edition, "Losing our Religion," January 15, 2013.

[40] Kaya Oaks, pp. 28-29

[41] Ibid, pp. 21-22.

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of the biblical wisdom tradition that embraces doubt, argument, and ambiguity. Will anyone do this? I doubt it. Jewish funders are still looking to revive the past and haven't a clue how to invent the future." [42]

Alain de Botton, atheist philosopher at Oxford University has similar ideas. He is the founder and chairman of *The School of Life*. His books include *Religion for Atheists* and *How Proust Can Change Your Life* and others. His new book is a novel, *The Course of Love*. He is a philosopher who likes the best of religion, but doesn't believe in God. He says that the most boring question you can ask of any religion is whether it is true. But how to live, how to die, what is good, and what is bad — these are questions religion has sophisticated ways of addressing. So, he's created The School of Life — where people young and old explore ritual, community, beauty, and wisdom in secular terms. He explains why these ideas shouldn't be reserved just for believers. He says:

> "In a world beset by fundamentalists of both believing and secular varieties, it must be possible to balance a rejection of religious faith with a selective reverence for religious rituals and concepts." [43]

Finally, I would like to end with a thought of Fr. Tomas Halik. He is a Czech Roman Catholic priest, philosopher, theologian, and scholar. He is a professor of Sociology at Charles University in Prague, pastor of the Academic Parish by Saint Salvator's Church in Prague, and president of the Czech Christian Academy, a country where most people consider themselves non-religious. Ordained in secret during the Communist Regime, he has written a few books around the dialogue of belief and non-belief. He says this dialogue is not a quarrel between two warring parties, but is something that takes place with many people. Belief and unbelief are two different interpretations, two views from different angles of the same mountain veiled in a cloud of mystery and silence. The "disappearance of God" need not be a dark night.

> "The commandment of love can lead to a mystical experience in which "God disappears" and "the ego disappears," because love transcends the boundary between subject and object...A god that is only external or internal in relation to the world and people, is not worthy of belief or love. In the controversy between the various concepts of the West, won't the decisive issue eventually be which of them proves the greatest scope for "goodness and tenderness"? [44]

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[42] Rabbi Rami, "The Nones among Us," sbnr.org website.

[43] Alain de Botton. *Religion for Atheists: A Non-Believer's Guide to the Uses of Religion*. (Pantheon Books, New York) 2012, p. 3. His TED talk on this matter is here: http://alaindebotton.com/tv-audio/

[44] Tomas Halik. I Want You to Be: On the God of Love (Translated by Gerald Turner. University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana) 2016, pp. 8-10.