

In Between Religion, Secularity, & Spiritualities: Some Implications for a Postsecular Catholicism

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Introduction

I wish to begin this study from the larger framework of spirituality, which is its impetus, and in particular I suggest we ponder St. Bonaventure and his doctrine of *exemplarism*,¹ which speaks of the profound relationship of God and cosmos. He describes creation as a limited expression of the infinite and dynamic love among Father, Son, and Spirit, exploding into a “a thousand forms” in the universe. The world is a mirror of the Divine and is therefore, sacramental. Our pluralism, the variety of faiths, cultures, and peoples is a “consciousness” of divine presence. This is one of many ways of understanding from a religious perspective, that in between religion, secularity, and spiritualities lies the abiding presence of the Creator, who is always creating.²

There is a term in contemporary spirituality called “catholicity.”³ It does not refer to the institutions of Catholic Churches. The word is taken at its etymological meaning conveying a thrust toward *unity*. Catholicity is the world that best describes nature’s craving for unity, the intrinsic capacity of “being for wholeness.” As Gerard Manley Hopkins put it, “the world is charged with the grandeur of God.” If God is deeply involved in evolutionary creation, Divine love is the whole of every whole, thrusting life toward greater unity. This particular study is evidence of catholicity bursting in life today. In the changing landscape of religion today, God has not vanished but is sought in the new terrain of a new social landscape.⁴

It is in this context that I understand the role of church and pastoral leadership to bring our religious tradition into dialogue with our changing and evolving worldviews, coined more recently by Dr. Michele Dillon in her important work, *Post-Secular Catholicism*. Rather than try to fit what we know and discover of the world into a predetermined idea of God, we need to let what we discover teach us new things about God, creation, and our relation to both. As a Catholic leader, I see my role in a similar way, to explore how Catholicism negotiates the tension between the forces of tradition and those of change. Like all of religious institutions in the northern hemisphere (Europe/USA) is in large part about navigating in this secular age the rich territories of God’s spirit, both within and in between religiosity, secularity, and spiritualities.⁵

For the Catholic Church in the United States, we must readdress our relationship with the secular. Since the mid-twentieth century, European Catholicism developed a theology of secularity as terms of distinction, of the opening of new spaces for the church, of overlapping

¹ Junius Johnson, “The One and the Many in Bonaventure Exemplarity Explained,” *Religions* 7, no. 12 (December 8, 2016): 144, accessed January 5, 2019, <http://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/7/12/144>.

² Ilija Delio. *Making All Things New: Catholicity, Cosmology, Consciousness*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2015), 18-20.

³ Two books I would recommend on this are from two of my former professors, Robert Schreiter’s book on *The New Catholicity: Theology Between the Global and Local*, and Dianne Bergant’s book, *A New Heaven, A New Earth: The Bible and Catholicity*.

⁴ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2007), 299.

⁵ Michele Dillon. *Postsecular Catholicism: Relevance and Renewal* (Oxford University Press, 2015), Kindle Location 60-61)

spaces in a world in which individuals have multiple identities. In the US, the conversation is often anti-secular, which is not the postsecular mutuality that will be developed in the following pages. This small study is a glimpse of efforts in that direction.⁶

In the Beginning

In 2012 our religious order, the [Xaverian Missionaries](#),⁷ was in the throws for some years of redefining the meaning and praxis of a Christian mission in a world that had changed dramatically since our founding in 1895, and the thrust of our work until the start of Vatican II. The traditional missionary roles of building new Christian communities in a non-Christian environments, erecting churches, hospitals, clinics and other institutions that were funded by generous western donations, shifted in a post Vatican II world. The local churches we began in many parts of the world became independent of our support with their own bishops, local clergy, and flourishing Christian communities. Western donations began to diminish. Experiments in dialogue with other faiths, particularly with Islam, Taoism, & Buddhism, as well as with other cultural realities such as our project of *presence* with the Kayapo Indians in Brazil, or transgender subcultures in Asia, and others.

It was in this same year we began to see the shift of interfaith dialogue from exclusively in Asia and Africa, to extend also in Europe and North America as well. Migrant flows of Muslims and Christians of the east increased dramatically the year before and was expected to continue, as we are most aware from the largest migrant flows from 2015 to the present.⁸ Our historical focus on Africa, Asia, and Latin America expanded to the west, and the distinction between “third world” and “first world” became more and more irrelevant. Thus, it was our interest to explore dialogue between faith and secularity in the northern hemisphere that began to expand our sense of Christian mission in the world. Our central purpose is to share our faith outside of the confines of our Catholic faith tradition and the interpretation of this fact in these times of post-Christianity and postsecularity is leading us in an extraordinary faith journey.⁹

The post-Christian shift consists partly of a phenomenon where belief in God is unchallenged and hegemonic, to one where this belief is presented as one option among many others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace. Post-secular here refers to the 19th century and

⁶ Massimo Faggioli, *Catholicism & Culture*. (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2017), 131-132.

⁷ Our religious order was founded in 1895 by an Italian Bishop, St. Guido Conforti. We began in China, and after the devastation of the Boxer Rebellion, were expelled and spread to other parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America over the years. We are presently in 21 countries globally, with almost 800 priests and brothers, and sisters serving in in these lands. The first phase of our work was often about the institutionalization of Christian communities up until the 1960's. In this second phase, we assisted many countries in their course toward independence. Globalization and the problems of post-independence made development work paramount. At the same time, Vatican II changed the course of the missionary thrust of the Church in profound ways by re-thinking our relationship with those of other faith and nonfaith traditions. The growing independence of local churches with their own leadership and clergy further freed us for new and creative ventures of mission in dialogue with other faiths and other cultural realities.

⁸ Phillip Connor, The most common Mediterranean migration paths into Europe have changed since 2009. Pew Research Center, September 18, 2018. Accessed December 29, 2018. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/09/18/the-most-common-mediterranean-migration-paths-into-europe-have-changed-since-2009/#toc-anchor-305846-1>

⁹ Taylor, 3.

early twentieth century predictions of the demise of religion by thinkers like August Comte, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber, among others, as well as those among the *New Atheists*, such as Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins in the present day.¹⁰ As secularity has developed dramatically, so too a steady and surprising resiliency of religiosity, and both religious and secular neighbors are finding all they can do is find ways to live together. Neither is going anywhere for the foreseeable future.¹¹

We see all of these changes and shifts pertinent to the evolving meaning and praxis of our Catholic mission, particularly in the Northern Hemisphere. In this same year we began a project to bring together in dialogue believers in faith traditions and nonbelievers, with many of the assumptions that exist in interfaith dialogue. Together with our *confreres* (*fellow Xaverian Missionaries*) in the United Kingdom, where secularity is much more pronounced than in the United States, we organized a conference of dialogue that included [Interfaith Scotland](#), the [Catholic Church](#), the [British Humanist Association](#), and the [Humanist Society of Scotland](#) in 2013 in Coatbridge, Scotland.

Jeremy Rodell, representative of the *British Humanist Society* present at the conference wrote this:

“This was a bold initiative by the Xaverian Missionaries to find “Common Ground” across one of the most important fault-lines of western society, especially here in the UK. I did not need convincing of the value interfaith dialogue involving humanists — I was already involved in it. But I left the conference convinced both that more could be done and that what we’re doing today could be done better. The conference itself was, of course, an example of dialogue in action. I had never met a missionary before and, if I’d thought about it at all, would probably have come up with the caricature of a Bible-bashing neo-colonialist. What I found were thoughtful people who had made major practical contributions to the lives of people in the countries where they’d lived — in one case helping to end a devastating civil war. That doesn’t make me more comfortable about Christian proselytization, but it certainly provides a more nuanced perspective. Equally, I don’t think many of the religious people present had met a humanist before. There were a lot of fascinating and enlightening conversations.”

In that conference and subsequent projects until the present,¹² we have been learning to navigate the surprising insights about each other that this dialogue reveals, that it is teaching us all “more nuanced ways” to understand each other, that the language of dialogue we use with other faiths is

¹⁰ Jonathan Fox. *Political Secularism, Religion, and the State*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 18.

¹¹ Carl Chudy. “Including the Nonreligious in Interfaith Dialogue.” Panel Presentation for the project requirement for the Masters of Transformative Leadership and Spirituality Program. Hartford Seminary, March 2018, 3-4 of the project paper.

¹² More on our Common Ground Project initiatives can be seen at our website: <https://www.xaverianmissionaries.org/religious-secular-dialogue>

inadequate with our attempts at dialogue between atheists and theists, and many other challenges we are discovering along the way, along with even more questions about where all of this could lead.

Central areas of common ground that came out in our dialogue were the experiences and meaning of the good life - the inspired life - the fulfilled life, the centrality of community and family, and the need to create places where all humans can flourish in peace and justice. It brought up areas around the experiences of secular and religious humanism, the idea of the sacred, the dialogue between science and faith, and spirituality for the nonreligious. In an increasingly plural society we can only gain from having a better understanding of one another, including beliefs, worldviews, and values which shape our attitudes and hopes in our pursuit of the common good.¹³

Language and the Unaffiliated

At the *Parliament of World's Religions* in Toronto in 2018, this same dialogue between religious and secular voices was energized and more robust than I have ever seen. One session in particular intrigued me. It was entitled, *From Interfaith to a Dialogue of the Religious, Secular, & Spiritual*. Rather than understanding this as religious/secular, atheist/theist, or believer/nonbeliever dialectics, this title and its language more aptly expresses the complex and porous boundaries between religiosity, secularity, and other spiritualities where one can find emerging adults and others who have left religious institutions behind, along with many others, finding community, inspiration, and opportunities to serve.

In the religious/secular spectrum between the narrow bands of religious and secular fundamentalism, lies a very large group of emerging adults as secular humanists, agnostics, aweists, disaffiliated adults, and the “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR). The language of *religious, secular* and *spiritualities* and their intersections provides a much wider frame by which to understand more deeply the extraordinary variety of expressions of meaning and faith crafted across religious and secular frameworks.¹⁴ Growing numbers of people today are reluctant to describe their identity and social practices as either religious or secular and prefer to portray themselves as “spiritual.” In this sense spirituality is not necessarily religious or secular, but a contemporary cultural formation expressing distinctive meaning and values that may contain some elements of each.¹⁵

¹³ Anthony Carroll and Richard Norman, eds. *Religion and Atheism: Beyond the Divide*. (New York: Routledge – Taylor and Francis Group, 2017), xvii.

¹⁴ One way at understanding the diversity of religious and secular variations in the lives of people today is to look at the Pew Research Center's report, *The Religious Typology: A New Way to Categorize Americans by Religion* which looks at beliefs and behaviors that cut across many denominations – important traits that unite people of different faiths, or that divide people who have the same religious affiliation. It looks high the spectrum of the highly religious, the nonreligious, and the many more in between. <http://www.pewforum.org/2018/08/29/the-religious-typology/> (Accessed December 29, 2018)

¹⁵ Huss, Boaz. *Spiritual, but not Religious, but not Secular: Spirituality and its New Cultural Formations*. Paper read at the European University at Saint Petersburg, November 17th, 2018. https://www.academia.edu/37804743/Spiritual_but_not_Religious_but_not_Secular_Spirituality_and_its_New_Cultural_Formations_Lecture_draft (Accessed December 31, 2018)

The Rise of the “Nones”

Although the historical developments leading up to the “nones” reach back to the 1960’s, with some significant shifts in the 1970’s and 1990’s, it shows that mainlines are losing ground; the bible Belt is less Baptist; Catholics have invaded the south; and denominationalism is on the wane. The headlines spoke of an increase in a typology of people not often heard of: the *nones*.¹⁶ The American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS 2008), which was released in March 2009, had one of the most widely noted findings in the increase of the *No Religion* segment, designated as “Nones.” They increased from 8.1% of the US adult population in 1990 to 15% in 2008, from 14 to 34 million adults.¹⁷ A 2013 Harris Poll of 2,250 American adults, for example, found that 23 percent of all Americans have forsaken religion altogether. A 2015 Pew Research Center poll reported that 34 to 36 percent of millennials (those born after 1980) had left religion behind.¹⁸

Who exactly are the Nones? It is not a movement, but a label for a diverse group of people who do not identify with any of the myriad of religious options in the American religious environment – the irreligious, the unreligious, the anti-religious, and the anti-clerical.¹⁹ Some believe in God, some do not. Some may participate occasionally in religious rituals, others will not. They are often misunderstood. On the one hand, only a small minority are atheists. On the other hand, it is also not correct to describe them as “unchurched” or “unaffiliated” on the assumption that they are mainly theists and religious searchers who are temporarily between congregations. They are also considered to be rational skeptics.²⁰

Drs. Robert Putnam and David Campbell, in their monumental study, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, seeks to understand religious change in the United States and the reasons it is occurring that operate within a dialectical relationship between religious polarization on the one hand, and pluralistic tolerance on the other. They call the long, barely perceptible change over decades *generational effect*. An example of this slow, measured change is in adolescent religious observance over four decades, accelerating in the 1960’s, 1990’s, and early 2000’s.²¹

They contend that the rate of change in American religion in the last fifty years is faster paced. The first shock that represents this more rapid change was the shift from the 1950’s strong religious affiliation of one generation into a secular direction in the 1960’s. The second aftershock, in reaction to the liberal direction, impelled a new generation into a conservative religious

¹⁶ James Emery White. *The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2014), 13.

¹⁷ Barry Kosmin. Ariela Keysar. A Report Based on the American Religious Identification Survey 2008. (Hartford: Trinity College), 5.

¹⁸ Michael Shermer. “The Number of Americans with No Religious Affiliation Is Rising: The rise of the atheists,” in *Scientific American*, April 1, 2018.

¹⁹ The sociological label “nones” is a label not many people living within this reality are happy with. One told me, “I’m not a none, I’m something!” That said, I will continue to use the word, understanding it’s limits.

²⁰ Kosmin, *ibid*.

²¹ Robert Putnam & David E. Campbell. *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2010) 91-133.

direction in the 70's and 80's. This sent yet another third aftershock in the 1990's and early 2000's for a new generation in an even more pronounced nonreligious direction.²²

This extraordinary arc of change was characterized from the unique upheavals of the 1960's of political and social assassinations, the setting of the stage of the culture wars, and changes in sexual mores. Thereby religious believers suffered losses in confidence, liberal and mainline Christians joined in social justice, the effects of Vatican II for Catholics regarding traditional practice, and opposition to birth control ushered a dramatic decline in church attendance. Decline in religious observance fell to new lows.

The two aftershocks that resulted from all of this first began with a great concern with a liberalizing trajectory. The response was a conservative religious boom among college age people, disavowing denominations and megachurches, and terming themselves "Christian." This rise in religious conservatism was short lived although quite significant in scope. As the rise of the "nones" grew in the 1990's, this evangelical rise ended. Youth disaffiliation from religious institutions was also in part due the growing dissatisfaction with the religious right who were perceived to be over judgmental, homophobic, hypocritical and too political. It is interesting to note the generational factors where those who left religion increased incrementally in the last three generations.²³

The trend is to see less people inheriting religion through their families and communities and more intentional choices that may indicate a great deal of changeability. This is certainly true of Catholicism as well. The 17th century model of parish evangelization was assumed as the only model of evangelization until declines began in the 1960's and 70's. Yet most parishes still work out of this model as the only model. There are different senses of belonging, where more people are on the fringe of their traditions, standing both in and out simultaneously. I call it "one foot out the door."

With this in mind, I would like to share briefly some distinctive salient insights in the work of various studies which give some deeper understandings into who these people are. They include the Pew Research Study, "*Nones*" on the Rise: *One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation*. The second study comes from the Public Research Institute (PRRI) entitled, *Exodus: Why Americans are Leaving Religion - and Why They're Unlikely to Come Back*. The third study is a Catholic study by Fr. Thomas Pausch, SJ entitled, *Being Catholic in a Culture of Choice*, and the final and most recent study sponsored by St. Mary's Press of Minnesota and CARA called, *Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics*.²⁴

The Pew Study/Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly

The Pew study reports that the number of Americans who do not identify with any religion continues to grow at a rapid pace. One-fifth and a third of all adults under 30 are religiously unaffiliated today, an increase of over 15% to just under 20% of all US adults. They are less religious on a number of measures, including frequency of attendance at religious services and

²² Ibid, 91.

²³ Ibid, 120-121.

²⁴ Other studies according to the General Social Survey are Smith et al. 2011; Baker and Smith 2009; Cragun 2007; Grossman 2009; Hayes 2000; Hout and Fischer 2002; Schwadel 2010; Sherkat and Wilson 1995. All have sought to understand how and why this shift is occurring.

how important they regard religion in their lives. At the same time, the study finds that many of the country's 46 million unaffiliated adults are religious or spiritual in some way. Two-thirds of them say they believe in God (68%) and more than half say they often feel a deep connection with nature and the earth (58%). More than a third (37%) say they are "spiritual but not religious" and 21% say they pray every day.²⁵

Overwhelmingly, they think that religious organizations are too concerned with money and power, too focused on rules and too involved in politics and therefore say they are not looking for a religion that may be right for them. The growth in number is largely driven by factors such as generational replacement. This is shown in the larger numbers of affiliation as the generation set gets young. The number of those who still retain some type of religious affiliation has dropped 20% since 2007 showing that the rising numbers also indicates that those who rarely attend religious services are more willing to drop religious attachments all together.²⁶

Dr. Elizabeth Drescher states that the religious and spiritual ecosystem show that the narrative of "Nones" are not just singular stories but shaped by historical and contemporary forces. Cultural movements that go back to the 18th century and the New Thought Movement, traces a development from a western embrace of Enlightenment ideas of individual autonomy, rationality and freedom, along with Protestant notions of a personal God. I personally always felt that the New England Transcendentalists were the first to exemplify the spiritual but not religious. History, culture and issues within religious institutions all play a part. That said, it need not be the case that institutional religion is in competition. In fact, the "None-ing" of America is not a turn away from religion, but rather the emergence of multiple, sometimes overlapping, sometimes diverse conceptions of what it means to be human.²⁷

Exodus: The PRRI Study

The decline of religious affiliation among young adults reflect to a reasonable extent the numbers of the Pew study. Four-in-ten young adults (18-29) are religious unaffiliated. Many of these switched from their childhood religious identity to become unaffiliated adults, with very few raised unaffiliated joining a religious tradition, around 3%. White Protestants and Catholics have all experienced declines, with Catholics suffering the largest decline among major religious groups, about a 10-percentage point loss overall. Nearly one-third (31%) of Americans report being raised Catholic, but only about one in five (21%) identify as Catholic today.²⁸

Around 62% of the religiously unaffiliated who were raised in some type of religion left their childhood faith before they turned 18. The study on Catholic disaffiliation from St. Mary's Press confirms that disaffiliation begins young, the medium age being 13. But the reasons for leaving religious institutions behind are quite varied, with a lack of belief in the teachings of the religion most commonly cited. This also includes pointing toward clergy sexual abuse scandals

²⁵ Gary Funk & Greg Smith, primary researchers. "Nones" on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life released October 9, 2012, 9-10.

²⁶ Ibid, 11-12.

²⁷ Elizabeth Drescher. *Choosing our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America's Nones*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 246.

²⁸ Robert P. Jones, Daniel Cox, Betsy Cooper & Rachel Lienesch, researchers. *Exodus: Why Americans are Leaving Religion – and Why They're Unlikely to Come Back*. Study of the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), Released September 22, 2016, 4.

(19%), a traumatic life event (16%) and an overly strong focus on politics (16%). Women were twice as likely as men to say negative things about religious doctrine regarding gay and lesbian people, as well as the status of women in church leadership. Other factors included family dynamics, religiously mixed households with interfaith marriages or unaffiliated and religiously affiliated adults marrying.²⁹

I'd like to mention one more area and that is the link between belief in God, or affiliation to a religious tradition and moral behavior. Religiously unaffiliated Americans are also less likely than religious Americans to link belief in God to moral behavior. Only about one in five (21%) unaffiliated Americans say it is necessary to believe in God to be moral and have good values. More than three-quarters (77%) reject this idea. A majority of black Protestants (78%), white evangelical Protestants (59%), and Catholics (59%) agree believing in God is a necessary precondition for moral behavior. Notably, fewer than half of white mainline Protestants (43%) and those who identify with non-Christian religions (43%) agree.³⁰ Greg Epstein of the Humanist Hub at Harvard University wrote a very popular book, [Good Without God: What a Billion Non-Religious Do Believe](#), which underlined this very factor from a secular point of view.

The Jesuit Study: 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 "tinkering" with their own identity formation as they seek meaning in a pluralistic culture. This 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 are 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.³¹

On the religious side, as the previous studies indicated for many others, the practice and membership in a Catholic Church diminished much more dramatically. In this study, Thomas Pausch, SJ 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?³²

Considering this, Pausch 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.

²⁹ Ibid, 8-10.

³⁰ Ibid, 11-12.

³¹ Thomas P. Pausch, S.J. *Being Catholic in a Culture of Choice* (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota), p. 1. Much of this particular material was used in a previous paper I wrote entitled, *Faith and Doubt in a Secular Age*, Fall of 2016.

³² Ibid, p. 2.

The bonds that tied 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 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 believes and do. It seems, according to Hoge, that Catholicism seems 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.³³

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 been well noted by Robert Bellah.³⁴ 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.³⁵

Going, Going, Gone: Catholic Disaffiliation in America (catholicresearch.smp.org)

I was invited, along with about 65 Catholic leaders across the country, to look over study findings concerning Catholic disaffiliation and discern some pastoral implications that they may engender. This study, with its quantitative data, also underscored the qualitative analysis which yielded textured and nuanced personal narratives or life stories that more fully revealed the

³³ Ibid, p.6.

³⁴ Robert Bellah lecture: Individualism and Commitment in America (http://www.robertbellah.com/lectures_4.htm)

³⁵ Thomas P. Pausch, S.J., pp. 9-18.

dynamics of disaffiliation. The interviews with disaffiliated young Catholics revealed profound struggles within the numbers.³⁶

First, this study was focused on young people who previously self-identified as Catholic, but longer do so. There were a number of issues then that fell beyond the scope of this study. They included: The impact of the Hispanic reality as a multigenerational immigrant experience; the “Sorta-Catholics” of those not disaffiliated, describing themselves on the margin of the Church; the “almost-done Catholics” is a new typology in the research of Josh Packard and Ashleigh Hope (Church Refugees, Group Publishing, 2015) identifies a significant percentage of people who remain affiliated with their church but are on the brink of being “done” (hence the typologies of none and done); the “engaged Catholics” who do maintain their Catholic Christian identity and knowing why this is the case would also be very useful; and finally, this study did not include the larger social, cultural, and historical settings that influences their lives.³⁷

As in the other studies, there is no single reason why many young people raised as Catholics no longer identify with the Church. Further, there is no one profile that adequately describes those who have left the Church. The multiplicity of reasons demands that a pastoral response needs to be informed by identifying contributing factors, both *ecclesial and social*. These dynamics can be grouped into three distinct categories, with the caution that no individual is never fully identified with one category. They are: *The Injured, The Drifter, The Dissenter*.³⁸

A powerful dynamic that can lead to disaffiliation are negative experiences associated with faith and religious practice, both in the family and in the church. Current research highlights the significant role that family plays in the transmission of faith to young people, so it is not surprising that disruptions in the family can negatively impact one’s faith. In many cases these disruptions contributed to or even caused the final severing of ties to the Church. One subtle dynamic among the *Injured* was the understanding of prayer. In several interviews it was mentioned how they prayed for healing with loved ones who were seriously ill. Despite their prayers, people died, parents divorced, and others did not heal.³⁹

“My doubts about being Catholic, guessing it happened a little bit before high school. It was just like the feeling of not feeling like you are part of something because sometimes you have these people that are extremely religious and then they become extremely hypocritical. And they think they are better than everybody else. But they do these bad things and it’s like, how could you be part of that”. (Fran #1556)

“So what? What difference does faith make anyway?” For some young people the dynamics of disaffiliation seems to stem from uncertain faith and lack of engagement with a faith

³⁶ The interviews of five young adults that were summarized and videotaped are quite marvelous and worth listening to. You can see them here: <https://catholicresearch.smp.org/my-story/>

³⁷ *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics*. A Study by Saint Mary’s Press of Minnesota, in collaboration with the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA). Released September 2017, 9-10.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 13.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 14-16.

community. This is the *Drifter*. The connection between religious belief and practice, and the connection between lived experience and faith slowly fades until at some point these young people question why they are affiliated with the church in the first place. Their experience of church seems to exemplify meaningless rules and rituals without any connection to their ‘real world’. Here many feel alone on their own to navigate their lives with their faith. Without peer or adult support this journey becomes tiresome and lonely.

“I just turned 22, and about two and half years ago, I’d say right around Christmas that actually I started to doubt my religion. I don’t remember exactly why. The end of high school, I didn’t doubt it, but halfway through college I’d say is when it happened. I just sort of fell out of it.” (Doug #557).

Dissenters reflect a more intentional disaffiliation. Though this group share a common starting point, their end point seem to vary significantly. Dissenting young people who actively leave the church express disagreement with church teaching on social issues, particularly same-sex marriage, abortion, birth control, all couched in an individual’s right to choose. Others take issue with their perception of church teaching regarding the Bible, salvation, heaven, hell, purgatory, and life after death. Though many in this group were involved in Catholic education, religious education and youth ministry, there is a disillusionment for questions that were never answered.⁴⁰

“I was already distancing myself from the teachings of the church when I was probably in middle school. There were passages that would come up in CCD, for example, rich people are bad, and men should not lie with a man as with a woman. I was already questioning, and I would always bring things up. It didn’t quite make much sense to me and I never felt like I was receiving satisfactory answers from my teachers.” (Bill, #542)

There are five short videos of young adult Catholics in the different stages of disaffiliation that are with looking at here: <https://catholicresearch.smp.org/my-story/>

Unaffiliated Adults in Massachusetts

In our local area of the Catholic archdiocese of Boston, the picture of the unaffiliated reflect overall national figures to some extent. There are 20 states in which no religious group comprises a greater share of residents than the religiously unaffiliated. These states tend to be more concentrated in the Western U.S., although they include a couple of New England states, namely, Vermont and Massachusetts.⁴¹ In Massachusetts, Catholics still constitute the largest Christian denomination at 34 percent, but the unaffiliated cohort is right behind, at 33 percent.

The share of Massachusetts Catholics dropped 9 percentage points since the last survey in 2007, while the unaffiliated grew 16 percent.⁴² The Pew Study puts the percentage of Catholic

⁴⁰ Ibid, 21-22.

⁴¹ PRRI Report, 8.

⁴² A New York Times article entitled: “Christian numbers in US Tumbling; Share of Catholics in Mass. Down by Nate Cohn, May 13, 2015. (Accessed January 4, 2019).

disaffiliation in the northeast generally at 36% for white Catholics, and for Hispanics at a much lower level, 18%. This significant number in our local church is reflected in the many conversations I have had with Catholic families who participates in our program, *Passing on our Faith to our Kids who don't Want it*.

Catholic theological underpinnings to dialogue with secular culture

However unintentionally it occurred, Vatican II became a watershed for the church in its relationship to a rapidly changing world, to its burgeoning opportunities, faith and nonfaith options, growing disillusionment in cultural institutions, and the process of secularization. In my opinion, the fundamental posture of Vatican II was its capacity to question the place of the church in the modern world through its 16 constitutions, declarations, and decrees. One significant document in Latin was called, *Guadium et Spes (joy and hope)*, and this document became the icon of a relationship of the church with an ever-changing world it was struggling to understand. One central metaphor that emerged from all of this was a new word to the vocabulary of the church of the early 1960's, *dialogue*.⁴³

Pope Paul VI, who closed the council after the work of Pope John XXIII, was close friends with *Louis Massignon* prior to his transition to the papacy. He was a Catholic scholar of Islam and a pioneer of Catholic-Muslim mutual understanding. He was an influential figure in the early twentieth century with regard to the Catholic church's relationship with Islam. He was also influential, among Catholics, for Islam being accepted as an Abrahamic Faith. Some scholars maintain that his research, esteem for Islam and Muslims, and cultivation of key students in Islamic studies largely prepared the way for the positive vision of Islam articulated in the *Lumen Gentium* and the *Nostra Aetate* at the Second Vatican Council.⁴⁴

His influence did not stop with relations with Muslims. The Vatican II document, *Nostra Aetate (In our Time)*, re-aligned relationships with Jews, Hindus, and Buddhists as well. In fact, the document was more focused with relations with Judaism, but not exclusively so. Consequently however, the world of "nonbelievers" became part of the conversation because of deeply felt secularization that seemed to upturn many traditions. At the end of the council, in April of 1965, several new dicasteries or offices in the Vatican were initiated: The Congregation for Ecumenical Relations, the Congregation for Relations with Non-Christians, and the Congregation for Nonbelievers.⁴⁵

In 1968 the first guidelines of dialogue with nonbelievers were established by Cardinal Konig, President of the Congregation of Nonbelievers at that time. It states: "The Secretariat for Non-Believers, in accordance with the purpose for which it was established, is hereby issuing a public document to encourage dialogue between believers and non-believers as well as to promote

⁴³ Papal roles since Paul VI are outlined briefly at: <https://www.xaverianmissionaries.org/religious-secular-dialogue/>

⁴⁴ Christian Krokus (Fall 2012). "Christianity, Islam and Hinduism in Louis Massignon's Appropriation of Gandhi as a Modern Saint". *Ecumenical Studies*. 47:2: 523.

⁴⁵ DIALOGUE WITH NON-BELIEVERS. Franziskus Card. Konig, President, Secretariat for Non-Believers. Taken from: L'Osservatore Romano Weekly Edition in English, 10 October 1968, page 6. <https://www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/PCIDNONB.HTM>

fruitful dialogue, carried out for the ends proper to the very nature of dialogue.”⁴⁶ Subsequent Popes took up the same challenge in distinctive ways. Pope John Paul II subsumed this dicastery into the *Pontifical Commission of Culture*, defining this dialogue as an *intercultural dialogue* worldwide, rather than an interfaith dialogue issue.

Pope Benedict XVI created in 2005 a program called, *Courtyard of the Gentiles*,⁴⁷ which creates conferences that bring together believers and nonbelievers throughout Europe, Latin America, and in the USA in April 2014 at Georgetown University. Pope Francis, in his first encyclical, *Joy of the Gospel*, says: “As believers, we also feel close to those who do not consider themselves part of any religious tradition, ...We consider them as precious allies in the commitment to defending human dignity, in building peaceful coexistence between peoples and in protecting creation.” (257).⁴⁸

One major change between the perception of the world at Vatican II and what the world appeared to be in in the post-Vatican II period is the degree, rapidity, and the pervasiveness of secularization. It’s Latin derivative *saecularis* appears in five documents of the council, but mostly in the sense of “worldly”, and not related to secularism or secularization. Yet, the secular age has brought in far-reaching changes in the church’s role in education, Catholic culture, and the voice of Christian ethics in the world. The secular and secularization are read through the lens of Western Christendom, both at Vatican II and after. In this sense there is a difference between the church facing pluralism in a secularized world and the facing pluralism in a multi-religious world where the dialectic is no longer between the Christian “free world” and atheistic Communism.⁴⁹

Postsecular Catholicism

Dr. Michele Dillon of the University of New Hampshire published an important contribution to Catholic Secular relations recently in her book, *Postsecular Catholicism: Relevance and Renewal*. In striking ways, she offers a way forward from previous conciliar and post-conciliar attempts to understand the meaning of our relationship with secular culture and its ways to shift the meaning of religious and secular boundaries. After all, the Catholic Church must do what it has done often in history, and that is negotiate the tension between the forces of tradition and those of change.⁵⁰

She sides with the notion of Jurgen Habermas on the understanding of postsecularity. Jürgen Habermas refers to this as the modern dilemma. For instance, although a secular society founded on natural reason can be stable, the solidarity and collective action needed to ensure its preservation may not have a reliable source of motivation.⁵¹ It speaks of a change in public consciousness, a postsecular consciousness. “A postsecular consciousness recognizes that while

⁴⁶ Taken from the EWTN website: <https://www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/PCIDNONB.HTM>

⁴⁷ <https://www.cortiledeigentili.com/>

⁴⁸ Much of our work in religious and secular dialogue can be found on our website at:

<https://www.xaverianmissionaries.org/religious-secular-dialogue>

⁴⁹ Massimo Faggioli. *Catholicism & Citizenship*. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2017), 55. He refers to an interesting work by the Australian theologian, James Gerard McEvoy in his, *Leaving Christendom for Good: Church-World Dialogue in a Secular Age*. (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2014), 152.

⁵⁰ Michelle Dillon. *Postsecular Catholicism: Relevance and Renewal*. (Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition, 2018), Kindle Location 61,

⁵¹ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger and Jürgen Habermas, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 34.

secularization is the settled reality, religion has public relevance and culturally useful resources for addressing contemporary societal ills.”⁵² It does not mean that we have moved beyond secularization, or it is a neo-revival of religion. Rather, postsecularity requires an appreciation of the mutual relevance of the religious and the secular.⁵³

This dialogue with theology and spirituality requires a secular translation into accessible secular language that is the “lingua franca” of our secular age. Our pluralism sits in the frame of a secular principles that guide everyday conduct and these secular expectations also apply to religion’s engagement in public discourse. Certainly, many of the disaffiliated seek community, inspiration in very secular terms. Robert Wuthnow notes, individuals, including those who are religious, participate in several diverse speech communities (associated with work, leisure, and other activities). All language, therefore, including religious language, is shaped by this diversity.⁵⁴ The questions of what to do and how to live may find fruitful answers if society draws on the mutual relevance and resources of the religious and the secular.⁵⁵

A case in point has been the postsecular leadership of Pope Francis. He argues: “It is no longer possible to claim that religion should be restricted to the private sphere and that it exists only to prepare souls for heaven” (JG #182). Rather, evangelization means “going out into the world,” and requires the Church to be in the vanguard, showing “concern for the building of a better world” (# 183). He too articulates the postsecular expectation of reciprocal religious–secular dialogue. Reminding secular citizens (and religious believers) that religion has a central place in secular discourse, *Laudato Si’* (Care for our Common Home), his encyclical on the environment, states:

“In the areas of politics and philosophy there are those who firmly reject the idea of a Creator or consider it irrelevant and consequently dismiss as irrational the rich contribution that religions can make toward an integral ecology and the full development of humanity. Others view religions simply as a subculture to be tolerated. Nonetheless, science and religion, with their distinctive approaches to understanding reality, can enter into an intense dialogue fruitful for both.” (*Laudato Si’* #62)⁵⁶

Emerging Models from the Shifting Borders of Religion and Secularity

The life of meaning, values and faith arising outside traditional religious institutions is evolving, changing the traditional meanings of faith, spirituality and indeed, secularity. While some may see this as the fragmentation of religious belief based in institutions of faith, I want to show that it is an evolutionary expansion of spirituality that is burgeoning beyond traditional institutional faiths, and in some sense, signals the limitations and failures of these institutions in postsecular times.

⁵² Dillon, Kindle Location 174-176/

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid, Kindle Location 199-201.

⁵⁵ Dillon, Kindle Location 199.

⁵⁶ Ibid, Kindle Location 741-744.

Religious and secular engagement thus assumes that we do not primarily focus on our distinctive identities as religious and non-religious, in some apologetic stance. As these identities are important in themselves, they are understood more profoundly through our relationships with each other. In this way, our identities do not imply separateness and independence, but rather interdependence, that we are all part of a creative whole.

What matters is that we who represent traditional religious institutions must remain in the tension with secularity and spirituality. Our courage to stay in the dialectic relationship of religion, secularity, and spiritualities is important because together we see new and interesting models of faith, community and outreach. This postsecular stance as a church invites us to open ourselves to the larger movements of the Spirit that needs discernment as they are revealed. In this light, I would like to share some experiences in the Catholic context.

Common Ground Project (<https://www.xaverianmissionaries.org/religious-secular-dialogue/>)

This project of the Xaverian Missionaries is a blend of public events, monthly meetup groups, and blogging in order to explore the spaces between religiosity, secularity, and spirituality. The first purpose is to explore new opportunities of the 21st century to live out the *mission ad gentes* of the Church that binds us as Catholics to all people, religious or nonreligious. This relationship is an important place where we share the openness and compassion of Christ.

Second, in the northern hemisphere (Europe/US), the gulf felt between people of faith and secular culture is a periphery of the Church that demands encounter, study, and the application of the Gospel in the spirit of dialogue, love, and bridge building. Secular culture here applies to persons who are atheists, secular humanists, the unaffiliated (those who left religion behind), seekers, agnostics and others who self-identify as not believing in divinity or hold to any particular religious institution or worldview.

The programs and reflections we have written have organically grown in the past six years through a number of factors both planned and unexpected. They include:

- Conference: Common Ground: Conversations Among Secular Humanists and Religious Believers (Scotland, 2013).
- Conference: Common Ground: Gathering of the Religious and Nonreligious at Rutgers University (New Jersey 2015). *Commonground2015.org*
- Conference: Common Ground: Religious and Secular Dialogue on Global Climate Change (Scotland 2015).
- Talk at Humanist Haven, Yale Humanist Community, October 2107.
- Meetup Group in Wayne, New Jersey which began in 2012 and a Meetup Group began in 2016.
- Blogging on our own media stream and the nonreligious blog on *Patheos*, *Secular Spectrum*. (Can be see at the above website)

The ongoing challenge is to encourage a multiplication of these dialogue opportunities across the board and to articulate and share what we are learning in these opportunities.

[Pass on our faith to our kids who don't want](#)

This is part of the Common Ground Program, but with a focus on the intra-dialogue concerning the issues of disaffiliation. Disaffiliation is an intimate part of this transversal of the religious, secular, and spiritual, and the most concrete place where ordinary people of faith encounter, particular in the departure of family members from faith. One area in which we are sharing this program is in preaching, which I have done extensively throughout the northeast. The second point is a workshop we organized which was conducted in September 2018. Since then we have decided to add two additional parts. We will be offering a *Community Winter Read* for the winter of 2019, using the book, *The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated* by James Emery White. At the conclusion of that read, in the Spring of 2019, we will conduct a second workshop to focus on more practical issues affecting families and others.

[Nuns and Nones \(nunsandnones.org\)](#)

This response to this religious secular dialogue is a program that has been gaining ground quite recently. They include communities of Catholic sisters across the country, along with millennials gathering together in intentional communities. They are a network of women religious, spiritually diverse millennials, and allied thought partners, creating new pathways to transmit the wisdom and legacy of Sisters, steward sacred spaces, and create a more just, equitable, and loving world. They strive to connect our generations through new forms of prophetic community, deepening in relationship, spiritual practice, and justice work to the meet the needs of our times.

Over the last three hundred years, Women Religious in the U.S. have created vast networks and infrastructure for community-building and community-serving. Much of that infrastructure is currently under-resourced and under-activated and many orders are facing stark decisions about what to do with their spiritual and worldly assets and how to continue their work in the world. Millennials, motivated by a similar spirit of service, are actively building new organizations and networks, figuring out how to create the connective tissue and physical infrastructure to support their work in community, and hungry to learn from women who have such a depth of experience in collaborative leadership and service.⁵⁷

They are gathering in many places nationwide, including a research arm and a pilot residency program which just began in San Francisco. They even have requests coming from Europe.

[New Monasticism \(http://www.new-monastics.com/\)](http://www.new-monastics.com/)

New Monasticism is a diverse movement, not limited to a specific religious denomination or church and including varying expressions of contemplative life. These include evangelical Christian communities such as "Simple Way Community" and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove's "Rutba House," European and Irish new monastic communities, such as that formed by Bernadette Flanagan spiritual communities such as the "Community of the New Monastic Way" founded by feminist contemplative theologian Beverly Lanzetta, and "interspiritual" new

⁵⁷ The information I provide come from their website as well as my conversations with the regional director in this area, Katie Gordon.

monasticism, such as that developed by Rory McEntee and Adam Bucko. These communities expand upon traditional monastic wisdom, translating it into forms that can be lived out in contemporary lives "in the world."⁵⁸

Conclusion

The “mission ad gentes” of Jesus, to engage the whole of creation with the gift of our faith is also understood in the Catholic tradition as an engagement in a complex and ever-changing religious picture.⁵⁹ Yet, as we look toward the future, if a much higher proportion of religious adherents will be shifting and switching in their beliefs and worldviews, if there will be far less continuity from parents to children, if many more people mix and match beliefs of various traditions, if many will keep a guarded distance from inherited faith, how can religious institutions that provide lifetime faith formation be maintained, reexamined, and renewed?

There is a temptation to identify solutions of strategies that address the dynamics of disaffiliation that has a multi-generational history. Pastoral communities need to be committed to a deep, patient, analysis and discernment. This also entails reaching out to those who leave, collecting stories of departure. Particularly, we need to assist families and assist them in their dialogue with their children, grandchildren, and friends who have left. At the same time, there needs to be more reach out and research on what it means to be “Catholic”, in light of those who still sit in the pews today, at least for now. They include the “sorta-Catholic”, or “Catholic-ish,” and the “almost-dones.”

Finally, in the larger scheme of God’s revelation in the world today, we may need to consider the limits of what religious institutions are capable of in these changing times, without compromising the need to search for ways to evolve in changing times. As we come to know and love those untethered from traditional religion, we, fellow seekers, both have much to learn from each other. Our faith heritage that reaches back centuries still remains a central inheritance we offer the world, and how we share the rich gift of faith in postsecular times is the tension we must remain in.

⁵⁸ The information here comes from their website. Two of the co-founders wrote a fascinating book: McEntee, Rory and Bucko, Adam, *The New Monasticism: An Interspiritual Manifesto for Contemplative Living*. (Maryknoll, Orbis Press, 2015).

⁵⁹ John Paul II, *Redeeming Mission: On the Permanent Validity of the Church’s Missionary Mandate*, Chapter 4. http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html.

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