BECOMING ABSENCE-MINDED:
SOCIOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE SENSE OF THE FAITHFUL

JEROME P. BAGGETT

Thinking Sociologically about Religious Culture

Since the Second Vatican Council, there seems to have been something of a retrieval of the centuries-old notion of the sense of the faithful. Put very simply, the more subjective dimension of this teaching is that individual believers possess a "sense of faith" (*sensus fidei*), an inner capacity to discern both religious truth and what is contrary to it. In its somewhat more objective dimension, it is expressed as the "sense of the faithful" (*sensus fidelium*), referring to those religious truths upon which, in light of believers' concrete experience of living out the faith, the church as a whole has come to some consensus and about which it cannot err. As subjective, it is a "supernatural sense" while, when looked at as an objective body of beliefs, it represents a "universal agreement in matters of faith and morals."[1]

Theologians, not surprisingly, have long contended with this notion.[2] Subjectively speaking, if a sense of faith is so broadly extant among earnestly discerning Catholics, how then does one account for the many theological differences among them? Objectively speaking, is a consensus ever possible within a church that so elevates individual conscience and is so variable in its localized forms throughout the globe? Such questions naturally elicit a wide spectrum of responses. Yet, both dimensions of the sense of the faithful presume that so-called ordinary Catholics have the capacity for engaging in careful discernment about their faith and that this

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1 See "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church" (*Lumen gentium*) in Abbott, ed., *Documents of Vatican II* (Piscataway, NJ: Association Press, 1966), nos. 12, 29–30. Related notions presented within conciliar documents are: *sensus catholicus* in "Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests" (*Apostolicam actuositatem*), no. 30; *sensus christianus fidelium* in "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (*Gaudium et spes*), no. 52; *sensus christianus* in *Gaudium et spes*, no. 62; *sensus religiosus* in *Gaudium et spes*, no. 59, in "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions" (*Notra aetate*), no. 2, and in "Declaration on Religious Freedom" (*Dignitatis humanae*), no. 4; *sensus dei* in *Gaudium et spes*, no. 7, and in "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation" (*Dei verbum*), no. 15; and *sensus Christi et ecclesiae* in "Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity" (*Ad gentes*), no. 19.

2 Two classic texts are John Henry Newman's 1859 essay, *On Consulting the Faithful on Matters of Doctrine* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1961); and Yves M. J. Congar, O.P., *Lay People in the Church: A Study for a Theology of the Laity* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1959). Some useful contemporary explorations of this general topic are: Orlando O. Espín, *The Faith of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997); Daniel J. Finucane, *Sensus Fidelium: The Use of a Concept in the Post-Vatican II Era* (San Francisco: International Scholars Publications, 1996); Richard R. Gaillardetz, *By What Authority? A Primer on Scripture, the Magisterium, and the Sense of the Faithful* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003); Paul Lakeland, *The Liberation of the Laity: In Search of an Accountable Church* (New York: Continuum, 2003); and Ormond Rush, *The Eyes of Faith: The Sense of the Faithful and the Church's Reception of Revelation* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2009).

discernment should be taken seriously as a source of theological insight by the church as a whole.

Given that this is a theological category and questions about what the church *should* take seriously are beyond the province of sociology, an essentially descriptive discipline, it is not obvious that sociological analysis can offer much to these concerns. Still, I believe it can. I say this because considered discussions of the sense of the faithful invariably gravitate toward three foci—beliefs, practices and community—which are often conceptualized far too narrowly. Whereas deploying what C. Wright Mills famously termed the "sociological imagination" enables us to de-naturalize our taken-for-granted understandings of these foci and think more capaciously about them.[3]

Oftentimes, for instance, the beliefs that most resonate with Catholics are reduced to mere "public opinion" with little thought about the socio-cultural shifts that, over time, render some components of the tradition more or less plausible to them than others. Something similar can be said about religious practices among the faithful, which are typically framed (and not infrequently trivialized) as "popular piety." Missing here is an awareness that religiously informed and salient practices among Catholics extend beyond acts of piety to other forms of action that include interpersonal discourse, lifestyle decisions, parenting styles, civic and political involvements and so forth. These types of practices can also be a reflection of deep religious sensibilities. And, finally, community tends to be framed simply in terms of "reception," as the collective authentication of those beliefs and practices that come to express the sense of the faithful per se. Unfortunately, scant attention typically gets paid to the mutually constituting relationship between faith communities and the beliefs and practices that partly define them. The community shapes what comes to be accepted as the "deposit of faith," in other words; it is also important to note that the sorts of beliefs and practices "carried" by the community have much to do with who then decides to affiliate or even loosely associate themselves with it.

Central to the sociological imagination is making the analytical connections between the complicated nature of lived realities—in this case, the realities of Catholics' beliefs, practices and community—and the larger socio-cultural changes that make these possible. The change I principally address here is secularization. Yet, rather than envisioning this as necessarily a decline of religion *tout court*, I argue that it is better thought of in terms of subtle shifts in how people, including American Catholics, who are the focus of this essay, engage the religious traditions meaningful to them.

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3 C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), esp. ch. 1.

At the Societal / Macro Level: Religious Culture as Available

A full 92 percent of American adults claim to believe in God or a "universal spirit." More than two-thirds are "absolutely certain" in this belief, whereas nearly one-quarter of all Americans believe with a lesser ("fairly certain," "not certain") degree of certainty.[4] About four in five say they pray, and nearly that many describe religion as being "very" or "fairly" important to them. Whereas a half century ago the theologian Paul Tillich could confidently describe Americans' attention to matters of the spirit as "lost beyond hope," now the language of spirituality has become remarkably pervasive, perhaps to a historically unprecedented degree.[5] The four in five adults who currently say they feel the need to grow spiritually marks a 50 percent increase in the proportion who said this only three decades ago.[6] And while there may a "yea-saying" bias for such questions—a tendency to portray oneself as more religious than might actually be the case—even this suggests just how strong cultural expectations of religiosity truly are within American society.

If the empirical evidence indicates that religious belief remains stubbornly resilient within the United States, then what does it mean to describe our society as "secularized?" It means that, like other modern societies, American society is marked by a distinctive structure in which religious norms and authority have been largely removed from public institutions.[7] Untethered from religious control, these institutions operate according to their own internal logics. No longer subject to such religious ideals as "just war" criteria and the Christianization of society, the state agencies responsible for collective governance are themselves governed by the logic of power accrual and exertion. No longer shaped by such religious teachings as equating usury (charging interest for loans) with sinfulness and such practices as enforcing business contracts through church courts, economic enterprises are primarily driven by the pursuit of profit. No longer subject to ecclesial oversight, science is judged according to its own empirical standards.

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4 "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Religious Beliefs and Practices—Diverse and Politically Relevant." The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (June 1, 2008), 28, http://www.pewforum.org/files/2008/06/report2-religious-landscape-study-full.pdf (accessed on August 12, 2015).

5 Quoted in Martin E. Marty, "The Spirit's Holy Errand: The Search for a Spiritual Style in Secular America," *Daedalus* 96.1 (Winter 1967): 99–115.

6 George Gallup, Jr. and D. Michael Lindsay, *Surveying the Religious Landscape: Trends in U.S. Beliefs* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1999), 79.

7 The sociological term for this process is differentiation. For fuller explication, see Niklas Luhmann, *The Differentiation of Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). Also important for making the case that, rather than religious privatization or decline, differentiation is the "structural trend" that defines "secular" society is José Casanova's *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 11–39. Finally, according to one sociologist who examined and compared the most influential theories of secularization, "differentiation, in one form or another, is absolutely central to all the secularization theories, without exception." See Olivier Tschannen, "The Secularization Paradigm: A Systemization," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion,* 30.4 (1991): 395–415.

In short, by functionally differentiating themselves from religion, such institutions have dethroned religion somewhat. Religion has become one institution among others, eminently separable in many people's minds from various dimensions of public life. This is why one can speak of "religious culture."[8] Far less influential in steering the workings of other societal institutions, religion is largely divested of such functions and, like culture as a whole, becomes for people more a locus of self-expression and meaning-making. Religious traditions are now most operative in making sacred symbols and meanings accessible to people who, with the de-monopolization of Christianity in Western societies like the United States, are now freer than ever to draw upon these as their needs require.[9]

Secularism, then, is the context within which Americans tap into the symbolic repertoires that give their lives a sense of coherence and direction. Religious meanings are certainly distinctive in signifying something about the sacred. At the same time, they are not so distinctive from other cultural meanings with respect to people's access to them. They have largely ceased to be imposed by the state, and they are no longer reaffirmed in everyday consciousnesses by being privileged within other institutional settings. They are simply available for people to draw upon and deploy within their individual lives in much the same way as are the other components of culture to which they have access. Clergy and other "experts" no longer monopolize what are taken to be valid interpretations of faith traditions and, concomitantly, lay people are no longer reticent to interpret religious symbols and meanings as they see fit.

At the Individual / Micro Level: Religious Culture as Appropriated

The question of how Catholics access the religious culture available to them is best addressed from the individual or micro level of analysis. Put simply, individual Catholics actively appropriate the religious symbols and meanings with which they are familiar. The remarkable variety among American Catholics, as well as the religious changes experienced by individual believers over the course of their lives, are testimony to the fact that they are not "cultural dopes."[10] They are not passive recipients of a religious culture that is simply planted in their brains and then directs their actions in essentially predictable ways. Rather, as sociologist Ann Swidler helpfully conceives it, culture is a symbolic repertoire or "tool kit," and individuals

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8 To put the matter in the tripartite categories used by social theorist Daniel Bell, religion now seems far less at home within both the "polity" and "techno-economic" order and most connected to "culture." See his *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 3–30.

9 This is one of the chief characteristics of modern religion according to Robert N. Bellah as described in his important essay, "Religious Evolution" in *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditionalist World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 20–50.

10 Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 68; "By 'cultural dope'," Garfinkel writes, "I refer to the man-in-the-sociologist's-society who produces the stable features of the society by acting in compliance with pre-established and legitimate alternatives of action that the common culture provides."

actively appropriate its symbolic tools on the basis of what they are doing, who they consider themselves to be, and which components they feel competent to utilize.[11]

Most Catholics have access to such symbolic tools as stories and beliefs about Jesus, church teachings, the pope's latest comments, themes within religious hymnody, and so forth. They are offered parables—depicting everything from unexpectedly good Samaritans to prodigal sons—that provide them with recipes for action when faced with roughly similar situations. They are presented with such values as faithfulness and respect for the intrinsic dignity of each person, as well as with such exemplars as St. Paul perceiving the holy as if through a glass darkly and Mother Teresa tending to the poorest of the poor. Objects from crèche to crucifix; images from Cana to Calvary; phrases that denote "doubting Thomases" and "dark nights of the soul"—all these and more texture the Catholic imagination. And it is not uncommon for them to wed these specifically religious meanings with ones that are *extra*-religious. In other words, they supplement what they know about the sacred through their faith tradition with ideas gleaned from books and newspapers, images portrayed in television programs and movies, and with cultural narratives derived from such multiple sources as capitalism (the "American Dream"), Enlightenment rationalism (knowledge equals progress) and the Romantic tradition ("do your own thing").

Complicating matters further, Catholics share their fellow citizens' propensity for *inter*-religious appropriation in place of strict brand loyalty to any one faith, especially in light of their growing recognition of what historian Martin Marty once called the "merits of borrowing." That one-fifth of all American Catholics consider themselves to be "born again" and more than one-quarter of them believe in reincarnation should disabuse anyone of the notion that religious traditions, including Catholicism, are hermetically sealed and thus impervious to the constant flow of beliefs and practices occurring around them.[12]

Finally, if inter-religious appropriation is a reflection of Catholics' access to concepts and practices embedded within other faith traditions, *intra*-religious appropriation is a function of their having access to a wealth of interpretations of their own tradition. There is a tendency to think of Catholicism as a kind of unified "cultural system" or a pre-assembled bundling of symbols appropriated completely or not at all.[13] In practice, though, the watchwords for people's use of religious culture are "some assembly required." Thus, it makes better sense to follow sociologist James Beckford's lead in seeing religions, for better or worse, as cultural "resources"

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[11] See especially Ann Swidler, *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), ch. 2.

[12] Gallup and Lindsay, *Surveying the Religious Landscape*, 68, 32.

[13] See, most famously, Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System" in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 87–125.

that people draw upon as their needs dictate.[14] As such, their symbols and meanings are appropriated much more heterogeneously than is frequently acknowledged.[15]

At the Organizational / Meso Level: Religious Culture as Allocated

When attending to religious culture at the organizational or meso level, one must first note that local congregations (including Catholic parishes) are not the only places where religion gets institutionalized in contemporary society. Schools, service agencies, publishing houses, advocacy groups, communities of vowed religious—each of these are important institutional forms of religion.[16] Still, congregations are the primary means by which religion is socially organized for Americans today. There are currently in excess of 300,000 congregations in the United States. This, as sociologist Michael Emerson reminds us, is even more than "all the McDonald's, Wendy's, Subways, Burger Kings, and Pizza Huts, combined."[17] The nearly 18,000 Catholic parishes comprise about six percent of this total but, since on average they are considerably larger than other congregations, they are where more than one-quarter of churchgoers in the United States actually worship.[18]

Besides worship and other parish functions, less acknowledged is their role in allocating religious culture to the faithful.[19] In other words, they are institutional carriers of the religious meanings embedded within the symbolic repertoire that is the Catholic tradition, but not every parish does this the same way. Each parish customizes this repertoire to better reflect the lived reality of its members. Over time they create what sociologist Gary Alan Fine calls "idiocultures," localized versions of a broader meaning system that, in turn, becomes the source for new, collectively shared meanings, customs and beliefs.[20] This is not to suggest that each parish is entirely idiosyncratic. As with the Little League teams Fine studied, different parishes each coalesce around a relatively uniform set of goals (connectedness to the sacred rather than winning games), practices (celebrating the mass rather than peer teasing),

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14 James A. Beckford, *Religion and Advanced Industrial Society* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 171–72. For an extremely sophisticated account of what she calls "the myth of cultural integration," see also Margaret S. Archer, *Culture and Agency: The Place of Culture in Social Theory*, rev. ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), esp. ch. 1.

15 Michele Dillon's analysis in *Catholic Identity: Balancing Reason, Faith, and Power* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999) is a notable exception; see especially her chapter entitled "Pluralism in Community" (194–220).

16 Robert Wuthnow explores these and other institutional forms in *Producing the Sacred: An Essay on Public Religion* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

17 Michael O. Emerson, *People of the Dream: Multiracial Congregations in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 7.

18 William V. D'Antonio, Michele Dillon, and Mary L. Gautier, *American Catholics in Transition* (Lanham, MD.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), 34. See also Mark Chaves, *Congregations in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 3, 23.

19 Here I am informed by Ulf Hannerz's understanding of the "social distribution" of culture; see his *Cultural Complexity: Studies in the Social Organization of Meaning* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

20 Gary Alan Fine, *With the Boys: Little League Baseball and Preadolescent Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 124–61. Penny Edgell Becker uses Fine's notion of idioculture with great nuance in her *Congregations in Conflict: Cultural Models of Local Religious Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 8–12.

language (theological terminology rather than "preadolescent slang"), and normative expectations (piety rather than sportsmanship) operative from one to the next. Within those parameters, though, parishes do develop their own religious style, their own ways of construing and enacting the Catholic faith. They inevitably valorize some components of Catholic culture as more central than others and, in doing so, they make these components more readily available to their members and thus more likely to be appropriated by them.[21]

There is an interesting feedback loop operative in parishes' allocation of Catholic culture to their members. Within a single locale, parishes are distinct from one another due to patterns of human geography. There tend to be more middle-class white people in suburban parishes, there are more working-class Latinos in inner-city parishes, and so on. This localized variability is exacerbated by a feature of what one sociologist calls "de facto congregationalism," the propensity of Catholics (and others) to seek out and become involved in whichever local churches seem most suited to their religious sensibilities.[22] When many people do this over time, this ultimately affects which aspects of Catholic culture are likely to get highlighted by particular churches catering to the needs of particular populations. Coming full circle, this then influences which symbolic tools actually get allocated to parishioners, become familiar to them, and then come to make sense to them by virtue of their participation within a given parish.

Looking Back and Becoming Absence-Minded

In my book *Sense of the Faithful: How American Catholics Live Their Faith* I attempted to provide an accounting of contemporary American Catholics' lived religion, paying attention to the interrelated cultural dynamics at the macro, micro, and meso levels of analysis.[23] This was based on a study of six very different parishes—rich and poor, urban and suburban, liberal and conservative, primarily white and comprised primarily of "minority" groups—in the San Francisco Bay Area. In addition to relying on both surveys and a few years of participant observation, my research assistants and I also did a lot of listening: We conducted more than three hundred, two-hour interviews with active parishioners. With all due modesty, I think the findings presented in that book would be of interest to Catholic theologians. What appears within its pages are the efforts of rank-and-file Catholics to interact with the cultural repertoires to which they have access in order to construct the "everyday theologies" by which they connect to what they hold sacred.[24]

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21 Here I am drawing upon the concepts of "institutional retention" and cultural "retrievability" astutely explained in Michael Schudson's essay "How Culture Works: Perspectives from Media Studies on the Efficacy of Symbols," *Theory and Society* 18 (1989): 153–80.

22 R. Stephen Warner, "The Place of the Congregation in Contemporary American Religious Configuration," in James P. Wind and James W. Lewis, eds., *American Congregations, vol. 2: New Perspectives in the Study of Congregations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 54–99.

23 Jerome P. Baggett, *Sense of the Faithful: How American Catholics Live Their Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

24 I borrow this term from sociologist Dawne Moon; see her book *God, Sex and Politics: Homosexuality and Everyday Theologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

However, when I look back five years after that book's publication, I am more drawn to what does *not* appear. An unintended consequence of how American Catholics interact with religious culture within a secular context is their ensuing construction of certain absences. In other words, one of the aforementioned foci concerning the sense of the faithful is belief. But, upon closer examination, we see from conversations among parishioners a notable absence of any clear understanding of what it means to adhere to an authoritative, particular, and distinctly religious tradition. Similarly, in terms of practices more broadly conceived, we find an absence of thoughtful socio-political discourse within parish communities. And, what of community itself? Here, informed by my current research on American atheists (especially former Catholics), I want to highlight the absence of those who once counted themselves among the faithful, which, as we will see, is actually related to the previous two absences. If what appears in my book would indeed be of interest to theologians, then I suspect that what does not appear, described in the pages ahead, could be taken as a challenge to them.

At the Individual / Micro Level: Rethinking Beliefs and the Absence of Answers

Among other things, Catholics' entry into the mainstream of American society, which accelerated during the second half of the past century, means that they have largely moved beyond a "Father knows best" ilk of piety and now relate to their faith tradition in ways that are similar to how people relate to culture more generally. What I discovered from my three hundred parishioner interviews is that they have what social theorist Pierre Bourdieu calls "a feel for the game," a sense of how culture—in this case, Catholic culture—can be accessed, deployed, and improvised amid changing circumstances.[25] Like the basketball player who intuitively knows how to drive toward the basket even when faced with a configuration of players on the court he has never exactly seen before, having a feel for the symbols transmitted by the Catholic tradition is to have an intuitive sense of how to use them in innovative ways amid novel situations. In short, when people have a feel for this particular game, it means they have attained the requisite cultural competence to negotiate with their religious tradition.

Catholics acquire this by paying attention to how others live out their faiths. They also do it by taking stock of the things they hear others say, even when they might not agree with what has been said. They hear certain scripts again and again, and these help them to better consolidate and express their own identities as Catholics. Sometimes these can be as elaborated as accounts of what the Eucharist means to them or why it was (or was not) important for them to be married in the church. At other times, these can be seemingly simple phrases that, upon closer scrutiny, actually reveal key areas of identity negotiation. Like archeologists sifting through large bins of dirt to discover shards of pottery left by some ancient civilization, the careful sifter of discourse finds what I call conversational shards, which continually appear in Catholics' interactions with one another and represent important loci of cultural improvisation. Dusting off a few of these and examining

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25 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 66.

them more closely should enable us to appreciate the subtle means by which Catholics attempt to live out their faith tradition as modern people and, in doing so, also engender for themselves (and often their children) newfound, largely unresolved cultural dilemmas.

"My Faith" and the Dilemma of Subjectivization

When parishioners describe themselves as Catholic, it is interesting to discover what they do not say. Rarely does one detect references to "Catholicism" (much less "Roman Catholicism") or to "the Catholic faith" or, as one would more likely hear in a religious studies classroom, to a "Catholic worldview." Rather, they say things like "my faith is very important to me." Or they might confide that "I don't know where I'd be without my faith." After a bit of reflection, they might also say something akin to "my faith has really grown over the years" and, as one woman added wryly, "whether I've wanted it to or not!" This, they and so many others suggest, is not about systematic theology or magisterial teachings or reciting the prayers correctly. It is about faith in things unseen and, as the essential modifier "my" attests, it is also deeply personal.

What makes this conversational shard so ubiquitous among Catholics is the increasing degree of religious subjectivization that has occurred since about the middle of the past century. In other words, the locus of religious authority has rather dramatically shifted from what Immanual Kant called "heteronomous" authority— instantiated, for example, in religious leaders and theologians—to the individual self.[26] Increasing levels of educational attainment, the cultural revolution of the 1960s, and the dissolution of tightly bound and religiously homogeneous communities—all these trends (and more, of course) are likely contributors to this cultural shift, which privileges questioning over obedience, journeying over steadfastness, and a commitment to personal growth and authenticity over collective adherence to objectified norms.

Importantly, while intuitively calibrated to this cultural shift, the "my faith" shard should not be written off as necessarily reflecting a "do your own thing" sensibility. This was surely not the case with Maria,[27] a longtime catechism teacher at her parish. When asked about how she is different from her parents religiously, she is quite nimble in both deploying this conversational shard and touching upon other well-worn themes expressed by American Catholics today:

> Some might call me a "cafeteria Catholic," but I have to say that my faith is also deeply personal to me. I've grappled with it and come to terms with it in ways that make sense to me in ways it didn't before.

> *Do you ever question or doubt things the Church teaches?*

> Of course! I think you should always doubt because that gives you the drive to mature religiously. Questioning things keeps you

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26 See Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck (1785; reprint, New York: Macmillan, 1990), 58–63.

27 Note that all interviewees have been assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

from becoming passive, becoming like some kind of sheep. "Baa, baaaa!" That's not the sound of a spiritually alive person. We have to question in order to grow, and we have to grow if we want to be fully human.

> *Is that what being a religious person is all about?*

I prefer to think of myself as more spiritual than religious.

> *What's the difference?*

> Well, even though I love the beauty of the mass and the Church's mystical tradition, and even though being a part of a larger community is so important to me, I think emphasizing spirituality means staying true to the core of Jesus' message and not to all the doctrinal trappings. . . I think we all have to be on a faith journey because when people—and I include Church leaders here—when we realize how loved we are by God, then we'll love others in ways that far surpass what's outlined for us by doctrines. It's very intimate.

Notice all the cultural work Maria does. Hardly doing her own thing, she has seriously "grappled" with what she dubs "my faith." Moreover, she revalorizes the pejoratively intended moniker, "Cafeteria Catholic," and appropriates it as an indicator of her own commitment to discernment. Not content to "pray, pay, and obey," as the old saw had it, she interrogates the tradition and selects those dimensions of it that resonate with her own experience—what is "deeply personal to me," "in ways that make sense to me," and so on. And she does something similar with Americans' mantra-like caveat, "I'm spiritual, but not religious." Often taken to signal a somewhat superficial faith, she draws upon it to signal her capacity to sift the wheat of what the philosopher William James once called "first-hand" religious experience from the chaff of her faith's less personally meaningful institutional dimensions. [28] Counterposed with spirituality's focus on the "core of Jesus's message," commitment to "love others" and on what is "very intimate" is, in her estimation, religion's "doctrinal trappings" and "what's outlined for us by the doctrines."

As laudable as this widespread emphasis on discernment and authenticity truly is, it comes with a difficult dilemma. This can be summed up with a question: what does it mean to identify with an authoritative religious tradition? By "authoritative," I refer to the capacity to direct thought and action in ways distinguishable from the dictates of both the broader culture and self-interest. Concerning the former, when Catholics exercise their religious agency in the manner encapsulated by the "my faith" shard, this may appear to denote their pure autonomy independent of pressures from without. However, it is actually the manifestation of a deeply ingrained cultural expectation that tells Catholics (and others) not only that they can make up their own

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28 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1961).

minds when it comes to matters of faith, but also that they must. And, if the religious tradition is not authoritative in the sense of being independent of cultural expectations, nor does it bear the presumptive authority of being derived from community-based—rather than idiosyncratic—discernment. Whereas once traditions held communities together, individuals are now inclined to hold onto traditions on their own terms. Fair enough. Yet, when "my faith" exists alongside "his faith" and "her faith" and so forth, it becomes harder to think through either the place of "the Faith" in this scenario or the role played by the larger faith community in assessing (or perhaps trumping) one's own religious understanding.

"For Me" and the Dilemma of Religious Pluralism

The flipside of respecting others' perspectives is Catholics' reticence to universalize what is appealing, sensible or true "for me." Because people typically perceive their faith as being so individualized, they tend to be reluctant to present their beliefs and commitments as necessarily applicable to others. "The Catholic religion is what's valid for me"; "this is where, for me at least, God is present"; "it's the best religion for me"—one hears this conversational shard with great frequency. "For me" seems to signify a widespread unwillingness to either judgmentally underestimate the validity of other people's truths or hubristically overestimate the validity of one's own.

This reticence has also been well documented as a prominent characteristic of contemporary American religion. When anthropologists Robert Lynd and Helen Lynd visited Muncie, Indiana (or "Middletown," as they pseudonymously called it), in the 1920s, they found that 94 percent of their respondents agreed that "Christianity is the one true religion, and all people should be converted to it."[29] However, when researchers returned to Muncie a little more than a half century later, they were surprised to discover that, even though religious conviction and practice remained alive and well, only 41 percent of the city's inhabitants continued to agree with this statement.[30] Now this burgeoning inclusiveness is in full bloom across the American religious landscape. When asked in a recent national survey whether a "good person not of your faith can go to heaven," a whopping 93 percent of Catholics agreed.[31]

I got nary a whiff of the once-pervasive *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* [outside the church there is no salvation] attitude among my interviewees. Instead, nearly everyone—even members of more conservative parishes—made use of the "for me" shard. A good example comes from my conversation with Richard, a member of his church's choir and self-described "dyed-in-the-wool Catholic":

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29 Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* (1929; reprint, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1957), ch. 20.

30 Theodore Caplow, Howard M. Bahr, and Bruce A. Chadwick, *All Faithful People: Change and Continuity in Middletown's Religion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 91–95.

31 Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 535.

Do you think the Catholic faith is better or truer than other religious faiths?

To put it simply, I'd say Catholicism is the best religion for me.

Hmm. What do you mean by that exactly?

I think that if you have a relationship with God, it doesn't make any difference what you are. My feeling is that, based on what I know about the Tradition of the Church and its history, this is where I should be. But one of the things Isaiah says is that God's ways and man's ways are different. He makes that real clear. I don't know a lot about Hinduism and Buddhism but, as far as I can tell, they're synonymous with Christianity since they're about connecting to God and getting along with other people. And the same goes for Islam; it's about the same kind of basic principles.

Interesting. But, if that's the case, then why be specifically Catholic?

Because this is what works for me. It's the path that I think is working to make me closer to God. Besides, this is the Tradition I know and feel comfortable with.

As he suggests in mentioning Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, his "for me" signals a recasting of what it means to be Catholic within an increasingly pluralistic context. All of the parishioners in my study say they have acquaintances, coworkers, and close friends who adhere to different faiths or no faith. Almost all of them also have non-Catholic siblings, spouses, or children with whom they report having many meaningful conversations about all manner of religious topics. This daily exposure to religious pluralism generally does not make them "heteroglossic," whereby they are knowledgeably conversant in other religious traditions ("I don't know a lot about Hinduism and Buddhism," confides Richard).[32] Rather, to coin a phrase, they are more "heterognostic" in the sense that they simply know about other denominations and religions; they have these faiths on their "radar screens," as it were.

Consequently, they and other Catholics seem to have added what sociologist Alan Wolfe describes as a growing number of Americans' unofficial eleventh commandment: "Thou shalt not judge."[33] What is more, "for me" also seems to denote their widespread uncertainty about religious matters. The parishioners I spoke to were remarkably forthcoming about this and, rather than as an indication of their

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32 I borrow this term from Robert Wuthnow; see his *Christianity in the Twenty-first Century: Reflections on the Challenges Ahead* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 108.

33 Alan Wolfe, *One Nation after All: What Middle-class Americans Really Think about God, Country, Family, Racism, Welfare, Immigration, Homosexuality, Work, the Right, the Left, and Each Other* (New York: Viking, 1998), 54.

own ignorance, they tended to frame this theological humility in terms of their fuller appreciation of the utter inscrutability of God. So far, so good, one might suggest. However, the "for me" shard does present Catholics with a second dilemma: What does it mean to identify with a *particular* religious tradition? This is not at all obvious to Catholics today. Most of them flounder when trying to give a fuller account for what it would mean for their particular faith to be true in a more universal sense unbounded by the prevarications of their own subjectivities. Instead, like Richard, the majority of them link what they hold to be true to pragmatic ("what works for me") or affective ("feel comfortable with") justifications, construals of which are eminently revisable and typically as fluid as are individuals themselves.

The "Good Person" and the Dilemma of Ethical Reductionism

The caveat "for me" reflects people's negotiation with the Catholic tradition by blunting its doctrinal edges. Another species of negotiation takes the focus off of doctrines altogether and places it upon the moral commitments derived from the church's doctrinal teachings. This subtle exchange of religious "orthodoxy" (correct belief) for what some liberation theologians have called "orthopraxy" (correct action) as a way of defining oneself as Catholic has become commonplace. [34] Of course, the sacraments, the parish community, and their comfort with the culture of Catholicism are important to people, and they cite them as key elements of their faith. Still, when queried about what best defines a good Catholic, parishioners almost unfailingly equate this with simply trying to be a "good person." Like the nonideological "Golden Rule Christians," whom sociologist Nancy Ammerman has found to increasingly populate American churches, Catholics are typically short on systematic theology and biblical scholarship and instead shift the weight of their religious identities more to the practice of everyday virtues. [35] Data for this is easy to come by. One recent national survey, for instance, presented Catholics with the statement, "How a person lives is more important than whether he or she is Catholic" and discovered that the vast majority either strongly (55 percent) or somewhat (31 percent) agreed. [36]

Certainly Jeffrey, an extraordinary eucharistic minister at his parish, is in agreement. Somewhat after the point in our interview where I typically read and asked about various well-known Bible passages—such as the famous Last Judgment passage in Matthew's Gospel—I inquired about how he understood what it means to be a good Catholic. Relying upon the broadly used "good person" shard, he responded:

> I would say that being a good Catholic in the traditional sense
> is going to Mass regularly, giving your time and money to the
> Church, praying regularly and embodying the beliefs of the
> Catholic religion in how you treat other people. I try to do that

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34 See Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989), 49–50.

35 Nancy T. Ammerman, "Golden Rule Christianity: Lived Religion in the American Mainstream," in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 196–216.

36 D'Antonio, Dillon and Gautier, *American Catholics in Transition*, 167.

stuff. Overall, though, being a good Catholic is a goal that I'm trying to attain. And, since I don't know many of the fundamental doctrines of the religion, I mostly do this by trying to be a good person.

How does that relate to the Last Judgment passage (Mt. 25: 31–46) *I just read to you?*

When I hear that passage, I'm reminded that we're called to do things for other people. I try to do that stuff but it's a pretty daunting task. I wonder sometimes how good I have to be to be good.

How good do you have to be to be good?

Ahh, Jeez! I knew you'd ask that question! I don't think you have to be Mother Teresa good or anything. I think we're called to do those things in the story, but I don't think I have to do all of them now. I think the story is showing us the ideal and then we're supposed to grow toward that. I'm in process and that's the direction I'm hoping to grow spiritually.

There's a lot going on in this brief exchange. Rather than pointing to the fundamental doctrines of the faith, many of which he does not know, he points to being a "good person" as central to his identity as a Catholic. Furthermore, living out his Catholicism on these terms has proven to be "pretty daunting" and, as such, it commits him to exerting considerable effort, evidenced by the four times he uses the verb "try." It also provides some direction for his life. Being a good person is a "goal" or an "ideal" to which he aspires and, even though he's not (or perhaps not yet) "Mother Teresa good," he is still reasonably content with where he currently stands because he is "in process" and thus moving toward a better iteration of his present self.

Needless to say, there is generally much good that comes from trying to be a "good person," but there are also some dilemmas. An obvious one is that what constitutes the good person is loosely scripted in American culture. Definitions vary from one person to the next and it can be fraught with uncertainty—"I sometime wonder," muses Jeffrey, "how good I have to be to be good." Still another, more pressing cultural dilemma reflected in the use of this shard can be posed as: What does it mean to identify with a specifically *religious* tradition? When religious conviction gets reduced to living ethically, then it can seem wholly expendable upon observing the plethora of non-religious paths toward goodness. [37] The religious dimension can thus get lost as Americans (Catholics included) increasingly come to

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37 For important scholarly treatments of this theme see James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985); and Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

realize that people can indeed be, to quote the title of a book written by Harvard University's humanist chaplain, "good without God."[38]

In sum, each of these conversational shards reflect areas in which Catholics actively engage in the sort of cultural work that renders their faith tradition meaningful to them within contemporary American culture. But, at the same time, this process presents them with newfound dilemmas. What does it mean today to live in accordance with an authoritative religious tradition when the triumphant Subject reigns supreme? To live according to a particular religious tradition within a pluralistic context populated by religious "others"? According to a specifically religious tradition when goodness springs from so many wells? Given the both/and-ness of so many American Catholics—their desire to be both Catholic and modern— it is not surprising that such questions would arise. What is surprising, however, is that the vast majority of active parishioners with whom I spoke could offer no clear answer to any of them, either for themselves or their children.

At the Organizational / Meso Level: Rethinking Practices and the Absence of Political Discourse

If the appropriation of religious culture among individual Catholics (micro level) results in the absence of answers to pressing theological questions, another kind of absence gets produced at the meso level. Recall that organizations (in this case, parishes) allocate different versions of a single cultural repertoire. One parish can be very different from the next in terms of thematic emphases, liturgical styles, communal narratives, and so forth. In *Sense of the Faithful*, I explained such distinctions among parishes as instances of differentiated cultural allocation. My focus here, though, is on what I call blocked cultural allocation. By this, within the parish context, I refer to mechanisms by which certain components of the faith tradition become relatively inaccessible to people. The example I want to discuss is that of the church's modern social teachings.

Concerns that these are not getting a proper hearing among the American faithful are nearly as longstanding as the teachings themselves. People voicing such concerns often note that Catholics are quite apt to hear about, read about, and talk about church pronouncements pertaining to such matters as liturgy, theology and personal morality. This is not nearly as true of the church's social justice teachings. These, bemoan the critics, are the church's "best kept secret," which results in their being less familiar to most Catholics and thus less deployable by them when making judgments about difficult sociopolitical issues.

This certainly seems to be the case. When reviewing the numerous nation-wide surveys of American Catholics conducted within the past couple of decades or so, one discovers two rather bracing realities. First, despite the seemingly endless stream of papal encyclicals and bishops' pastoral letters concerning peace and justice, Catholics' attitudes on such topics do not much depart from those of the average American citizen. They are no less likely than the rest of the country to agree that "the best way to ensure peace is through military strength" (about 36 percent), and they are no more likely to agree that "government should do more for the needy"

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38 Greg M. Epstein, *Good Without God: What a Billion Nonreligious People Do Believe* (New York: William Morrow, 2009).

(about 48 percent).[39] Similarly, neither the four in ten Catholics who would like to see churches put "a lot" more emphasis on providing social services to those in need nor the half of all Catholics who think a "great deal" or "fair amount" about their own responsibility to the poor stand out from the crowd.[40] These data are about the same for the wider public. Even more surprising is that parish affiliation does little to change this. Catholics who are members of parishes are much more likely than non-members to accept traditional beliefs and practices as well as church teachings on sexuality. Yet, they are not at all more accepting of the church's social teachings than are their non-affiliated counterparts.[41]

This is partly a function of the fact that American Catholics as a whole generally have a hard time envisioning these teachings as being constitutive of their faith. For good or for ill, doing good and remedying the ills of society are simply not at the forefront of their thinking about why and how they are Catholic. Asked what they believe to be the primary duty of Christians, one survey reveals that three-fifths of all parishioners say it is following the teachings of Jesus as the basis for spiritual growth and nearly one-quarter say it is participating in the tradition and sacraments of the church. In contrast, only six percent identify their primary duty as "helping to change unjust social structures."[42] Another survey reveals that only about half of all parish members consider "seeking justice" to be a Christian virtue.[43] And still a third study indicates that more than three in five of them agree that "religion is a private matter that should be kept out of public debates over social and political issues."[44]

Attempts to account for these realities typically privilege either supply- or demand-side arguments. Some observers, preferring the former, point to parish leaders' reluctance to marshal the church's social teachings in speaking out on sociopolitical issues, and to provide churchgoers with opportunities for seriously engaging these teachings, as evidence of their sub-optimal supply. Alternatively, others cite the purported civic apathy of parishioners or the various distractions of their busy lives as cause for their minimal demand for those same teachings.

Such formulations, while intuitively appealing, betray a lack of sophistication concerning the way parish participation influences how Catholics actually relate to

39 Andrew Kohut, John C. Green, Scott Keeter, and Robert C. Toth, *The Diminishing Divide: Religion's Changing Role in American Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2000), 143–45.

40 Robert Wuthnow, *God and Mammon in America* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 197, 219.

41 These data come from the Pew "Religion and Politics Survey, 1996," which are available online at the American Religion Data Archive: http://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Descriptions/96KOHUT.asp (accessed on June 29, 2015). Along with "your religious beliefs," the other five response categories provided by this survey were "a personal experience," "the views of your friends and family," "what you have seen or read in the media," "your education," and "something else."

42 Dean R. Hoge, Charles Zech, Patrick McNamara, and Michael J. Donahue, *Money Matters: Personal Giving in American Churches* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 44.

43 Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Pillars of Faith: American Congregations and Their Partners* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 126–27.

44 Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 134.

their church's social tradition. Parishes are not simply associative spaces where previously produced teachings are demanded and supplied (or vice-versa). Paying attention to what goes on in parishes alerts us to the deeper reality that they are also where shared understandings of how Catholics should relate to those teachings are ongoingly produced through everyday interaction. These teachings are Catholics' "best kept secret," I argue, largely because parish cultures inadvertently establish tacit discursive rules that effectively restrict people's discussion of them at church and, in doing so, produce a sociopolitical silencing among the faithful.[45]

The people I interviewed are very different from one another. Yet what they all have in common is that they are especially committed Catholics and, importantly, they tend to frame their parish commitment in distinctly affective, emotionally warm terms.[46] They are forthcoming about the various ways they "feel supported" by the people they know at church. In turn, they say they "love" and "feel close to" their fellow parishioners, and they consider them to be "a blessing," like a "second family" or a "true Godsend."

Among its numerous personal benefits, this affective tenor of parish commitment also comes with a civic cost. Namely, it means that the discursive rules generated within these parishes have come to be primarily geared toward maintaining parishioners' affective ties and, therefore, minimizing the kinds of interactions—especially political discussions—that could potentially disrupt them. To varying extents within each of the six parishes, these implicit rules restrict public-minded conversation among parishioners and thus delimit their awareness of the very ethical categories embedded within their church's social tradition that such conversations would likely draw upon. Examining three of these rules should suffice to illustrate this point.

"One Size Doesn't Fit All"

This is shorthand for the discursive rule insisting that, instead of being constitutive of the faith, having an interest in the social ramifications of their religious tradition is simply one way among legitimate others of being Catholic; therefore, parishioners should accord equal respect to each of these ways. For many, to transgress this rule by assuming that all must tailor their religious identities to fit the mold of the socially engaged Catholic is to give short shrift to the multidimensionality of the faith. "There is a kind of endlessness in the Catholic tradition," observes one lector on this point. "You know, a spirituality has developed over the millennia; then there is the intellectual tradition; then there is the artistic tradition; then the entire liturgical form slowly, organically developed; and then there's the whole social justice tradition, which interests me, too. There are just so

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45 My analysis of the "sociopolitical silencing" operative in these parishes has been greatly informed by Nina Eliasoph's exploration of the "political evaporation" that occurs among the activist groups she investigates in her book *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

46 The notion of "affective" commitment, as distinct from both the "instrumental" and "moral" types of commitment, is discussed very nimbly by Rosabeth Moss Kanter in *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 61–74.

many different things for different people." Like Gregorian chant or systematic theology or Baroque painting, he suggests, an affinity for the social dimension of the faith may rightly appeal to some people, but not necessarily to others.

Instead of relying on the multidimensionality of the tradition, many base their conformity to the "one size doesn't fit all" rule on what they see as the nonconforming nature of the individual self. Challenging or often even engaging other people on delicate issues, such people claim, is tantamount to disrespecting the religious agency of the other. Because it is the issue that people seem to feel most sure about for themselves, the topic of abortion best illustrates their reluctance to enter into conversations that give even the remotest impression that they are imposing their (or the church hierarchy's) views upon others. The basic attitude of a longtime parish volunteer is very commonplace. "I feel that for me abortion would be wrong because of my personal beliefs," she says. "I do not think that I can tell you whether abortion is wrong for you or not. So, I absolutely believe a woman should follow her own conscience, but I can only answer for my own."

This sense of the individual conscience as being unchallengeable when it comes to such issues is inadvertently perpetuated by parishes themselves. They frequently enhance the plausibility of the "one size doesn't fit all" rule by offering a broad menu of small groups enabling parishioners to carve out their religious identities in their own ways. In doing so, they can give the impression that the various dimensions of the Catholic tradition are indeed selectable. If some people do choose to take the church's social teachings seriously, then that entails their joining a usually very small group of others who have selected the same "size" of the faith to which they are best suited. In the process, thoughtful discussion of sociopolitical concerns often becomes the province of a sequestered clique of likeminded others rather than being framed as something incumbent upon all. "We don't get into a lot of political discussions here," informs a member of her church's choir, "but if you're interested in that, we have a group that's into community organizing and that kind of thing. And there are groups for other things, too. That way, people's different perspectives don't come to the fore all the time and we don't get into disagreements."

"Don't Rock the Boat"

This parishioner's concluding sentence is a fair encapsulation of a second discursive rule. Rocking the boat means upsetting the otherwise tranquil waters of community by bringing one's own political perspectives, especially unpopular ones, to the fore. To give just one of many examples, consider another parishioner's discussion of her pro-choice position on the abortion issue. A teacher in her parish's faith formation program for middle schoolers, Diane talks to her students about respecting other people's opinions. At the same time, she would never dream of sharing her views on abortion with these children. Nor, interestingly, would she even do this with the other adults at her parish:

> I sometimes feel I'm on the hush about this one. I mean, I don't go out of my way ever to discuss my pro-choice feelings or ideas with the pro-lifers in the parish. I don't think it's constructive or particularly conducive to the feeling of community that's here. There's nothing wrong with their convictions and there's nothing wrong with mine. . . . So, it's a bit hushed. I don't go out of my

way and, yet, I don't shy away from it either. If someone came up
and challenged me on it I would have to probably explain my point
of view.

Notice that Diane is "on the hush" because she wants to protect that "feeling of
community" she so cherishes at her church. This is not an overriding concern, she
insists, because she would certainly stand up for herself if challenged by someone.
When asked about this, though, she could not recall a single time when this actually
happened. Nor would one expect this to happen too soon. The fact that the believing
and worshipping community is so central to Christianity means that, instead of
acknowledging the hushing effect of affect-based commitment, a desire to protect
feelings of community can be justified by drawing upon elements of the tradition
itself. "Raising a bunch of divisive issues and making sure people are all on the same
page is really unnecessary," says another parishioner exemplifying this approach. "I
think it was St. Augustine who said, 'In essential things, unity; in doubtful things,
freedom; and in all things, love.' That's basically my view."

"Neither the Time Nor the Place"

Not everyone agrees with what is implied by this: That the church's social
teachings are as "doubtful" as they are often made out to be or that people's own
positions on them should enjoy quite so much "freedom" from being challenged by
others. Some people in these parishes even think that rocking the boat on occasion is
important to do. However, a third discursive rule goes a long way in explaining why
such boat-rocking advocates are relatively rare and, even when they do make waves,
they are usually unsuccessful in initiating the kind of political dialogue they think
should be a regular feature of parish life. This rule mandates parishioners' vigilance
in maintaining the imagined boundary between what is collectively demarcated as
sacred and as profane.[47] Set off from ordinary time and being a place reserved for
prayer and worship, church is envisioned by many as an entirely inappropriate venue
for having conversations about societal issues. Associating such conversations with
self-interestedness, baseness, and worldliness—in other words, with things deemed
profane—and then discouraging them from occurring functions as an interpersonal
means of enhancing the sense of sacredness within church.

"Church is neither the time nor the place for a lot of political type discussions
and being at loggerheads with other people," declares a parish council member
explaining why she is loath to discuss social justice issues at her church and, in the
process, providing this discursive rule with its nomenclature. "What we're strong at is
presenting the church's teachings about these issues and then hoping people will
learn from them; that they'll take what they've learned out in the world with them."
Not wanting to be at loggerheads with her fellow churchgoers, she prefers airily
"hoping" they will learn and apply church teachings "in the world" rather than
braving the messiness of engaging them for certain within the parish itself. Since
most parishioners' everyday lives are unavailable for scrutiny, she really has no way
of knowing whether they have indeed learned much or what precisely they have

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47 For the classic discussion of this demarcation, see Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary
Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995).

elected to "take" from these teachings. Nevertheless, such matters seem less important than preserving a sense of sacredness within her church.

She is not alone in doing this. In fact, it also tends to be a preoccupation of those who do take the social justice tradition seriously, and do take it into the world with them. Consider, for instance, another member of the very same parish council. Stephen is active in number of progressive political causes outside of church, but is also quite resistant to addressing these same causes within it. Accounting for this disparity, he is especially candid:

> I never talk about social justice or the kinds of political issues that are important to me at church. To be perfectly honest, it's because I don't want to disappoint myself. I don't want to know when people think we [the U.S.] should "nuke 'em" or poor people should just "pull themselves up by their bootstraps." I get into all this stuff at work, though. I have a couple of colleagues with those kinds of attitudes. We go at it sometimes. I have to admit I really lay into them. They're so focused on the individual, they just eat up Bush's simplistic rhetoric, they have no appreciation for the common good, you know? So, it's no holds barred…That's at work, though. I just can't bring myself to get into all this at church because I really need to feel like I'm part of a religious community.

In contrast to merely hoping others will bring the church's social message into everyday life with them, Stephen does it. On the other hand, where he and his fellow parish council member come together is on their shared conviction that addressing difficult issues with self-interested, often contentious others should take place outside of church.

This is not simply about a desire to avoid conflict, which is operative among those for whom the boat rocking rule is most salient. Rather, in order to preserve feelings of both sacredness and affection for other people in the pews, those who conform to this rule relegate presumptively profane sociopolitical matters to what sociologist Erving Goffman once called the "back region" of social interaction.[48] Having access to this dimension of other parishioners' lives, Stephen contends, would likely prove disappointing to him and would make his church participation feel less religious, less sacred than he claims to need. He instead has access to their "front region"—as they do his—in which, when guided by this discursive rule, their performance of self seems more elevated, unencumbered by worldly concerns and biases, and, in its repudiation of the political, more attuned to the sacred. "Neither the time nor the place," in other words, functions as a reminder to many that, among other things, their churches are sites of synchronized performance whereby people often attempt to jettison those aspects of themselves deemed less religious in order to maintain a collective sense of transcendence among politically hushed actors.

The discursive rules delineated above are not imposed upon parishioners from some outside source. They are established within and by the everyday interactions among parishioners who think of church community in distinctly affective terms. This is problematic, especially since Catholics engaging one another about the world around them is a communal practice no less religiously significant than, say, coming

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48 Erving Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places* (New York: Free Press, 1966).

together for prayer, reading Scripture, or singing hymns. By delimiting this practice, moreover, the result is the blocked allocation of the church's social teachings to the faithful. Put differently, parish cultures frequently produce sociopolitical silence, the absence of the very sort of dialogue that would require Catholics to become more familiar with the concepts and values borne of their church's social teachings. If this dynamic goes unrecognized, then this dimension of their faith will remain shrouded in greater secrecy than they will know, well-kept even from them.

At the Societal / Macro Level: Rethinking Community and the Absence of People

Key to understanding that, at the societal level of analysis, religious culture is more available to people than in times past is to note that also available to them is a broader constellation of conceivable religious (and non-religious) options. In his mammoth and illuminating *A Secular Age*, philosopher Charles Taylor calls this shift the "nova effect." Beyond simply an explosion of new options, he explains, there emerges a permeating sense—due to increasing levels of interreligious proximity, contact and even marriage—that these options are not "too different, too weird, too incomprehensible" to loom as imaginable alternatives for oneself.[49]

This new sensibility is evidenced most clearly by the escalating rates of religious switching. In the mid-1950s, only four percent of American adults no longer adhered to the faith of their childhood.[50] This is true of roughly 35 to 40 percent today.[51] By far, the Catholic Church has lost more of its adherents to switching than any other religious group. While nearly one-in-three Americans say they were raised Catholic, fewer than one in four identify as such today. Two things are important to note here. First, this overall proportion of Americans who call themselves Catholic has remained relatively stable in recent decades largely because losses have been offset by the fact that nearly half (46 percent) of all immigrants to the United States are Catholic. And, second, these losses have been nonetheless considerable. A full ten percent of all Americans today are former Catholics; if these people were considered a distinct religious group, it would be the nation's third largest.[52]

Just over half of these former Catholics eventually affiliate with other faiths, whereas just under half join the ranks for the nation's second largest and fastest-growing "religious" group—the "nones."[53] Looking back again to the mid-1950s, a mere three percent of Americans then told pollsters they had no religious preference.[54] After decades of very slow growth, the percentage of nonreligious Americans doubled during the 1990s, from seven to 14 percent.[55] During the past

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49 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 304.

50 Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 88.

51 Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, 137.

52 "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Religious Beliefs and Practices—Diverse and Politically Relevant." The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (June 1, 2008), 7, 19.

53 Ibid., 30.

54 Mark Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 19.

55 Michael Hout and Claude S. Fischer, "Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Politics and Generations," *American Sociological Review* 67 (April 2002): 165–90.

decade, about 660,000 Americans became "nones" each year, such that they now make up more than 20 percent of the general population, including about one-third of all Americans under the age of thirty. This trend shows no signs of abating. Compared to other religious groups, the nonreligious is the group with both the highest number switching to it and the lowest percentage switching from it.[56] Nearly 90 percent of nonreligious Americans say they have no interest in looking for a religion that might be right for them.[57]

Of course, not belonging is hardly the same as not believing. Best estimates suggest that somewhere between one-third and one-half of "nones" are either agnostic or atheist in orientation.[58] Despite the likely undercounting due to "social desirability" effects, the most reputable national surveys report that only about five percent of Americans say they do not believe in God.[59] And since, along with being likely undercounted, these people are most definitely understudied, I recently embarked upon a research project on lived atheism in the United States. Using a combination of in-person interviews, telephone interviews and online questionnaires, I eventually heard from 500 atheists, all of whom also filled out a five-page, closed-ended survey. They are men and women, young and old, rich and poor, people of different races and lifestyles, and from every state in the country. Ironically, they are perhaps best described by borrowing James Joyce's puckish quip about American Catholics themselves: "Here comes everybody."

I mention this ongoing study because, quite unexpectedly, speaking to these atheists—especially the nearly 100 former Catholics among them—has made me think about the communal dimension of the sense of the faithful in new way. The Catholic community may do its part in authenticating religious beliefs and practices, but these, in turn, are instrumental in shaping the community and, importantly, determining who ultimately will elect to absent themselves from it. People concerned with the sense of the faithful would do well to pay attention to those no longer present. After all, if tradition is, in G.K. Chesterton's memorable phrase, a kind of "democracy of the dead," it makes sense that the voices of the otherwise departed should also be heard, principally because they have important things to say.[60]

Indeed, when actually engaging those who have left the church, one gets disabused of the hackneyed presumptions about them rather quickly. This is true of former Catholics who have switched to other faiths or who have switched to the religious "none" category. And it is equally true of that subset of "nones" who currently identify as atheists. For instance, while nonbelievers are often stigmatized by their fellow citizens as immoral, there is simply no empirical support for this claim.[61] The lion's share of atheists I spoke to are actually quite determined, in the

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56 Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, 139.

57 Phil Zuckerman, *Living the Secular Life: New Answers to Old Questions* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014), 61.

58 Ibid., 60.

59 "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Religious Beliefs and Practices—Diverse and Politically Relevant," The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (June 1, 2008), 26.

60 Gilbert K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane, 1908), 85.

61 Penny Edgell, Joseph Gerteis and Douglas Hartmann, "Atheists as 'Other': Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society," *American Sociological Review* 71 (April 2006): 211–34. Also, for excellent distillations of the many studies on non-religious Americans' moral lives in comparison to their religious counterparts, see Phil Zuckerman,

absence of clear moral signposts bequeathed by religious traditions, to do the work of discerning for themselves how best to live ethically. Interestingly, a full 95 percent of them say the term humanist describes them "very well." Nor, as another hidebound conceit has it, do they live meaningless, aimless lives. More than four in five of them agree that "my life has a real purpose." And what about the stereotypical "angry" atheists? They were hard to find as well. Most have close friends, family members, and sometimes even spouses who are believers, and only one-third of them say that they "tend to dislike religious people." Most also see the church as being as flawed as any institution, and thus are neither surprised nor especially angered by its disparate shortcomings. Religiously ignorant atheists? No, the majority of them were socialized into religious adherence as children and, to this day, nearly two-thirds say they enjoy reading books about religion. I should also note that, as a recent Pew study discovered, compared with other major religious groupings, atheists (along with agnostics) are on average the nation's the most religiously knowledgeable citizens.[62] So, are they simply duped by the so-called "new atheism" fad? There is no evidence here either. Nearly all (97 percent) of the respondents in my study say their own critical thinking has been "very influential" in terms of thinking through and living out their atheists worldviews. But far fewer say this about recently published books on atheism (32 percent), their friends who are atheists (20 percent), atheist websites (16 percent), and atheist groups in their area (8 percent).[63]

The reality is that, when one leans in and listens to what they have to say, these people do not sound particularly immoral, aimless, angry, ignorant, or duped at all. I cannot emphasize this enough. In fact, they typically sound a lot like Jason, a thirty-something electrical engineer living in Minneapolis, about forty miles from his hometown. He told me about being raised in the Catholic Church; about his Catholic older sister and his agnostic younger brother; about his practicing (or "still practicing," as he exasperatedly harrumphed) Lutheran girlfriend. He went on for quite a while. Then our conversation turned to how he came to think of himself as an atheist. Because he articulates themes I heard again and again among my ex-Catholic interviewees, I will quote him in some length:

> I can't say it was a difficult process. I mean, I'm not one of those people who are incredibly angry at the church or who think that religious people are whack jobs or whatever. More than anything, it felt like I just sort of outgrew religion.

"Atheism, Secularity, and Well-Being: How the Findings of Social Science Counter Negative Stereotypes and Assumptions," *Sociology Compass* 36 (2009): 949–71; and Justin Didyoung, Eric Charles, and Nicholas Rowland, "Non-Theists Are No Less Moral Then Theists: Some Preliminary Results*," Secularism and Non-religion* 2 (2013): 1–20.

62 "U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey." Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (September 28, 2010), available at http://www.pewforum.org/files/2010/09/religious-knowledge-full-report.pdf (accessed on June 30, 2015).

63 Note that all percentages cited in this paragraph are data taken from my survey administered to respondents for my forthcoming book titled *The Varieties of Irreligious Experience*.

Can you say more about the distinctions you're making here?

Sure. I've got family members and few friends who are definitely religious people. These are people I care about and respect in one way or another. And the people at St. Catherine's [his boyhood parish] were great too—caring, personable, actually pretty fun sometimes. No complaints there. So, rather than bashing the church, I actually took it and its teachings probably more seriously than some would have liked.

What do you mean by that?

Well, whether I'm intellectually oriented or just enjoy being a pain in the ass, I had a lot of questions that, for the longest time, went unanswered. Or even went unacknowledged as legitimate questions. You know what I mean? I remember being in a C.C.D. class and asking my teacher—who was one of my neighbors actually and, again, a super nice lady—all sorts of stuff she couldn't handle. Stuff like, "Is the bread and wine really the body and blood of Jesus?" "Why do we all need to be saved and how did Jesus dying and rising—if he did—accomplish that?" "Why are there inconsistencies in the gospels?" I feel bad for her now. But I remember her just getting flustered and treating me like some problem child, like I was just going through some silly phase of something. I was truly sincere, though. I'd try to raise these issues with my parents, but that's not where they were. They were more concerned about just checking the boxes—get baptized, get confirmed, go to church. Check, check, check. And, of course, my friends probably thought I was freak whenever I'd bring religion into the conversation. I even ran into a wall whenever I'd talk to the priest. One in particular was a great guy. I'd chat with him sometimes and he'd dutifully listen—a great guy. Still, he'd basically tell me to stay connected to the faith or pray. Or he'd tell me to just be the best person I could be and don't worry about or the theological questions I was having.

Was that helpful at all?

Not really. Honestly, I was already a pretty good kid and, thinking back, I know I prayed a lot for guidance, for answers. I remember staying awake plenty of nights just praying to God, asking Him to show me what's real. "Do you actually exist?" "What's true?" "Am I on the right path?" Questions like that. No answers though—that was clear enough.

So, what did you do?

> Well, I guess I took matters into my own hands. I read a ton. For example, I think it was during the summer between my junior and senior year in high school that I read the whole Bible, basically cover to cover. That really woke me up, I must say. All the violence, all the implausible stuff in it. It seemed like a lot of Bronze Age storytelling actually; pretty hard to take seriously as fact. Anyway, I also read a lot about other religions, from books and online. This had a similar effect on me. It just seemed like all these different religions were different people's stories, different opinions that just kind of cancelled each other out. And, so I kept exploring and, before I knew it, my faith was gone. I didn't "reject it" [uses finger quotes]. It's just that, by the time I looked up, it was gone. Kind of like my interest in playing with Legos: One day I just realized I had outgrown them.

Although only an excerpt from an approximately 25-page interview transcript, there is so much one could say about Jason's comments here. But allow me to make three unambiguous points. The first is that, like the majority of the former Catholics in this study, Jason exhibits what I call a "teleological identity acquisition frame." In other words, instead of describing his turn to atheism as a function of particular events or experiences coming from without (i.e., a "situational identity acquisition frame"), Jason casts his becoming an atheist in terms of changes coming from within himself. He did not "reject" God or religion as a result of a church scandal or a negative experience. He, in his estimation, simply matured. Like the Legos that once occupied his time, he discovered that he "just sort of outgrew" his faith.

Second, again like a startling number of former Catholics I interviewed, he describes his movement away from Catholicism in conjunction with the other two absences discussed above, something I could not have detected in my previous study of active parishioners. Taking the church's teachings "more seriously than some would have liked," he had real questions. How can this be an authoritative religious tradition when some key doctrines did not make sense to him? What is the worth of a particular religious tradition when, in his view, different faiths "kind of cancelled each other out"? What is the worth of an explicitly religious tradition when he was "already a pretty good kid" independent of the moral guidance garnered from a strong faith? Moreover, when he tried to address this absence of answers, he was then met with an absence of candid conversation. Not the socio-political discourse addressed above, here I refer to absence of the kind of sincere engagement with Jason that would have acknowledged both the seriousness of his questions (rather than these being trivialized as a "silly phase" or nothing to "worry about") and, as a maturing young man (not a "problem child" much less a "freak"), the appropriateness of his asking them.

Finally, and perhaps most obviously, Jason and others like him do not conform to various atheist stereotypes. Presumptions that those absent from the gathered community are immoral, aimless, angry, ignorant and/or duped are typically more about people in the pews constructing an idealized framing of themselves as being, by contrast, none of these things than they are about offering a realistic picture of nonbelievers. Nevertheless, they can function to legitimate the commonplace notion

that non-believers (and the disaffiliated) no longer need to be heard. This is problematic because when we do listen and try to come to a more realistic appraisal of people like Jason, we learn that they can actually sound a lot like serious Catholics interested in doing more than "just checking the boxes." Unrecognized as such, they are often left with unanswered questions, perceive themselves as having no one with whom to discuss these and, before long, come to equate letting go of faith with becoming an adult.

Insofar as they seem to represent a sincere grappling with the tradition, I presume that theologians would have taken Jason's questions far more seriously as an important feature of the sense of the faithful within a secular context. No doubt they could also have provided him with much insight. As a sociologist, I would simply and happily, defer to them. My only suggestion is that, as theologians reflect upon the sense of the faithful, they be sociologically-minded and thus think broadly and in culturally nuanced ways about beliefs (beyond "public opinion"), practices (beyond "popular piety") and community (beyond "reception"). My challenge to theologians, if I may, is that they attempt also to be absence-minded, to understand how the dynamics of culture at different levels of analysis engender certain absences—clear answers to pressing questions, candid discourse about serious matters, questioning but disengaged people like Jason—that are certainly germane to the project of Catholic theology today.