

## THEOLOGICAL ROUNDTABLE

### Deconversion and Disaffiliation in Contemporary US Roman Catholicism

*Disaffiliation—when members of religious communities leave—has recently become a popular topic for theological and social scientific investigation. Today, fewer Roman Catholics than in recent memory describe themselves as strong members of their church. Many have left to seek other spiritual paths, and many of those who remain do not believe and practice as the Church teaches that they should. These essays propose that the theoretical framework of “deconversion” provides a broader and more effective way to understand forms of religious change that are occurring in contemporary America. In the classroom, teaching theology can take on a specific productive shape when the surrounding culture challenges theologians to take deconversion seriously as an element of, and larger context for, spiritual identity today. Theology remains vital when patient curiosity about the current adventure of religious identity is foregrounded pedagogically. Concluding thoughts sketch some important characteristics of an evangelical church, more concerned with its mission and witness in the world than with maintaining its internal life.*

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#### I. Teaching Theology in an Atmosphere of Deconversion

At a university commencement recently, I ran into the father of a woman I knew from church work nearly two decades ago. When I asked how she is doing, he replied that she is now married to an agnostic and they have a couple of children whom they are raising more or less apart from the Catholic Church. I inquired whether she is still involved in ministry, and he said, a little sadly, “She is so disgusted with the Church she is done with it.” She stopped going to Mass several years ago. He expressed his bewilderment that so many younger Catholics are not willing to tolerate the brokenness of the Church.

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Around the same time, a neighbor casually asked what research I was working on. I described my research into Roman Catholic “deconversion,” which is the process by which baptized Catholics change their ways of affiliating with the Church or the faith—revising and/or rejecting beliefs and practices—away from what are taken to be official expectations.<sup>1</sup> I talked about how the Catholic Church has become one of the most important sites for the study of deconversion today, due to the sizable number of Catholics who decelerate their practice or leave altogether. My neighbor spontaneously unfolded an emotional, angry, and disappointed story of having to let go of Catholicism in the last decade and invent a new religious path by visiting other churches and seeing what they have to offer. She told me of her offense at the Catholic Church’s “preoccupation with controlling women’s bodies” and her visceral disgust at the sexual abuse scandal. The Church is sick and damaged, she seemed to say, and she has had to move on at midlife, and her twenty-something child is now moving on. It means letting go of a treasured family heritage, which, she admitted, is painful.

I have come to expect to hear these stories of baptized Catholics substantially reconsidering their relationship to the faith or to the Church. In almost any group, I have found, even the shortest explanation of deconversion research is an occasion for people to share personal/familial stories, to ask questions, to share griefs, or to narrate journeys. Deconverting Catholics are seemingly everywhere. Chances are that “they” are in “our” families, our workplaces, even at theology conferences. Among theologians, sometimes “they” are also “us.” And deconverts are often our students in theology, who are raised in a culture in which deconversion is becoming normal and even expected.<sup>2</sup> The following considerations regarding teaching theology in an atmosphere of deconversion are drawn from my reading of the deconversion literature and from my experience of teaching theology to

<sup>1</sup> The most substantial theological study of deconversion is Heinz Streib, Ralph W. Hood Jr., *et al.*, *Deconversion: Qualitative and Quantitative Results from Cross-Cultural Research in Germany and the United States of America* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2009). For the Catholic context, see Tom Beaudoin and J. Patrick Hornbeck II, “Deconversion and Ordinary Theology: A Catholic Study,” in *Exploring Ordinary Theology: Everyday Christian Believing and the Church*, ed. Jeff Astley and Leslie J. Francis (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 33–44.

<sup>2</sup> On secular culture as the multiplication of paths to “fullness,” see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). On “religious nones,” see the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “Nones” on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation (October 9, 2012), <http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx>.

undergraduates and graduate students in several Jesuit universities over the past twelve years.

My graduate students are mainly pastoral workers, and while I would characterize some of them as “deconverts,” irrespective of how they identify, most of them would say that the challenge of keeping Catholics connected to the faith and the Church—in other words, dealing with deconversion—is one of their most difficult tasks. When I ask them how many baptized Catholics live within a few miles of their church but are not connected to it, a lively conversation always ensues. How ready are Catholic theology and ministry for this situation? After all, as Michael Horan has observed, “Catholic leaders ... are more respectful and adept at talking with Buddhists than with secular Catholics.”<sup>3</sup>

The Most Reverend Diarmuid Martin, Archbishop of Dublin, recently characterized Ireland as “post-Catholic,”<sup>4</sup> and that term is an accurate description of where my undergraduate classroom is increasingly going. In my view, there can be no attempt to use theology to corral my undergraduates back into Catholicism as “we” theologians or as the bishops understand it. A new palette of understandings of religious/spiritual identity is emerging in our culture, and young adults are the harbingers of it. As theologian and youth minister Kenda Dean argues, youth are the canary in the mine—they indicate the atmospheric conditions, already present, of the coming future.<sup>5</sup> We don’t need to say that this emerging palette is all good or all bad in order to try to work creatively in relationship to it. There have recently been many calls for more effective evangelization of young people, for more intensive religious literacy, for an all-out effort by bishops and theologians to impress on young people the basics, the essence, of the faith.<sup>6</sup> The intensity suggests a certain desperation and inability to speak an adequate cultural language or to creatively accommodate the coming shape of faith. The important recent “exit interviews” of baptized Catholics who left the

<sup>3</sup> Personal communication, April 2, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Diarmuid Martin, “A Post-Catholic Ireland,” *America Magazine*, May 20, 2013, <http://americamagazine.org/issue/post-catholic-ireland>.

<sup>5</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> The literature on “the New Evangelization” is already quite substantial. See Donald W. Wuerl, *New Evangelization: Passing on the Catholic Faith Today* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2013). Peter Steinfels speaks for many commentators in calling for a “massive, all-out mobilization of talent and treasure to catechize the young, bring adolescents into church life, and engage young adults in ongoing faith formation”; Steinfels, “Further Adrift: The American Church’s Crisis of Attrition,” *Commonweal Magazine*, October 18, 2010, <http://www.commonwealmagazine.org/further-adrift>.

Church, conducted in New Jersey by William Byron and Charles Zech, are an example of the recommendation of deeper literacy as a therapy for deconversion.<sup>7</sup> I am more persuaded by what the editors of the British Catholic journal *The Tablet* had to say recently about this situation:

Tacit [Catholic] disobedience in practice, for instance over birth control and increasingly over the admission of divorced people to Holy Communion, is already commonplace. Disobedience, in theory, includes a rejection of the arguments against ordaining married men and, increasingly, against the ordination of women. Lay Catholic attitudes to homosexuality have changed remarkably within a generation. *There is no method of re-evangelisation that will turn this tide.*<sup>8</sup>

If the *Tablet* editors are right, then a key recommendation from Byron and Zech is not going to be sufficient. In line with many other calls for evangelization, they state that “it is time to offer more reasoned arguments and better pastoral explanations of points of Catholic doctrine and practice that appear to be troubling to people.”<sup>9</sup> The trouble is that “more reasoned arguments and better pastoral explanations” often do not do it for student-theologians or for professor-theologians, because these arguments and explanations do not engage the depth of the cultural shift and too often mask the contingency of the doctrine and practice taken to be essential today. So if “no method of re-evangelisation ... will turn this tide,” then more experimental thought and practice are called for.

My undergraduate students reflect much of the research about young adults today,<sup>10</sup> especially in their expectations of theological study: they appreciate theology that makes sense in and of their lives, that helps them build bridges to and connect better with the “others” in their lives, that opens them spiritually, that offers realistically hopeful ways of saving the very small corner of the world they feel like they can save, and that does not make them too dependent on a religious institution for further growth.

<sup>7</sup> William J. Byron and Charles Zech, “Why They Left,” *America Magazine*, April 30, 2012, <http://americamagazine.org/issue/5138/article/why-they-left>.

<sup>8</sup> “From the Editor’s Desk: Listen to the People,” *The Tablet*, April 14, 2012, <http://www.thetablet.co.uk/article/162590> (my emphasis).

<sup>9</sup> Byron and Zech, “Why They Left.”

<sup>10</sup> For example, Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

They look for things that are true across religions and across secularities that bring on board as many people as possible. I interpret this prevailing pattern of young adult life today—evident not only among young adults sympathetic to it but among young adults living in reaction to it—as a way of making do with religious subjectivity in a pluralistic, consumer culture. In other words, my students have a holding place for religion or spirituality that makes sense for them as relatively agential while at the same time being prespecified by a larger force, such as the economy. Other students find other well-known holding places for religion, other places on the palette of religious subjectivities available today, such as an active rejection of religion/spirituality/faith, or a deep-diving commitment to a particular religion/spirituality/faith. I try to teach in such a way that all of these subject positions are engaged and respected, because I see all of these subject positions not as “natural” stances but as cultural-spiritual negotiations with the situation in which my students find themselves. I try to encourage them to think of what they undertake to be the spiritual persons they are, what they have suffered, what they have overcome, what remains for them in the drama of their spiritual growing, to try to heighten their awareness of themselves as spiritual thinkers already—by way of exercises that call forward their particular psycho-cultural-religious history. In other words, to teach them theology means also to help them settle more fully into the arc on which their current religious position represents a point. This is a way that I try to instantiate something like Karl Rahner’s theology of the “logic of concrete individual knowledge in Ignatius Loyola.”<sup>11</sup> I want to try to help them go deeper into their own mystery and to think and live in such a way that they allow others to do the same.

I cannot control the adventure of religious subjectivity in our age, but I can teach my students ways of paying attention to themselves and their world through what and how I teach theology. I have learned that this has as much to do with how and who I am with them as it does with what I put on the syllabus. To do well in class, they have to demonstrate careful reading, critical thinking, constructive/synthetic imagining. But they also have to consider that these intellectual exercises are also, if they are to actually affect them as persons, spiritual exercises. And so my students also regularly write about their journey through the course as it relates to their psycho-cultural-religious history and situations. I want them to have theology as an experience, and moreover, to experience theological work as a way of relating

<sup>11</sup> Karl Rahner, “The Logic of Concrete Individual Knowledge in Ignatius Loyola,” in Karl Rahner, *The Dynamic Element in the Church*, trans. W. J. O’Hara (London: Burns and Oates, 1964), 84–170.

to oneself and to others that hopefully makes life more vibrant, full, personal, and that allows my students to say the “yeses” to life that they need to say, with care and with resources from religious tradition. I have developed ways of talking with them about how to think about themselves as theological persons, as leading a theological life. I ask them to think about their identity as something that is in the process of being orchestrated, and that this orchestration is done with reference to what I have learned to call “claiming powers.” This means powers that they find effective in their life, powers that exceed them, that they did not invent and do not control. Some name this God or grace; some give it other names. Some do not know and spend the semester wondering. But “claiming powers” involves a gerund that also speaks to the powers that one claims, owns, or deploys, in one’s life. What are those powers that you use to orchestrate your identity, to articulate (express and make) what you are? We reside, I tell them, between the powers we claim and the powers that claim us. Thinking through this pedagogical space can be intellectual and spiritual *askesis*. We study together under the sign of this *askesis*. The essential shift in teaching theology in an atmosphere of deconversion should be from theology as covert/overt rhetoric of institutional affiliation to theology as the service of the integrity of the other, and as solidarity with the next step in the other’s yes to the “more” in their life and their world.

Sometimes I do the following exercise with my students: imagine that you were born in another time and place, and you might well be holding onto some other religious version of yourself. What would you be defending right now in our class? How would you feel about these religious/nonreligious “others”? How might they feel about you? That exercise should have some relativizing effect on us. Religions are, I have learned through teaching, at best, for developing human beings who are alive to the “more” in and about their life. I thus try to teach theology in a way that communicates, Keep saying “yes” to life and helping to make that “yes” more possible for others.

So much for our students. What about “us”? Are there deconverted theologians? Are there theologians who have left the Church or are leaving the Church but “stay” in theology? Are there theologians who deconvert and stay in the Church, reframing their practices and beliefs, perhaps more assertively than ever, and teach from that experience? I think the answer to these questions is “yes,” but in truth we just do not know. As a scholarly guild, we more or less accept theological discourse as material for public argument, ecclesial sanction, or liberative energy. We do not really ask ourselves who has had to go through what in order to get where they are in their relationship to what is presented as normative for Catholicism. Of course, we all (one

hopes) have friends that know our real stories, but among Catholic theologians, or theologians in Catholic settings, it is more often a situation of “don’t ask, don’t tell.” (This silence is the “telling” kind of truth that ethicist and historian Mark Jordan has written about, and that can be relieved only by *parresia*, telling the truths in church that are the truly telling truths.<sup>12</sup>) The first serious study of deconversion among Catholic theologians remains to be undertaken. Nevertheless, based only on my experience of nearly twenty years since I started graduate school in theology, I feel qualified to say that, yes, there are many theologians who are deconverts. I think we might be better off if there were more public discussion of this phenomenon. I know a good number of theologians who process and suffer their deconversion experiences largely in private because of negative consequences, imagined and actual, for trying to talk out loud about their journey. But how much more significant might theological work be if these experiences could be integrated more publicly into theological work? We might learn more about what Catholicism is and how theology really works (and does not work). And we might gain more traction for solidarity with our students.

Though we no doubt have post-Catholic theologians in practice, we lack a theory for the identity of the post-Catholic theologian. What might a post-Catholic theologian be? Perhaps a theologian who moves beyond seeing the Catholic Church as a primary or exclusive home, but without surrendering their history with the Church; placing the Church on the same plane of ethics, history, and politics as any other religious institution or tradition; admitting that wise and saving insight and practice come from other traditions heterogeneous to Christianity and that one is open to and involved with those different paths; seeing Catholicism as something that one has moved through, in the sense of parting with the normative discourse of the tradition in the terms of its authoritative defenders (progressive or conservative), although prospects for “return” always remain. A post-Catholic theologian might have a kind of relationship to the Church, faith, or tradition that was once claiming or defining and has now been concluded. At the same time, another relationship is under way that can become a creative new space for holding what is retained from the Catholic journey.

Becoming a post-Catholic theologian can be an act of solidarity with the scores of victims of Catholic sexual abuse, many of who disaffiliated or deconverted as a way of dealing with trauma.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the victims-survivors pose a

<sup>12</sup> Mark D. Jordan, *Telling Truths in Church: Scandal, Flesh, and Christian Speech* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> See Mary Gail Frawley-O’Dea, *Perversion of Power: Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2007).

kind of “ecclesiodicy” to those who think with the Church, to theologians. They ask not only how it is that theologians can stay Catholic, but how it is that the Catholic experiences of victims-survivors came to be subtracted from what counts as church life and Catholic identity. A post-Catholic theologian could thus paradoxically be closer to lived Catholicism than those who refuse to imagine themselves as deconverted.

Post-Catholic theologians can serve Catholicism, then, in several ways: they can conceptualize the (common) deconversion passage through or out of Catholicism; they can support students and pastoral workers in living and working with integrity; and they can help Catholicism to tell more of the truth about itself. These are all ways of “serving the Church,” and of teaching theology in an atmosphere of deconversion.

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## II. Deconversion: What, Who, Why, How?

In March 2013, a report from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life announced that fewer US Catholics than in recent memory consider themselves to be strong members of their church. Since 1974, participants in the nationwide General Social Survey who say that they identify with a religious tradition have been asked whether they consider themselves a “strong” or “not very strong” member of that religious community.<sup>14</sup> Only 27 percent of the Catholics polled in 2012 described their religious affiliation as strong, in comparison to 46 percent in 1974. Pew researchers noted that that these Catholic data were “down more than 15 points since the mid-1980s and among the lowest levels seen in the 38 years since strength of religious identity was first measured.”<sup>15</sup> They also observed a contrast between Catholics

<sup>14</sup> The General Social Survey is carried out annually or biennially by researchers at the University of Chicago; see <http://www3.norc.org/gss+website/>.

<sup>15</sup> Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “‘Strong’ Catholic Identity at a Four-Decade Low in U.S.: Widening Gap with Protestants” (March 13, 2013), 1, <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/03/13/strong-catholic-identity-at-a-four-decade-low-in-us/>

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