

Losing our Religion: Houses of worship face younger generations drawn to 'cultural agnosticism'

By [Christopher Vondracek](#) - *The Washington Times* - Monday, December 30, 2019



Auxiliary Bishop Robert Barron of Los Angeles (center) is reaching out to millennial and Generation Z “nones.”

The prophet Daniel had the lion’s den. Auxiliary Bishop Robert Barron of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles has social media.

Bishop Barron is viewed as the Catholic hierarchy’s most forward thinker in testing new paths of evangelization amid troubling times for the church in the U.S. According to the numbers, youths in particular are increasingly rejecting association with any faith.

It was perhaps inevitable that Bishop Barron ended up fielding questions on Reddit, the massive online message board where millennials and Generation Z types make up most of the community.

One user wanted to know whether God has feet (No, says the bishop) while others wanted to engage in grade school theology.

“You’re seriously telling someone that they will never experience true happiness unless they subscribe to your worldview? What a horrible thing to say,” said user [egg_princess](#). Another Redditor, [Natehasbeans](#), wondered whether agnostics go to hell.

“I don’t know,” the bishop replied in what was surely a bit of funning.

He faced hundreds of inquiries and accusations about the priest sex abuse scandals that have rocked the Catholic Church, and he was subjected to a fair share of ridicule.

“You really need to try sex, mate,” user [New-Dork-Times](#) said.

It’s not clear that the bishop won any converts in his two Reddit sessions, but many Redditors told him they appreciated the effort at a time when the most active proselytizers among those younger than 40 are the irreligious — the atheists, the agnostics and those who claim spirituality but reject all denominations.

“What’s unique to our time is a widespread cultural agnosticism,” Bishop Barron told *The Washington Times*. “And that is something kind of unique in recorded history. It’s an unusual mark of our time.”

It’s particularly acute among those younger than 40. What they are looking for, and whether religious denominations can deliver it while remaining true to their doctrines, is a central question as churches, temples, mosques and other houses of worship enter a new decade.

Why are millennials leaving?

There are plenty of explanations for the faith community’s struggles to attract youths.

The Atlantic, in an article this fall, said the break stems from a growing tie between Christianity and the Republican Party.

Another line of reasoning says the disintegration of family bonds has strained ties to faith. An American Enterprise Institute survey released this month seems to back that up by pointing to the absence of strong religious convictions from parents.

Pollsters say that as best they can tell, it's not that disaffected youths are rejecting God. The Pew Research Center says they just don't want or need religion.

The Rev. Anne Edison-Albright doesn't buy into social science research that argues young people proclaiming no religious affiliation — the “nones” — are the driving force in faith right now.

The pastor at Luther College in northeastern Iowa rejects the term “nones.” She said it suggests something is lacking in those grouped under its heading. Instead, she sees careful but curious shoppers who are not opposed to faith but who are skeptical of fully embracing a denomination they may not completely trust.

“I've experienced young millennials and Gen Z as very interested in community,” said Ms. Edison-Albright, who identifies as an older millennial. “I think most people, including young people, are calling on the church to make substantive changes, not just changes to our branding.”

Bishop Barron, who has hundreds of thousands of followers on his social media accounts and “Word on Fire” podcasts, said part of the Catholic Church's challenge is its teaching.

“A lot of young people don't like our teaching on sexuality,” he told The Times. “That's a given. They don't like that. So we probably shouldn't lead with that.”

He told a gathering of bishops in Baltimore in November that they need to focus instead on beauty and the Catholic Church's history of social justice, including the work of Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day, to captivate the minds of millennials and Gen Z parishioners.

In his podcasts and videos, Bishop Barron has discoursed with social philosopher Jordan Peterson about Yoda, did an interview with conservative figure Ben Shapiro and analyzed the third season of the Netflix series “The Crown.”

He took flak for the appearance with Mr. Peterson, an atheist who has made critical remarks of LGBTQ behavior, but he stands by the conversation and his reach into social media.

“Look, he's one of the biggest cultural influences of the moment,” Bishop Barron said. “He's reaching, especially, young men, and the church has had a tough time with this group. ... I'm not advocating we all become like Jordan Peterson, but shouldn't we at least be in dialogue?”

Others are also tapping technology.

Churchome, a popular Los Angeles ministry that scored headlines with appearances from singer Justin Bieber this year, asks its scattered flock to download a smartphone app to connect with services.

Yet it's not exactly clear why millennials are leaving or never even joining.

New communities

Still, the atheists and agnostics who are driven by disbelief or questions about God represent only a small fraction of America. The bigger issue is those who profess some spirituality but reject association with any faith.

A 2018 survey by the Public Religion Research Institute found that just over 50% of respondents who said their religion was “nothing in particular” cited “religious teachings” for their unaffiliated status. In other words, many were open to God, faith or even religion but were not engaged in a practice for whatever reason.

“A lot of the narrative around disaffiliation has been a narrative of secularization,” said Angie Thurston, a fellow at Harvard Divinity and co-founder of Sacred Design Lab, a consultancy focused on community and belonging. “You have widespread unmooring, but longing is as deep as it has ever been.”

In 2015, she and research partner Casper ter Kuile authored “How We Gather,” a booklet cataloging phenomena such as CrossFit and SoulCycle that they say foster the same kind of personal growth and accountability that religious believers find in their denominations.

“People are bringing their whole lives to these communities,” said Ms. Thurston, noting stories of people sitting shiva in CrossFit or texting with SoulCycle instructors on Sunday mornings to ask for parenting advice. “They are showing up for the highs and lows. In some ways, religiosity has not gone anywhere.”

Outside of Christianity, faiths such as Islam (1%), Hindu (1%) and Judaism (2%) maintained their numbers as a percentage of the overall population, according to Pew.

Trying to lure them back

Gil Preuss, CEO of the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, noted outreach campaigns to young people such as the Birthright Israel program, which over the past 20 years has sent 700,000 young Jewish people to Israel, and PJ Library, a program sending books for children to young Jewish parents.

“We know unless we actively work to connect people, the odds are that [we] disappear,” he said.

It turns out that the social scientists may not be capturing some overlap.

Anna Naiyapatana, president of the Georgetown University Buddhist Student Association, said her group at the Jesuit university comprises mostly blended practitioners such as Catholic Buddhists, Jewish Buddhists and Quaker Buddhists.

Because Buddhism is a nontheistic religion, Ms. Naiyapatana said, it welcomes multifaith practices. Moreover, with the Dharmic traditions’ emphasis on mindfulness and mental health, such as meditation or sessions of mandala coloring pages during finals week, club participation has increased in recent years.

“What’s very nice here at Georgetown is that our interreligious scene is big, so the students have the opportunity to explore their spirituality freely,” Ms. Naiyapatana said.

Students who leave college often take a hiatus from religious practice and then reconnect when they get married or have children. But a recent article from FiveThirtyEight says the boomerang pattern is shaped more like a Frisbee.

Ms. Edison-Albright said students can face disappointment when they leave campus.

“Life after graduation can feel lonely by comparison,” she said. “I hear from many young alumni that they’ve sought out congregations to get involved in because they’re looking for that sense of community and connection that they’re missing from college.”

But she said Luther College will continue to grow with those who do come back to the faith, though the practice will look different from what it did for their parents and grandparents.

“My Haugean Lutheran ancestors probably wouldn’t love that I enjoy playing card games and dancing,” she said. “But they would recognize the way I listen to students, listen to God, pray with students, and help and encourage students to pray.”

https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2019/dec/30/religious-communities-lose-americas-youth/?utm_source=Boomtrain&utm_medium=manual&utm_campaign=20171227&utm_term=newsletter&utm_content=morning&utm_ee=9BgZj%2BAOvMtBcEFnR1z1cwcBD8fZbSm4PkGd23IR4BkwMC83fK41fSHH9vWrVVV2&utm_ts=1577790837472