

Faith finds some but loses others

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My mother won't go to Communion.

My mother is a spasmodic Mass-attende, but because her children are devout practitioners, she frequently finds herself in pews, hands folded in her lap, with a look somewhere between longing and ruefulness. She wants the old, blind devotion of her childhood back, I suspect, but sees that road as barbed, shameful, and, ultimately fruitless.

Nearly half of American adults have left the faith tradition of their childhood to either switch allegiances or abandon religious affiliation altogether, the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life reported earlier this year. The worst to suffer is Roman Catholicism, which has lost more members than any faith tradition from affiliation, the survey reported. Almost one in three Americans were raised Catholic but fewer than one in four have remained Catholic.

But Protestantism, particularly "mainline" Protestantism, continued its slow erosion. Some 40 percent of Protestants switched branches merely because they couldn't get that old feeling from their old faith.

As society embraces changes many religions consider anathema, some former Catholics cannot tolerate the religious certitude of the faith in which they were raised. The Pew study found that two in three Catholics who became unaffiliated and half of those who became Protestant say they left the church because they "stopped believing in its teachings."

Those would be people like my mother, who could no longer abide the church's position on hot-button social questions like female priests, married priests and the like. Other friends, formerly Catholic, said when they experienced the complexities of divorce themselves, they could no longer agree with the church's prohibition against re-marriage.

Reasonable people can reasonably disagree and while I can't invert doctrine, I can at least respect a decision carefully measured and deeply felt. The devout have been arguing about "What Jesus Meant" or "What the Gospels Meant," since the death of Jesus. Peter split hairs with Paul. Mary of Magdala argued with Peter. Theodotus argued with Irenaeus, and my mother will argue with me over infallibility, virgin birth or how many angels can dance on the head of a pin.

But the overwhelming reason people give for leaving the religion is not some theological donnybrook over faith versus good works. Neither is it some secular epiphany at the hands of atheist crusaders like Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens. It's simple laziness. Seventy-one percent of Catholics and Protestants who are now unaffiliated say they "just gradually drifted away from the religion."

In other words, when it came to transcendence, they just slept in.

Granted, eschatology can't hold a candle to "American Idol." But I have a hard time respecting the apostasy of former Christians who don't even know there are four Gospels.

It should not surprise that in a peripatetic country swimming in choice, religion should be a victim of that fluidity. What's surprising is not so much the erosion of mainstream religions but the unabated hunger for spiritual ecstasy.

One of the underreported findings in the Pew study was that most children who were raised without a religion later joined one. All of those well-meaning parents, opting to relieve their children of the burdensome propaganda of their own wretched childhoods, ended up with children who wondered how Mom and Dad could have kept all that from them.

When I was at Georgetown University, a fellow theology student said that she had been raised by two atheists and had only enrolled at the school to try to explain these baffling "stirrings" in her own heart. I have no idea how her journey ended up but had to commend her for the investigation.

My mother has spent 30 odd years in fitful investigations into this or that brand of Christianity, feeling like she liked the appetizer but missed the meal. "Once a Catholic, always a Catholic," the writer Edna O'Brien once told me. "They have a way of getting to you."

Maybe it is that way with all religions; the old hymns, the chants, the prayers, the symmetry of worship is one of the few unvarying pillars in a shifting world, so it is unsurprising that the previously unaffiliated would embrace it.

It's hard to know what is more mysterious — how devout faith can atrophy or how it can endure. There are times when cruelty and evil can be so shrill, so insidious, and so ordinary, that one wonders how faith finds the oxygen to breathe.

What is clear is that nature abhors a vacuum and that when we lose faith, we seal it with something else — materialism, narcissism, Oprah, "Entertainment Tonight." But the pull of the transcendent is palpable. I see my mother looking for her spiritual home, and feeling alternately angry and unworthy to enter it. She is not the first prodigal Catholic; we are surrounded by prodigals of every persuasion. Perhaps they need to forgive the Church, or perhaps the Church needs to forgive them. But somebody needs to take the first step, because the walk ahead is not for the weak of heart.