The Thinker & The Guide: A Portrait of Religious Disaffiliation

Abstract

For a denomination that is canonically is difficult to leave, many American Catholics are migrating beyond the institution’s immediate influence. These new religious patterns represent a somewhat cohesive movement influencing not just Catholicism, but the whole of American religion. People flow more freely through what was once a boundary distinguishing who is religious and who is not. This paper explores this phenomenon in and through the portrait of one religious educator and his disaffiliating student.

Introduction:

Religion in the United States today includes a growing number of people disaffiliating from institutional communities. American Catholicism has experienced the “greatest net losses as a result of affiliation changes” (Pew 2017). For a denomination canonically difficult to leave, many American Catholics are migrating beyond the institution’s immediate influence. These new religious patterns represent a somewhat cohesive movement influencing not just Catholicism, but the whole of American religion. People flow more freely through what was once a boundary distinguishing who is religious and who is not.

This paper explores this phenomenon in and through the portrait of one religious educator and his disaffiliating student. This essay introduces the methodology of portraiture, puts the portrait in context, and concludes by suggesting questions for further study.

The Methodology

Portraiture offers disciplines interested in disaffiliation a compelling blend of analysis and aesthetics to answer the questions: What is happening here? What is working? And why? (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 2002, 142). The researcher who asks these questions first will experience a very different reality than one “who is on a mission to discover the source of failure” (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997, 9). This

1 Disaffiliating Catholics now make up 10.1% of the overall adult population. If these “former,” “lapsed” or “non-practicing” Catholics, as they are often pejoratively described, were seen as a religious denomination, they would be the third-largest religious group in America (Pew 2014).
2 52% of all adults who were raised Catholic have left the church at some point in their lives. Roughly the same amount of United States residents identify as Catholic today as in the 1970s, but the effects of migration obscure the larger trend of movement out from standard affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church in the United States (Murphy 2015).
3 Disaffiliating Catholics now make up 10.1% of the overall adult population. If these “former,” “lapsed” or “non-practicing” Catholics, as they are often pejoratively described, were seen as a religious denomination, they would be the third-largest religious group in America (Pew 2014).
study proceeded with the assumption that positive religious educational encounters that result in disaffiliation could be found, and could be learned from.

Over the course of four months, I interviewed and observed Catholic high school teachers and their disaffiliating former students. The research included a group interview to shed light on these two perspectives, educators on the one hand and learners on the other, and to reveal the lived religious praxis being constructed in these teaching-learning relationships. These perspectives provide insight on an under-represented experience in religious educational research. The portrait presented does not reduce the complexity of disaffiliation but hopefully makes that complexity more comprehensible (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 2002, 215).

**Framing the Portrait**

Charles Taylor argues post- foundationalism has generated an explosion of “third ways” between orthodoxy and atheism (Taylor 2007, 302). Wade Clark Roof suggests a “Great Spiritual Divide” has grown due to the variety of options (Roof 1994, 122). While two poles might exist at the extremes, most people occupy the space in between and come into regular contact and shape religiousness as an ongoing choice (Drescher 2016, 11). In this context, the number of those who check the box “None” when asked their religion is increasing. Nearly one-in-five American adults (18%) were raised in a religion before disaffiliating from it, compared with just 4% who have moved in the other direction (Liu 2012).

Elizabeth Drescher suggests a provocative pairing to this phenomenon. She intends the term “Somes” to describe the religiously affiliated, but the language, and her findings imply that Nones and Somes are not opposites. “Somes” are not “Tons” or “Totally Ins,” so to speak. They have some religion, and some other stuff too. Drescher paints a poignant image of this shared quality: half empty church parking lots on Sunday mornings in America as both religiously affiliated and disaffiliating persons drive by on their way to hiking, surfing, dog parks, and brunch to enjoy intimacy with friends and/or the natural world (2016, 247). The once consequential boundaries of adherence and single religious identity have become porous to create a space where bodies move and mix. Inter-faith families represent one example of the pluralism-plus that increases the

---

4 In other words, for every person who has converted, more than four people have “de-converted” and joined the ranks of the religious Nones. See Nagle 2017 for a discussion on deconversion. It is significant for this study to note that research suggests very few Nones just drift away One particular example comes from an "exit interview" survey of nearly 300 "lapsed" Catholics in Trenton, NJ in 2011. Byron and Zech’s demonstrated that an overwhelming number of their respondents shared they had left the Church, but a quarter still considered themselves Catholic. They cited the failure of the institution as their reason for leaving the Church but not the tradition (2011).

5 Tom Beaudoin argues that affiliated religious identities (Somes) are no less dynamic and complex than their disaffiliating counterparts. Moreover, affiliated religiousness appears to “harbor elements of disaffiliation, and vice versa.” I am grateful to Dr. Beaudoin for the many conversations and support regarding this work. The quotes given in this footnote reflect his response to Elizabeth Drescher’s lecture presented at Fordham University in 2016.

6 In her book, *Being Both*, Susan Katz-Miller presents a “kaleidoscope” of complex patterns of heritage and practices that in-form the lives of some families The idea of being both presents a challenge to notions of
viability of believing and practicing otherwise. As persons meet and mingle, things get remixed.

Scholars define remix as a contemporary practice enabled by the increased exposure to ever-expanding sources of cultural content (Eduardo, Gallagher and Burrough 2017, 8). Despite understandable resistance to this practice, what seems clear to scholars is that in the twenty-first century, all interpretation of cultural forms will have to engage with questions of remix (Eduardo, Gallagher, Burrough 2017). The following portrait suggests the same.

An Initial Sketch

When I met with Elliot Chance, 56 years old, and Michael Keene, 32 years old, I had already spoken with them individually on a number of occasions. I was curious how the pair would discuss the potentially uncomfortable topic of disaffiliation that developed since their time together as teacher and student. On the first summer-like day in the heart of New York City, Eliot and Michael sat down with me to talk about the experience they shared.

The elder Chance grew up in what he described as a typical Catholic family of his generation. An alumnus himself of an all-boys Catholic high school in the area, Eliot earned advanced degrees in theology and explored a vocation as a priest. He has taught religion in Catholic high schools for thirty years. The younger Keene also spoke positively of his Catholic childhood and his “Catholicness.” Michael works in a consulting firm, and lives with his fiancé. He does not attend Mass regularly. Michael and his fiancé are not planning a Catholic wedding. That said, Michael does not believe he has “left” the Catholic tradition. Michael concedes he does not have “a good label” for who he is religiously.

Knowing these details, the two appeared an unlikely pair – even more so sitting by side. Over six feet tall with a baritone voice, Chance commands attention. Michael is short and softer spoken. The surface differences, including their religious affiliation, obscure the more intangible elements that make up these two men. What they shared in

exclusive religious identity, but also offers a helpful new view in a world where interfaith friendship, love, and marriage is an increasingly common and inevitable reality (2013, ix).

The vastly expanded contemporary social media also provides immediate and relational access to diverse details of everyday religious life, and the people living it. Drescher suggests technology in particular undermines the structural expectation of affiliation. The logic of digitally integrated social practices encourage self-representation in which affiliational commitments are muted. The expression of religious and spiritual perspectives signal a lack of institutional, doctrinal rigidity (Drescher 2016, 11, 62).

In his book, Virtual Faith, Tom Beaudoin explains this tendency of contemporary culture to reshuffle the fragments of pre-existent traits to solve the religious dilemma of their age with the term “bricolage.” Religions have become symbolic “tool-boxes” from which men and women today draw freely, without necessarily identifying themselves with the bounded institution the symbol came from (Beaudoin 2000, 148).

I have given each of the research participants pseudonyms to keep their identities confidential in compliance with Fordham University’s Internal Review Board. All the proper names of places and people given during their interviews have similarly been changed. All interviews and observations were conducted in New York City April – June 2017.
common quickly became apparent and brought into focus what I had learned about Eliot as an educator and Michael as a learner. They both like to talk about things that matter. As we sat down together, there was an immediate and easy inter-generational banter between like-minded men.

**Meeting Eliot Chance**

Chance was interested in the research from our first phone call. We agreed to meet at the New York Public Library. The clarity with which Chance responded during our conversations about his hopes for his students, the realities of teaching religion, and his own formative experiences that contributed to his theology and practice struck me immediately. The stories Eliot shared provide insight into the connection between the religious person and the religious educator. Eliot possesses a disarming swagger that can only be characterized as that of a man with a secret he is completely willing to share.

In our first interview, Chance quoted a mentor and described his own *je ne sais quoi* indirectly: “If you want someone to give up their life for this thing you call your religion, I better see a hell of a lot of joy in your face, not the sourpuss’…. Joy may be too strong a word on most days, but I try to live that. It provides me meaning.” Eliot presents Catholic tradition in a persuasive way that only authenticity can produce. Chance is, for lack of any better descriptor, “evangelical” in the best sense of that term. He has *evangelion* - “good to be made known.”

**“The Church As it is” – A Critical Appraisal of the Institution**

Chance does not shy away from sharing the reality that religious life is complex and imperfect. Eliot shared core experiences that influenced his strong connection to the Church, including lessons of the Church’s flaws. As a student, Eliot thrived in his theology classes. He expressed gratitude for his religion teachers’ openness. How the Brothers treated Chance, not just what they taught him, made them some of his most significant teachers. However, a number of those Brothers, including the principal and vice-principal, left the school and their order during Eliot’s first year in high school. They left and married their secretaries. Chance recalled that watching them leave their vows was traumatic, but added he has met some of them over the years. “They are wonderful!….They’re not traitors.”

Chance explained that during that time he recognized the Church for what it was - not eternal and unchanging, but human and limited. Chance suggested this humility is part of growing up. This and other experiences also taught young Eliot that the Church’s limitations are not deal breakers. This theme of maturity and openness continues to guide his teaching.

**“When in Doubt, I Lean Toward Being Open. Absolutely” – A Practical Theology**

As an educator myself, I believe the physical space you teach in is significant. My own classrooms have always reflected my approach to religion so that even if a student

---

10 Before the Greek work *evangelion* became synonymous with the Christian Gospels, it was used to more broadly describe good news and tidings to be shared. Tom Beaudoin uses the helpful translation “good to be made known” in his courses on Evangelization, Faith, and Culture at Fordham University.
did not listen to a thing I taught, but just stared at the walls for a period, there was a narrative they could not help but absorb and remember. When I walked into Eliot’s classroom, I smiled, and began staring at the walls.

Chance’s classroom seems equal parts chapel and man-cave. The room is small and there is little empty space on the walls. They are covered with Da Vinci sketches, religious icons, and photographs of Cathedrals, along with framed posters of Jerry Garcia, The Beatles, and significant sport pages from Met’s History. A large banner centrally located on the far wall dominates and organizes the assemblage. What the attention-deficient student in his classes walks away with, at the very least, is religion = “Finding God In All [these] Things.”

Talking about his goals as an educator, Chance shared,
My hopes for my students during and after my classes are that they see that religion is relevant to their lives and to the questions that every life ought to engender, and that despite some of the mistakes the Church has made historically, there's still a treasure chest of wisdom that I think includes the best of the human tradition, philosophy and the arts and the like.

In order to reframe religious questions for an audience that thinks they have heard it all before, Chance takes his students to the boiler room the first day of class. In the dark and unfamiliar room, he has them imagine they are being brought into existence and this is their reality. “What questions do you want to ask?” When his students suggest "Where are we? What is this stuff around us? What are we supposed to do here?" Chance explains:

These are the great questions for any human being to address at the core of his or her being, and at the core of religion. Religion is one of the ways humanity has set out to respond to the questions that life ought to engender with doctrine, ritual and symbol. Let's go back to the classroom and with that in mind. I want you to spend the year thinking about how adequate the responses we're going to study are. I want you to always feel free to raise your hand and say this either doesn't make sense or I think you're trying to ram some BS down our throats.

Chance explained, for him, if religious education is not a conversation where he is meeting his students where they are “then it's a colossal waste of time for both of us.”

In addition to this surprising classroom and style, Chance shared his own children, age 25 and 23, have an ambiguous relationship with Catholicism. I explained awkwardly in the form of a question the reason for my surprise. “If your kids are disaffiliating, what do you think that means?” Chance smiled accepting the implied compliment and responded with clarity that indicated this was not the first time he had wrestled with the question.

I don’t know if it’s rationalization, but this is between them, God and the Holy Spirit. I’ve just got to be a role model…I’ve been humbled by how little I have
known that’s turned out to be true in my life, and even more humbled by what I thought was absolutely true in my life and has turned out not to be. That openness, I think…comes from when I see Jesus in the scriptures, and experience Him in the Mass. That is the God I resonate with. That it is ok. He says, “I want you to work your ass off, and I want you to be humble, but I want you to have a sense of humor, and I want you to care about every single person that’s in need because everyone is an instance of my son or my daughter. Some days that’s easier than others…but when in doubt, I lean towards being open. Absolutely.

Chance learned this humility both in and out of the classroom.

“Being Right vs. Being Good” – A Formative Experience

Eliot Chance’s life provides a rich template that informs his practice as a religious educator. Humility and theological reflection emerged as a consistent theme. Though Eliot told this next piece of his story without a smile, the tale is not dark. Chance shared that around the age of eight, he began to notice his father came home “a little out of focus.”

I can still hear it, the pop of a Schmidt’s beer bottle. Whether it was 11am or 12am, that just marked that it was going to be a different day. So I would make myself scarce… He never laid a hand on us, never got fired, but just that change, it was not desirable for anybody…

Eliot has given retreat talks about being the child of an alcoholic and shares it in his classes when teaching the Paschal Mystery. Eliot often framed the value he places on religious life and learning in terms of getting through the, “Crap storms that are sure to come, if they haven’t already, and will come again and again.” He explained in one interview, “I tell my students you will suffer like everyone else. You may even suffer for taking a stand for justice…but do you believe that through Good Friday there is an Easter Sunday coming after? If the answer is yes, and there is a community to share that grief with in dialogue with tradition, you can receive graces that you otherwise would not receive through suffering.” This faith was tested early on in Eliot’s life.

Chance’s parents separated due to the pain his father caused. Eliot recalled noticing a lump on the side of his father’s neck while visiting him. “Long story short, oncologist, lymphoma, radiation, and then they finally called us in and said, ‘There is nothing we can do. So it’s time to prepare.'” Chance shared the life changing way his mother helped him and his family prepare:

My mother called my brother and sister and I into the living room and said, “We’re going to bring your dad home.” We set up a hospital bed in my bedroom on the first floor. I slept on the couch and took care of him for two months… He was sober the whole time… Those were the best two months that I can remember … For my mom to be able to want to do that, to bring him home, that is the most formative experience of my life…She taught me an important distinction, one that I wish more people understood: There is a difference between being right and
being good. It’s important to know what the right thing to do is, but there’s sometimes a higher calling in a situation.

Eliot Chance teaches with this level of gravitas. He embodies the teaching that hangs centrally located in his classroom. One of the reasons Chance hoped Michael would choose to participate in the study was that he thought he was one of the few students in his long career that had understood what he does in the classroom.

Meeting Michael Keene

Even after hearing Eliot’s memories of him, as the product of public schools, I must admit I had some preconceived notions of an east coast prep school graduate. Michael Keene quickly dismantled my pre-judgments. Keene was responsive in making time to speak with me despite what was clearly a busy period between work and wedding planning. We met in the middle of the business day in midtown Manhattan. Michael arrived early and politely would not let me buy him a cup of coffee. And before I realized it, he had paid for my bottle of water.

Keene looks a young 32 years old. He wears glasses, and his hair cropped short. Michael was well dressed in a suit and tie. What struck me meeting Keene was what I experienced as a dissonance between the suit and the man I was speaking with. I also work in midtown Manhattan. In that context one is not accustomed to the patience Michael communicates with. We both leaned into an engaging exchange concerning his religious life and learning.

I was curious about Michael’s upcoming wedding and wondered whether he and his fiancé’s choice to not have a Catholic wedding was hard for his family. Michael explained he had not felt any judgment from his family, but added that he thought Mr. Chance might have an opinion about it. (Eliot had in fact mentioned it with concern).

Michael explained his view:

I thought about it, I made a decision, and I am ok with it…The religiosity of [our wedding] does not come from being in a church necessarily or needs to be provided by a priest. I think it’s about the event itself… Instead of the religious quality being given to the event externally; it is coming from a more internal expression of us… I am not going to get married by someone I don’t have a relationship with. We are both not church-goers, so we will have someone who knows us well and a have a thoughtful ceremony that means something to us. That seems more appropriate, but you are going against tradition.

Despite how it might sound, tradition matters to Michael.

“Proudly Catholic” – A Disaffiliating Identity

Michael explained in our first interview that he identifies proudly as a Catholic, but “Catholic sociologically.” I followed up to clarify this distinction. I was curious how he understood the difference between being Catholic sociologically, religiously, and spiritually. Michael explained that, to him, “religiously” meant the “going to church.”
Being “spiritually Catholic” included Catholic belief and theology. Identifying as “Catholic sociologically” meant the cultural context that continues to shape him. When I asked what was keeping a sociological Catholic from joining the community, Michael laughed at the irony and replied:

The reason that I don't go to church is that as much as it's been a habit to go, it's become a habit to not go …Although I don’t go to church anymore, I love the Tridium…I really love Good Friday, Holy Thursday, the whole Tridium. To me, it’s what all the rest of Catholic ritual is based upon…. I find the historical progression of the Pagan religions, into the early church, and Muslim influences fascinating. I feel the Catholic Mass captures a lot of the collision of those traditions …When I go to Mass, that’s what I think about…I learned that in Mr. Chance’s class…The Church was not stamped out as one thing…. I don’t go anymore because I have lots of frustrations with the Church: It’s resistance to move forward and all the obvious abuses.

Michael repeated that while he has developed a new habit of not going to church, he has not “departed” his relationship with God. He discussed an expansive theology learned from exposure to diverse points of view, including those presented in formal religious education. “My mindset is not exclusive,” he asserted. “I don’t feel like I have left anything because there’s nothing to leave from. It [Catholicness] is a relationship with God. It is not ‘we are in this box, and you’re not.’ We are all together and the boxes don’t matter in the end.”

“Which Side I Sit On” – Religious Learning in the Presence of Other

Michael shared that as a child although he did not understand the difference, he was aware difference existed. There was a synagogue a few blocks from his home; His uncle was Jewish; And one of his aunts had converted to an Evangelical Christianity. In high school, Keene began to learn what it meant to be Catholic or not. Rather than narrowing his notion of religiousness, Michael explained his education prepared him for when he would encounter religious others. His teacher revealed to him that other religions not only existed but also had always been mixing with each other throughout history. This level of honesty spoke to Michael.

The class was taught by someone who was in the middle of this struggle trying to help us make sense of what appears to be a bit of nonsense. What we’re supposed to believe is a little nonsensical in a lot of ways. So how do you handle that? How have people for the past 2000 years handled that? It was a practical approach to history. What does it all mean? What do the sacraments mean in relation to life? What are they telling you? Why are they important?

Michael learned to ask the questions “any life ought to engender.”

The year Michael spent in Eliot’s class was significant in light of this struggle. It was 2011 in New York City. In addition to the collective trauma of September 11th, two
of Michael’s classmates committed suicide. Chance described those months after 9/11 as a series of challenging moments where he hoped to “adjust [his students’] image of God in a way that would serve them well for the rest of their lives.” It was in that class that Michael was shown how to reflect on his life. His motivation, Eliot observed, was not academic but the desire for an encounter with the material, and the theological reflection being demonstrated. Keene confirmed his education prepared him for the next steps in his adult religious life.

After graduation, Keene attended college where he met Evangelicals, Atheists, and encountered a conventional contrast to the “sense of tradition” he had learned. Keene explained this encounter was thought provoking.

I wondered what being Catholic meant exactly? There is so much dogma in the Catholic tradition and so much precedent that if you were to be a strict catholic, your life would be pretty constrained. The way we each have gotten around that is that we each kind of have our own belief system. Right? That’s how it really plays out…Strict adherence was not something I had ever experienced as being Catholic…That wasn’t the religious curriculum I learned in high school. My grade school was like that, but I didn’t put much credence in that kind of conventional religion…I learned a very broad thought process and a very deep philosophical tradition.

After graduation, Michael chose to live in the Holy Land because “he wanted to better understand the religious conflict.” Michael worked for a small Christian international development company and lived with a Palestinian family. The experience was transformative. Michael searched for appropriate language to explain it.

Maybe it was a religious experience, but not in a religious way…There were months of having nothing to do but think, write, and try to understand what was going on. There was a lot of time for reflection… I don’t know how to describe it, but it felt like being at the center of something…A lot of my thinking on the social construction of religions started when I was in the Holy Land. You can’t help but think that a lot of people thinking about the same thing in just slightly different ways have been killed over that difference …I think I learned a lot about myself and my approach to things. When I was in the Holy Land, I feel like I defined who I was. What made me tick and who I was as an adult. I don’t think I knew that at the time, but I left there with something fundamental. It was growing up, I guess. That was the internal take-away. Externally I learned you can’t always take for granted how religious things are presented.

**Persistent Tradition: The Religiousness That Remains**

Michael shared one feature of contemporary culture influencing him and others like him: Whether it is craft beer or artisan shaving instruments, those who can afford to

---

11 David Hansen uses this language to distinguish between “traditionalism” and a more living and evolving “sense of tradition” (2017). In my own work, as it emerged in the language of my research participants, I used the language of convention vs. a sense of tradition to identify a similar felt distinction.
think in those terms have a desire for design thinking. Michael compared this to disaffiliation. “You’ve been exposed to a broad range of ideas, philosophies, religions, cultures, you can’t help but select the things you like and not the things you don’t.” Michael has mixed feelings about this practice but believes it fits contemporary experience.

Within this tension, Michael chooses significant elements of Catholicness to design this life. He still prays. “My prayer is reflection and the repetition of prayers that I’ve been saying forever. My prayer is a discourse with God.” His sense of tradition is also expressed in more innovative ways. His affinity for ritual shows up in the kitchen, garden, and more. Michael and his fiancé do not attend church, but have initiated a new meaningful ritual. They cook soup together on Sundays.

We decided to stop doing anything after a certain time and just hang out together…It became a thing we do… It’s not explicitly religious... It’s just this event to be together, the soup takes a while to make, and the smell of the soup rises up like an offering, like it says in Hebrew Scriptures….It’s not a date night. There is no pressure to find a place to go. It is a let’s have a glass of wine and just hang at home with no agenda. We fold laundry. I’ll call my folks. She’ll call hers…It has become a ritual…That is probably why we do it. And that’s why church is church.

This consistent embodiment of a complex but coherent religious life represents what Michael and his fiancé do want to share as they start a family.

I guess my feelings about going to church could change with children. I don’t know how much it would… Going to church as a habit is not there anymore. But the relationship has remained. I would like to pass that on to our children. When I was growing up, my mother would pray with me. Then we’d just talk. Prayer at home always included open discussion…That is one beautiful thing about church, I think. You share something. That is the point of the conversation. And it is also the point that you are supposed to come to your own understanding…I think that experience would be nice to share with children.

Michael admitted that planning the next phase of his life has reminded him of what prepared him to take these steps. He particularly identified the inclusion of non-religious concepts into this practice of discernment of God in all things. Michael explained that his religious education taught him to be comfortable “going outside of religion to find religious answers… or even going outside of being Catholic to find spiritual answers.” Keene shared, “My teachers never actually said that, but it is something I learned from them.” I shared with Michael that his comments were striking because Eliot Chance had said something very similar.

Michael: That's funny because he probably never said it that way in class, ever, but I heard it. I guess that's the point

---

12 Design thinking is an engineering methodology to find desirable solutions in an action oriented way to create a preferred future. The process involves iterative prototyping and evaluation (Roth 2015).
(laughing) That's very interesting.

Interviewer: Indeed, it is.

**Final Portrait: “Put it in the Win Column”**

Before Eliot Chance and Michael Keene met with me to discuss the experience they shared from their different perspectives, Eliot said he often wished to be able to meet former students as part of a reunion weekend to listen to where they were and “hit them with a couple more lessons.” Sitting in Bryant Park, on his school’s reunion weekend, Eliot had something like that opportunity. As the three of us spoke, Chance described the younger man across from him as a disciplined student who integrated perspectives and practices from any tradition if he could see their value and relevance. “So, it was on me to communicate tradition in a compelling manner.” If Chance felt it was up to him to guide Michael through a broad and applicable meaning of Church history in compelling manner, he did so. Keene’s appreciation of tradition and ritual is a testament to this. But, in many ways, it was a collaborative educational encounter.

Eliot shared with Michael that his typical evaluation of a student included initially determining what it was that a particular learner needed to grow. Eliot shared to Michael he felt he was able to, and ought to, relate to the young man as himself from the start. As an educator, I felt this was an integral piece of a very different type of teaching. What occurs in such a teaching and learning relationship is unpredictable and transformative for both subjects. Michael spoke of Eliot as a trusted guide because he taught from the authority of his own struggles. Michael felt his guide was preparing him for a similar struggle of his own.

Sarah Tauber suggests teachers-as-guide develop an awareness of what direction a learner needs to move in for growth to occur, cultivate a familiarity with the strengths and weaknesses of a learner, and ultimately trust the learner can complete the challenge ahead (Tauber 2015). This commitment to openness invites learners to pose questions and propose new perspectives. Chance shared, “I have a job to teach what the Church teaches. That said, I want to hear their reaction to that… That's the best part of the job, I could do something else if I weren’t really interested in what they were thinking.”

Keene learned being religious was something that developed. Michael described his experience in Chance’s class as a time when he was building his own religious identity. Chance nodded often during this exchange and added that what Michael described “marks the difference between authentic religious education and education in some other Catholic schools where it pushes tradition into a student and expects the students to act like sponges and absorb it.” He explained when he was teaching Michael and his classmates, he wanted to know what these young men experienced and what gave them a sense of awe and wonder, and where they had suffered. Chance wanted to share

---

13 I am grateful for Dr. Tauber’s guidance myself during the portraiture process and in many conversations during the editing process.
how tradition may be able to speak to that. Tauber argues the effectiveness of this approach derives from when guides present a viewpoint, “they do so in a manner that encourages the learners to make their own decisions and informed choices” (Tauber 2015, 112). Doing so, the teaching-learning relationship involves shared deconstruction and reconstruction of existing views for the sake of something new. Chance invites his learners into this reflective and interpretive process relating tradition with their lives. If he did not, “It would be a colossal waste of time.”

Michael did not believe his religious education was a waste of time. Teachers like Chance taught him the depth and value of Catholic tradition. Teachers like Chance prepared him to be able to “have conversations like this,” Michael said with a smile - meaning the questions we were exploring together in this study.

To understand what I believe, regardless of whether it is line with Church dogma. My religious education got me ready for the next steps of learning in my life. Regardless where it took me, it got me ready for the context I live in and am comfortable with.

Despite his ambiguous relationship with the institutional Church, Keene characterizes his religious education as “successful and effective.” He did note the dissonance that may cause for some: “I don't think that Church leaders would say the same thing, but I would say it was successful. Absolutely.” Chance and I both exchanged glances during this conversation. Eliot knew the question would return to him. I had asked Eliot in an earlier conversation if affiliation is important to him as a result for his students. He hesitated and realized the tension that could surface, but admitted more quickly than I anticipated, “That's a good question. My gut is no, it's not.” He went on to qualify that response:

I believe that we're all on a quest to find that which will still the restlessness of our heart. I have found it for the most part, not completely, in the Catholic faith and being affiliated with the Church, but I recognize that most of the great saints have gone through times when they've struggled with the Church, or Church authority, or even Church teaching. So to wander away from it at some point for some length of time does not freak me out... I guess what would scare me more is a loss of that desire to find those meanings. I sometimes worry about the kids who are gung-ho affiliated. What are the reasons why they are, and how does that translate into the way they live their life and the way they live their marriage and their parenting and their relationships with others who don't share that experience? I'd probably have much more in common and have a few more laughs and sweet moments with somebody who's disaffiliated but searching than I would with somebody who's affiliated for the wrong reasons.

Eliot added that he has a real faith that in and through young people like Michael, and the Holy Spirit, the Church might be “laboring into a new era of understanding which may be more Christian when we come out on the other end.” That said, he is still concerned. “I teach this stuff because it has worked for me. I worry my kid’s generation won’t have a tradition to lean on.” Both his concern and faith exemplify the range and
depth that he draws from. Chance’s deeply embedded value of “finding God in all things” appreciates this complexity and indicates Eliot’s trust in the revelation that may be occurring outside his control. When I asked Chance if Michael’s religious education had been successful, he and Michael smiled at each other—not an awkward I-cannot-tell-a-difficult truth kind of smile. The shared moment fit the rest of the engaging and respectful conversation. With the smile still stretching across his face, Eliot nodded without hesitation and drew a sports metaphor that reminded me of his man-cave-chapel: “You gotta put this one in the win column.”

Questions for Further Study

These two religious persons embody the promise and inspiring unpredictability of religious education. What Eliot and Michael share beneath differences of size and affiliation is an active religiousness. Eliot is the product of practical religious knowledge and invites learners to develop a similar *phronesis* through ongoing *praxis* (Miller-Mclemore 2014, 2). In many ways it was this reflective process modeled by Chance that prepared Michael to live the sense of tradition he learned in innovating ways. Michael’s remix of Catholic tradition is nonetheless an authentic expression of “Catholicness” worthy of research because it suggests a theological transformation at the level of lived religion. This portrait offers access to the educational and theological intersection that R. Ruard Ganzevoort describes as the ongoing process and exchange with various sources, norms and traditions that “aims at a more profound and more adequate spiritual life” (Ganzevoort 2009). In the contemporary cultural circumstances, is the meaning of religious being obscured by the binary of affiliated or disaffiliated? What might be an alternative to affiliation?

In his book, *Experience and Nature*, John Dewey warns educators to distrust simplifications that make judgments easy. Instead, he encourages educators to discover and wrestle with the complexity of a thing (Bender 2010, 44). The disaffiliation “crisis,” I suggest, is just this sort of thing. When the three of us stood to say our goodbyes, I walked away first and looked back to see Michael Keene and Eliot Chance had sat back down together to continue the conversation.

---

14 I use this term in the sense Maynard, Moschella, and Hummel deploy the term “The everyday practices through which character is formed, communities are strengthened or subverted, and religious meaning is made” (2011, 4).
Bibliography


