By What Authority: Reading Research on Disaffiliation through the Lens of Constructivist-Developmental Psychology

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Crisis in the Churches! Young Adults are leaving and are not coming back! They are losing their religion! The Rise of the Nones! These are just some of the shocking headlines being discussed in the world of religious education when it comes to the current status of young adults leaving organized religion. There is clearly something going on that is part of a wider phenomenon of younger generations dis-affiliating from institutions and communal organizations. The numbers behind these headlines reflect the growing body of research on religious belief and belonging. However, the numbers alone are not necessarily helpful as religious communities and leadership try to figure out how to respond. This paper is an attempt to offer a potentially valuable lens through which to read some of the research data. The lens is based on constructivist-developmental theory, an epistemological framework for the development of meaning-making This does not negate the research findings, but asks different questions regarding the data in order to inform strategies for supporting young adults. As religious educators are reading more work in sociology of religion, it becomes important to find a lens through which to read and analyze the findings. This essay is an attempt to put these disciplines in conversation so as to constructively view the current trends and data not as a crisis but as an opportunity to creatively support young adults in their development and well being.

The essay has three sections. The first looks at the current research from the United States with regard to young adults disaffiliating from organized religion with special attention to the Catholic context. The second section is an introduction of pertinent constructivist-developmental

theories and how they apply to reading the research findings. The third section illustrates use of constructivist-developmental theory as a lens for interpreting and analyzing qualitative research data through a series of examples. The conclusion points toward implications for religious education practice in light of the suggested interpretive lens.

I. The Rise of the Nones: Contemporary US Context and Research Trends

Trends of Disaffiliation

Disaffiliation is a phenomenon at the center of many studies. We identify the disaffiliated as those who were raised within the church (i.e., baptized), but who are no longer connected with the institutional church nor are actively engaged in church as community. Researchers Robert McCarty and John Vitek argue that "Disaffiliation from the Church is largely a thoughtful, conscious, intentional choice made by young people in a secularized society where faith and religious practice are seen as one option among many. It is a dynamic process that unfolds over time and after a series of experiences or considerable thought."[1] There is no question that membership in organized religion is declining among young adults in the United States. There appear to be many significant factors that are contributing to this decline and not a single one is dominant. For example, many point to the contemporary pluralistic society we live in that makes religious involvement more voluntary, such that religious belief and practice is less of a given, tied up with family, local community, or culture. In much of the country, religious worship is no longer what everyone does on Saturday or Sunday mornings. Another factor, relevant especially to the Catholic context, is that many young adults disagree with the Church on social and moral

[1] Robert McCarty and John Vitek *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholic* (Winona, MN: St. Mary's Press, 2018), 11.

issues such as birth control, women's roles in leadership, and treatment of LGTBQ people.[2] Furthermore, the sex abuse crisis in the Catholic Church is no small issue. The full effect of actual abuse and failure of church leadership on the lives of Catholics of all ages, has yet to be fully realized. It is important to point out that this trend of declining membership is not unique to religious organizations as there has been a significant trend of decline in all voluntary types of organizations post-World War II.[3]

There appear to be many reasons for the decline in participation within religious organizations and there is a growing body of sociological research that is attempting to capture this phenomenon. In order for religious organizations to respond effectively and appropriately it is important to grasp as accurately as possible what is driving the decline. However, it is equally important that the research be interpreted well by religious leadership, and not simply taken at "face value." To that end, it is valuable to understand something of the methodology (i.e., what is being measured and how), as well as to read the sociological results through other analytical lens (e.g., theological, psychological). Therefore, in this section we look at a few sociological studies on religious belonging. We focus, when possible, on those whose subjects are between the ages of 18-30 and identified somehow with Roman Catholicism. We discuss the studies' methodologies and findings so as to discover how we might learn from the studies as well as identify their limits. In the following section we interpret the findings through a

[2] Christian Smith, Kyle Longest, Jonathan Hill, and Kari Christoffersen, *Young Catholic America: Emerging Adults In, Out of, and Gone from the Church* (New York: Oxford University, 2013). Jean Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids are Growing up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy – and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood* (New York: Atria Books, 2017).

[3] Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, Steven Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985). Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

constructivist-developmental lens to further illuminate the findings for the purpose or religious education efforts.

According to Pew Research, one-fifth of the US public, and a third of adults under thirty, are religiously unaffiliated. The 2012 Pew Research study *"Nones" on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation* was designed "to delve more deeply into the theological, social and political views of the large and growing number of Americans who have no religious affiliation."[4] It was conducted via phone interviews (landline and mobile) with an intentional over-sampling (approximately one-third) of those who identified as religiously unaffiliated. The intention for the over-sampling was to gain a better picture of the religiously unaffiliated and compare them with findings drawn from Pew's rich data sets of those who *are* religiously affiliated. Overall religious affiliation has dropped dramatically over the prior five years of study, with the greatest decline attributed to "generational replacement" whereby younger generations are not as religiously affiliated as those they are replacing. The research shows that the trend is mainly a Euro-American phenomenon in the U.S. In fact, Roman Catholic affiliation overall has remained stable over time, which Pew attributes to the influx of Hispanic immigrants to the U.S.[5] However, within the Catholic Church, White non-Hispanic membership has dropped, as well, significant numbers of Hispanic immigrants have switched affiliation to other Christian denominations upon arrival in the U.S.[6]

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[4] Cary Funk and Greg Smith. *"Nones" on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation*. (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2012), 7. Pew Research Center: Religion and Public Life, October 9, 2012 Accessed at: http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/. The authors qualify the use of "nones" by using quotation marks, but within the study this refers explicitly to those identified as "religiously unaffiliated," including atheists and agnostics.

[5] Funk and Smith, 14.

[6] "The Shifting Religious Identity of Latinos in the United States," *Pew Forum*, May 7, 2014, Pew Research Center. Accessed September 13, 2019, https://www.pewforum.org/2014/05/07/the-shifting-religious-identity-of-latinos-in-the-united-states/

According to the Pew report, a majority of those identifying as "unaffiliated" never doubt the existence of God (68%) and at least one-third (33%) say religion is "at least somewhat important in my life."[7] So what is the reason for disaffiliation? Within the study report, the authors offer "capsule summaries" by leading theorists as to why they have seen a dramatic increase in the number of people claiming no affiliation even though three quarters (74%) were raised with some affiliation.[8] Those reasons include: political backlash; delays in marriage; and broad social disengagement. If one digs deeper into the report, one finds that when those who consider themselves religious, but do not attend services regularly, are asked why not, only 40% offer what the researchers considered a "religiously-related reason," somewhat less than the 45% who offer either practical or personal reasons for not going.[9] Even this finding raises for us the question, is this true "disaffiliation" or lack of affiliation?[10] In other words, even for those who still claim to be religious, is their reason for not going less a deliberate choice to leave, or lack of a compelling reason to stay? We believe the distinction becomes important in a cultural world which in general is trending away from religious practice and membership.

Pew's large quantitative surveys are very valuable for noting major trends and the correlation among factors. But they are not able to determine causation. Is the loss of religious

[7] Funk and Smith, 18.
[8] Funk and Smith, 16.
[9] Funk and Smith, 78.
[10] It is worth noting an additional body of research in this section is on the process of *deconversion*. While not coined specifically for Catholic experiences, Catholic theologians such as Tom Beaudoin and Pat Hornbeck are taking up the term and using it to define the process by which baptized Catholics change their ways of affiliating with the Church and faith. Tom Beaudoin, et al. "Round Table on Deconversion and Disaffiliation in Contemporary US Roman Catholicism," *Horizons* 40 (2013), 256. Hornbeck argues that "deconversion" reflects an "emerging consensus among scholars that terms like lapsed and defectors fail to capture the complex reality of the process by which a person chooses to leave a religious group.more completely." Hornbeck argues that deconversion also names a more complete process of detachment than the concept of disaffiliation. Pat Hornbeck, "What is Deconversion" in "Round Table on Deconversion and Disaffiliation in Contemporary US Roman Catholicism," *Horizons* 40 (2013): 255-92., 266.

affiliation attributable to a larger social decline, the influence of conservative religious communities on politics, failures of religious leadership, or doctrinal and/or ethical teachings of the religious body? While the study can provide trends, even access and more fine grained analysis of the data (e.g., intersecting the axis of age along that of reason for non-attendance) can only hint at a clearer sense of causation, simply because that is the nature (and limit) of this form of research.

Another interesting contribution to the conversation on religious belief and belonging is a report by Barry Kosmin and Ariela Keysar drawn from the *ARIS 2013 National College Student Survey*. This is helpful for our purposes because of its limit to college students. The researchers write,"This report also provides a unique opportunity for an investigation into the phenomenon of the growing number of Americans who say they are 'secular' as well as those who say they are 'spiritual but not religious.'"[11] In particular, the researchers wanted to investigate whether those who are identified as "religiously unaffiliated" in other studies are largely traditional theists in search of a religious home or not. The researchers emailed the link to an online questionnaire to students at 38 colleges and universities within the United States, resulting in over 1,700 surveys that were at least halfway completed. The study sets itself apart from Pew by asking respondents to self-identify by responding to the question: "In general would you describe yourself more as a religious, spiritual or secular person? Select one."[12] The responses were distributed almost equally: 31.8% Religious, 28.2% Secular, and 32.4% Spiritual.[13] It is noteworthy that no descriptor is offered of any of these three. Throughout the survey, the

[11] Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, "Religious, Spiritual, and Secular: The emergence of three distinct worldviews among American college students." *A Report based on the ARIS 2013 National College Student Survey*, (Hartford: Trinity College, 2013), 4.
[12] Kosmin and Keysar, 8.
[13] Kosmin and Keysar, 8.

researchers test for various theological, scientific, philosophical, and political stances. These responses are then analyzed for how they correlate with the three worldviews. For the most part, their findings were not surprising. For example, most Secular respondents either don't believe in God (41.7%) or don't believe there is any way to find out (35.2%),[14] and believe in "Evolution/Darwinism" (93%).[15] When asked which religious tradition each identified, the researchers found that "Over 99% of the students who self-identified as Nones rejected a Religious worldview and a clear majority opted for the Secular worldview."[16] This data, they claim, complicates the narrative that all "Nones" are still searching for a spiritual home, or are just religiously unaffiliated.

The researchers admit that their questions are chosen to reflect current political and social debates found in the public square. While the majority of the questions are not written in a binary fashion (e.g., Do you believe A or B?) but as separate questions (e.g., Do you believe A? Do you believe B?) they largely reflect binary choices and use language about religious belief that would be found in the public square in debates over public policies, for example: *"Do you believe in Creationism/Intelligent Design? Do you believe in Evolution/Darwinism?"*[17] The questions do not reflect the nuance that might be discovered as differences within and among religious communities. In other words, the survey is not testing for adherence to religious, political, philosophical beliefs *as held by* many religious people, but *public perceptions* about those beliefs. In that regard, this survey might be difficult to answer for those who hold religious worldviews that allow for greater nuance than these questions do. The study overall is best

[14] Kosmin and Keysar, 13.
[15] Kosmin and Keysar, 21
[16] Kosmin and Keysar, 11
[17] Kosmin and Keysar, 21.

understood as validating "Secular" as a distinct worldview among college students than offering anything revelatory about Religious or even Spiritual worldviews.

We learn from the study that of those who self-report as Secular, close to half (49%) attended religious services frequently in childhood, are concerned about global warming (96%), hold more progressive or liberal political views (women's and LGBTQ rights), and believe in assisted suicide (71%). These findings may be helpful as religious leadership wishing to reach out to college students who so identify, may have a sense of the topics on which they might connect. These researchers claim that "over 99% of the students who self-identified as Nones *rejected* a Religious worldviews and a clear majority opted for the Secular worldview."[18] This may be an instance of overclaiming. To choose something for oneself is not necessarily a rejection of other worldviews. However, the authors do make a strong and valid claim for creating space in religious research for the Secular worldview.

A very different study published online by Harvard Divinity School students in 2012 entitled *How We Gather,* investigated the premise that unaffiliated young adults *are* looking for meaningful communities and finding it in spaces other than organized religion. In their report, the researchers present ten case studies of organizations that are attracting considerable attention and commitment from millenials. In their reading of these organizations - some for profit, some not-for-profit, the authors concluded that while young adults were engaging in a cultural shift away from traditional religious organizations they were looking for and engaging in meaningful communities. The report does not indicate their methodology except to note that within each case study the authors "map six recurring themes...found in mission statements, blog posts, and

[18] Kosmin and Keysar, 11. Emphasis added.

manifestos, and on the lips of leaders and participants." The six themes by which each organization is assessed are: Community, Personal Transformation, Social Transformation, Purpose Finding, Creativity, Accountability.[19] According to the report, no single organization held all six values, but two or three were clearly associated with each case. Some examples of cases were: CrossFit, SoulCycle, and The Dinner Party. While it is clear that the authors applaud each case as a value-driven organization, they caution leadership about being unprepared for the pastoral role many are taking on. Furthermore, while the authors are not necessarily looking for God-talk or religious language, they do claim that "community would ultimately be unsatisfying for both [authors] if it did not encompass the spiritual dimensions of existence."[20]

We believe two points are worth mentioning. First, the report, as written can tell us nothing about the ability of these organizations to sustain individual members, even if they may be attractive to significant numbers of members at any time. Second, while the authors describe several of the organizations as value-driven, there is no indication of a larger worldview, ideology, or agenda that drives or directs those values. In fact, in the cases of the for-profit organizations (e.g., Soul Cycle and CrossFit), we might assume that if they are not financially viable as commercial projects they might be closed down. This raises the question for us, what is the larger vision that supports or prioritizes the values therein?[21]

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[19] Angie Thurston and Casper ter Kuile, *How We Gather* (Cambridge, MA, 2012) Accessed at: https://www.howwegather.org/reports.

[20] Thurston and ter Kuile, 19.

[21] The study authors address just this question in a follow up study called *Something More* wherein they note that the organizations listed in the first study "These fledgling organizations are cultivating and experience for which they largely lack language. In fact, they are often startled by the gravity and attraction of what they find." Angie Thurston and Casper ter Kuile, *Something More,* (Cambridge, MA,), 7

Catholic Trends and Research Results

Christians make up over 70% of the U.S. population and Roman Catholics make up the single largest denominational group of Christions at 20%.[22] This fact alone explains why Catholicism has experienced the greatest net losses of any major U.S. religious tradition in this current trend of disaffiliation. However, St. Mary's Press - long-time publishers of religious education materials for adolescents and young adults - wanted to understand "more fully why young people leave the Catholic Church in particular."[23] In 2015 the publisher commissioned the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate out of Georgetown University (CARA) to conduct a survey of adolescents and young adults (ages 15-25) who have left the Catholic Church. Casting a wide net, CARA eventually was able to conduct the full 8-minute telephone survey with 204 respondents who identified as having disaffiliated from the Catholic Church. The survey data was analyzed for themes and demographics. From that number, fifteen subjects were later interviewed more fully on their history and reasons for disaffiliation. The interview material has been subject to a qualitative analysis. They found that for those interviewed, disaffiliation had been a largely thoughtful and conscious choice.[24] There was no single reason for disaffiliation but researchers generally saw three categories that young adults interviewed could be places within: the *Injured*, the *Drifters*, and the *Dissenters*.[25] Those identified as *Injured* often had "negative experiences associated with faith and religious practice, both familial and eccelesial."[26] Those identified as *Drifters* do not see the value of religious faith and practice

[22] Evangelical Christians make up the largest group at 25.4%, but are spread across many churches. *Pew Religious Landscape Study*, Pew Research, 2019. (Accessed August 6, 2019) https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/
[23] McCarty and Vitek, 5.
[24] McCarty and Vitek, 11.
[25] McCarty and Vitek, 3.
[26] McCarty and Vitek, 14.

for their lives or the lives of others. Additionally, they felt they lacked companions on their spiritual journey: "[At] some point these young people question why they are affiliated with the Church in the first place."[27] Those identified as *Dissenters* "exhibit a more active resistance to or rejection of the Church" mostly for the Church's stance on social issues or "perceived Church teachings about the Bible, salvation, heaven and life after death."[28] The researchers who have done an initial coding of the data has named six "common dynamics for disaffiliation." These findings are helpful, but we will not identify them here. For now we simply wish to express the value of this research data is that it allows us to hear in the young persons' own words why they have left. As we demonstrate below, access to a young person's own words allows us to analyze those words for how the young person makes sense of the Church, its beliefs, the value of membership, and the like.

The issue of disaffiliation causes much anxiety in many religious leaders across traditions. Our goal is not to jump to solutions nor to join in the anxiety. Instead we suggest taking a step back so as to look at the data through the lens of cognitive and spiritual development. This lens may help us read the data in a more useful way, helping us learn what is going on internally for youth and young adults who choose to disaffiliate.

II. Cognitive and Spiritual Development of Young Adults

In this second part we suggest constructivist-developmental theory as a basis for developing a lens through which to read the research. The theorists attached to this theory use a qualitative methodology, using interviews, in which they pay attention to how people express themselves and in doing so, make meaning. Robert Kegan writes, "I use the word 'meaning' to

[27] McCarty and Vitek,18.
[28] McCarty and Vitek, 21.

refer to this simultaneously epistemological and ontological activity; it is about knowing *and* being, about theory-making *and* investments and commitments of the will."[29] We believe a meaning-making theory is highly applicable to research on religious belief and belonging. For in proclaiming belief in life's ultimate source, meaning, and purpose, religious communities hope to call for commitment and investment from its members. Reading research on belief and belonging through this lens may help us recognize to what extent religious belief and belonging impacts a young person's investments and commitments in life.

Our focus will be on the leap a young person makes when moving from childhood, through adolescence to adulthood. To assist us, we look to the work of Robert Kegan, Sharon Daloz Parks, and James Fowler. Though each theorist is paying attention to different aspects of the cognitive, emotional, and affiliative movements of this development, they hold some things in common. First, each comes out of the cognitive developmental school pioneered by Jean Piaget, noting diverse aspects implicated by the growth from *concrete-operational* thought to *formal operations*. Piaget studied the development from infancy through adolescence, thus ending with formal-operational thought. Kegan, Fowler, and Parks all study development into adulthood, thus recognizing cognitive development beyond formal-operations. Kegan identifies the next development as *systemic-complex*.[30] Similarly, Parks names the further step *probing commitment* and *tested commitment*.[31] Fowler next is *individuative-reflective*.[32] Each calls for the

[29] Robert Kegan, *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 44-45.
[30] Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: the Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994)..
[31] Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).
[32] James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: Harper Collins, 1981).

capacity to move beyond simple ideation, to think ideologically, which is possible in young adulthood, given the appropriate support and challenge.

Second, their research methodology is qualitative. Through an interview process researchers analyze not only what research subjects say, but how they compose meaning in what they are saying. Finally, each perceive developmental "stage" as reorienting. What was understood previously is not forgotten, but reorganized or re-centered in light of what is newly perceived. Kegan describes "the subject-object relationship" as the "principle of mental organization."

> "Object" refers to those elements of our knowing or organizing that we can reflect on, handle, look at, be responsible for, relate to each other, take control of, internalize, assimilate, or otherwise operate upon. All these expressions suggest that the element of knowing is not the whole of us; it is distinct enough from us that we can do something with it. "Subject" refers to those elements of our knowing or organizing that we are identified with, tied to, fused with, or embedded in. We have object; we are subject. We cannot be responsible for, in control of, or reflect upon that which is subject.[33]

In the process of assessing the meaning-making capacity of the interviewee, these theorists pay attention to what the interview subject holds as object (e.g, what they believe they can manipulate or determine) and to what they are subject (e.g., the unnamed or given and beyond their control). According to constructivist-developmental theory, development occurs through the knower disembedding from that to which they were *subject*, such that it becomes *object*, thus making it possible (and necessary) to make new sense of their world and of themselves.

Kegan explains further, "One does not simply replace the other, nor is the relation merely additive or cumulative, an accretion of skills. Rather, the relation is transformative, qualitative, and incorporative. Each successive principle subsumes or encompasses the prior principle."[34]

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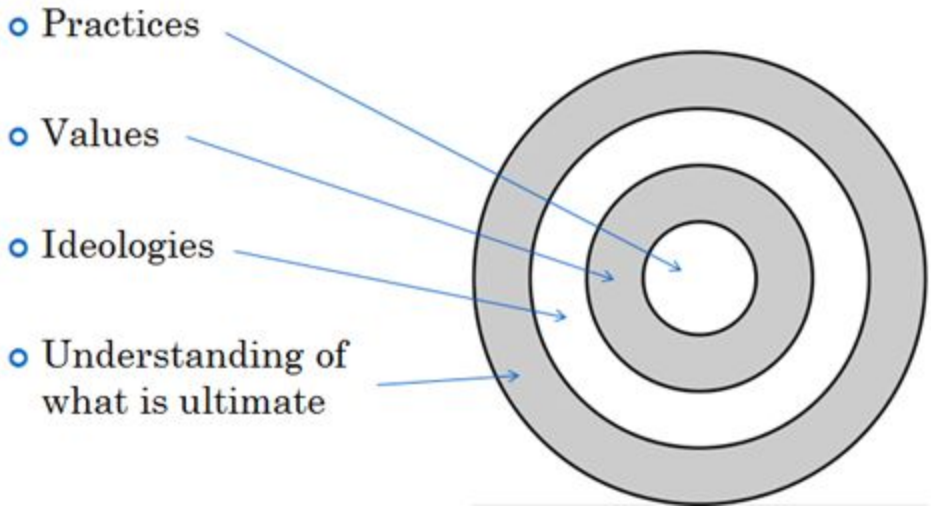
[33] Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads*, 32.
[34] Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads*, 33.

What is *subject* becomes the organizing principle of what is *object*. Kegan makes a geometric analogy of a point being subsumed in a line, which is further subsumed in a plane. Each, more complex frame, organizes, but does not negate the earlier element; rather the earlier is included and organized within a larger frame of reference. The research analysis determines what the research subject is able to recognize, decide about, or manipulate: the point, the line or the plane?

The cognitive development that is most likely (but not necessarily) to occur as a person moves from childhood, through adolescence to adulthood, is from the concrete to the thematic, and possibly, the ideological. For example, the concrete-operational child is able to follow instructions and prohibitions, but is not able to communicate or understand the motives or values behind those instructions or prohibitions. The child, limited to the concrete and immediate, will attribute a meaning that makes most immediate sense to them (e.g., if they don't do it they will be punished). Appropriately supported and challenged, the growing adolescent develops the capacity for formal-operations; they are able to ideate and think thematically, and is no longer simply bound by the concrete and immediate. They begin to learn the meaning behind concrete actions (e.g., intentions or values); and can learn to organize more concrete realities into thematic groups, like values. However, if questioned, why those values? They likely would be unable to articulate the theological vision in which they are grounded. More likely than not, they would attribute the why to some authoritative source (e.g., the church, or parents), thus indicating their inability to see and discuss the ideological.

How might we recognize constructivist-development in terms of religious belief and belonging? Similar to the analogy of point-line-plane offered by Kegan, and following the kind of development that can happen through adolescence to adulthood (from concrete-operational to

formal-operations, then complex ideation), we offer the schema of practice-value-ideology. This schema reflects the kind of elements found within religious traditions (practices, values, and ideologies) and organizes them from the concrete, to thematic, to complex/systemic. Each becomes the organizing principle for the previous, and finally, ultimate claims about life's source and purpose become the highest organizing principle.



Practices may include the concrete realities of worship and prayer, community membership and activities, reading from scripture, but also injunctions and prohibitions for behavior. *Values* would include commitments to beliefs that inform and determine the practices, but also the commitments to the community that holds those beliefs. *Ideologies* would include the theological perspectives that shape and prioritize the values and the community. Finally, the ideologies express, but fit within claims/beliefs about what is ultimate; what is ultimate organizes and prioritizes the ideologies. Thought of as concentric circles, each circle is the organizing principle for the circle interior to it. For example, our values shape what practices we think are important.

Imagined in this way, the constructivist-developmental framework can be a helpful lens through which we interpret research on religious belief and belonging among adolescents and younger adults because it gives us a means of paying attention to what research subjects say about religious faith and belonging. Is the subject able to ideate and discuss issues from a thematic level, or are they limited to talking about concrete practices? For example, they may talk about bible stories in a literal or concrete way, but are unable to recognize any deeper meaning communicated by those stories. Similarly, they may speak of the moral injunctions of religious community - do this; don't do that - without being able to name the values intended in those injunctions. In both instances, we would say that practices are object, but the values remain subject. Such is not a value judgement about the person's life of faith, but it gives us a sense of their cognitive capacity for making meaning of religious belief and belonging. Such can be a helpful guide for religious educators to develop new initiatives for what is appropriate to the way adolescents and young adults are coming to see and make sense of religion.

III. Reading Accounts through the Constructivist-Developmental Lens

In this section we use a few personal statements from research subjects whose interviews are found in *Going, Going, Gone*. As first-person accounts they can serve as examples for analysis, analyzed for how the speaker is making sense of their belief and belonging. Through these examples we offer brief illustrations of how to read first person accounts through the constructivist-developmental lens. The complete transcripts would be more helpful to give a fuller picture of any individual study subject, but for the time being, the short statements offer an opportunity to initially illustrate our thesis. We interpret and analyze the statements of three subjects - Diane, Amy, and Edward - drawing new insights from their words.

1. *Seeing beyond the concrete, but...*

In our first example, Diane, we notice her basic growth beyond concrete-operational towards what Kegan calls cross-categorical. But we wonder why her capacity to ideate does not translate into an ability to recognize and discuss religious values. Diane's statements offer examples of someone who is quite able to ideate and think in terms of values. This is best demonstrated in her repeatedly naming the of the value of choice. In the following statements she bemoans her lack of choice in childhood and lauds her right to choose that comes later:

- But in reality, kids go to church because they think that is what kids do, they don't realize they have a choice.[35]
- It was not until I went to college that I was officially out of the Catholic Church. I was no longer forced to be Catholic. When this finally happened I was relieved and happy, really now I was able to make my own decisions. I have never went back to church.[36]
- I went to Catholic schools from kindergarten through high school. That was something that I did not have a choice in either.[37]

In each of these we notice that she not only names choice, she can apply it to multiple situations, reflecting a capacity to work with choice as a value.

On the other hand, it is noteworthy that she names an extensive list of religious practices in which she was involved as a child and adolescent (receiving sacraments, serving at liturgy as an altar server and a Eucharistic minister, attending annual school retreats, and completing service hours).[38] Yet never once does she speak of them in terms of any value they represented - except for their inhibiting her choice. Likewise, she identifies several moral injunctions or prohibitions: "I believe in birth control...I am a complete supporter of gay marriage and being

[35] *Going, Going, Gone,* 22.
[36] *Going, Going, Gone,* 27.
[37] *Going, Going, Gone,* 27.
[38] *Going, Going, Gone,* 27-28.

able to choose who you want to be with. I am fine with priests being able to get married."[39] Yet only speaks of them as a restriction to freedom, with no articulation of the values intended in the prohibitions.

Her discussion of the value of choice and extending it to a variety of situations indicates a good capacity to ideate and think thematically, extending the application of an idea from one setting to others. Diane is able to speak extensively of the value of choice, which is widely and diversely communicated in the culture at large. On the other hand, she does not speak of the values inherent in the many religious practices. She seems to be unaware of them; as if they do not exist for her. The irony is that these practices are deeply value laden, and Diane is capable of thinking and judging in terms of values. As religious educators it draws us to ask, did Diane never hear someone speak of the religious values that inform the practices? Or was it presumed that the values were obvious and explanation unnecessary? Either way, it points to the need to regularly and consistently articulate the values of practices, along with instruction on the practices.

2. *Struggling with Conflict and Ambiguity*

One of the challenges of the necessarily uncomplicated religious belief taken on in childhood is that it usually does not stand up well to the more complicated reality of life first discovered in adolescence and continuing into adulthood. Even for the child able to "tell right from wrong" the framework in which they are able to do that is pretty limited to simple conceptions of good and evil, and a simple reciprocity between actors: If I do this, you will do that. Things are either good or bad. Fowler describes this kind of faith as *mythic-literal*, wherein

[39] *Going, Going, Gone,* 21.

the concrete-operational child interprets stories and actions in a literal and limited way and God is bound to the limits of the stories.[40] When a child moves beyond childhood and begins to recognize the world in a more complicated way, religious faith needs to grow deeper and wider to take account of newly recognized conflicts and complexity. Unfortunately, it frequently does not.

For example, in the face of suffering, God, who the child learned is good and loving, is determined by the adolescent to be either absent or weak. According to Fowler, recognition of this kind of conflict is common for someone who has moved beyond the early credulity of *mythic-literal faith*, but does not yet have any other way of conceiving of God. Fowler writes of the "'eleven-year-old atheists'...[who] begin to experience the breakdown of the moral principle of reciprocity they have used to compose their images of God. By observation and experience they have found that either God is powerless…[or] 'asleep.'"[41] Such incredulity if commonly found in the stories in *Going, Going, Gone*.

We see evidence of such a struggle particularly in the stories of the *Injured*. For example, Amy, who says,

> When I reflect back, I think my initial doubts began with my childhood diabetes. I would always ask, "Why me? Why would God do that to somebody? Why would he let that happen to somebody who has been going to church religiously and doing everything they were supposed to be doing?"[42]

[40] James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: Harper Collins, 1981).
[41] James Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development and Christian Faith* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 45-46.
[42] *Going, Going, Gone,* 17.

In this instance we see Amy's expectation of a tit-for-tat reciprocity between herself and God. Her concept of God remains limited to a mythic-literal conception, but she is able to conceive of greater themes, such as suffering, pain, loyalty, and fairness.

The Christian tradition is centered around a belief in a God who suffers *with* us. However, most children (and many adults) find it difficult to hold such contradictory realities (e.g., suffering and love) simultaneously. Granted, asking where is God in the face of suffering is an enduring question within religious traditions, never fully answered for all time. However, as religious educators we suggest that engaging in the question with worthy and thoughtful interlocuteurs would be most pastorally helpful direction for Amy, rather than assuming that her questions put her beyond the pale.

3. *Authority and the Possibility of Choice*

The third example shows someone who clearly has moved beyond the limits of concrete-operations to formal-operations, demonstrated by their ability to recognize values and claim allegiance or affiliation. However attaining the simple capacity for formal-operations is not always sufficient in a world of apparently conflicting ideologies. It becomes necessary to understand the values more clearly and make determinations or prioritize among them. To recognize if a person is able to do that, it is helpful to notice where they are placing authority and how. In *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, Sharon Daloz Parks offers a multifaceted schema of development, one facet of particular value attends to where and how people place authority. She writes, "When people compose their sense of truth in this form...eventually they reveal their assumed, unexamined trust in sources of authority located outside the self."[43] Parks adds that

[43] Parks, 55

"this form of knowing also tends to be dualistic…. They tend to make clear divisions between what is true and untrue, right and wrong, us and them. There is little or no tolerance for ambiguity."[44] Their trust is in the authority to know what is right, and they affiliate with that authority as a source of truth. Their own agency is found in choosing among authorities, not in closely understanding and examining what they assume the authority has done reliably.

In Edward we see agency around his choice of allegiance to an authority, but we also see that his authority remains largely unexamined by him. Edward says:

> I always have been very smart and I was always studious. But as I started to enjoy math and science more I just realized the discrepancy between science and religion. I guess that was another shaking point. Obviously the two can coexist fairly easily, people do it all the time, but for me I was one of those more toward the science end of things. Catholicism, especially, did seem to clash fairly well…. That pushed me away from the Church a bit more because of the belief in science that really didn't stack up with religion as far as agreeing with each other.[45]

By his own description, Edward says that "the two can coexist fairly easily" because he sees it in the example of people who "do it all the time," but seems unaware as to how they do it. In no instance does he indicate how it is that science and religion do not "stack up." What is apparent is that he sees a duality between science and "Catholicism, especially," but that presumed duality remains largely unexamined. Were Edward indicating membership in a Christian denomination that was more tied to biblical literalism, or denied or undermined scientific inquiry and discovery, the charge might make some sense, but such is not largely the case within Catholicism. The church does not set up the dualism, he assumes there are differences requiring a judgement in favor of one over the other.

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[44] Parks, 55.
[45] *Going, Going, Gone,* 24.

As a religious educators we might be drawn into deeper conversation with Edward about the points of distinction he sees between scientific inquiry and religious belief. Were those distinctions about biblical texts, we might investigate what it means for scripture to make theological claims, rather than scientific. Were the distinctions about moral injunctions, we might have a conversation around the values intended behind the moral injunctions and those intended behind scientific inquiry. Broadly, we could invite him to learn more about why and where these two "authorities" converge and diverge. We could invite him into a more nuanced understanding of both.

In this section we have offered three brief examples, working from very limited interview statements. Were we to test this interpretive lens more thoroughly we would need access to the fuller interviews for the purpose of greater validity. However, even in these brief examples we demonstrate that by analyzing the material through a subject-object lens, as offered through constructivist-developmental theory, we notice how the young person is making meaning. A better understanding on our part helps us move to more constructive responses as religious educators.

IV. Conclusion

In this paper we have suggested that sociological research on disaffiliation among young people might be interpreted through the lens of constructivist-developmental theory. This lens helps us nuance and read between the lines of what may be going on cognitively and spiritually. Reading the data at its face value does not allow for the complexities of individual experiences nor does it take into account the diverse locations interviewees and survey respondents may be at within stages of growth. Furthermore, reading current data trends on religious belief and

belonging of young adults through a constructivist-developmental lens can lead to practical responses for religious educators as they work with young adults.

We must take seriously the voiced concerns of young adults who are dis-affiliating while also being aware of where they are developmentally so that we can support their spiritual and cognitive growth. While many religious professionals remain validly concerned about the statistics of young adults falling away from organized religion, we remain hopeful that there can be opportunities to engage with disaffiliated young adults so as to support their exploration of life's ultimate source, meaning, and purpose. Familiarity with the work of Parks, Fowler, and Kegan can help educators provide young adults with the support *and* challenge that they need. Interpreting current and future data on trends of religious belonging among young adults through a constructivist-developmental lens can ultimately aid religious educators practically in working with young adults.