

From Faith to Facts

Theology to Atheism an Unintended Outcome

Catherine Dunphy

When I was a practicing Catholic, I often stretched my imagination by visioning my church not as a global oppressor of women but as a segmented community, “a church with in a church”, that derived its mandate not from the pulpit in Rome but from the roots of liberation theology. I spent many years at the altar of feminist theologians, honoring their articulation of the liberated experience.

Yet despite the appeal of feminist theology I now identify as a secular humanist. So what happened? To put it shortly and succinctly; I could no longer reconcile myself to belief. Instead I embraced the sentiment that I was not losing faith, but gaining reason. Since that time, I have spent many an unfettered hour thinking about religion, its function as a building block of society and how and when it will be retired as product of a bygone era.

Which brings me to this article. Despite religion’s best efforts, things are changing, particularly in the West; with the influence of science a new world of possibilities, free from religion have come into focus. But there is also, in my opinion, another unknowing contributor – theology.

The study and development of theology has become one of the main architects of internal schisms in the Roman Church. Most people in this day and age don’t take notice of who the Vatican is excommunicating or whose book has been banned. In most instances, the person in question is a theologian. Recent examples of theological thinking that has gotten the Church in a tither include the splinter group “Roman Catholic Womanpriest”, an international union of women priests ordained in the apostolic tradition. Also, since the 1970’s the church has

spoken against liberation theologies that it feels focus too much on the emancipate communities of disenfranchised persons seeking justice in areas of political, social, economic and ecological oppression. One of the most vocal of these groups include feminists.

Rosemary Radford Ruether is one of the most influential feminist liberation theologians. Dr. Ruether has written numerous books on women and the church, including *Sexism and God Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology*. She currently teaches at Claremont School of Theology. She agreed to speak with me in preparation for this article.

The recognition of sexism as wrong, evil and sinful brings about the total collapse of the myths of female evil... more than that, women have to suspect that the entire symbolic universe that surrounds them, which has socialized them to their roles, is deeply tainted by hostility to their humanity.

Before I spoke with Dr. Ruether I knew that she would have a perspective that was contrary to official church teaching. In a very frank discussion she said that catholicism is not about the papacy, and “if you identify the hierarchy as the church, then you might as well forget about it (church).”

When I asked Dr. Ruether to provide more information about what she meant by “church” she explained that her experience of it, “has some relationship to Christ, specifically as an inspiration for justice, but that church is mostly a community committed to an ecumenical and interfaith dialogue about liberation and so-

cial justice”, of which feminism is part of that tradition.

When it comes to Ruether’s theology, the idea of church does seem “out of focus” with the general consensus of what it is to be a Christian and Catholic.

Many would be surprised that most reputable theological schools are places where a convergence of similar ideas occurs; everything from the feminist perspectives of Ruether and Daly to biblical scholarship that includes the detailed study of pseudepigraphic texts as well as metaphorical concepts of god as mother or as the manifestation of love in the universe.

Yet despite these differing views at the academic level, very little transcends to the pew.

Rome continues to dictate the rules and obligations for millions of Catholics as it is the recognized church on the world stage. I have given a lot of thought to this conundrum, therefore it should not be surprising that theological students like myself, would find themselves trapped by doctrine when working in parishes, schools and hospitals.

Concerning this topic, Daniel Dennett and Linda LaScola authored a recent study in *Evolutionary Psychology, Preachers Who Are Not Believers*, that clearly outlines what appears to be an emerging phenomenon.

The loneliness of non-believing pastors is extreme. They have no trusted confidantes to reassure them, to reflect their own musings back to them, to provide reality checks. As their profiles reveal, even their spouses are often unaware of their turmoil. They are caught in a trap, cunningly designed to harness both their best intentions and their basest fears to the task of immobilizing them in their predicament.

Inspired by this research, I spoke with a friend and former student of theology. She was aware that I had left the church but this was the first time that we had discussed it.

Though our meeting was conversational and at ease, I was struck by her relief at speaking with someone else about her evolving beliefs. Most notably she spoke in detail about the lack of solace or spiritual nourishment she found from her position as a school chaplain and her

continued attendance at church. In fact, she indicated that she most often found it to undermine her happiness, resulting in frustration. She did say these frustrations contributed to her decision to leave her job as a chaplain and to pursue other career options.

When I asked her about her beliefs now, she identified “god as the manifestation of love in the universe”, not a particularly canonical view, especially since she admitted to feeling like a heretic since she stopped believing in the virgin birth and the divinity of Jesus.

I left our meeting feeling like I was on the tip of an iceberg. It seems to me now that the process of completing a degree in theology is directly related to changes in belief and for at least a percentage of people, loss of faith.

So where do we go from here? Without a doubt, religion has played an important part in the human story. It once provided answers to questions about the world we live in and purported to reveal the meaning of life. As science ebbs ever closer to answering the crucial facts of existence, believers will continue to be challenged to let go of the ramblings of a bygone era.

References

1. www.RomanCatholicWomenPriests.org
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3. Ruether Radford, Rosemary, Telephone conversation March 10, 2011.
4. Daniel Dennett & Linda LaScola, “Preachers Who Are Not Believers”, *Evolutionary Psychology*, ISSN 1474-7049, Volume 8(1), 2010.
5. *Ibid.* Pg. 143.

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