


Methodologically, the book reminds us of the risks of overgeneralizing or underscrutinizing core concepts, like “atheist” or “religious None,” and underscores the importance of rethinking and revisiting questions that seem as if they are already relatively well understood.

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MASS EXODUS: CATHOLIC DISAFFILIATION IN BRITAIN AND AMERICA SINCE VATICAN II. By Stephen Bullivant. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. viii + 309 pp. \$32.95 cloth.

The stories are the same on both sides of the Atlantic: large numbers of those raised Catholic no longer identify as such in either Britain or the United States. Catholic retention has been dropping, with later generations of Catholics more likely to disaffiliate than those previous. Although these countries (and others beyond the study) were affected differently by the post-War boom, the social questions of the 1960s, the implementation of the Second Vatican Council, the reception of *Humanae Vitae* (colloquially known as “the birth control encyclical”), and other events, Stephen Bullivant examines the role of each of these in *Mass Exodus*. The final result is a much richer explanation for Catholic attrition than is regularly proffered, as many accounts tend to focus on one of these factors at the expense of others.

Mass Exodus begins with quantitative data, setting the demographic stage of Catholic disaffiliation in the United States and Britain, describing which groups are more or less likely to leave, based on ethnicity, gender, region of the country, and so forth. Next, the author turns to qualitative data reporting the reasons Catholics give for leaving, taking care to note that often disaffiliation is a gradual process even while a specific trigger may be named. His discussion on identity adds to the literature on exit, demonstrating that being a “former Catholic” can constitute a specific identity itself.

The book’s greatest contributions to understanding Catholic disaffiliation come from

the chapters that examine not only the Second Vatican Council itself, but also Catholic belief and practice in the decades that preceded the council as well as the more than 50 years that followed. In narrowing his focus to just the factors that he argues contributed most to Catholic disaffiliation, he is able to lend an analysis that spans decades while looking deeply at each of the social phenomena. In taking this careful longitudinal examination, Bullivant offers a more complicated argument not just of Catholic disaffiliation, but also the degree to which we can attribute causality to different factors in producing shifts in Catholic belief, identity, practice, and community life.

He does this very convincingly through the literature on plausibility structures, social network theory, and Credibility Enhancing Displays. In demonstrating the significance, for example, of the tightly connected, pre-War Catholic communities of the 1930s and 1940s and the distinctiveness of Catholic practices in this era, the reader sees the efficacy of these in reinforcing identity and moral coherence. And not only does he examine the multiple events and circumstances that scattered these communities and minimized or ended unique practices, but he also discusses the significance of current Catholic attitudes and behaviors for the religion’s ongoing reproduction. In the end, scholars of Catholicism and other Catholic voices who (1) “blame” the Second Vatican Council for the empty pews, (2) attribute disaffiliation to a thwarting of the fullness of the Council, or (3) believe disaffiliation was a result of causes completely outside Catholicism should be left realizing that their schema is too simplistic.

Perhaps my biggest want from Bullivant is a precise thesis statement in the opening chapter that revealed exactly what his main argument would be. He states clearly that the book is *about* disaffiliates themselves as well as the process of disaffiliation. However, he does not reveal the central argument of the book, save that it will be covered in later chapters, beginning with Chapter Four (to his credit, he does mention in the order of the book that his analysis will include plausibility structures, social network theory, and Credibility Enhancing Displays, but given

their centrality for his conclusions these must be lifted up alongside the thesis). Bullivant asks too much trust from the reader. Instead, I would have liked for him to outline his socially complex disaffiliation argument at the outset. Then, a reader can proceed with confidence, challenging or learning from the author's ideas, all the while firmly understanding the role each section or footnote plays in building toward the final conclusion. Soon into the fourth chapter, the purpose of that which came before was clear, but those earlier chapters would have been a more engaging read if I was not regularly left wondering about their larger significance and the author's argument.

The choice to disclose the central argument later in the book, however, should not be reason to pass up *Mass Exodus*. This book

would prove useful to multiple audiences. Most obviously, it would appeal to historians, sociologists, and pastoral theologians of Catholicism. It also provides contributions to theories of disaffiliation as well as that of community and social networks. Insofar, as religious disaffiliation is not unique to Catholicism, this book likewise provides insights for those who study exiting in other denominations or even in institutions more broadly. The book could likewise be very illuminating to Catholic leaders seeking to foster a greater sense of Catholic imagination in their parish or diocese.

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