

The Problem

The rate of religiously unaffiliated millennials is increasing rapidly. In 2014, the PEW Research Center Survey reported that millennials were abandoning religious affiliation (becoming agnostic or atheistic) at a much higher rate than previous generations. 35% of older millennials (born 1981-1989) are unbelievers as well as over 36% of younger millennials (born 1990-1996). Approximately 40% of those born after 1996 are likely to become unbelievers. This is more than triple the 11% rate of unbelief in the Silent Generation (born 1928-1945) and more than double the 17% rate of Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964) – see www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/12/millennials-increasingly-are-driving-growth-of-nones/.

Many young people who were raised in religious households are leaving not only their Church, but a life of faith after their 18th birthday. By extrapolation from the PEW 2016 survey data, we expect that about 41% of our Catholic young people will abandon belief in Jesus Christ and God between the ages of 16-35. This rate is likely to increase at about 1.2% per year.

Why are millennials abandoning belief in God at such increasingly high rates? Surprisingly, it is not because they are bored by homilies or liturgies, or affected by scandals or disagreements with the Church's moral teaching—though these reasons do impact a small percentage of those leaving the Catholic Church (but not necessarily religion or faith). It seems that the majority of our young people (including Catholics) are leaving because of an intellectual problem—particularly the problem of science and faith. In 2016, the PEW Research Center Survey reported the following:

About half of current religious “nones” [agnostics, atheists, and religiously unaffiliated] who were raised in a religion (49%) indicate that a lack of belief led them to move away from religion. This includes many respondents who mention “science” as the reason they do not believe in religious teachings including one who said “I’m a scientist now, and I don’t believe in miracles.” Others reference “common sense,” “logic” or a “lack of evidence” – or simply say they do not believe in God. See www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/08/24/why-americas-nones-left-religion-behind/.

Science, logic, and “lack of evidence” are the most prevalent reasons given for atheism and agnosticism (82% and 63%, respectively) among millennials who come from a religious background. There appear to be four major intellectual topics from which these doubts are derived:

1. A perceived contradiction between God and science.
2. A lack of evidence for God from science and logic.
3. An implicit belief in metaphysical materialism (“I am only a bunch of atoms and molecules – nothing more”).
4. A general disbelief in the historicity and divinity of Jesus.

In addition to the science, logic, and verification problems mentioned above, there is one less prevalent (but influential) problem of the heart—human suffering. This is expressed in one central question, “Why would an all-loving God allow suffering?”

Readers may be asking, “Why is this extensive problem of rapidly increasing unbelief not daunting, but only very challenging?” It seems that Providence has left us with an abundance of contemporary scientific evidence to mitigate the doubts of young people. When this evidence is presented in a clear and objective way, the vast majority of students who had previously considered abandoning their faith in God, change their minds. This is explained below.

Furthermore, when the above fundamental problems are cleared up, several subordinate problems connected with a Church community, or specifically with the Catholic Church, diminish in intensity. Some of these problems are:

- Hierarchically organized religion seems to cause more problems than it resolves.
- The moral teachings of the Church seem discriminatory and needlessly moralistic.
- The real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist seems to be a myth from a bygone age.
- Personal problems with Church or parish leaders.

If faith in God, and particularly faith in Jesus Christ, are increased significantly, then even those individuals formerly inclined toward unbelief are likely to give greater “benefit of the doubt” to Jesus’ and the Church’s teachings. Moreover, if they can find liturgies and communities that speak to and feed them, they will begin to increase their participation in the Church.

The lesson is clear—in order to help a majority of our Catholic millennials remain believers and active participants in Church, we will have to first respond to their fundamental problems of belief in God, the soul, Jesus, and miracles with credible contemporary scientific evidence. This will infuse rationality and credibility into millennials’ belief in Church authority and moral teaching. If we failed to do this, we build a beautiful statue of bronze and steel atop clay feet. It takes only one peer, teacher, YouTube video, or television program (from a new atheist) in high school or college to undermine years of Catholic formation and education. If we respond to the above fundamental problems in middle and high school with successive layers of evidence, we can reverse the majority of students’ decisions to move toward secularism, materialism, agnosticism, and atheism.

