

# Why is the “Faith and the Big Questions” Program Needed?

By: Steven R. Hemler

“Faith and the Big Questions” is a Christian apologetics series for Catholic youth and adults. This series is especially intended to help prepare high school and college age students for challenges to their faith that they are facing or will likely face in the future, and thereby help reduce the large number of young people who are leaving the Catholic Church. As noted in the attached excerpts from the Pew Research Center’s *U.S. Religious Landscape Study*, ***almost half of those who were raised Catholic no longer identify themselves as Catholic***. Both external (from outside themselves) and internal (from within themselves) challenges to faith lead many Catholics to stop practicing the faith of their childhood. This “Big Questions” series is intended to help reverse this trend by addressing key external and internal challenges to faith.

The first type of external challenge to young peoples’ faith may come from their friends, their lifestyle, and their desire to have fun and experience excitement by partaking of the world’s attractions and pleasures. This desire may lead them into morally questionable activities. So, the desire of many young people to experience the “forbidden fruit” of the pleasures of this world may cause them to consider abandoning the “restrictions” of their faith.

Second, our increasingly secular culture often does not support or allow much room for religious beliefs or convictions. It is difficult to maintain one’s faith when faced with so much that is contradictory to that faith from the media, including movies, television, music and the Internet. Distinguishing truth from falsehood in our popular culture is increasingly difficult, since trendsetters speak and act as if God and objective truth do not exist. The following article elaborates more on this major challenge to the faith of today’s young people.

A third major external challenge to one’s faith is intellectual. The prevailing worldview within the scientific and academic community is that the material world of nature, that which can be observed, measured and quantified, encompasses the whole of reality. This philosophical worldview, that nature is “all there is,” is called materialism or naturalism. Naturalism is the basis of nearly all science that is taught in schools and universities. Science classes almost always teach that the extraordinary complexity and variety of life on this planet evolved without any divine plan or guidance over very long periods of time. Naturalism, unfortunately, leaves no room for so-called “religious superstition” or unsubstantiated “faith.” Many people have lost their faith when they become convinced that science has all the answers and everything can be explained by only natural causes.

In addition to these and other external challenges, young people also face internal challenges to their faith as they grow older. These internal challenges are best understood by looking at what has been called the “stages of faith.”

In his book, *Will Our Children Have Faith*, the Rev. John Westerhoff describes four stages of Christian faith development. Westerhoff labels these four stages of faith development:

- (1) Experienced Faith
- (2) Affiliative Faith
- (3) Searching Faith
- (4) Owned Faith.

The first stage of faith development is called “Experienced Faith.” Experienced faith grows by participating in (experiencing) the customs and rituals of our faith tradition (the “bells and smells”). It is first experienced by young children and is the lifelong foundation of our faith.

The second stage of faith development is called “Affiliative Faith.” Affiliative faith develops by belonging to (being affiliated with) a close Christian community where we are individually known, valued and accepted. Provided the needs of experienced faith are met during childhood, young people may expand into affiliative faith during adolescence. A dynamic youth ministry program, with its social, spiritual, and service activities, provides excellent opportunities for teenagers to deepen their relationships with Christian peers. However, according to Westerhoff, research shows that most adults have had their faith “arrested” in the affiliative faith stage.

The third stage of faith development, “Searching Faith,” brings internal challenges to our faith. Searching faith is the faith of questioning and internalizing what we have long been taught. Searching faith usually begins during late adolescence and often continues in earnest during young adulthood. Many college students frequently have “debates” on the existence of God, evolution, Jesus’ resurrection, etc., with their professors and fellow students. This “Searching Faith” stage can be troubling if not properly understood. And, of course, it is risky. However, only by questioning and testing what they have long been taught can young people truly come to accept and internalize these teachings.

The final stage of faith development is called “Owned Faith.” Owned faith rarely occurs before young adulthood. Because of the serious struggle with doubt that precedes it, owned faith may appear as a great illumination or enlightenment. It’s now one’s own faith, and no longer merely the faith of one’s parents, family, etc. People who “own” their faith decide to be involved in religious activities because they personally want to, and not just because their family or friends expect them to.

Even though doubts and questions remain, those who “own” their faith seek to witness it by personal and social action, and are willing and able to stand up for what they believe in as mature disciples of Jesus Christ. According to Westerhoff, owned faith is God’s intention for everyone. However, the only way to owned faith is to work through the doubts and questions of the searching faith stage.

This “Faith and the Big Questions” series is intended to help young people face the external challenges to their faith, as well as work through some of their “searching faith” internal doubts and questions. This is primarily done by examining common intellectual challenges to Christian belief, which young people are likely to face or are already facing in their lives. The intellectual challenges to faith addressed by this series include many of the “big questions” of life such as how do we know if God exists, is creation or evolution true, is Jesus really the Son of God and did he actually rise from the dead, as well as how are we saved, why go to Church, and why would a loving God allow evil, pain and suffering?

In short, the “Faith and the Big Questions” series is intended to strengthen the faith of young people and adults, as well as to help them be able to better explain and defend their faith when challenged.

## Excerpts from the Pew Research Center's 2014 U.S. Religious Landscape Study

This major new survey of more than 35,000 Americans by the Pew Research Center finds that the percentage of adults (ages 18 and older) who describe themselves as Christians has dropped by nearly eight percentage points in just seven years, from 78.4% in an equally massive Pew Research survey in 2007 to 70.6% in 2014. Over the same period, the percentage of Americans who are religiously unaffiliated—describing themselves as atheist, agnostic or “nothing in particular”—has jumped more than six points, from 16.1% to 22.8%.

Meanwhile, the number of religiously unaffiliated adults has increased by roughly 19 million since 2007. There are now approximately 56 million religiously unaffiliated adults in the U.S., and this group—sometimes called religious “nones”—is more numerous than either Catholics or mainline Protestants, according to the new survey.

One of the most important factors in the declining share of Christians and the growth of the “nones” is generational replacement. As the Millennial generation enters adulthood, its members display much lower levels of religious affiliation, including less connection with Christian churches, than older generations. ***Fully 36% of young Millennials (those between the ages of 18 and 24) are religiously unaffiliated, as are 34% of older Millennials (ages 25-33).***

By a wide margin, religious “nones” have experienced larger gains through religious switching than any other group. Nearly one-in-five U.S. adults (18%) were raised in a religious faith and now identify with no religion. And for every person who has joined a religion after having been raised unaffiliated, there are more than four people who have become religious “nones” after having been raised in some religion. This 1:4 ratio is an important factor in the growth of the unaffiliated population.

***Nearly one-third of American adults (31.7%) say they were raised Catholic. Among that group, fully 41% no longer identify with Catholicism.*** This means that 12.9% of American adults are former Catholics, while just 2% of U.S. adults have converted to Catholicism from another religious tradition. No other religious group in the survey has such a lopsided ratio of losses to gains.

The percentage of college graduates who identify with Christianity has declined by 9 percentage points since 2007 (from 73% to 64%). Religious “nones” now constitute 24% of all college graduates (up from 17%) and 22% of those with less than a college degree (up from 16%).

More than a quarter of men (27%) now describe themselves as religiously unaffiliated, up from 20% in 2007. Fewer women are religious “nones,” but the religiously unaffiliated are growing among women at about the same rate as among men. Nearly one-in-five women (19%) now describe themselves as religiously unaffiliated, up from 13% in 2007.

In 2007, 25% of the “nones” called themselves atheists or agnostics. The new survey finds that the atheist and agnostic share of the “nones” has grown to 31%.

For more information on this survey, see <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>

Excerpt from ... **“Acclimated to Atheism”**

*BreakPoint WorldView Magazine*, September 2007

By Gina R. Dalfonzo

Anyone studying the state of religion in America over the last several years might easily conclude that the best word to describe it is schizophrenic. How do you explain a society in which 90 percent of adults say they believe in God, and 82 percent call themselves Christians, while at the same time books advocating atheism keep rocketing to the top of the bestseller lists?

It is tempting to write off the phenomenon by pointing out that for many who call themselves believers, their belief is little more than nominal. And yet it is not an entirely convincing case. To go from a vaguely comforting belief in a benevolent Deity who gives without requiring anything—Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, as sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton have christened it—to outright atheism, is still quite a leap. In fact, one might argue that such an undemanding belief might make people more inclined to hold on to faith.

So why the suddenly heightened interest in atheism? The reasons seem to be too varied and complex to pinpoint easily. But we may be able to learn something about its development if we take a closer look, not just at the militantly anti-theist authors that have been drawing so much attention, but also at other cultural voices that have been pleading the atheists' case for many years now—more quietly, perhaps, but no less persistently than the likes of Richard Dawkins [author of *The God Delusion*] and Christopher Hitchens [author of *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*].

So whether half-hidden or out in the open, in the end we see again in popular culture the same thing we saw in the political philosophers, the news media, and academia: a sense of boiling rage and frustration at being surrounded by religious belief. Small wonder that these widespread feelings, simmering for so long, would eventually explode in a series of vitriolic screeds against religion by Dawkins, Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, and Sam Harris. But now, perhaps, we can begin to understand why these books are attracting a larger-than-expected audience—and why Moralistic Therapeutic Deism may have something to do with that after all.

*A nominal, feel-good faith may survive a long time in a culture where the primary institutions are oriented toward religion. In a culture where the majority of those institutions have become steeped in secularism, it will erode faster.*

And when that secularism changes to “angry atheism,” it soon clears the ground for outright evangelizing for atheism, and finds a willing audience prepared to meet it. Not all the readers of these books are going to become atheists, naturally, but *many of them are going to buy into the militant worldview being peddled, in which secularism is the only view worth taking seriously, and religion a bunch of silly, outmoded superstitions.*

*Despite the comforts their faith might offer, it might not be so surprising that those who have been acclimated to atheism, without a solid grounding in the basic tenets of faith and the fundamentals of a Christian worldview, are easy prey for Richard Dawkins's definition of God as a “delusion” in which no thinking person would believe. Maybe, if you look below the surface, our nation's beliefs aren't quite so schizophrenic after all.*