

Theological Fragments

*Confessing What We Know and
Cannot Know about an Infinite God*

Rubén Rosario Rodríguez

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*And questions are, I suspect,
all we will take with us on our final journeys
through Time and into Night.*

—Neil Gaiman, *The Sandman: Overture*

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In a very real sense this book began when I was an undergraduate student in the philosophy department at the College of William and Mary, where I pushed gently against the ideas and opinions of such wonderful role models as Earl McLane, who sparked my love for the writings of Søren Kierkegaard, and the late Lawrence Becker (1939–2018), who encouraged me to study at Union Theological Seminary in New York. The book continued to develop under the mentoring of the late James M. Washington (1948–1997) at Union Theological Seminary, who nurtured my love of Kierkegaard and also shared my love of Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* comic books, then attained some degree of theological maturity at Princeton Theological Seminary under the tutelage of Daniel L. Migliore, Mark L. Taylor, and Luis N. Rivera-Pagán, who not only served as my dissertation committee, but each in their own way modeled the socially engaged and intellectually rigorous pastoral theology I seek to embody in this work. Along the way I also benefitted from public lectures by such luminaries as John D. Caputo, Richard Rorty, David Tracy, Jacques Derrida, Cornel West, Elaine Pagels, Peter Brown, Jon Sobrino, Martha Nussbaum, Jürgen Moltmann, John Polkinghorne, Catherine Keller, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Serene Jones, David Bentley Hart, Elizabeth Johnson, Willie James Jennings, Rowan Williams, and Kathryn Tanner, to name a few. As I always remind my students, one of the great benefits of higher education is the opportunity to meet and engage the greatest minds alive; so, I always encourage them to avail themselves of as many such opportunities as come their way.

As a theologian who is also an ordained minister of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), I have remained active in the life of the church, having been a member-at-large of the Presbytery of Giddings-Lovejoy

in St. Louis since 2004. During that time, I have been a pulpit supply preacher and regularly led adult education classes throughout the greater St. Louis and southwestern Illinois region. I have also served on the Presbytery's Camp and Conference Center Committee, the Presbytery's Dismantling Racism Committee, and the Committee on Nominations, and I currently serve as moderator for the Commission on Preparation for Ministry.

Every book I have ever written has at some point in its gestation been tried and tested in a parish setting. This book is no exception. I want to thank the adult education classes at Trinity Presbyterian Church, Webster Groves Presbyterian Church, First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood, and Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church, for continuing to invite me back, and for struggling with me through some difficult subject matter that we might together hear what the Word of God has to say to us today. Academic theology and the church are fellow pilgrims on the journey, and I am a firm believer that each setting is improved by maintaining dialogue and cooperation, despite what some other academic theologians contend.

This project was completed while juggling a full-time teaching load, serving as Coordinator of the Masters Programs, and agreeing to chair a search committee in the Department of Theological Studies at Saint Louis University—all complicated by the strange new world created by the global COVID pandemic. The book reaches completion in part due to the generosity of my department chair, Dr. Daniel Smith, and my dean, Dr. Donna LaVoie, who in 2022 appointed me to the Clarence Louis and Helen Steber Professorship in Theological Studies. I would also like to thank the doctoral students in my Political Theology seminar, taught in Spring 2019 and again in Spring 2022, for accompanying me through many of the texts and issues that eventually made their way into this monograph. I particularly want to thank my research assistant, Michael Thiele, for his help in compiling the bibliography, copyediting proofs, and indexing the book, and my doctoral student, Josh Sturgeon, whose own dissertation project, a post-Evangelical process theology, has been a welcome conversant on many intersecting concerns.

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Bob is a very compassionate and forgiving editor who was willing to extend multiple deadlines when life reared its ugly head and impeded the timely completion of this project. I might be fooling myself, but I like to believe that we long ago transcended the professional author-editor relationship and have entered the far more rewarding—if exponentially more complicated—realm of friendship. Thank you, my friend.

Finally, some mention of the “welcome intrusions of everyday life” alluded to in the first paragraph is due. My wife and I have been blessed with two wonderful children, Isa and Rafe, who during the writing of this book have transitioned from adolescence to adulthood and from childhood to adolescence respectively. Not a day goes by that I do not marvel at the wonderful persons they have become and give thanks for the miracle they embody. Of course, none of this could have been possible without my wife, Betsy, often at great sacrifice to her own research and scholarship. I pray that in the end, when we tally all the good and all the bad, you can say that your life was better for having me in it, because I know for a fact this is the case for me. Thank you. For everything.

Introduction

This is a book for anyone wrestling with the Christian faith—the believer in the pews, the pastor in the pulpit, the theologian in the academy—who *still* identifies with the Christian tradition *despite* its much-publicized demise in the cultural mainstream. I have been and remain all three: believer, pastor, and theologian. While I make no claim to any special insight, I am at a point in my career as a professional theologian—and more importantly, on my journey as a Christian believer—where I can look back and assess with some degree of clarity why so many are leaving the church and no longer identify as Christian. I hope that, by articulating why I continue to follow Christ regardless of the many failings of the institutional church, I can help others sort out their own relationship with Jesus of Nazareth.

I have always considered myself a “church” theologian, mindful of the lessons learned from my first professor of theology, James H. Cone at Union Theological Seminary in New York. On the first day of class Professor Cone reminded his students that as theologians and pastors we are neither set apart nor elevated above the community of faith, but merely fellow pilgrims on the journey of faith. Thus, in our vocation as theologians, we ought always to remain *accountable* to the community of faith: “Doing Christian theology is a task that arises when one’s commitment to Jesus Christ grows in the context of a community of faith that is in search of an understanding of God’s meaning for their lives in the world today.”¹ Many an “academic” theologian has forgotten this. To clarify, Cone does not stress the accountability of the

1. James H. Cone, “The Vocation of a Theologian,” *Union News* (Winter 1991), 3–4.

theologian to the community in order to undermine academic freedom, or to bind the theologian to church dogma, but in recognition that the prophetic dimension of the theologian's task seeks *to build up the body of Christ* (Eph. 4:12). Granted, pastors and theologians are often called to speak a prophetic word: "There is no way to speak and to do the truth in an oppressive society without offending the people who are responsible for that oppression."² Yet Cone cautions that this urgency to preach "prophetically" ought *not* arise from some "desire for notoriety or for status," but from a deep sense of calling to help the community of believers make sense of Christ's good news for their day and age.³ Nevertheless, *as* a church theologian and a minister of the Word and Sacrament active in the mission of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), I have come to the conclusion that the church's own actions contribute to its demographic demise, which is why so many—including many Christians—no longer consider the church an institution worth defending.

Elizabeth Drescher's analysis of recent survey data concludes that nearly three-quarters of those who now identify as religiously unaffiliated "were raised in families with some religious affiliation, generally in a Christian denomination."⁴ She also jokes, "Nones are the overachievers of the US religious landscape"⁵—her point being that if the nation's "religious Nones" were gathered together as a single demographic bloc, they would constitute one of the largest segments of the population, "larger than any Protestant denomination and *all* Mainline Protestant denominations combined."⁶ Still, amidst the church's panic over the rise of the religious Nones⁷ and the continuing secularization of Western culture,⁸ Drescher cautions academics and church leaders not to lose sight of the fact that the Nones are *not* a homogenous group. Consequently, the search for some "quick fix" that will reverse demographic trends is likely to fail, given there is no cohesive entity called the Nones. Rather, scholars of religion have lumped together an uncategorizable plurality under a single rubric for the sake of convenience. Therefore, instead of focusing on what the church can do to bring Millennials and Gen Z back

2. Cone, "Vocation," 3.

3. Cone, "Vocation," 3.

4. Elizabeth Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America's Nones* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 6.

5. Drescher, *Choosing*, 16.

6. Drescher, *Choosing*, 6.

7. Pew Research Center, "'Nones' on the Rise," October 9, 2012, <https://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>.

8. See Callum G. Brown, *Becoming Atheist: Humanism and the Secular West* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), and Phil Zuckerman, Luke W. Galen, and Frank L. Pasquale, *The Nonreligious: Understanding Secular People and Societies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

into the fold, the church ought to listen to what these Nones are saying, in order to take spiritual inventory and get its own house in order.

Digging deeper into the makeup of this diverse and expanding group, it becomes evident that much of the disaffection among the key 18–29 demographic has to do with their rejection of a traditional church culture that reinforces certain cultural stereotypes, especially in matters of race, gender, and sexuality: “Surveys report that they [Nones] often turn up on the moderate or liberal side of social and political issues. And—being contemporary people with progressive values—surely they would insist on moving away from the stereotype of a male God, and one who is demanding, authoritarian, or punitive. . . . Many interviewees did not like the idea or term ‘God’ because they connected it with negative masculine stereotypes, such as the demanding, difficult-to-satisfy father, or the capricious king who could just as well smite you as help you.”⁹ For one Millennial who came out as lesbian in her mid-thirties, the struggle to leave the Catholic Church was complicated by what she saw as internal efforts within Catholicism to challenge the patriarchy:

There are Catholic feminists. There are lots of women who are trying to change the church “from within.” You know, they’ll say, “we can’t let them”—the male hierarchy—“push us out of our own church.” I was like that for a long time. I didn’t want to go. I wanted to help make a change.¹⁰

Ultimately, she left the Catholic Church but continued participating in Catholic spiritual practices. As they did for many members of the Millennial and Gen Z generations, the sex abuse scandals¹¹ and the role of the church

9. Linda A. Mercadante, *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but Not Religious* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 95.

10. Drescher, *Choosing*, 74.

11. While the sheer size of the Roman Catholic Church as a global religion has landed the spotlight upon Catholicism, it is important to note that similar sex scandals have plagued every Christian denomination, as well as nondenominational megachurches. For an analysis of the scandal within the Catholic Church, see Michael D’Antonio, *Mortal Sins: Sex, Crime, and the Era of Catholic Scandal* (New York: Macmillan, 2013); The Investigative Staff of the Boston Globe, *Betrayal: The Crisis in the Catholic Church* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2008). For an analysis of sex-abuse scandals across all denominations, see Patrick Parkinson, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Churches: Understanding the Issues* (Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge, 2003). For an exploration of these issues within Evangelicalism, see Emily Joy Allison, *#ChurchToo: How Purity Culture Upholds Abuse and How to Find Healing* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf, 2021). Also see this 2019 Pew Research Center study of US attitudes about the sex abuse scandal, which acknowledges numerous reports of sexual abuse in other religious organizations, including decades of abuse within the Southern Baptist Convention. Claire Gecewicz, “Key Takeaways about How Americans View the Sexual Abuse Scandal in the Catholic Church,” Pew Research Center, June 11, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/11/key-takeaways-about-how-americans-view-the-sexual-abuse-scandal-in-the-catholic-church/>.

hierarchy in covering up abuse by priests¹² proved the straw that broke the camel's back: "You know, I stood by the church even through all the sex abuse scandals. At the time, I tried to focus on all the good that was done for the poor by people in Catholic churches—by women religious especially. I didn't excuse the abuse, but I didn't want to throw away all the good, too."¹³

This same pattern is repeated across Christian denominations as the culture, in the wake of the #MeToo movement, no longer tolerates sexual abuse and rape, as demonstrated by the third-party investigation of sexual abuse within the Southern Baptist Convention that documented a systemic cover-up of predatory sexual abuse by clergy and denominational leaders, including the intimidation and slander of accusers and evidence that "staff members were reportedly told not to even engage those asking about how to stop their child from being sexually violated by a minister."¹⁴

David Clohessy, former executive director of SNAP (Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests), contends that the sex abuse scandals, especially the cover-up by the church hierarchy—while not the only reason—contributes to the exodus of believers from the church: "Generations of Catholics have been raised to respect and revere priests and bishops and trust them implicitly. Even without the scandal, younger people are more skeptical and rightfully so. Most survivors are no longer churchgoers. Very few of their children are."¹⁵ In the words of one young adult interviewed by the same journalist, the church's (lack of) response to the sex abuse scandals "'made me vote with my feet' and leave the church for good."¹⁶

In a 2020 study, the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) noted a leveling off in membership among mainline Protestant and Catholic churches

12. As the scandal continues to be investigated, now with greater cooperation from the Catholic hierarchy, the breadth of the conspiracy to cover up abuse by priests is staggering, with new evidence implicating Pope Benedict XIV in the cover-up during his time as archbishop of Munich and Freising. Bill Chappell, "Pope Benedict XVI Failed to Stop Sex Abuse When He Was an Archbishop, Law Firm Says," *National Public Radio* (January 20, 2022). <https://www.npr.org/2022/01/20/1074355457/pope-benedict-xvi-sex-abuse-report>.

13. Drescher, *Choosing*, 74–75.

14. Russell Moore, "This is the Southern Baptist Apocalypse," *Christianity Today* (May 22, 2022). <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/may-web-only/southern-baptist-abuse-apocalypse-russell-moore.html>. The full report is available here: Guidepost Solutions LLC, "Report of the Independent Investigation: The Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee's Response to Sexual Abuse Allegations and an Audit of the Procedures and Actions of the Credentials Committee," May 15, 2022. <https://www.sataskforce.net/updates/guidepost-solutions-report-of-the-independent-investigation>.

15. Kaya Oakes, "How to Make Nones and Lose Money: Study Shows Cost of Catholic Sex Abuse Scandals," *Religion Dispatches* (September 21, 2015). <https://religiondispatches.org/how-to-make-nones-and-lose-money-study-shows-cost-of-catholic-sex-abuse-scandals/>.

16. Oakes, "How to Make Nones and Lose Money."

after decades of decline while documenting the more recent drop among Evangelical churches, especially white Evangelical churches.¹⁷ Despite tangible panic within Christian denominations, from mainline Protestant to Catholic to Evangelical, the survey data shows an overwhelming majority of Americans still believe in God or some higher power, despite the rise of the religiously unaffiliated.¹⁸ PRRI data also confirms Linda Mercadante’s analysis that Nones fit the pattern of those who in previous generations have described themselves as “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR); that is, those who have not fully abandoned religious belief but just left organized religion. In other words, rather than marking the rapid secularization of US society and culture, the growth of religious Nones among the younger generations polled is marked by “an amazing proliferation of spiritual alternatives which both promote and cultivate the significant proportion of the ‘nones’ who are looking to develop their own spirituality apart from traditional structures.”¹⁹

According to the Pew Research Center, “one-third of Americans say they do not believe in the God of the Bible, but that they do believe there is some other higher power or spiritual force in the universe. A slim majority of Americans (56%) say they believe in God ‘as described in the Bible.’ And one-in-ten do not believe in any higher power or spiritual force.”²⁰ Yet a closer look at the data from the 4,700 adults polled by Pew in 2018 reveals that for all the vexation with “traditional” biblical language, popular beliefs about God in the US continue to reflect a fairly orthodox consensus: “Overall, about half of Americans (48%) say that God or another higher power directly determines what happens in their lives all or most of the time,” and “Nearly eight-in-ten U.S. adults think God or a higher power has protected them.”²¹ Most telling, a predominance (72 percent) of the religiously unaffiliated—a group that brings together those who identify as atheist, agnostic, or “nothing at all”—still “believe in a higher power of some kind, even if not in God as described in the Bible.”²²

17. See Robert P. Jones, Natalie Jackson, Diana Orcés, and Ian Huff, “The 2020 Census of American Religion,” Public Religion Research Institute (July 8, 2021). <https://www.prii.org/research/2020-census-of-american-religion/>.

18. Pew Research Center, “When Americans Say They Believe in God, What Do They Mean?,” April 25, 2018, <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/04/25/when-americans-say-they-believe-in-god-what-do-they-mean/>.

19. Mercadante, *Belief without Borders*, 4.

20. Pew Research Center, “When Americans Say They Believe in God, What Do They Mean?”

21. Pew Research Center, “When Americans Say They Believe in God, What Do They Mean?”

22. Pew Research Center, “When Americans Say They Believe in God, What Do They Mean?”

Consequently, the 2020 Census of American Religion conducted by PRRI substantiates the claim that the demographic “collapse” of institutional religion is stabilizing, for even the most rapid decline—among white Evangelical Christians—has slowed down, while the number of religiously unaffiliated has declined slightly since 2018 (with the numbers among Christians of color and non-Christian religious groups remaining stable).²³ In light of the argument that Western culture is becoming increasingly fragmented, and that a return to an earlier model of cultural Christendom is extremely unlikely (and, I would argue, undesirable), one of the most important points to be gleaned from the PRRI study is that Americans ages 18–29 are not only the most likely to answer “nothing at all” when asked what religion they profess; they also constitute *the most religiously diverse age group* in the United States. As one male Millennial describes his journey,

I guess I still have a lot of religion in me, you could say. It just comes out differently now. I feel comfortable in a church for the most part, or in a Buddhist temple, or whatever even if I don’t exactly believe what they believe. I think it is good when people pray together and sing. All religions have something good in them, even the most small-minded of them. I like that. I like to be open to all of it.²⁴

Accordingly, while secularism and atheism account for a small but constant percentage of the global population (especially in Europe and North America), the growth of the religiously unaffiliated in the United States is also attributable to an expanding diversity of religious perspectives and a more religiously pluralistic future, rather than increased secularization alone.²⁵ In fact, the religiously unaffiliated are projected to decline as a share of the global population (from 16.4 percent in 2010 to 13.2 percent in 2050), while Islam and Christianity will see continued growth. Islam is currently the world’s fastest growing religion, while global Christianity continues to grow at a slower pace, so that by 2050 Christianity and Islam combined will account for 64 percent of the world’s population.²⁶ Perhaps most surprising is that by 2050 the atheist state of China could become the world’s largest Muslim and Christian nation, given that today the government of China estimates there are over 78 million

23. Jones, Jackson, Orcés, and Huff, “The 2020 Census of American Religion,” 7–10.

24. Drescher, *Choosing*, 25.

25. See John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *God Is Back: How the Global Rise of Faith Is Changing the World* (New York: Penguin, 2009).

26. Pew Research Center, “The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010–2050,” April 2, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/>.

Christians and about 20 million Muslims in China, which according to the Pew Center on Religion and Public Life are very conservative estimates.²⁷

Regardless, given that a majority of the religiously unaffiliated in the US were raised within a Christian confessional setting, even if expressing deep dissatisfaction with how the institutional church articulates and embodies its beliefs, conceptions of God among the Nones remain intelligible within the framework of the Western Christian intellectual tradition. Therefore, the church ought to view the rise of the Nones as an opportunity to understand and learn from the challenges and insights embodied in the 18–29 demographic. Christianity is still the largest religion in the US (by far), but the demographic decline signals the breakup of Christian hegemony in the West (Europe and North America),²⁸ aided by the decentering of power and authority within world Christianity as the churches of the Global South continue to grow and assert their influence on the vestiges of a Eurocentric Christendom.²⁹ The challenge for the church is not combating the rise and spread of atheism; the challenge for white, Eurocentric Christianity entails accepting and adapting to its greatly reduced place within Global Christianity, as well as the increased competition from non-Christian religions and nontraditional spiritualities.

One challenge I have encountered teaching theology to this youngest generation of students at a private religious university is the fact that more and more students come to my Theological Foundations course—required of all undergraduate students—with little to no knowledge of Christianity, the Bible, or even religion in general. Recognizing that anecdotal evidence has limited value, due to the fact that it is rarely gathered in a manner that is both empirical and verifiable according to the scientific method, twenty years of classroom teaching experience nonetheless provide a unique vantage point from which to observe the rise of the religious Nones. In 2004, when I first started teaching at Saint Louis University (SLU), a Jesuit Catholic university in the midwestern United States, most students in my Theological Foundations

27. Pew Research Center, “The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010–2050”; also see Pew Research Center, “The Global Religious Landscape,” December 18, 2012, <https://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/>.

28. See Francis Rothery, *Missional: Impossible! The Death of Institutional Christianity and the Rebirth of G-d* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014); Hugh McLeod and Werner Ustorf, *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Nancy Christie, Stephen J. Heathorn, and Michael Gauvreau, eds., *The Sixties and Beyond: Dechristianization in North America and Western Europe, 1945–2000* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

29. See Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Dyron B. Daugherty, *Rising: The Amazing Story of Christianity’s Resurrection in the Global South* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018); Elijah Jong Fil Kim, *The Rise of the Global South: The Decline of Western Christendom and the Rise of Majority World Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012).

course were Roman Catholic, with previous religious education, whether catechetical instruction in their home parish or theology classes at a Catholic high school. In the years since, I have observed some gradual changes. First, the number of Roman Catholic students with a Catholic high school education began to decrease over time; gradually Protestant students—primarily some form of Evangelical Christian—closed the gap with Catholic students (though 50 percent of SLU undergraduate students still identify as Catholic).

Then, in the last three to five years, non-Christian students at Saint Louis University have become a more visible presence. Some of this can be attributed to shifting demographics, resulting from increased international student recruitment from regions like the Middle East, South Asia, and East Asia, but given that the majority of undergraduate students at Saint Louis University come from US midwestern states, the shift in religious affiliation from Christian to None at SLU follows national patterns for Gen Z students.³⁰ In other words, given that an overwhelming number of SLU undergraduates, even those who claim “no religious affiliation,” at one time identified as Christian, understanding the dissatisfaction with and exodus from Christianity by young people age 18–29 remains a pressing concern for Christian institutions.

Undoubtedly, one of the factors contributing to the rise of religious Nones is simply that while their parents might have been raised Christian, many in *this* generation of students have had little exposure to Christianity, as evidenced from this comment by a first-year student in Theological Foundations: “This year was the first time I have read a bible verse. Growing up, my family never taught me to believe one thing or another, and let me think for myself as I progressed through my public education.” For other students, especially those majoring in the natural sciences, there is real resentment about the narrow worldview imposed by their religious upbringing:

I felt like a chump. There I was thinking I was so smart. You know, all the parents always brag about how much better homeschooled kids do on standardized tests. I did so well on the SATs. I actually had a full academic scholarship. I was that smart. And I also thought the universe was six thousand years old. I actually believed that. . . . Who the fuck sends their kids out into the world thinking that? What was wrong with my parents that they believed these domineering, self-deluded church leaders who told them to teach us this stuff?³¹

30. According to the Office of Institutional Research (OIR), only 5 percent of SLU undergraduates in the 2021 incoming class come from outside the United States. See “Saint Louis University: 2021 Profile.” <https://www.slu.edu/about/key-facts/slu-profile.pdf>.

31. Drescher, *Choosing*, 70.

For many Gen Z students, changes in attitudes concerning institutional religion are grounded in some ideological disagreement or personal disappointment with the church. There is some consensus that “the majority of Nones who retain a belief in a supernatural being or power that acts within human life” conceptualize their faith within an unaffiliated spirituality that “sets any supernatural engagement primarily in the concrete reality of the here-and-now” rather than some “promised eternal hereafter.”³² Because the majority of Nones come from some type of religious background, they inevitably employ religious language when speaking about their views—especially moral beliefs. Yet, what distinguishes this generation is that they retain some degree of faith or spirituality without prioritizing any one confessional tradition, while also tolerating moral and religious pluralism. Meaningful engagement with these students can lead to a rediscovery of faith, even if said faith is located *extra muros ecclesiae* (“outside the walls of the church”), as evidenced by another student’s comments:

I went into this course thinking it was going to be just another Bible study similar to what I have been doing my whole life. I was very pleased to learn that our goal was to actually try and find some answers, analyze, and critique our faith. . . . I not only connected with my past self and began to be intrigued by my religion again, but I learned a lot of useful information about our society as a whole.

Perhaps the widespread panic ignited by the rise of the Nones has been overstated, and the church’s response ought to be tempered with caution, since the data shows both a stabilizing decline and a more focused identification of the causes behind the decline.

I have always pursued my vocation as a theologian guided by David Tracy’s axiom that the theologian addresses three publics simultaneously: the church, the academy, and the public square.³³ Admittedly, I am at a point in my life where I am having doubts as to the effectiveness of the *ecclesia* in the public discourse. Don’t get me wrong—I am fully committed to a vision of Christian “life together” amidst the public square, working with non-Christians to build the common good. But time and experience have taught me to readjust my expectations concerning the efficacy of Christian witness in the contemporary world. Despite identifying as a “political” theologian, I don’t believe in five-year plans. Suspicious of authoritarian projects, be they theological or political, I long ago gave up any desire at controlling the powers and

32. Drescher, *Choosing*, 248.

33. See David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 1–28, 99–135.

principalities (Eph. 6:12) and have redirected my efforts at goading—even shaming—the powers that be into more compassionate behavior. In other words, I am not trying to remake the public square in my image, but simply entering and engaging the public square as a Christian, while focused on the common good. Unfortunately, many Christians in the US seek to blur the lines between church and state and are actively working for the return of Christendom by means of a politically imposed Christian hegemony.³⁴ Still, the rapid and continuing demographic decline of Christianity over the last decade suggests a near future in which self-identified, practicing Christians no longer constitute a demographic majority of the United States.³⁵ Which is not to say that secularism has triumphed, but only that Christianity—especially white Christianity—will no longer be the presumed dominant culture.

Contemporary Christianity in the US is undergoing a process of deconstruction. Rooted in the atheist and secular attacks on revealed religion by the great masters of suspicion—figures like Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud—the concept of deconstruction was popularized via the semiotic analysis of Jacques Derrida, who rejected the static and unchanging essentialism of Platonism.³⁶ Deconstruction argues that language, especially when applied to abstract concepts like truth, justice, and beauty, is irreducibly complex, ever changing, and in constant flux. Therefore, a deconstructionist approach is intentionally postmetaphysical by limiting meaning to the interrelationships within language, without positing an underlying and corresponding nonlinguistic reality.

34. See Frances Fitzgerald, *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017). Fitzgerald traces the evolution of the Christian Right from a populist countercultural movement to a major political player in conservative politics. Also see Benjamin T. Lynerd, *Republican Theology: The Civil Religion of American Evangelicals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). Lynerd argues that the Christian Right is promoting an Evangelical civil religion that is increasingly Republican, straight, white, and male, marking the publication of Martin Luther King Jr.'s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* (1963) as a major break within Evangelical politics, highlighted by “the relative silence of Republican theology in the face of structural injustice” (9). Finally, Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). The authors contend that the overwhelming support Donald Trump has among white Evangelical Christians—despite his all-too-public moral failings—is evidence of yet another transformation within American white Evangelicalism into a form of “Christian nationalism” that works to promote an authoritarian social order, an order in which everyone—Christians and non-Christians, native-born and immigrants, whites and minorities, men and women—is given their “proper” place in society.

35. Gregory A. Smith, “About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated,” Pew Research Center, December 14, 2021, <https://www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/>.

36. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, corrected ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). In this influential volume Derrida introduces the majority of ideas that came to constitute the concept of deconstruction in textual analysis.

Philosopher John D. Caputo, influenced by Derrida, applies a deconstructive hermeneutic to the concepts of God and religion, an approach he calls weak theology. The goal of “weak” theology is not to dismiss or reject God or religious belief, but to recognize the limits of philosophical and theological claims by positing instead an almost mystical understanding of God as an unconditional presence that does not employ coercion when relating to humankind within human history. Caputo gives voice to the struggle many intelligent and educated people of faith have with traditional theism:

By “God,” on the other hand, I do not mean a being who is there, an entity trapped in being, even as a super-being *up there*, up above the world, who physically powers and causes it, who made it and occasionally intervenes upon its day-to-day activities to tweak things for the better in response to a steady stream of solicitations from down below (a hurricane averted here, an illness averted there, etc.). That I consider an essentially magical view of the world. . . . I mean a call that solicits and disturbs what is there, an event that adds a level of signification and meaning, of provocation and solicitation to what is there, that makes it impossible for the world, for what is *there*, to settle solidly in place, to consolidate, to close in upon itself. By the name of “God” I mean the event of this solicitation, an event of deconsolidation, an electrifying event-ing disturbance, the solvent of the weak force of this spectral spirit who haunts the world as its bad conscience, or who breathes lightly and prompts its most inspired moments, all the while readily conceding that there are other names than the name of God. I am trying to save the name of God, not absolutize it.³⁷

Dismissive of traditional theism, Caputo’s deconstruction of theology nevertheless remains open and receptive to the idea of divine revelation and thus is compatible with theological notions of divine agency as *manifestation*, an experience described by many Christians “as uncanny gift and command, a power not one’s own.”³⁸ Caputo’s weak theology also resonates with Paul Tillich’s notion of the “God above God,” a sympathetic critique of traditional theism that “takes seriously the radical doubt experienced by many people. It gives one the courage of self-affirmation even in the extreme state of radical doubt.”³⁹ Tillich’s “God above God” transcends confessional Christianity. In Caputo’s language, this helps preserve the name of God by not absolutizing it.

37. John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 39–40.

38. Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 371.

39. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 12.

In *Dogmatics after Babel* (2018), I argued that Enlightenment rationalism is modernity's very own Tower of Babel—an imaginary construct designed to stave off uncertainty and chaos through the imposition of a singular, monolithic rationality—whose foundations are just as uncertain as those of the Age of Belief that preceded it.⁴⁰ That book developed a critique of modernism's emphasis on truth as a narrowly epistemological concern by promoting narrative knowledge, since rationality is more than merely “getting the facts right”; human rationality originates in the creation of stories that help us cope with the world. The goal of such narratives is not certainty but edification, the moral and/or intellectual improvement of a person through a process of social and cultural formation.

Like Caputo's deconstructed theology, my approach does not seek to impose one narrative above all others but welcomes *many* discourses to the ongoing public conversation on “how best to live”—with the proviso that no single narrative imposes itself as normative for all. *This* book explores what happens when Christians abandon their reliance on metanarratives and embrace the fragmented and incomplete nature of human cognition, aware that the stories we weave are *at best* snapshots of reality—or more accurately, snapshots of some localized reality—while also recognizing that God's manifestation in the world is itself incomplete, fragmentary, and open-ended.

Within US Catholicism, mainline Protestantism, and Evangelicalism the decline in church membership has been accompanied by popularized versions of this deconstruction hermeneutic promulgated by public figures like Richard Rohr,⁴¹ John Pavlovitz,⁴² and Rachel Held Evans.⁴³ Pavlovitz describes his

40. Rubén Rosario Rodríguez, *Dogmatics after Babel: Beyond the Theologies of Word and Culture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2018), xi–xix, 1–33.

41. Richard Rohr, OFM, is a Franciscan priest and writer of popular books on spirituality who founded the Center for Action and Contemplation (CAC) in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in 1986. The CAC is an educational nonprofit organization introducing spiritual seekers to the contemplative Christian path of transformation, founded on certain “prophetic” principles expounded in Rohr's books critical of the institutional church's failure to transform its members and therefore becoming increasingly irrelevant. See Richard Rohr, *Yes, and . . . : Daily Meditations* (Cincinnati: Franciscan Media, 2013) and *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation* (London: SPCK, 2016).

42. John Pavlovitz is a Unitarian pastor and author known for his progressive social and political writings. He worked for nearly a decade as youth pastor at the Good Shepherd United Methodist Church, a megachurch in Charlotte, North Carolina, before being fired for a series of controversial blog postings espousing support for LGBTQ church members and voicing criticism of Christians who voted for Donald Trump in 2016. See John Pavlovitz, *If God Is Love, Don't Be a Jerk: Finding a Faith That Makes Us Better Humans* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2021) and *A Bigger Table: Building Messy, Authentic, and Hopeful Spiritual Community* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2017).

43. The late Rachel Held Evans (1981–2019) was a popular columnist, blogger, and author who chronicled her departure from Evangelicalism due to the movement's close association with the Christian right in the United States. See Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*:

journey as a slow and evolving process of self-realization: “It was a gradual deconstruction of my faith. You look at one isolated area of the Bible, for example, then realize, Well, if that doesn’t mean what I was taught it meant, what other areas of my spiritual journey was I taking for granted? So you start digging into it, and you find yourself exploring all areas of your belief system.”⁴⁴

For Rohr, a septuagenarian Franciscan priest known for running the Center for Action and Contemplation, part meditation retreat part religious school, overcoming the exclusion of Christian incarnational dogma is a major part of his deconstructionist agenda:

We daringly believe that God’s presence was poured into a single human being, so that humanity and divinity can be seen to be operating as one in him—and therefore in us! But instead of saying God came *into* the world through Jesus, maybe it would be better to say that Jesus came *out of* an already Christ-soaked world. The second Incarnation flowed out of the first, out of God’s loving union with physical creation. If that still sounds strange to you, just trust me for a bit. I promise you it will only deepen and broaden your faith in both Jesus and the Christ.⁴⁵

According to Rohr, Christianity has become a tribal religion by emphasizing the *uniqueness* of Jesus’ incarnation, thereby *excluding* any other vessel of divine manifestation, severing Christ from his mission to unite humanity and divinity, thereby losing “the core of what Christianity might have become.”⁴⁶

Rachel Held Evans struggled with leaving the church of her youth, while still strongly identifying as Christian:

I can find my way around a Bible backward and forward because evangelicals gave me that foundation—I was raised to love and cherish and be hungry for the Bible. But I don’t use “evangelical” to describe myself anymore. It’s taken on political connotations that I adamantly oppose. Trump has become this figurehead of Christianity, which I think is really harmful. But evangelical is such

Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church (Nashville: Nelson, 2015), and Rachel Held Evans and Jeff Chu, *Wholehearted Faith* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2021).

44. Amanda Abrams, “How Raleigh’s John Pavlovitz Went from Fired Megachurch Pastor to Rising Star of the Religious Left,” *INDYweek* (November 22, 2017). <https://indyweek.com/news/raleigh-s-john-pavlovitz-went-fired-megachurch-pastor-rising-star-religious-left/>.

45. Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope For, and Believe* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2019), 15.

46. Rohr, *The Universal Christ*, 19.

a loosey-goosey term. You ask five evangelicals what it means and you get five different answers.⁴⁷

In all her writings, Evans fought to “change the way Christianity is taught and perceived in the United States,” and a major part of her legacy remains “her unwillingness to cede ownership of Christianity to its traditional conservative-male stewards.”⁴⁸ As David P. Gushee, arguably the highest-profile defector from American Evangelicalism, reflects,⁴⁹ the cause of much of the discontent among ex-Evangelicals stems from the “sense that card-carrying American evangelicalism now requires acquiescence to attitudes and practices that *fundamentally* (aha!) negate core teachings of Jesus.”⁵⁰ For Gushee, Evans, Pavlovitz, and many others who have attracted the public spotlight for criticizing “traditional” Christianity, the goal is “to try to articulate a more faithful version of faith.”⁵¹

Forgotten among all this talk of deconstructing religious beliefs is the painful yet necessary task of *reconstruction*. Unless one simply walks away from the faith—sadly, an increasingly popular alternative—wrestling with belief involves not only critically evaluating church teachings, but also the more painful task of introspection and personal self-improvement. Christian spirituality, however else it is defined, entails a journey of self-discovery mediated by an encounter with a reality beyond the solipsistic confines of the modern self. Whether one envisages their encounter with Jesus of Nazareth as a mystical union with God incarnate, a disciple learning from the wise sage, or a social justice warrior in solidarity with the revolutionary hero, Jesus’ impact on Western culture cannot be denied. As this culture fragments, it also reconfigures itself. Christianity must do the same.

47. Donna Freitas, “Ex-Evangelical Rachel Held Evans Still Cherishes Her Bible,” *Publishers Weekly* (May 9, 2018). <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/religion/article/76494-ex-evangelical-rachel-held-evans-on-feminism-and-the-bible.html>.

48. Emma Green, “Rachel Held Evans, Hero to Christian Misfits,” *Atlantic* (May 6, 2019). <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/05/rachel-held-evans-death-progressive-christianity/588784/>.

49. David P. Gushee is a renowned Christian ethicist and public intellectual who rose to national prominence for his outspoken criticism of US policy on the use of torture techniques during the interrogation of detainees, serving as president of Evangelicals for Human Rights, an organization advocating for an end to torture. However, his break with US Evangelicalism came after the publication of his book *Changing Our Mind*, 2nd ed. (Canton, MI: Read the Spirit Books, 2015), in which he makes an argument—as an Evangelical believer—supporting LGBT inclusion. Gushee chronicles his departure from American Evangelicalism in *Still Christian: Following Jesus Out of American Evangelicalism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2017).

50. David P. Gushee, *After Evangelicalism: The Path to a New Christianity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2020), 27.

51. Gushee, *After Evangelicalism*, 27.

Unfortunately, many Christians feel threatened by deconstruction, even when it leads to finding a less toxic form of Christianity to call home, since for many spiritual seekers their struggles are not with following Jesus but with the religious institutions bearing his name. The church feels threatened, but for many Millennials and Gen Z believers it is *only* by deconstructing their religion that they can hold on to their faith. This book is offered as one Christian's journey of reconstruction, with some concern for the wreckage of the institutional church but motivated primarily by pastoral concern for those like me whose encounter with Jesus of Nazareth yields enough meaningful fragments to allow for careful reassembly.