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REL1300 Introduction to World Religions

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A Decline in Catholicism

As a child, I remember going to Epcot – Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow, a new Disney World park that opened in 1982. I loved the different rides they had there but was always confused by one, Ellen's Energy Adventure. Why would this be confusing? Because to anyone that was raised as a Catholic, it would be extremely confusing as a child to be told that the Big Bang Theory was how the universe was created which would basically mean that God had nothing to do with the creation of the world. That is a pretty heavy theory to unload to over 12 million visitors a year not knowing how many of them are Catholics. As more people have embraced the scientific theories of evolution, Catholicism has become less popular...but is that the only reason?

The idea that Catholicism is less popular due to science was proven wrong immediately after doing some research. After watching a program on BBC and doing some research in the library, I learned that the Big Bang Theory was actually proposed by Monsignor Georges Lemaitre, a Belgian priest-astronomer, who is known as "the father of modern cosmology" (he had become a Catholic priest and later became a professor of physics after receiving his degrees from Harvard and MIT). The idea that Catholicism is opposed to science is simply not true, it actually encourages scientific research and is responsible for important scientific advances. The

only conflict between science and Christian faith is an individual decision of belief. People are not abandoning their religion because of science, they are abandoning it for other reasons.

In 2013, Pope Francis gave a very candid speech while visiting Brazil, about the “exodus” of followers of the Catholic Church. The Church has been continually losing members to other religions who see Christianity more of a “relic of the past” and not as a modern religion that understands modern issues. Unfortunately, one such issue is women not being allowed to be ordained in the priesthood. In speaking to my Church secretary, I was told that they have lost several members over the past few years due to “the Catholic Church’s unwillingness to budge on this issue”. The Church’s argument is that it clearly states in the New Testament that a woman being ordained is not allowed:

“A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man, she must be quiet” (Timothy 2:11-12).

“Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submissions, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church” (Corinthians 14:34-38).

A woman being ordained is simply not compatible, or ever will be, with the Catholic faith. In order for a woman to embrace the Catholic Church, she must realize that she will NEVER be considered equal to a man which unfortunately, undoes all the work women do to promote equal rights.

. Another huge issue for the Catholic Church is the sex scandals which were brought to the surface in the mid-1990s and became increasingly reported in the 2000’s. When the original

abuse charges came to light, church attendance in the United States dropped significantly and unfortunately, the Roman Catholic Church cannot seem to recover. Although many critics of the Roman Catholic Church feel that the religion is just too strict and there is no freedom to make choices on their own, the real problem seems to be is that as strict as they are with wrongdoing of others, there is much leniency when it comes to their OWNING their wrongdoings. It has not gone unnoticed that if a priest uses the trust of the children of his congregation to sexually molest children, there is a 100% chance that the crime will be covered up by the diocese to defend the reputation of the church. Although Pope Benedict XVI resigned as Pope amid speculation of covering up sexual abuse and possible participation, Pope Francis who replaced him has made a vow of “zero tolerance” for clergy who sexually abuse minors. What is so frightening to many about this proclamation is that “zero tolerance” is still not compulsory in the global Catholic Church. It exists in the United States after the public outrage of these behaviors destroyed the reputation of the Catholic Church but, unfortunately, outside the United States the bishops still follow the church’s universal law in which priests that molest minors receive “just penalties” which could consist of a verbal warning. The Vatican describes a policy framework that was established in 2011 where a priest must be removed if he is “a danger for minors or cause of a scandal” but the framework allows a bishop to retain a guilty priest if he feels (or the Vatican) that the priest has reformed and there is no negative publicity regarding the event. The interesting thing about the policy framework is that it also protects the priests identity which results in Catholic officials being given multiple chances with the Vatican’s permission. Hopefully, this will change with the appointing of Boston’s Cardinal Sean O’Malley as his trusted advisor since he heads the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors which is charged with putting the best practices to respond to child abuse into place. Only after the

patrons of the church feel that the Vatican's response is acceptable, can the Catholic Church truly begin to heal.

Another reason why Catholics leave the church is divorce/remarriage. According to the February 2012 PolitiFact.com "overall probability of marriages now ending in divorce falls between 40% and 50%". Unfortunately, the position of the Roman Catholic Church remains unchanged, "In marriage, the two become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate" (Mark 10:8-9). A valid sacramental marriage is impossible to dissolve thereby making divorce not possible leaving only an annulment as an option although one must prove the marriage did not meet the requirements of a "sacramental marriage". A Catholic can divorce but if a Catholic is divorced and remarries, then one would be in a state of mortal sin and cannot receive communion for Jesus says "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery" (Mark 10:11-12). With so many people divorcing and remarrying, it leaves very little option for the Catholic church goer except to change religions to one that accepts a more modern way of thinking.

It used to be that to consider yourself a Catholic you would attend church regularly on Sundays; however, many people still consider themselves Catholic but do not attend church anymore which makes it seem that there is a huge decrease in members but it is more that some members just choose to not attend services. In speaking to a couple of the church secretaries in the area, the current trend is not that "actual" membership is declining but that "active" membership has. Of course when you have less "active" members, the church receives less envelopes on the plate they pass which puts the church at a financial deficit. Strangely though, the Catholic Directory numbers do not add up. Marriages, Confirmations, First Communions,

Infant Baptisms and Adult Baptisms (which MUST be documented) have all declined over the past few years and most Americans are “unclaimed” or non-adhering to any religion. Even though there is a dramatic loss of support for the Catholic Church among white women and Catholics are less likely to hold on to key theological claims, Catholics still remain the largest religious group in America even with the formal sacrament participation declining.

What can be done to gain the support of the Catholics again and make them “active”? Pope Francis is making great strides to increase Catholic faith in all parts of the world and has candidly spoken about the “hemorrhaging of the Church” in every country. He believes that people no longer feel the church offers them anything considered meaningful or important and acknowledges that even though the church is a “prisoner of its own rigid formulas” and “must remain faithful” to its ways, it has to find a way to reach people again and understand the problems of today’s societies. Most priests and nuns are content remaining in their comfortable surroundings and having people come to them but Pope Francis feels that they need to go beyond the doors and travel to the poor areas and try to fill their material and spiritual needs. Pope Francis does not reside in the residence he is provided in the Vatican at the Apostolic Palace and instead lives in a Vatican guest house eating his meals in the common dining area. This appears to be what Pope Francis is all about and will hopefully regain the trust of many Catholics who felt so negatively towards Pope Benedict in recent years as Pope Francis’s actions definitely demonstrate his love for the people. On a recent visit to Kenya in Africa he visited the poorest of places and lashed out at the elite for neglecting those less fortunate saying it is a “dreadful injustice of social exclusion”. In interviews after his visit, one resident made a comment “he has restored my faith, I now have a role model and will practice his humility”. More and more

people are demanding change or at least an acceptable justification for the lack thereof. The restoration of faith to the Roman Catholic Church seems to be in the hands of Pope Francis now.

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