

Faith Formation and Post-Secularism in Catholic Universities

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Abstract: Post-secularism is generally understood as the renewed appreciation of faith and spirituality without religion. Through a critical analysis and reflection of post-secularization as a sociological and theological movement, the paper intends to explore new ways of understanding and doing faith formation in a Catholic university. In this pluralistic and multi-faith reality, faith formation definitely calls for a discernment and rearticulation. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis himself states that the church cannot anymore be attached to the past and must respond to new questions about life and the world with new and better answers. University-based religious leaders and spiritual formators are challenged to respond positively, intelligently, and creatively to the challenges of faith formation within the framework of the post-secular era. In this paper, I argue that post-secularism is an opportunity to embrace towards a more vibrant Catholic faith. This is in consonance with the desire of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, the so-called manual for Catholic Universities which states that universities must “discern and evaluate both the aspirations and the contradictions of modern culture to make it more suited to the total development of individuals and peoples” and to encourage “dialogue *between Christian thought and the modern sciences*”.

Key Words: secularism, post-secularism, faith formation, Catholic universities

1. INTRODUCTION

Faith formation in Catholic universities is normally understood as direct religious and spiritual activities such as retreats and recollections offered by the campus ministries, daily Masses, and other religious festivities. However, with the increasing understanding of faith and scholarship as something integrated in the very fabric of Catholic university life, academic and secular events that invite students and staff to pause and reflect on various issues are also considered moments for the growth of the faith. But in all these encounters, faith is construed in multiple forms because of the diverse characteristics of the members of the university community.¹ In this pluralistic and multi-faith context, faith formation calls for a reimagination in terms of its conceptualization, approach, and

content. In this paper, I would like to utilize the post-secularization theory as proposed by sociologists Peter Berger and Jose Casanova. The secularization theory is practically a failure as far as observers in the United States are concerned^{2 3}. What the world witness over the last decades is a renewed appreciation of spirituality at a new level, primarily, at a level outside of organized religion. I would like to argue that the Church must now begin to deal with faith-life questions within the post-secularization context instead of continuing an antagonistic stance on secularism. This antipathy is not helpful in the spiritual and religious formation given in the academic setting. Thus, university-based religious leaders and spiritual formators need to respond positively, intelligently, and creatively to the challenges of faith formation within the framework of the post-secular era. Post-secularism

¹ Robert Hunt, "Our Journey In Multifaith Education", in *TEACHING FOR A MULTIFAITH WORLD*, Eleazar Fernandez ed. (OR: Pickwick Publications, 2017), 1.

² Peter L Berger, *The Many Altars Of Modernity* (Boston; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), IX.

³ Jose Casanova, ebook (Charlottesville, VA, 2006), accessed April 17, 2018, <http://www.iasc->

is not a challenge to overcome but an opportunity to embrace towards a vibrant faith. This is in consonance with the desire of Ex Corde Ecclesiae that Catholic Universities “discern and evaluate both the aspirations and the contradictions of modern culture, in order to make it more suited to the total development of individuals and peoples”⁴ and to encourage “dialogue *between Christian thought and the modern sciences*”⁵.

2. METHOD AND OBJECTIVES

Through a critical analysis and reflection of relevant literature, the paper hopes to provide a broad picture of trends in religiosity and spirituality, discuss the ecclesial understanding of faith formation in the university, present the sociological discourse on post-secularization, expound on the ecclesial and theological perspectives of post-secularization, and finally, offer insights and recommendations for faith formation in the university setting within the post-secular context.

3. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Trends in Religiosity and Spirituality

Several surveys provide us trends in religiosity and spirituality based on studies done by Pew Research⁶, Gallup Research⁷, European Values Survey⁸ and the Social Weather Station⁹ (SWS) based in the Philippines. The SWS survey on religion will also be

supported by the 2013 Filipino Catholic Youth Survey¹⁰ research initiated by the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines’ Episcopal Commission on Youth (CBCP-ECY) and Catholic Educational Association of the Philippines (CEAP). All the studies are one in the conclusion that attendance at religious services has dramatically decreased over the years, but the value given towards religion or to a divine being has continued to increase, on the contrary.

A well-cited 2017 Pew Research¹¹ reveals an increase of Americans that claim to be spiritual but not religious (SBNR). The survey showed that 27% identify themselves as spiritual but not religious from a low of 19% in 2012, while those that regard themselves as both religious and spiritual (SAR) remains relatively high at 48% but this is a significant drop from 59% in 2012. The SBNR group comprises of 53% women, 30% ages 30-49, 65% white, and 34% with college degrees while the SNR group would have a similar composition. This Pew Research is affirmed by a 2016 Gallup Research¹² that also note the decline, although in different but very much related categories. Of import to our study, Gallup presented a steep increase in American non-identification to any religion from an all-time low of 2% in the 1950s to a high of 21% in 2016. Although 71% still claim to belong to a religion, only 36% attend religious services weekly. The change is not dramatic for church attendance, however, in the 1940s, only 41% attended church services regularly. Although 54% of Americans consider religion important in their lives, 75% believes that its

⁴ Ex Corde Ecclesiae (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1990), 45.

⁵ ECE, 46.

⁶ Michael Lipka et al., "More Americans Now Say They're Spiritual But Not Religious", *Pew Research Center*, last modified 2018, accessed April 17, 2018, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual-but-not-religious/>.

⁷ Inc. Gallup, "Five Key Findings On Religion In The U.S.", *Gallup.Com*, last modified 2018, accessed April 17, 2018, <http://news.gallup.com/poll/200186/five-key-findings-religion.aspx>.

⁸ "European Values Study", *European values study.Eu*, last modified 2014, accessed April 17, 2018, <http://www.europeanvaluesstudy.eu/page/religion.html>.

⁹ Social Weather Stations, "Social Weather Stations | First Quarter 2017 Social Weather Survey: 48% Of Filipino Adults Attend Religious Services Weekly; 85% Said Religion Is Important", *Sws.Org.Ph*, last modified 2018, accessed April 17, 2018, <https://www.sws.org.ph/swsmain/artcldisppage/?artcsyscode=ART-20170413105521>.

¹⁰ "Survey Shows Youth'S Negativity Over Church'S Political Activism", *CBCP News*, last modified 2013, accessed April 17, 2018, <http://www.cbcpnews.com/cbcpnews/?p=24282>.

¹¹ Lipka.

¹² Gallup.

influence is decreasing in society with only 22% who believes otherwise.

Numbers in the Philippines reflect a similar pattern. A SWS¹³ survey reveals a decline in religious services attendance from 66% in 1991 to 48% in 2016 with Catholics leading the pack at a very low 41% in comparison with 91% and 81% among Muslims and Protestants respectively. Despite this finding, 85% continue to consider religion as important in their lives. The 2014 European Values Survey¹⁴ reveals a rather different angle of the same reality. From a non-western perspective, entire Europe may seem to be the most secularized part of the world. This may not be necessarily true because almost 50% of Europeans either pray or meditate weekly, and more than 50% consider themselves as a member of a religion. This number may be coming from the south-eastern of Europe where secularization is not as felt as in the north-western section or it may also reflect the beliefs of thousands of migrants that entered Europe in the last couple of years.

3.2 Ecclesial Understanding of Faith Formation in Catholic Universities

I will present the ecclesial understanding of faith formation in the university through the document *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (ECE) released by Pope John Paul II in 1990. This document remains effective for Catholic universities and colleges. The Apostolic Constitution of Pope Francis, *Veritatis Gaudium*, released in January 2018, although referred by some commentators as an update of ECE, applies only for universities of pontifical right that offers theological courses for the clergy and the religious like the University of Santo Tomas in Manila but not to Catholic colleges and universities. Nevertheless, it offers us insights into how Pope Francis would like Catholic education to move forward under his watch. ECE presents to us the enduring value of Catholic education throughout history. Monasteries, seminaries, and religious residence were the forerunners of Catholic education that provided moral and intellectual formation that was initially available only to the royalty. This historical

background has defined what Catholic universities should be in terms of Christian inspiration, a treasury of human knowledge with a commitment to be faithful to the Gospel towards the transcendent goal which is Christ¹⁵. These essential characteristics reflect the need for universities to be open and at the same time discerning of human knowledge to be of service to Church and society. This necessitates a broad and open attitude to cultures, and other faith traditions. As an essential element of this study, pluralism becomes a point of discourse in the rethinking process we are undertaking for faith formation¹⁶. I should say that, more than anything else, the section on Pastoral Ministry and Cultural Dialogue¹⁷ are the inspiration of this research endeavor that seeks to find a renewed approach to faith formation in the university.

Pastoral Ministry cannot just be complacent in offering opportunities for spiritual nourishment through the sacraments knowing that the sacraments, taken as they are, reflect a culture of their own. Perhaps, there is a need to creatively look at sacramental theology and recognize the sacramental nature of culture itself. I find the need to mention *Veritatis Gaudium* to inform this study of the mind of the Church through Pope Francis regarding the role of Catholic education in our times. Pope Francis, at the beginning of this Apostolic constitution, wanted to emphasize that Catholic education must educate and evangelize towards peace, justice, and the integrity of creation¹⁸. The Church desires that Catholic education responds to every facet of life in the most practical way. In the forward of *Sapientia Christiana*, St. John Paul II insists "that Catholic education should be able to that the very power of the Gospel should permeate thought patterns, standards of judgment, and norms of behavior"¹⁹.

3.3 Sociological Discourse on Post-Secularism

¹³ CBCP.

¹⁴ European Values Study.

¹⁵ ECE, 13.

¹⁶ ECE, 43-47.

¹⁷ ECE, 38-47.

¹⁸ VERITATIS GAUDIUM (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2018), 2.

¹⁹ From the Forward of *Sapientia Christiana* and VG 2.

Post-secularization has been conceptualized mainly by sociologists Peter Berger²⁰ and Jose Casanova²¹. “Secular” is a borrowed term from the Church which is Latin for “of the world” or “worldly” in contrast to what is sacred or “of God” or “of the divine”. Post-secular implies a new take on secularism and religion. Basing themselves on the earlier work of Weber and Durkheim, Berger and Casanova’s work on post-secularism offer a renewed and intense appreciation of religion.

In 1966, Peter Berger, in his book, the Sacred Canopy²², described secularization as “the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols”. Just a year after the promulgation of Vatican II, Berger was already dealing with the nuances of secularization. He acknowledged already that secularization may not affect all in the same manner and intensity. What is striking in his observations is that, according to him, secularization did not only happen in cultures and societies, it also took place in the hearts of men or what he refers to as the secularization of consciousness. This meant that people started to reflect on the meaning of life without having to refer to religion or any divine being. This seems to sound more like an emancipation from the clutches of an unwanted powerful figure but it kind of ushered the existential beginning of post-secularism.

By 1999, and then again in 2014, Berger retracted his secularization theory in his books, *The Desecularization of the World*, and *The Many Altars of Modernity*, respectively, by explaining that a new paradigm is necessary. Secularization alone was not a viable discourse because religion was merely dented by secularization, if not enriched. Instead, he proposed a theory of pluralism by acknowledging the that the world has a myriad of religions and that secular and religious discourses simultaneously exist²³. At the heart of his new theory is that if society can make a differentiation of the secular and the religious, then this should also be true in human consciousness²⁴. He elaborates that some aspects of

human existence have a very strong religious foundation while some aspects are completely devoid of God. Casanova²⁵, on the other hand, offered some helpful distinctions to help navigate around understanding secularization.

First, he uses the most common definition of the natural decline of religion due to modernity or the development of science supposedly making humanity more analytic and objective towards divine phenomena.

Secondly, Casanova looks at secularization as the privatization of religion which, in my opinion, is also a natural consequence of objectivity. Religion is now dependent upon the individual that chooses to continue to believe or not without any fear of retribution or condemnation.

Third, Casanova calls this last distinction as differentiation of different spheres of secular life such as economics, politics, and science.

3.4 Theological Perspectives on Secularism and Post-secularism

In this part, I will expound on the ecclesial and theological perspectives of secularization and post-secularization. Vatican II through *Gaudium et Spes* or the Church in the Modern World which remains to be among the most groundbreaking documents produced by the council largely due to the paradigm shift that the Church has finally taken in response to modernity. It basically declared that God is at work in the hustle and bustle of daily life in the same way as he is active in the sanctuary. In this chapter, I will also draw from Schillebeeckx who believed that when the Church engages with the struggles and suffering of God’s people, the Church becomes the privileged location of God’s engagement with humanity²⁶. The Church’s attitude towards secularism is a confused one. It will be saying that it wants to enter into dialogue on one hand, and then label secularism as a threat to the faith on the other hand. Fortunately, given the status of *Gaudium et*

²⁰ Peter L Berger, *The Many Altars Of Modernity*, IX-X.

²¹ Jose Casanova.

²² Peter L Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969).

²³ Peter L Berger, *The Many Altars Of Modernity*, IX-X.

²⁴ Peter L Berger, *The Many Altars Of Modernity*, X.

²⁵ Jose Casanova.

²⁶ Lieven Boeve, *Edward Schillebeeckx And Contemporary Theology* ([Place of publication not identified]: T & T Clark Ltd, 2012), xiii.

Spes (GS) as a conciliar document, it assures the author that at least there is a document that lays out clearly the relationship of the Church with the modern world. All other statements are mere commentaries.

The famous first line of the document continues to reverberate in academic conferences up to this day: *“The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts”*²⁷ This was a commitment of the Church to the world to understand its language and context. GS 53 affirmed the plurality of cultures and the different ways of practicing religion. It went on to affirm that progress in the sciences has enabled man to advance in a way never possible before opening new ways of thinking and communicating²⁸ thereby elevating human culture. But this advancement also brings its own anxieties²⁹. Humanity must now struggle to keep up with the progress and create safeguards to prevent abuse. In all of these, the objective is for every person to live out his or her potential.

Boeve³⁰ offers his own take on the post-secular situation. For Boeve, post-secularism is characterized (1) by detraditionalization implying a dynamic change with traditions; (2) by individualization that gives power on individual choices; and (3) by pluralization that views at the legitimacy of alternative positions. In a pluralistic environment, theology must dialogue with difference. In this way, what Boeve calls as the Christian open narrative, incarnates a God at the margins that interrupts history and critiques the world.

4. Conclusion and Synthesis

The preceding ideas gave us an overview of the reality I refer to as the post-secular era in relation to faith formation in the university from which we are able to gather four important points.

First, the seemingly grim statistics of the decline of religiosity from almost all parts of the world reveal man's insatiable search for meaning and connection. I see these data as a call for faith leaders to step up and be innovative and creative. I see the skill of keen listening and observation as key in responding to the decline. In describing it as a decline, I am not actually reading the movement negatively but merely as a fact in human history. Its real meaning may still need to be discovered or researched upon.

Secondly, the university remains to be a fertile ground for constructive discourse and intellectual exchange that uplifts our understanding of our faith among the students and faculty.

Third, faith leaders need to harness the power of the secularization discourse by being able to view Catholicism and Christianity from an observer standpoint. In my experience, I have appreciated and valued my faith in a way I have never experienced before.

Fourth, Vatican II is well prepared to converse with post-secularism. The authors of *Gaudium et Spes* were inspired and sincere Church leaders who were deeply in touch with their faith and modernity at the same time. GS had no qualms in acknowledging religious pluralism knowing that Christianity will never be enough to explain the complexity of God.

Thus, faith formation, in our times, becomes now an encounter with God incarnated in the most secular narrative.

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²⁷ GAUDIUM ET SPES (Vatican: Vatican Press, 1967), 1.

²⁸ GS, 54.

²⁹ GS, 56.

³⁰ LIEVEN BOEVE, *THEOLOGY AT THE CROSSROADS OF UNIVERSITY, CHURCH AND SOCIETY* ([S.l.]: T & T CLARK, 2018), 33-53.

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