

THE

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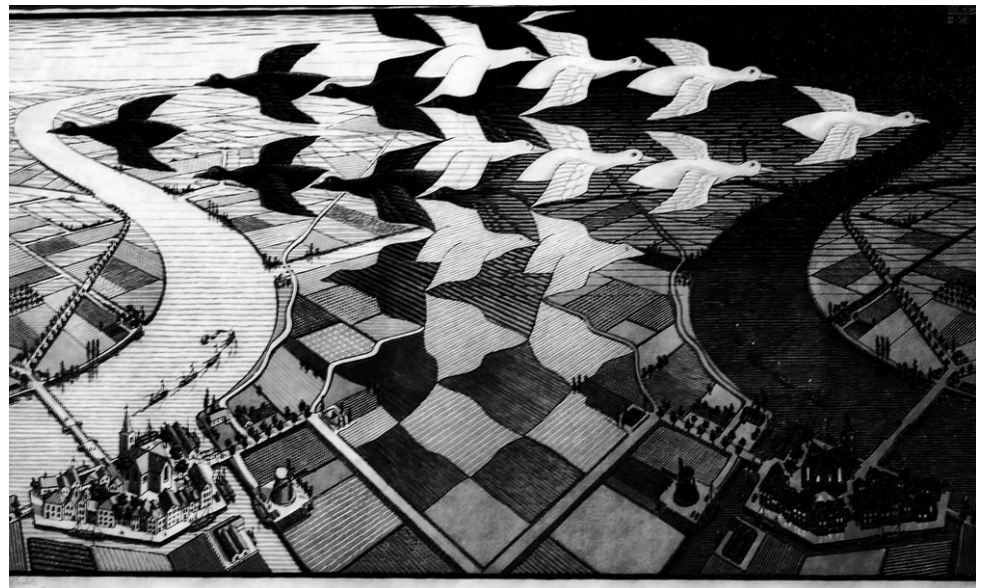
**MARA WILLARD** is assistant professor of religious studies at the University of Oklahoma and the 2017-18 visiting scholar at the Boisi Center. She spoke with Boisi Center director Mark Massa, S.J. about the ‘stickiness’ of Catholic identity, as well as new ways of framing questions around what it means to be Catholic outside of the Church. The following interview has been edited for length, clarity, and content.

**MASSA:** You are working on a very important project. I would like you to open up this interview by describing what your project is, how you started it, and why you got into it in the first place.

**WILLARD:** The title of my project is *Catholic Afterlives*. The title captures the idea that for individuals who no longer understand themselves to be part of the Catholic Church—to be practicing Catholics—there is a continuation of identity and of having a relationship with the Church that is a complicated one. It’s something people are still working out. A lot of the narrative around people who leave the Church is exactly that—they left, and it’s over—so there’s this sense that people exit and that for the Church, there’s a numerical loss in the pews. But I want to tell the story in a different way: to think about the ways that Catholic formation and the questions that it raises—resources and problems—are still getting worked out in the world.

**MASSA:** Andrew Greeley, the famous Catholic sociologist, once said, “If we have you when you’re seven, we have you for life.” Do you think that’s true? Or do you think it’s uniquely true for Catholics?

**WILLARD:** There’s a reason why that claim sticks in your head! There is something true about it—it’s a quip, and as scholars we’re always careful not to essentialize or to assume that everything



is the same for everybody. But there is something about Catholic formation that is notoriously “sticky,” as Greeley suggests. It gives you questions you can’t always answer. It’s the source of the language of “recovering” Catholics—of people who are carrying around Catholic guilt when they no longer consider themselves to be actively Catholic. People joke and they talk seriously about the legacy of their Catholic life upon them, if they have left the Church. And, obviously, many people continue to be active participating Catholics in the Church.

It’s interesting to think about how Greeley’s observation about the psychology

of Catholic formation is connected to the theory of the sacrament. That you have your First Communion when you reach the “age of reason,” around age 7, acknowledges something developmentally appropriate. With this sacramental participation, you become an active member of the community. Of course, Baptism is ontologically when you become Catholic. But your First Communion is a different kind of agency. I think that the participation—like putting on your white dress, your first blazer and going up there receiving communion—is an impressed memory for many Catholics. You are a young person participating in the claim that the Church has upon you.

**MASSA:** As you well know, in the last religious census, the three largest religious groups in the United States, in descending order, are first: Evangelical Protestants; second: Catholics; and third: former Catholics. Former Catholics make up the third largest denomination in the United States. Tell me a little more about the “stickiness” that would account for the fact that so many Catholics do not define themselves as Catholics. They define themselves as “former Catholics.” Why is that?

**WILLARD:** Right. So people are trying to get at this by using relational language. How do you talk about having had this incredibly intense relationship that is really changed, but is in important ways not over? There are other kinds of relationships like that, maybe if you were married and are no longer married, or after a parent dies. How do you talk about the end of a certain kind of identity, where who you are has changed in many ways, but you are never going to not have been formed by that relationship? So sometimes it is institutional – like you’re an alumnae of the college that you went to, or refer to your hometown even if you don’t live there anymore, or you’re a veteran of the armed services, or an immigrant or refugee from a place where you grew up and still make those kinds of foods. I’m bringing those relational but somehow apart accounts to Catholic identity.

So in response to your comment, I would say two things. One, as you noted, is that Catholic formation is sticky. The other, which is also notable, is that there are so many ex-Catholics. The numbers that I saw are that 10% of the American population identify as ex-Catholics, and another 10% identify as cultural Catholics. So very high percentage of those that once participated in the sacraments do not identify themselves cleanly as Catholics.

To be clear: I am not interested in writing a polemic about why people should leave the Church. I am not trying to weigh in and advocate for that by any means. But

I do think that someone needs to think more about what’s happening to that Catholic formation once people are no longer in the pews. I do not think that religious biographies or cultures of these people should be represented only as the end of the story, which is the way it would be done by a parish ministry survey or a grim meeting of the U.S. Council of Catholic Bishops. Instead, it should be

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an interesting question for some compelling, wise, loving individuals that had a formation that was powerful and that keeps acting through them.

**MASSA:** Give me an example of some of the figures you’re looking at in this project. Who comes to mind when I say “former Catholic”?

**WILLARD:** Well, the way that this project of scholarship started for me was when I was researching the Boston response to the disclosures of sexual abuse and the ensuing crisis. Actually in that project I was interested in why and how certain Boston Catholics decided to stay with the Church. But in the course of my interviews, I talked to Walter Robinson. He was the head of the *Boston Globe* Spotlight investigation team. When I was interviewing him, in 2002, he was saying he just cannot go back. He had gone to the Paulist Center, “home for wayward Catholics,” as he called it, and he raised his daughter in the Church, but he just said he cannot go back. I really respect the ethics and the trauma of what he had seen. That makes his refusal to enter a very meaningful statement. His

story is not just about absence. It is about having had an encounter that deserves to be talked about positively.

Another example is scholarship in which I want to talk about a survivor, whom I had seen when I was living in Washington, DC. There was this man across from the Vatican Embassy holding this huge sign—“Vatican Protects Pedophiles Worldwide.” I never thought he was right until I learned what was true. I was ignorant, and I had not taken him seriously. In writing about him, I wanted, as a scholar, to be able to give an account of his identity that did not insist on drawing him into the Church. But I also couldn’t locate him entirely out of the Church. How do I put him on the landscape of American Catholicism? This man is across the street. For him, being proximate to the Vatican Embassy but being across the street is an important geography. As scholars, our job is to contribute to telling the story in a full way, so that is what I want to contribute.

So again: if we only worry about those in the pews, we do not tell the whole story of what’s going on.

**MASSA:** So it is almost a concrete metaphor?

**WILLARD:** It has a spatial and temporal metaphor. It also is just generational. There was a large Irish and Italian American population, as you know, especially in the Northeast, that was raised Catholic and had a very strong Catholic identity. This population had big upward mobility in postwar America. They became recognized as white. They were able to buy property and get their kids educated in the suburbs. They went to Protestant universities sometimes. That has been also a big generation that has exited. You can do a Marxist analysis—say they had access to capital; they had other networks they participated in.

**MASSA:** Or you could do a purely Durkheimian secularization thesis.

**WILLARD:** Right: that for them, Catholic life is no longer a compelling narrative.

It would be interesting to also ask some questions more thoroughly or to tell a story—where are those people and why did they go?

**MASSA:** You are absolutely right. We are sitting in Boston, and that is where the bomb dropped on the sex abuse crisis. The sex abuse crisis, especially in the Northeast, plays a large part of the answering role. But there are other people. When I think of former Catholics, I think of people like Bruce Springsteen, who were not touched at all by the sex abuse crisis, at least personally. So how do you account for that?

**WILLARD:** That's a great example. I was looking up entertainers and comedians. There are huge numbers of post-Catholic comedians! I do not actually think that is a coincidence. I feel like there is something about bodily participation, and also about doing work back upon what that Catholic life was. Mark Ruffalo is an example of someone who was raised Catholic, and he suggests that his commitment to the social teachings outstrips his ability to be in the pews. He feels like he has to leave, because he is also committed to affirming the LGBTQ community and female leadership that he feels is not getting affirmation in the Church. And yes, Springsteen's a great example. He has been written up even as having a kind of liturgical message and medium that he delivers in the world.

A really fun, interesting part of this project could be looking at the encyclicals of the Second Vatican Council and the injunction to go out into the world. You could tell a sort of happy story. One way of reading these people who no longer attend mass, but are still nurses or still social workers or still teaching their kids to show respect for structural reasons for poverty and to know that we're responsible for people on this earth. You could say the message of Jesus Christ lives on in those people. Those people are living out the demands of their formation. One way of interpreting this is Catholic formation

in the social teachings eventually working back upon Catholic identification.

That's a second reason I'm compelled by this project. There are a lot of white Catholic guys that are patrolling who is in and who is out. As I become a more mature scholar and feminist and citizen, I realized that no one is telling this story of the "Catholic after-lifers." I realized - I have a PhD in the study of religion. I could tell that story. Otherwise, I cede the territory to other line-drawers, who have other motivations. I do not want this story to be told only from the conservative side: that the people that left were lazy, or were not willing to cede to the authority of the teachings, or they were too caught up in culture, or they want only entertainment, or they become too complicit with

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materialism. That's not accurate, and we need to have an account of how it's not accurate. My Catholic childhood friend married a Jewish man. She's running a Jewish household now. She's a physician at Boston Medical Center caring for poor people and people who have opioid addiction problems. I don't think that she would identify as Catholic, but she is still living a life that Jesus Christ would be really proud to see her living.

**MASSA:** As you know well, “stickiness” has gone from being a popular term to be a highly technical academic term. Do you think the stickiness of Catholicism is different than the stickiness of Judaism, or do you think they are analogous? Is there something more than just the numbers there?

**WILLARD:** People talk about analogues between Catholicism and Judaism—that

they share a more integrated worldview than the Sunday-only Protestants. Or that you receive this identity more often as intergenerational. If you're born into a Jewish lineage, people often want to continue to represent, to witness to the survival of what their parents and their grandparents have experienced in the world back through the generations.

In the Catholic Church, there are some analogues. To be clear, there certainly was never any Holocaust of Catholics to the same horrible degree as on the Jewish population of Europe. But I suspect that people practice out of respect for their grandmothers, and that mothers bringing their children to Church do so out of respect for their parents.

The import of this logic of participation, though, is that leaving this intergenerational community of practice can come with a cost of feeling disloyalty to people whose religious and cultural lives you really want to acknowledge and to have stay with you. So a question for my Catholic Afterlives project is “How do you think about that intergenerational connection, if it is on your watch that you no longer identify as Catholic or you are the first generation not to bring your children up in the faith?”

**MASSA:** Who are your conversation partners in this? Who is doing the kind of scholarship and asking the smart kind of questions that you want to be in conversation with in this project?

**WILLARD:** The Fordham faculty has been a leader in this. Brenna Moore told the story in *Sacred Dread* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2012) of extra-ecclesial communities in Catholic France after the war. There are people like John Seitz, who wrote *No Closure* (Harvard University Press, 2011) about the occupation in the Boston Catholic Church. That's a really interesting example of people who are not orthodox Catholics. They are somehow askew. They are not “Catholic compliant.” It is interesting spatially, too, like they are too present. They should be

out of those parishes, but they will not leave. Julie Byrne recently wrote the book *The Other Catholics: Remaking America's Largest Religion*, (Columbia University Press, 2016). She said that increasingly people are experimenting with being outside the apostolic succession but still understand themselves to be part of the global communion of Catholicism. I think my cohort—many of us actually had Robert Orsi as a teacher—are thinking more capaciously about how the story that the hierarchy told us is actually not how things look in communities.

A theologian at Villanova who is your friend and colleague, Massimo Faggioli—he provides a lot of theoretical resources for thinking about the ways that doctrinal injunctions “go into the world.” That would be a resource for recognizing dispersal and multiple forms of Catholic practices need to be, should be, and can be told.

**MASSA:** What you’re doing is a very interesting take on “lived religion.” You mentioned Bob Orsi, who now teaches at Northwestern University. He’s one of the most important voices in lifting up lived religion as a category. What you are doing is saying you could conceive of being a former Catholic as a form of lived religion. Is that fair?

**WILLARD:** Yes. This is deep water, but there is a certain way in which I do think people are living their religion, even if they’re living it ambivalently, in their memory, or with nostalgia. I hold myself accountable to the two examples of Walter Robinson and John Wojnowski, the survivor of sexual abuse. How do I tell their stories as lived religion, showing how they are both living their Catholicism, even if they are not in the pews. But I do not want to say that these are crypto-Catholics. I am aware of the risk that “religion is solely the creation of a scholar’s study,” as J. Z. Smith said. Remember that I said that one audience for this project is contesting who gets to draw the lines about Catholic identity, and on what terms. As a scholar of religion, I do not want to be sitting in my armchair telling people if they are

Catholic or not—“you’re in, you’re out.” I want to thread this delicate channel of respecting self-ascription of identity. People are going to describe themselves as being Catholic or are being living in a Catholic afterlife. To that I also want to observe practices and have the practices instruct the identity categories.

That’s something that Bob Orsi has taught me—to look more at what people do in ways that make them Catholic as much as what they say. To look not only at whether people are kneeling, reciting the creed, or if their moral behavior lines up to their penance. Orsi reminds us to be just as interested in how people in the Bronx are at the recreation of a holy shrine, where they fill up vials of holy water that come out of the city reservoir. He is convincing in making his case that those people are practicing their Catholicism. They are producing their Catholic selves. I think it’s so can we transfer this methodology. Ask about practices: is my friend who is running a Jewish household—is she practicing Catholicism when she cares for “the least of these”?

On this, I expect that Orsi is going to be an early critic of mine. He has observed so much assigning of some essential religious identity from afar, both in theology and in the academic project of religious studies. He is going to have me be extremely wary about the ethics of my claiming any authority to project religious identity onto someone else.

**MASSA:** As you point out, authority to some extent is in the eye of the beholder. Why do certain people have the authority—self-proclaimed authority—while other people do not?

**WILLARD:** That’s the question. It’s where the descriptive and the normative run together in ways that Catholic scholars don’t often scrutinize and take apart. There is an almost necessary alignment between the institutional Church and those people who claim the authority to say who is a bad Catholic, who is a lapsed Catholic. They have the power of institutions behind them, often ecclesial but in the U.S., also universities. In my life-

time, the patrolling of compliance with doctrine and practice has been especially around sexual reproduction, gender, which bodies are allowed to desire which bodies. Those in the positions of authority end up looking pretty consistently like population of conservative, mostly European men telling other people that they are not following their rules. I do not want to lump these people all into one group. There’s a huge variety of



Catholic power. The Church is worldwide, and there are many women invested in compliance, like Mary Ann Glendon. But I want to change the conversation. Changing the conversation will also change who is respected as an authority.

There is an important element of power that has to be thought through. When we tell these stories of how lives are lived in relation to Catholic formation, we are contesting another way of telling the story that is about recognition according to doctrinal tradition. Implicitly or explicitly, we are using methods from religious

studies as a challenge to the methods that are authorized by the ecclesiological hierarchy. A woman standing at the front of a classroom, and disseminating her research through Oxford University Press, is performing a contest of the narrative of the hierarchy. But that contest takes institutions. It takes access to universities, colleagues, and presses.

**MASSA:** This, as I understand it, is a project that is going to become an article or something like an article. But if it is going to grow into a larger project—and I hope it does grow into a larger project—where would you want to go with that project?

**WILLARD:** I have made a little outline, which is revisable, and I genuinely hope people will respond.

First, I have the cover. It's an M.C. Escher drawing of the birds that are flying, and turning into landscapes and farms, so you see both change and constancy.

I have an introduction, where I locate myself and my training and the kind of terms I would use.

Part One would be the conditions for Catholic afterlives, and that is a little bit of a history. One is the recent origins of Catholic afterlives, talking about the last two generations—what has changed demographically, what has changed with the birth control encyclical, and what has changed with the decrease in religious attendance in general in America.

Another chapter might be between the living and the dead, about the ways that generations show fidelity to one another by participating in the same tradition and the way that there is loss and there is struggle to figure out how you connect if you are not going to be in the same kind of participating religious world. This understanding is indebted to Orsi's definition of religion, which he develops in *Between Heaven and Earth* (Princeton University Press, 2006). and in this amazing introduction that he wrote to the *Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Then I think your Greeley proposition, that “If we have you at seven, we have you for life” deserves consideration. Maybe it's ironic, but thinking about Aquinas and virtue theory and the ways that habit instills makes a certain kind of subject possible. You can say perhaps that we become a subject—a Catholic subject—in ways that we cannot outgrow. It is sort of fitting with Canon 920. You cannot become un-ontologically Catholic.

Part Two might be something like an “extra-Church,” people living outside of the institution—gifts and sorrows of Catholic afterlives. Drama and humor need to be told, and I was thinking about the playing of the nuns, from Susan Sarandon playing Sister Prejean, to the making fun of the nuns that happens in some of the comedy people consume. Another one might be arts and pilgrimage, like liturgy beyond sacrament. People go to Notre Dame. They light candles. They still feast on holidays. Service for me would be important. I would be really curious to see why people continue to live out caring for the poor and the planet.

Then I think it is important to talk about scholarship as a kind of Catholic afterlife—imagining teaching, writing and telling the story otherwise. It is interesting to think of the academy as a Catholic afterlife space. There you can have

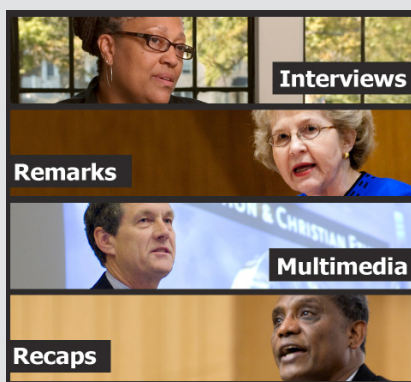
access to different kinds of conversation partners. You can teach the next generation not Catechism, but about a twentieth century French Catholic community of practice that was organized by loving friendship.

**MASSA:** I think this is a very important and protean project. I really hope it does come out as a book. I hope you do the humor. I was just talking to an Irish Catholic pastor friend of mine, who has a Church in South Boston that has a lot of what we call “FBIs”—foreign born Irish. He says that the FBIs who are atheist now believe that there is no God and the blessed Virgin Mary is his immaculately conceived mother.

Thank you Mara. You have been an important voice this year and hopefully into the future.

**WILLARD:** Thanks. And thank you for your scholarship on American Catholic life as a complicated, historical thing. Thank you for leading this institution—the Boisi Center—where we can have these kind of conversations. I appreciate your leadership and your giving space for this. If we only had them under the purview of the hierarchy or we did not have them at all, it would be an impoverished world.

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