

‘Major’ Changes Toward Philosophy and Theology: Interpreting a Recent Trend for Millennials in Catholic Higher Education

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Abstract

This study examines emerging trends among those members of the Millennial generation who have dedicated a significant portion of their young-adult lives to the study of philosophy and theology at Catholic colleges and universities. Our analyses suggest that the number and percentage of Millennial undergraduates who earned degrees in philosophy or theology at Catholic institutions of higher education and the subsequent variation between them and their Generation X predecessors provide statistically significant data that might better inform our understanding of the religiosity, spiritual searching, and adherence to Church authority in this population.

Introduction

In recent years the Millennial¹ generation has attracted the attention of both the popular media and generational researchers.²

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¹ While generational monikers for this cohort remain equivocal, this description (Millennial) is one that frequently appears in the publications of contemporary generational demographers. An equally acceptable and interchangeable term is “Generation Y.” Due to the potentially pejorative connotation of “Generation Y”—a title that suggests that this current generation’s identification is dependent on its predecessor, “Generation X”—we have opted to use “Millennial” in this study.

² There is some debate about the most appropriate starting year. For our purpose, Millennials are understood as those born in or after 1980 through the year 2002. For more see Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000).

This cohort—the first members of which have reached adulthood during tumultuous times characterized by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the Roman Catholic sexual abuse crisis, and the instability of economic institutions—is still taking shape. Few empirical data exist about this generation’s collective behavior, so conjecture and assumption is often used. Such is the case with the religiosity of the Millennials. A wide continuum encompasses the range of opinions about the Millennial generation’s religious tendencies and interests. Considering the lack of religious affect of many in Generation X³—the predecessor cohort of the Millennials—some have speculated that Millennials will follow suit or decrease their affiliation with and participation in institutional religious organizations. Others hold a more optimistic position, suggesting that Millennials will reverse the Generation X trend and embrace the structures of religious institutions. Both views have remained highly anecdotal.

The first members of the Millennial generation commenced undergraduate study around the fall of 1998, placing the graduation of the first Millennials from postsecondary institutions at the turn of the twenty-first century. As members of this generation continue to come of age and the cohort moves toward its complete breakout,⁴ the collective characteristics of the group will become more apparent. In the meantime, enough of the Millennials have reached adulthood and completed undergraduate education for us to study some trends that have emerged vis-à-vis Catholic higher education. By limiting our scope to analysis of data collected on the first Millennial graduates of Catholic colleges and universities in the United States, and comparing these statistics to those of the first graduates of Generation X, we can glean valuable information that allows us to better understand the current attitudes of Millennials at Catholic institutions of higher education and to more accurately anticipate the future inclinations of the cohort.

³ For more on Generation X and religious institutions, see Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998); William Dinges, et al., “A Faith Loosely Held: The Institutional Allegiance of Young Catholics,” *Commonweal*, July 17, 1998, 13-16; Tom Beaudoin, “Irreverently Yours: A Message from Generation X,” *US Catholic*, April, 1999, 10-15; Janel Esker, “Good Ground for Ministry: Initial Results of a Pilot Project to Recruit Generation X,” *Seminary Journal* 6 (Winter 2000), 46-51; and Jean Twenge, *Generation Me* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

⁴ A generation’s complete breakout is when the group attracts maximum social attention, generally occurring twenty-five to thirty years after its first birth year. Howe and Strauss give comparable examples: for the “Baby Boomers” this happened in the late-1960s, for the “Generation Xers” this happened in the mid-1990s. For the Millennials it should happen around 2008-2010. See Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising*, 68.

This study examines emerging trends among members of this generation who have dedicated a significant portion of their young-adult lives to the study of philosophy and theology. A previously unexamined inquiry, we suggest that the analysis of the number and percentage of Millennial undergraduates who earned degrees in philosophy or theology at Catholic institutions of higher education and the subsequent variation between them and their Generation X predecessors provides statistically significant data that might better inform our understanding of the religiosity, spiritual searching, and adherence to Church authority in this population. Furthermore, this information can be used to help Catholic institutions of higher education meet the spiritual and pastoral needs of this population. Additionally, educators, administrators, and researchers might benefit from a more comprehensive understanding of the observably increasing interest Millennials have in formal exploration of philosophy and theology.

This paper is structured in three parts. First, we will review the available literature that lays the foundation for this study and raises the questions that have served as the impetus for this investigation. This precursory material provides the definitions and demarcation necessary for further examination of Millennial traits and trends. Second, we will present the methods used for and the data resulting from our study of changes in undergraduate degree completion in the fields of philosophy and theology for Generation X and Millennials. Third, we will offer some interpretation of the data that might aid educators and administrators of Catholic institutions of higher education in their efforts to better understand the most recent generation to walk through the doors of their colleges and universities.

Millennial Religiosity: Some Preliminary Observations

The merging of Millennials characteristics with those of Generation X has led to the often-confusing task of authentically bifurcating the contemporary young-adult population into two cohorts. The delineation of those traits properly understood as constitutive of either Generation X or the Millennials is further complicated by the fact that Millennials are still coming of age. An awareness of this point allows one to appreciate the limited research on and literature about the Millennials. Because Generation X has completely reached adulthood (the first members of which are now entering “middle age”), it stands out as a more cohesive subject to study. As the Millennials enter adulthood, additional research and analysis will be conducted and the cohort will

be more fully understood. Because this study is primarily concerned with a trend in Millennial religiosity as it affects Catholic institutions of higher education, a full review of the available literature about the generation as a whole is beyond the scope of this paper.⁵

A population's religious behaviors and preferences are affected by other cultural, social, and environmental conditions. For example, as Robert Wuthnow has observed, the general tendency of Millennials to delay commitment and long-term responsibility has a direct impact on and correlative relationship to the religious behaviors and preferences of the group.⁶ While a study of the religious behaviors and preferences of a generation might at first appear myopic, collective generational traits must be viewed as dialectical, and the researcher must always

⁵ For more information on Millennials see, Dawson McAllister, *Saving the Millennial Generation: New Ways to Reach The Kids You Care About in These Uncertain Times* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Press, 1999); Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), especially 247-276; Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising* (2000); Lynne Lancaster and David Stillman, *When Generations Collide: Who they Are. Why they Clash. How to Solve the Generational Puzzle at Work* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), especially 10-47; Daniel Egeler, *Mentoring Millennials: Shaping the Next Generation* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2003); Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Go To College: Strategies for a New Generation on Campus* (Washington, DC: American Association of College Registrars and Admissions Officers, 2003); Michael Coomes and Robert DeBard, eds., *Serving the Millennial Generation: New Directions for Student Services* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004); Dave Verhaagen, *Parenting The Millennial Generation: Guiding Our Children Born Between 1982 and 2000* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2005); Rebecca Huntley, *The World According to Y: Inside the New Adult Generation* (Sydney, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 2006); Morley Winograd and Michael Hais, *Millennial Makeover: Myspace, YouTube, and the Future of American Politics* (Newark, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), especially 66-109; Eric Greenberg and Karl Weber, *Generation We: How Millennial Youth are Taking Over America and Changing our World Forever* (Emeryville, CA: Pachatusan Press, 2008); John Palfrey and Urs Gasser, *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives* (New York: Basic Books, 2008); Tara McPherson, ed., *Digital Youth, Innovation, and the Unexpected* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2008); David Buckingham, ed., *Youth, Identity, and Digital Media* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2008); and W. Lance Bennett, *Civic Life Online: Learning How Digital Media Can Engage Youth* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2008).

For a fine introduction to the comparative relationship of the Millennials with their predecessor generations, see James Davidson, "Generations of American Catholics," *CTSA Proceedings* 63 (2008): 1-17 and Maureen O'Connell, "A Response to James D. Davidson," *CTSA Proceedings* 63 (2008): 18-27.

⁶ Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

bear in mind the relationship between the particular characteristic studied and the holistic composite that portrays the generation as an interconnected whole.

Affective Religious Expression

In 2001, the authors of the *Young Adult Catholics: Religion in a Culture of Choice* wrote: "There is no evidence that young adult Catholics today are a generation of irreligious scoffers."⁷ The opposing view, namely that today's young adult Catholics are, in fact, cynical about or disinterested in religion, is widely held and often portrayed stereotypically in the media and entertainment industry. Perhaps the view contrary to the one published in *Young Adult Catholics* is rooted in the affective manner of Millennial religiosity as it compares to previous generations. The authors of the recent book *American Catholics Today* note that, while young adults attach some importance to their identity as Catholics, Millennials do so to a lesser degree than previous generations.⁸ So, if the manner of Millennial religious expression bears little resemblance to that of previous generations, what does it look like?

Traditional forms of participation in the religious life of the Catholic Church do not seem to be taken up by Millennials in ways their parents and grandparents might have done. This is not to suggest that such a population—young adult Catholics who embrace "traditional" forms of Catholic religious expression—does not exist. Rather, these young adults remain a minority among the broader Catholic Millennial population. In their 2005 study on the religiosity and spirituality of American teenagers, Christian Smith and Melinda Denton maintain that among U.S. Christian teenagers, Catholics consistently scored lower on most measures of religiosity.⁹ At first glance, this observation appears contradictory to

⁷ Dean Hoge, et al., *Young Adult Catholics: Religion in a Culture of Choice* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 83-84. Note that this book primarily deals with the very earliest members of the Millennial generation.

⁸ William D'Antonio, et al., *American Catholics Today: New Realities of Their Faith and Their Church* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, 2007), 34-35. For more on the religious identity of Millennial Catholics, see Thomas Rausch, *Being Catholic in a Culture of Choice* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2006), esp. 1-19; and Dean Hoge, "Religious Commitments of Young Adult Catholics," in *Inculturation and the Church in North America*, ed. T. Frank Kennedy (New York: Herder and Herder, 2006), 198-214.

⁹ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 194.

the 2001 statement published in *Young Adult Catholics*; however, as Smith and Denton explain, this is less a matter of belief and more an expression of Catholic faithfulness which diverges from that of previous generations. Wuthnow supports this claim from a broader perspective of Millennial religiosity, suggesting, “Young adults overwhelmingly opt for personal experience over church doctrines.”¹⁰ He goes on to propose that an appropriate way to view Millennial spirituality is not through their adherence to a particular set of doctrinal canons, a simple test of religiosity for previous generations, but instead through their roles as “spiritual tinkerers” or “spiritual bricoleurs.”¹¹ By this categorization, Wuthnow is not suggesting that Millennials are necessarily adopting a spirituality of syncretism. Rather, this generation makes choices about which aspects of their religious tradition’s normative expressions they wish to embrace, while also appropriating other, and often new, expressions of faith.

The shift in forms of religious expression takes shape in two observable ways. First, there is the sacramental participation of Catholic Millennials. While nearly two-thirds of Millennial Catholics believe that the sacraments are “very important,”¹² only 38% of young adults attend Mass “once a week or more.”¹³ There is anecdotal evidence to support these data as well. By simply visiting a Catholic Church on Sunday, one can observe that young adults are absent.¹⁴ Although this trend is acutely present within this young adult cohort, this phenomenon coincides with the parabolic curve that sociologists have mapped during the twentieth century concerning Catholic sacramental participation. Peaking in the 1950s, the transgenerational trend of sacramental participation has declined toward the end of the century to a point resembling the uneven sacramental participation of Catholics in the early 1900s.¹⁵ What emerges is the implication that Millennials, while acknowledging the importance of the sacraments, do not believe that regular participation in the sacraments—namely, the celebration of the Eucharist—is constitutive of being a good Catholic or Christian.

Second, there is the nonsacramental expression of religiosity. Here we include devotional practices and traditional expressions of Catholic

¹⁰ Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 133.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 134-135.

¹² D’Antonio, et al., *American Catholics Today*, 63, table 4.3.

¹³ Hoge, “Religious Commitments of Young Adult Catholics,” 206.

¹⁴ Tim Muldoon, “Sowing the Seeds for Ministry,” *America* 199 (July 21-28, 2008): 25.

¹⁵ D’Antonio, et al., *American Catholics Today*, 65-66.

piety such as recitation of the Rosary, attendance at the Stations of the Cross, participation in a Holy Hour or other exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, observance of days of fasting and abstinence, and so on. Hayes, among others,¹⁶ reports the observable changes in Millennial affective religiosity.¹⁷ This openness to new forms of religious expression is the nexus of Wuthnow's "religious tinkering" and of the Millennials' move away from regular Mass attendance. Included among these new forms of religious expression among Catholic young adults are the practices of Taizé, centering prayer, *lectio divina*, yoga prayer, scripture study groups, participation in World Youth Days, and community service. While the last form of religious expression might appear incongruent with the rest, service has emerged as a form of religious expression often overlooked by generational observers and sociologists.¹⁸ What we can glean from this trend is that Millennials, while possibly uninterested in the traditional or normative tenets of Catholic religious expression, are in fact appropriating contemporary avenues to the Divine and exploring new expressions of Catholic religiosity.

This information should not be surprising. As the authors of *American Catholics Today* report, "all observers are saying that Catholic identity has been shifting."¹⁹ However, it is important to note that the degree to which the affective expression of Catholic religiosity has shifted within the Millennial generation is greater than that of other generations. This helps explain why young adult Catholics are so difficult to analyze when

¹⁶ For additional commentary on the subject, see Richard Malloy, "Religious Life in the Age of Facebook," *America* 199.1 (July 7-14, 2008): 14-16; and Alice Kearney Alwin, "Christ and the Cooks: Ministry Beyond Liturgy for Young Adults," *America*, 199.2 (July 21-28, 2008): 32-34; and Rausch, *Being Catholic in a Culture of Choice*, 4-19.

¹⁷ Mike Hayes, *Googling God: The Religious Landscape of People in Their 20s and 30s* (New York: Paulist Press, 2007), 147-150. For a discussion about strategies to engage Millennials, especially young women, in catechesis and faith reflection, see Jane Regan, "Fostering the Next Generation of Faithful Women," in *Prophetic Witness: Catholic Women's Strategies for Reform*, ed. Colleen Griffith (New York: Herder and Herder, 2009), 140-148.

¹⁸ For more, see Wendy Murray Zoba, "Youth Has Special Powers," *Christianity Today* 45.2 (February 5, 2001): 57; Megan Sweas, "Marked For Life: Former full-time volunteers confess that their experiences change them for good," *U.S. Catholic* 72.7 (July, 2007): 12-17; D'Antonio, et al., *American Catholics Today*, 93; and Rausch, *Being Catholic in a Culture of Choice*, 12-13.

¹⁹ D'Antonio, et al., *American Catholics Today*, 34; Rausch, *Being Catholic in a Culture of Choice*, 102-114; and, for a more sociological overview of shifts in Millennial identity formation, see David Buckingham, "Introducing Identity," in *Youth, Identity, and Digital Media*, ed. David Buckingham (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2008), 1-24.

compared to their generational predecessors. Millennials affectively express their religious convictions in a manner that differs greatly from previous generations. Given this variation, religious institutions, including and especially Catholic colleges and universities, must meet the changing needs and expectations of the Millennial generation.

Engagement with Religious Institutions

Millennials “seek the reverse of Generation Xers in church.”²⁰ Generation X is often portrayed as a group resistant to authority and skeptical—if not cynical—of institutions and formal churches.²¹ Hayes attributes this in part to the “pain of family disruption” many Generation X members felt from childhood through adolescence.²² Tom Beaudoin suggests this suspicion of religious institutions is also rooted in the access—via modern technology and cultural pluralism—Generation X has had to a variety of religious “outlets.” With an assortment of religious expressions and a variety of methods for spiritual exploration, “Xers challenge religious institutions to clarify the uniqueness of their spiritual message and tradition.”²³ Consequently, the institution must justify its existence and argue for Generation X’s participation. Equally problematic for Generation X is the “relevance factor.” Beaudoin asserts that “Xer religiosity challenges institutions to examine the space between their concrete expressions of religious traditions and the assumptions of the surrounding culture.”²⁴ If a church is seen as irrelevant, Generation X has no interest in pursuing additional experiences with that institution.

The profile of the Millennial generation’s engagement with religious institutions is strikingly different. Hayes argues that, for Millennials, “religion may be less threatening than it was for their Gen X counterparts, who found religion to be for crackpots and weak-minded people.”²⁵ For Hayes, and for Howe and Strauss, the decrease in cynicism is partly the result of widespread paradigmatic shifts in parenting trends during the 1980s. Whereas members of Generation X are associated with an

²⁰ Hayes, *Googling God*, 8-9.

²¹ See Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith*, 51-72; and Hayes, *Googling God*, 6-8.

²² Jackson Carroll and Wade Clark Roof, *Bridging Divided Worlds: Generational Cultures in Congregations* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 63, as quoted in Hayes, *Googling God*, 6-7. See also Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising*, 123-142.

²³ Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith*, 58.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁵ Hayes, *Googling God*, 9.

era in U.S. history marked by discontent with the perceived burdens placed upon them by society and family, Millennials have been reared in the age of *kinderpolitics*.²⁶ Millennials are described as the “most wanted” and “most watched” generation.²⁷ Additionally, some authors posit a desire by Millennials to avoid the “mistakes” of their parents and the previous generations. As children, Millennials witnessed the decline in upholding marriage as a lifelong and significant institution. In contrast, Rebecca Huntley suggests, Millennials are more likely than their generational predecessors to revere such life-long commitments.²⁸ Perhaps, then, Millennials are also more open to exploring religious institutions.

Yet, it may be the case that Millennials’ current religious practices reveal that institutions are not meeting the needs of Millennials and their differing approach to spirituality. Researchers at UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) find that while nearly half of students entering college in 2003 indicated that it is “essential” or “very important” to seek opportunities to grow spiritually in college, two-thirds of these students responded that professors “never” encourage discussions of religious or spiritual matters.²⁹ Such observations of the changes in behavior from one generation to the next validate the positions forwarded by Hayes and by other optimistic generational observers.

However, not all researchers and generational observers are optimistic about Millennial engagement with religious institutions. In a recent article, Dean Hoge argues that today’s young adult Catholics are less invested in the “institutional Catholic Church.”³⁰ He suggests that Millennials are both less active and less emotionally invested in the Church than other generations, predicting that, as they age, this generation will be less involved in the Church than were their parents. Smith and Denton concur with Hoge’s observations. They believe that

²⁶ See Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising*, 97-142; and Hayes, *Googling God*, 8. The term *kinderpolitics* is used to describe “the growing voter determination to translate America’s fears about kids into aggressive public policies that would protect their health, stop their crime, improve their learning, filter their media, and perhaps, over time, shape them into positive examples of civic virtue” (Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising*, 98).

²⁷ Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Rising*, 78-81. See also Mark Gray, et al., *Marriage in the Catholic Church: A Survey of U.S. Catholics* (Washington, DC: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 2007), 52-53.

²⁸ Huntley, *The World According to Y*, 78-87.

²⁹ Jennifer Lindholm, “Spirituality in the Academy: Reintegrating Our Lives and the Lives of Our Students,” *About Campus* 12 (September/October, 2007): 10-17.

³⁰ Hoge, “Religious Commitments of Young Adult Catholics,” 205-206.

there are a number of causes that influence this trend, including U.S. Catholic upward mobility in recent decades, the decline of Catholic schools and religious education programs, and the low institutional priority ranking for youth evangelization or formal young adult ministry in many dioceses and parishes.³¹ Like Hayes, and also Howe and Strauss, Smith and Denton note a connection between the Millennials' generational predecessors' (including parents of Millennials) treatment of religious institutions and Millennials' own. However, the interpretations are quite different. Smith and Denton believe that the resistance of Baby Boomers and, to a greater degree, Generation Xers, to participation in religious institutions has influenced Millennials to do likewise. Smith and Denton observe:

It does not appear to be the case that most U.S. Catholic parents of teenagers are struggling mightily to live out vibrant lives of Catholic faith and yet find their teenagers to be religiously apathetic and resistant. Rather, it appears that the relative religious laxity of most U.S. Catholic teenagers significantly reflects the relative religious laxity of their parents. Once again, teens effectively embody and reproduce the larger adult world of which they are a part. Thus, we think the evident “problem” of Catholic teens is rightly seen in part as a larger challenge of Catholic adults generally and parents specifically.³²

While the interpretation of present trends and predictions of future Millennial behavior varies, it is clear that all researchers see an important connection between this generation and the ones that preceded it.

What remains clear from the available literature analyzing contemporary studies of Millennial behaviors and preferences toward religious institutions is that no consensus exists. Perhaps it is necessary to consider additional proxy measures that might better aid us in our effort to understand Millennial religiosity.

American Academy of Religion and Religious Studies Majors

While the religion proxy measures that have been considered by all the researchers and generational observers named above have led to varying interpretations and, at times, contradictory predictions, one measure has not been factored into these measures: the increase in the

³¹ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 216.

³² *Ibid.*, 216-27. A similar theme is present in Rausch, *Being Catholic in a Culture of Choice*, esp. 9-19 and 114-119.

completion of undergraduate degrees in fields closely tied to institutional religions. In other words, few have considered what the change in degree completion rates in philosophy and theology programs might indicate about the engagement of Millennials with religious institutions. To date, the only significant attempt to organize any data about undergraduate majors of related subjects was conducted by the *American Academy of Religion* (AAR).

In October 2007, the AAR published its first report on what would become an eighteen-month-long project titled "The Religion Major and Liberal Education."³³ The impetus for this study was the monumental shift in opinion (ushered in by the attacks of September 11, 2001) about the place of religion in public discourse and in academic study. Tim Renick, the principal investigator of this project, notes that the existing trend—without and within academe—to dismiss the academic study of religion changed overnight. Now, not only was there widespread support for such endeavors, but also calls arose from all corners of the political, cultural, and academic world for a renewed focus on the study of religion, especially for undergraduate students.³⁴ The AAR launched their study six years after the tide of religious studies criticism began to turn toward widespread support of such scholarship.

The AAR study and our present study do not share the same purpose. The AAR study is broader than our current project, and its conclusions do not explicitly mirror our investigation into the affective religiosity of Millennials or the temperament of their engagement with religious institutions like the Catholic Church. The audience and membership of the AAR is broad, including philosophers, theologians, sociologists, anthropologists, and other scholars concerned with a more objective study of religion, and these individuals hold positions at a variety of institutions. While the AAR study does not explicitly explore connections between undergraduate degree completion and the Millennial generation, it does show that the religious studies major is growing.³⁵ These data corroborate the findings in our study, further supporting the notion that Millennials are increasingly more interested in the formal study of religion.

³³ American Academy of Religion, "Focus on: The Religion Major and Liberal Education," *Religious Studies News* 22 (October, 2007): 21-26.

³⁴ Timothy Renick, "The Religion Major in Transition," *Religious Studies News* 22 (October, 2007): 21.

³⁵ Timothy Renick, et al., "The Religion Major and Liberal Education – A White Paper," *Religious Studies News* 23 (October, 2008): 21.

A 2008 AAR report states that “the number of religious studies majors increased by 22% in the past decade.”³⁶ Interestingly, this trend is not limited to liberal arts colleges and universities, the traditional bastion of religious studies and theology programs; public institutions also witnessed a 40% increase in religious studies majors during the same period.³⁷ This widespread increase led us to examine the specific trends concerning philosophy and theology degree completion at Catholic institutions of higher education. If this widespread trend continues, future political, cultural, and academic landscapes—including the future of Catholic institutions of higher education—will be significantly affected by the religious positions and attitudes espoused by the Millennials. The AAR identifies a trend that also has important implications for educators and administrators of Catholic institutions of higher education. When closing their report, Renick and his colleagues note:

With almost 50,000 students majoring in religious studies in American colleges and universities at any given time (and with that number increasing rapidly), we, as scholars of religion, will play a significant role in shaping what the next generation of Americans knows, thinks, and does with regard to religion.³⁸

As we will illustrate below, there is a statistically significant trend emerging from the Millennial generation: Millennials are engaging religious institutions through the formal study of philosophy and theology more frequently than their generational predecessors. As the AAR reports, this trend extends beyond the walls of Catholic institutions of higher education, but it affects Catholic institutions of higher education all the same.

Research Methods

Since Millennials are still coming of age, we are able to analyze only the first college graduates of this generation from academic years 2003 through 2007. (The academic years 1984 through 1988 represent the first years of undergraduate degree completion for members of Generation X.) By isolating comparable years for Millennials and for their immediate generational predecessors, we can provide a context for interpreting trends that emerge from data collected on the first cohort of graduates of each generation. While data provided by the AAR studies

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 24.

imply an overall increase of degree completion in religious studies majors across institutions of higher education, this study focuses more narrowly on how the first five years of Millennial graduates compare with the first five years of Generation X graduates at Catholic institutions of higher education.

For this analysis, we use rates of undergraduate degree completion in the fields of philosophy and theology as a proxy measure for testing the engagement of Millennials with the Church as a religious institution. This religion proxy measure also serves as an initial indicator of the affective religiosity of Millennials as compared to members of Generation X.³⁹

We extracted data on undergraduate theology and philosophy degree⁴⁰ completion at Catholic institutions of higher education for both Generation X and the Millennials from the Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) datasets. These philosophy degrees range from basic philosophy and logic to studies of the world's major religions including Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity generally; theology degrees are as varied as mission and missionary studies, biblical studies, and other theological endeavors. Neither set is exclusive to Catholic theology, but both include many different fields under the disciplines of theology and philosophy. However, given the framework in which a Catholic college or university operates, being "both a University and Catholic," even those theology and philosophy degrees not in

³⁹ Due to the limited scope of this paper, other socioeconomic variables have not been included in our analyses. While there are likely differences due to sex, race, and other ascribed and achieved states, we are concerned here with addressing an emerging trend with a wider lens. For a discussion of these additional indicators at Catholic colleges and universities, see Laura Lemming, "The Millennial Generation on Catholic Campuses: Changes and Challenges in Ethnicity, Social Status, Spirituality and Gender," in *Handbook of Research on Catholic Higher Education*, ed. Thomas Hunt, et al. (Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing, 2003), 217-242.

⁴⁰ Selected according to the *Classification of Institutional Programs* (CIP) 2000 including all programs in the 38 (Philosophy) or 39 (Theology) category. The *Classification of Instructional Programs* (CIP) 2000 edition is a taxonomic coding scheme for secondary and postsecondary instructional programs. Using categories at the two, four, and six digit level, according to specificity, it is intended to facilitate the organization, collection, and reporting of program data using classifications that capture the majority of reportable data. For more information about the CIP, including the 2000 revised standards, see U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, *Classification of Instructional Programs—2000: (NCES 2002-165)* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2002).

Table 1. Completion Counts for Catholic Colleges and Universities.

	Year	Number of Institutions*	Total Undergraduate Completions	Total Undergraduate Theology/Philosophy Completions	Number of Undergraduate Theology/Philosophy Completions per 1000 Degree Completions
Generation X	1984	175	72,969	982	13.5
	1985	175	72,258	954	13.2
	1986	143	72,586	955	13.2
	1987	137	74,232	876	11.8
	1988	139	74,740	957	12.8
	Period			366,785	4,724
Millennials	2003	150	93,933	1,406	14.9
	2004	162	94,854	1,523	16.1
	2005	161	96,669	1,589	16.4
	2006	166	98,663	1,586	16.1
	2007	166	99,978	1,670	16.7
	Period			484,097	7,774

*The number of total institutions of Catholic higher education fluctuates due to opening and closing institutions and IPEDS reporting practices.

Catholic-specific focus are imbued with “Catholic ideals, attributes, and principles [which] penetrate and inform university activities.”⁴¹ Using the concept of a Catholic university presented in the encyclical *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, the argument can be made that Catholic theology and philosophy departments are markedly different, and, therefore, have markedly different graduates.⁴² Table 1 includes the completion counts for these two groups.

At first glance, there appears to be a proportional relationship between the rise in philosophy and theology undergraduate degree completion and overall degree completion rates from Generation X to the Millennials at Catholic institutions of higher education. According to this initial reading, as the number of undergraduates earning degrees increases, so too does the number of those completing programs in

⁴¹ See Pope John Paul II, *Ex corde Ecclesiae: On Catholic Universities* (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1990).

⁴² For more on the identity of Catholic colleges and universities, see James Heft, “Identity and Mission: Catholic Higher Education,” in *Handbook of Research*, ed. Hunt, et al., 35-58; Philip Gleason, *Contending with Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), esp. 283-322; and Melanie Morey and John Piderit, *Catholic Higher Education: A Culture in Crisis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), esp. 21-89.

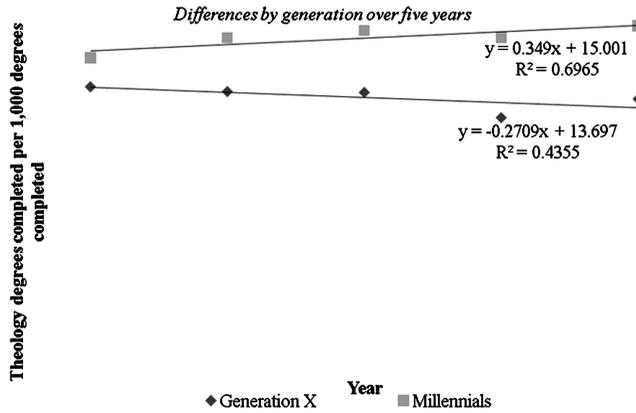


Fig. 1. Theology and Philosophy Degrees Completed as a Proportion of Total Undergraduate Degrees Completed.

philosophy and theology. However, upon further investigation, the data present a trend that is more nuanced.

When compared to their Generation X counterparts, Millennials show a steady increase in the proportion of philosophy and theology undergraduate degrees completed. While the initial observation is true—that as the overall number increases for undergraduate degree completions at Catholic institutions of higher education so does the number of degree completions in the fields of philosophy and theology—an examination of the proportion of completed undergraduate philosophy and theology degrees per 1,000 completed undergraduate degrees is higher (and growing) for Millennials than for Generation X. Figure 1 shows the proportion of completed degrees in philosophy and theology for both generations over a period of five years, as well as the slope of this trend.

Some Constructive Suggestions

The first members of the Millennial generation to complete undergraduate degrees at Catholic institutions of higher education have revealed a trend that may have important implications for educators and administrators of these institutions. Three suggestions emerge from this study.

First, as the Millennial generation continues to come of age and move through the Catholic educational system, the ability to respond to their engagement with the Catholic tradition in novel ways will become increasingly important. As highlighted earlier, the Millennial appropriation of Catholic identity looks starkly different than it has with previous generations. One simplistic temptation is for educators and administrators

of Catholic institutions of higher education, not recognizing the variance in affective religiosity, to dismiss this new generation as a cohort of “irreligious scoffers.”⁴³ Such a view will undoubtedly affect administrative, budgetary, and academic policies in ways less than helpful for effectively engaging young people on issues of faith and spirituality. The late theologian and former president of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities (ACCU), Monika Hellwig, addressed administrators of Catholic institutions of higher education with these insightful closing remarks.

[A] major dimension which urgently demands our attention is the challenge of understanding and clearly formulating what it means to be Catholic as individuals and as institutions in a pervasively and intricately multicultural and multifaith setting. This third dimension certainly assumes the shift described above, namely one from being defined primarily by Catholic context, historical and social, to being defined by Catholic purpose and vision, shared but personally, creatively internalized.⁴⁴

Hellwig observed the shift from previous approaches to understanding Catholic identity to new and challenging ways that need to be recognized, examined, and understood. Therefore, Catholic institutions of higher education in which these Millennials are enrolled need to provide the environment necessary for these young adults to efficaciously grow in their faith and spirituality.

The second suggestion is a formal re-evaluation of departments and programs of philosophy and theology at Catholic institutions of higher education. As the data show, this generation is more likely than the previous generation formally to engage the Catholic faith through degree programs. Bolstered by other studies (e.g., AAR) and the opinions of certain generational observers, there is reason to believe that the increase in degree completions in the fields of philosophy and theology is a sign of the Millennial generation’s inclination toward engaging religious institutions. If this trend continues on the current trajectory, administrators of Catholic institutions of higher education would be wise to reallocate funds necessary to develop departments and programs of philosophy and theology to meet the increase in interest. In addition to the financial resources necessary to enhance those departments and programs, a strategic effort to examine core curricula at Catholic

⁴³ Hoge, et al., *Young Adult Catholics*, 83-84.

⁴⁴ Monika Hellwig, “Catholic Identity: The Twenty-First Century Challenge,” *Current Issues in Catholic Higher Education* 24 (Fall, 2005): 7.

institutions of higher education is important. While the number of students who declare philosophy or theology as their particular field of study is increasing, the overwhelming majority of Millennial students at Catholic colleges and universities will only encounter philosophical and theological inquiry through the required courses mandated by the core curriculum. For this reason, educators and administrators should examine the core courses to determine whether and how well the studies of philosophy and theology are integrated with the rest of the program. Those Millennial students who study business, science, or another of the liberal arts are likely hungering for an outlet to express their religious interests and for a resource to explore their faith as much as those who declare philosophy or theology as their major. The core curriculum at Catholic institutions of higher education provides just such a nexus to link Millennial spiritual searching with the richness of Catholic education.

The third suggestion, closely linked to the second, is a call to examine the content of the philosophical and theological education offered to Millennials at Catholic institutions of higher education. If we are correct in understanding this trend—i.e., the increase in philosophy and theology undergraduate degree completion among Millennials—as an additional proxy measure for Millennial willingness to engage with religious institutions, then it is of great importance that what Millennials are studying embodies and accurately reflects both the tradition of Catholic education and the particular charisms of religious-community sponsored institutions (e.g., Franciscan, Jesuit, Dominican, etc). In this way, one can see the relationship between a spiritual longing expressed by today's young adults and their increasing interest in engaging religious institutions through formal studies. Ilia Delio has noted this connection in her article on the role of the Franciscan tradition in understanding this link. She writes,

The integral relation between spirituality and theology suggests an integral relationship between “being” and “doing.” The theologian is not first one who “studies” theology but one who “lives” theology....The theologian is one who, filled with the Spirit, contemplates the depths of the mystery, the fountain fullness of God’s love and returns love for love. Theology therefore is a spiritual practice because it requires grace and a deepening of life in the Spirit.⁴⁵

Such an understanding of the correlative relationship between theology (and philosophy) and spirituality helps illuminate what is at

⁴⁵ Ilia Delio, “Is Spirituality the Future of Theology? Insights from Bonaventure,” *Spiritus* 8 (Fall, 2008): 153.

stake in the integrity of these programs of study at Catholic institutions of higher education. The commitment of Millennials to pursue a course of study in philosophy or theology at a Catholic college or university reflects that desire expressed by Delio to engage study as a “spiritual practice” in ways studying economics or education simply does not.

There is another facet of this trend that is not immediately or explicitly recognizable from this study because it becomes manifest after students complete their respective programs. The education that Millennials receive will shape the way they view the world and will have an impact on their homes, work places, and faith communities. Since Millennials are exhibiting a greater interest in the formal study of philosophy and theology, this contact point needs particular attention, as it may serve as a location for personal and spiritual formation. The way Catholic institutions of higher education respond to this Millennial trend will play an important role in the future of the Church and of the world.

Philosophy and theology undergraduate degree completion is not a direct measure of Millennial affective religiosity or engagement with religious institutions, but it does provide valuable insight that has been, until now, overlooked and unconsidered. We hope that these findings, along with other current and future statistical measures, can help guide educators and administrators of Catholic institutions of higher education in their efforts to reach this new generation while responding to the signs of our time.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Pope Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (Vatican City, Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1965), sec. 4.