



Out on Waters: The Religious Life and Learning of Young Catholics Beyond the Church

James Michael Nagle

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James Michael Nagle's *Out on Waters* challenges religion and theology teachers to perform acts of "theological humility" and radical hospitality for student learning, especially if their learning compels them to leave the church. At the "intersection of preservation and revelation" in religious educational institutions, teachers should not see disaffiliation with church belonging as rejection or loss. Instead Nagle asks them to step "out on waters" and better communicate about disaffiliation as a graced process. For introductory courses in faith development or pastoral ministry, Nagle's book offers an easy-to-read collection of faith and "non-normative religious identity" stories featuring themes of growth, conversion, integration of beliefs, and loving service.

Fifth in the *Horizons in Religious Education* series from Pickwick Books, Nagle's text centers on six interviews and participant-observations he conducted among high school religion and theology teachers and their young adult former students. Most of the latter moved away from or never took on ecclesial identity but retain some ways of thinking inspired by Catholic Social Teaching or the charisms of religious congregations. After chapter 1's introductory material, a longer section follows on teacher-student relationships, entitled "Portraits from the Edge of Affiliation" (chapters 2-4). Nagle's interpretive arguments follow in a shorter section titled "The Edge that Is a Place" (chapters 5 and 6).

In interviews, Nagle inquires about "alternatives to affiliation within the church" in a way that is caring and curious, just as he hopes readers will be in their classrooms. He finds an increase in instructors who may identify or empathize with their students' "critique, disinterest, and departure" (85) and who may share this in class. Additionally, he argues teachers should emphasize perennial questions and an ongoing process of discernment rather than an expectation of future ecclesial belonging. Nagle points to an urgency for dialogical spaces where the "hidden teaching and learning narratives" can be shared.

Treatment of the impact of religious communities in students' faith development could have been more prominent in the book. It would have been helpful to hear more from former students who stayed in the church and about students who ended up more affiliated than their teachers. In addition, one wonders about the book's potential alignment with a consumer model of Christian education. Are there limits on how selective we want our students to be about Christian traditions and ways of life? Are discernment and fidelity equal values? Would goals for student learning rooted in mission or scripture be as welcome as student goals rooted in exploration and self-knowledge?

This book fits well with the work of Kaya Oakes, Christian Smith, Kevin Ahern, and Tricia Bruce. We need to be reminded that our students may critique unjust systems intertwined with our schools or churches, or seek out life-giving practices that place them outside religious affiliation or our hopes for them. Valuing students' unique spiritual paths is just the beginning. *Out on Waters'* best contribution is pricking teachers' consciences about whether our hospitality can be felt by the ones we serve.