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We need more 'theological wiggle room'

Maureen Fiedler | Jul. 9, 2013 NCR Today

On last week's "Interfaith Voices," we had two unusual segments about clergy (or those filling religious leadership roles) losing their faith and moving to atheism.

Our lead interview was with an author and former Pentecostal pastor, Jerry DeWitt, who said he experienced a "reverse conversion." He wrote about it in a new book, *Hope After Faith: An Ex-Pastor's Journey from Belief to Atheism[1]*.

But especially interesting to me was my conversation with a Catholic woman named Catherine Dunphy. She is the executive director of The Clergy Project [2], an online anonymous community of clergy or former clergy who have moved from belief to atheism or agnosticism. It was formed very recently, in 2011.

Catherine was not -- of course -- clergy, but she served as a chaplain in schools and hospitals. I asked her how she lost her faith. At first, she said briefly, "Studying theology." Then she spoke about the reality of being a Catholic woman and how she experienced a church that had no real place for her.

"My personhood was diminished because of my gender," she said.

I daresay she is not alone. Although not all Catholic women who feel this way lose their faith, many have abandoned their parishes or left for friendlier fields in other churches.

But there's more to learn here. The Clergy Project has almost 500 members, and about 80 percent are evangelicals. I asked her why most of the members reported losing their faith.

"Those most likely to leave are those without theological wiggle room," she said. She specifically cited those who are taught to read the Bible literally and believe it is inerrant. When they become acquainted with modern biblical scholarship or new theological approaches, they can -- and many do -- lose their faith.

We Catholics, of course, don't read the Bible literally. But we experience rigidity in other spheres, as Catherine did in her life as a Catholic woman. There are a lot of dogmas and practices that seem to allow no flexibility, like the ordination of women, blessing a same-sex marriage or the use of contraceptives, to name but a few. In many ways, we need more "theological wiggle room."

Listen to the week's interviews, followed by Part I of a new series called "Modern Day Mystics." [3]

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Links:
[1] http://www.hopeafterfaith.com/
[2] http://www.clergyproject.org/

[3] http://interfaithradio.org/Archive/2013-July/The_Pastor_Who_Became_an_Atheist__Modern_Mystics__and_More