

Swimming against a demographic tide

Tom Roberts | Jul. 20, 2013

If demographics are destiny, then 42-year-old Kaya Oakes and 31-year-old Chris Haw ought to be among the “nones,” those who are disenchanted with institutional religion and certainly beyond the borders of Roman Catholicism. Everyone knows the church is bleeding members, especially young members. The measurement that gives the exodus perspective is that, taken together, ex-Catholics (about 23 million) would make up the secondlargest denomination in the country after Catholics (68.1 million) and well ahead of the next largest group, Baptists (16.2 million).

Another demographic feature that defines U.S. Catholicism today is that the church’s membership total has remained fairly steady because of the influx in recent years of Hispanic immigrants, mainly from Mexico and Central America, as well as Asians and Africans.

But immigrants don’t account for all of the numbers, and parishes throughout the country (the incomprehensibility of the “new evangelization” notwithstanding) can tell stories of the most unexpected types showing up at the end of the yearly RCIA instructions to seek entry or re-entry into the church.

Oakes and Haw represent that much less-documented, swimming-upstream-against-the-demographic-tide phenomenon. It’s a smaller throng than those exiting, but their stories suggest that it is perhaps as important a part of the mix for the future. Because they aren’t part of some broader cultural wave, returnees like Oakes and Haw are choosing against the very culture that formed them. It’s the same culture that sets up, some church leaders believe, the vaunted secularist, relativist, materialist threat to organized religion.

In many ways, however, the two writers are as different from each other as the Midwest is from the West Coast, as a megachurch is from the Berkeley campus, as a budding theologian sinking into the weight of a tradition is from the contemporary novelist trying to fit the ancient tradition to the demands of the day.



RADICAL REINVENTION: AN UNLIKELY RETURN TO THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

By Kaya Oakes

Published by Counterpoint, \$15.95

In the case of Oakes, whose writing can run from *New Yorker* chic to a kind of *Rolling Stone* shock, the

motivation seems to have been a low-level, persistent ache for more that she felt during an ongoing search for herself.

"I'm used to therapy; I know the lobby in my shrink's office better than my own office at work," Oakes says. "But the notion of talking with her about God doesn't quite work. She knows a lot about the mind, but I'm not sure she's an expert on the soul. And my soul is clearly in need of counsel."

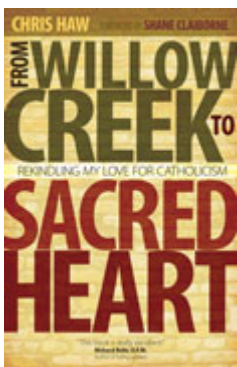
The occasional swells of piety and movingly candid disclosures of newly discovered spiritual truths are well-balanced with a healthy irreverence and strategically placed F-bombs. She lectures at the University of California, Berkeley, after all, and whatever kind of conversion experience she's had, it hasn't dulled her analytical edge. She's had to work through explanations to the most skeptical of the skeptical. Which, in the same vein, might make her a really valuable mentor to those wrestling with the same questions but fearful that conversion would require angelic behavior and flights of spiritual ecstasy.

It is not an easy or resolved relationship she has with the Catholic community. The church, she writes, "is so good at ministering to the poor, caring for the sick, educating people in forgotten communities. It is so good at encouraging its flock to stand up to fight injustice and fight oppression. And it is just freaking awful at understanding what it means to be a woman, or to be gay, or to want to express your sexuality without catching a disease. Yet what being Catholic has given me is a sense of love and compassion for the people around me that was pretty much absent in my decades of fake atheist faithlessness."

At the time of our interview in January -- before Pope Benedict XVI resigned, an act that itself began to redefine the papacy, and before Francis was elected, an act that continues to play out to a growing and increasingly fascinated audience -- Oakes described this "kind of weird space you occupy where you're not in the institutional church 100 percent but you're not out. So where are you? What is this marginal space you've created to stand in with other marginalized people? I want to say I believe, but I don't necessarily believe everything in the catechism. It is awkward, in the secular world, to say I have doubts but I also believe."

She can feel alienated, she writes, at the latest manifestation of the hierarchy's apparent antipathy toward women. "However, I like a challenge, and while one is not exactly encouraged to shout back protests during the Mass when the priests uses only male pronouns -- "Hello, do you see all these women in the pews, dude?" -- the irritations of the "big-C Church" give her something to push back against. "It's like politics for liberals," she writes. "Republicans and Tea Partiers may repulse us, but oppositional sides have their purpose. They give us something to struggle against."

Among the "kick-ass intercessors" who keep her going are Mary Magdalene, Teresa of Avila and Dorothy Day.



FROM WILLOW CREEK TO SACRED HEART: REKINDLING MY LOVE FOR

CATHOLICISM

By Chris Haw

Published by Ave Maria Press, \$15.95

Haw, a budding theologian, initially was formed in the environment of Willow Creek Community Church, a prototype of the suburban, one-stop, all-inclusive, big-box outlet of religious experience known as megachurch. In his arc of return, he has ended up, at least ecclesiastically, hierarchically and demographically, at the other end of the spectrum -- in downtown Camden, N.J., one of the poorest, most dangerous and dysfunctional cities in the country.

While his life eventually became deeply entwined with poor people and issues of justice, that expression of Christianity was merely part of the original draw back into the Catholic community (he had attended Catholic churches as a youngster until his mother switched to Willow Creek, which is located in suburban Chicago). His real Damascus road event apparently happened during a study trip to a rain forest in Belize. His meditations in the Central American jungle brought an unexpected appreciation of corporeal reality and its intrinsic connection to the divine. The realization toppled his old conception of a deep divide between the material world and "an afterlife" viewed "through the usual cartoony images of disembodied souls flying into clouds, or some other immaterial realm beyond the stars," he writes.

He had, adhering to Christian constructions, always spoken of the universe as "creation," but he had had "little sense of *connection* to it, of being *part* of it, tied to, the universe. Instead, I viewed the world merely as God's begrudging waiting room, or perhaps God's training facility, a proving ground where we practice while we wait to go to the "Real Place." It had never struck me to view bodies, physicality, and *matter itself* as coming from the hand of God. ... Always looking to the future through the lens of an immaterial heaven, I had never stopped to wonder how the heavenly was already embedded in our midst [*italics his*]."

That Teilhardian/Berry-an, dare we say, Franciscan moment, he says a bit later, was the opening that allowed him to eventually embrace the sacramental aspects of Catholicism.

Oakes' journey is expressed as a kind of apologetic of the alienated and faux atheist hanging out on the fringes overcoming the lack of coolness in a deep attraction to an institution that, by mostly its own fault, has become a topic of conversation for all the wrong reasons. It's tough for committed Catholics, let alone one from the critics' crowd, to explain the rationale for walking back into a contemporary symbol of homophobia, abuse, anti-feminism and other garden varieties of holy corruption.

Haw, on the other hand, comes at the church fresh out of Protestant fervor, out of a community that was alive, vibrant and young, with worship services that were high on performance value, crisply scheduled and designed to excite religious fervor.

His community in Camden is quite different. It is smaller, more threadbare and wrestles not just with the theoretical Christian issues of the day, but with violence, despair and poverty on the doorstep, the kind of poverty that's only lightly dented by a night at the soup kitchen.

He traded Willow Creek for Sacred Heart Parish, another place that is legendary, but for different reasons. Its pastor for more than 35 years, Fr. Michael Doyle, has made it his life's work to deal with the corporeal reality outside the church walls. Every liturgy at Sacred Heart ends with a prayer for Camden he composed some years ago. But the transformation happens outside the old, rather traditional-looking church.

Haw compared the church to "one of those old hardware stores, you know, the kind they don't make them like they used to sort of hardware store." He said he feels sorry for many in his generation, even those with whom he shares strong conviction about Jesus, that "they still would never really be able to find a church home like I have at Sacred Heart. Maybe because of some of the reasons I describe in the book. A lot of people don't have patience for being in a part of the church that they don't like."

These are two very smart books, different in tone and perspective. But in the telling of their stories, both writers wrestle with the big and small of things, with matters of matter and creation and their connection to divine life; the deep ills of humankind and the Christian response; a kind priest; an understanding atheist husband; remarkable sisters; the sense of family; the ever unfolding project of spirituality; the quiet profundity of sacramental life; the role of women in the church; war and peace.

In the months since our interviews, Oakes has decided to launch an online, interfaith magazine of woman writing about faith. She is planning the first issue to appear late summer or early fall. It's going to be called *Limina*, she said in an email, which is roughly translated as she who is standing on the threshold. An appropriate name for many of us.

For Haw's part, he and his wife welcomed a second child recently, and he was also awarded a generous fellowship to study at the University of Notre Dame's Theology and Peace Studies program. So he'll be leaving Camden and his carpentry practice for a doctoral program in South Bend, Ind.

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