A Community of Mankind: Catholic Engagement with American Unbelief

By

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Introduction

The violent destruction of religion in the Soviet Union led many American Cold War strategists to construct a world divided between Christendom and godlessness. But as the United States continued to understand itself as a god-fearing nation well into the 1960s, the Catholic Church began to identify atheism as a widespread phenomenon on American soil. Indeed, in 1965, the Church established a global institution, known as the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Believers, to study the various forms and types of atheism. Among its regional offices was one dedicated to studying not Soviet atheism, but American unbelief. Within months of its creation, the Secretariat brought Catholic priests and American “non-believers” (those without a belief in God) together to engage in intellectual discussion. American Marxists and secular humanists were invited to write idealistic articles for Catholic theological journals; to speak on Catholic campuses across the country; and to participate in conferences aimed at building a political coalition between Catholics and non-believers. By no means did the Secretariat intend to convert these non-believers. Instead, it sought to bring both sides towards a movement of rapprochement that emphasized understanding and compassion. The Secretariat’s activities in the United States reflected and interplayed with the radical changes that occurred in Catholic intellectual life, progressive Catholic politics, and Catholic higher education in the 1960s. Yet, how did the Catholic Church come to identify American unbelief as a serious problem? And why did Marxists, secular humanists, and progressive politics figure so prominently in the Catholic conception of American unbelief?
The decision to peacefully engage with American non-believers represented a major rupture in the Vatican’s response to and understanding of atheism. Before the 1960s, the Church understood atheism as a phenomenon that was exclusively attached to the threat of Soviet Communism. The Soviet Union’s rise, combined with its atheistic outlook, led the Church to understand Communism as its biggest enemy and threat to survival. Between 1917 and 1958, the Vatican waged an anticommunist crusade to ensure that “atheistic Communism,” a term coined by Pope Pius XI in 1937, would not further encroach upon Christian civilization. As Communism became Catholicism’s principal opponent, the Vatican relied on its influence with Western nation states to uphold a Christian social order strong enough to defeat its adversary.

The geographic division between Christendom and godlessness proved to be more porous than originally imagined. During the long 1960s, the West experienced a marked decline in religious observance without having experienced a Communist revolution. Instead, a cultural revolution, driven by youth, challenged the social norms that had previously ensured that members in Western societies would at least outwardly adhere to Christian values. Meanwhile, a number of secular worldviews thrived in postwar Europe, such as secular humanism and existentialism, that rendered the Church’s previous understanding of atheism obsolete. Atheism had suddenly transformed from a problem

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exclusively attached to Communism to a phenomenon with many political forms and social contexts.

This thesis examines the Vatican’s engagement with unbelief during the long 1960s, especially in the American context. It will evaluate how the Catholic Church understood American unbelief, as well as the strategies it used to respond to the problem. To achieve this, I analyze how the changing political, intellectual, and social context in postwar Europe informed and transformed the Church’s understanding of unbelief. Whereas in the interwar period the Vatican understood atheism as a threat exclusively attached to Communism, in the postwar era, the decline of religious authority and the growth of secular society, which allowed for a multiplicity of alternative worldviews, caused the Church to identify unbelief as a broader global issue. When atheism was restricted to its Soviet context, the Vatican launched a crusade against atheistic Communism, disseminating propaganda and coordinating efforts to undermine the Soviet regime. However, the emergence of unbelief as a mass social phenomenon in the West forced the Vatican to reconsider its tactics. In increasingly liberal and pluralistic societies, the Vatican could no longer rely on the state to curtail atheism or enforce Catholic teaching. In the past, the Vatican could rely on Western governments to uphold Christian morality, but by the late 1950s, the West retreated politically from arbitrating private morality and conscience, which made it impractical for the Church to rely on European and North American governments in its attempt to secure a Christian social order. As a result, the Church’s response to unbelief had to be realized through direct engagement with secular society and individuals.
One of the Vatican’s responses to this new reality was the creation of the Secretariat for Non-Believers. The Secretariat was an institution with offices around the globe charged with studying different forms of unbelief and engaging with non-believers in dialogue. However, as I argue in the thesis, the Secretariat’s efforts in the United States were constantly undermined by its misperception of American unbelief as essentially analogous to its European counterpart rather than its own distinct phenomenon that required specific approaches. Although a handful of American Catholic intellectuals recognized American unbelief as an attitude of indifference towards religion rather than an explicit philosophical rejection of it, the majority insisted that it was informed by the same philosophical trends in Western Europe: namely, continental philosophy and secular humanism. The decision to treat American unbelief as an intellectually coherent and positive worldview led the Secretariat and the broader Catholic intellectual community to engage with a handful of Marxists and secular humanists who were at the margins of American society rather than at the center of American unbelief.

Higher education became a critical site of engagement with unbelief on both Catholic and non-Catholic campuses. Because the Secretariat imagined the university to be the epicenter of American unbelief, it sought to utilize Catholic students and faculty on non-Catholic campuses as instruments for dialogue with non-believers. On the Catholic campus, meanwhile, the image of the American non-believer as an intellectually-sophisticated thinker caused Catholic higher education to fundamentally restructure how Catholic students were taught philosophy and theology. Rather than prepare Catholic students to engage with
non-believers, the reforms had the unintended consequence of secularizing Catholic higher education and caused the Church to overlook the more likely sources of unbelief in the United States: practical indifference and the student counterculture.

Literature Review

This thesis is related to two main bodies of existing scholarship: one on Catholic anticommunism before the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and one on transformations in Catholic higher education in the United States in the twentieth century. In recent years, several historians – most notably John Pollard, James Chappel, and Giuliana Chamedes – have situated the Vatican’s political agenda within the broader context of the interwar and early (1945-1958) Cold War periods.

Pollard’s book, *The Papacy in an Age of Totalitarianism, 1914-1958* (2014), argues that the rise of secular political orders motivated the Vatican to revive a medieval understanding of the papacy that would allow for it to insert itself more forcefully into international affairs. The doctrine of papal infallibility, combined with the 1917 reform of canon law, substantially strengthened the papacy’s power and allowed Popes Pius XI and Pius XII to use concordats - formal, legally-binding treaties between the Vatican and secular governments - to protect the Vatican’s interests against Communism and secularism. Pollard uses the discrepancy between the Vatican’s reaction to Nazism and Communism to show that the Holy See was not opposed to totalitarianism in principle. Rather, the
Vatican was uniquely hostile towards Communism because it was a universalistic ideology grounded in atheism.² This explicitly challenged the essence of Catholic universalism and achieved massive worldwide expansion thanks to an era of economic, political, and social turbulence.³ Pollard shows that, under Pius XII, from 1939 to 1958, the Vatican’s political agenda did not change significantly, and in the immediate postwar period, Pius XII continued to rely on concordat diplomacy and state intervention to combat Communism’s postwar expansion.

Chappel’s book, Catholic Modern: The Challenge of Totalitarianism and the Remaking of the Church (2018), puts forth an argument that looks strikingly different than the ones advanced by Pollard and Chamedes. The challenges posed by Communism and fascism, argues Chappel, caused the Church to advance a vision of modernity that embraced religious pluralism, human rights, and the secular state. These concepts were not accepted reluctantly, argues Chappel, but were positively embraced as a way to ensure the Church’s existence and political influence against the threat of totalitarianism.⁴ His argument challenges the narrative that the Church sought to further embed Church-state relations during the interwar period to ensure that religious liberty, pluralism, and secularism would not lead Europe down the road to Communism.

These conflicting arguments can be partially reconciled by considering whom the authors identify as key actors. Chamedes and Pollard examine the high

³ Ibid., 271.
politics of the papacy, while Chappel focuses on the European Catholic intellectuals who were not part of the Church’s formal hierarchy, but were still engaged with the question of how Catholicism should respond to totalitarianism. Chappel’s emphasis on underground, progressive Catholic intellectual circles is important to this thesis because it is essential to telling the story of how the Vatican came to embrace liberalism at the Second Vatican Council, and, more specifically, how certain theologians, like Henri de Lubac, laid the groundwork for the Church’s revised approach to unbelief.

Chamedes’s book, *A Twentieth Century Crusade: The Vatican’s Battle to Remake Christian Europe* (2019), explores how the Vatican relied on papal diplomacy and lay organizations to safeguard the Church’s existence against both liberal secular and Communist atheist political regimes. What the Vatican sought to achieve under the leadership of Popes Benedict XV (1914-1922), Pius XI (1922-1939), and Pius XII (1939-1958), argues Chamedes, was a Catholic international European order that united states behind Catholic social teaching. With the advent of popular front governments (governments formed with the support of Communist parties) in France and Spain in the late 1930s, the Vatican elevated its anticommunist rhetoric into a fully developed crusade that used what Chamedes calls “concordat diplomacy,” bilateral treaties that allowed the Vatican to expand its influence in secular politics, to ensure that nation states supported the Church’s anticommunist agenda. Her book shows that the Vatican’s

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5 Ibid., 7.
anticommunist crusade fused atheism and Communism, seeing “atheistic Communism” as the largest threat to the Church’s existence. Until the 1960s, the Vatican extensively relied on the support of European states to ward off the Communist threat. Her books closes with the Vatican’s repudiation of Catholic internationalism in the 1960s, citing the Second Vatican Council as the event that transformed the Church’s understanding of its political position from an institution that combatted modernity to an institution that learned how to function within a liberal world order.

Like the works discussed above, this thesis will discuss how the Catholic Church responded to atheism and secularism between 1917 and 1958. However, while these sources focus on the Catholic Church as a European institution, I integrate American Catholicism into the broader story of Catholic anticommmunism between 1917 and 1958. Furthermore, my research adds to this field of scholarship by evaluating the continuities and ruptures in the Church’s response to atheism after Vatican II. Currently, there are no works that examine the Church’s institutional response to atheism, particularly its American form, in the post-conciliar period. The only related work is Stephen Bullivant’s *The Salvation of Atheists and Catholic Dogmatic Theology* (2012), which evaluates how Catholic theology has changed over the course of the twentieth century to conceive of ways in which atheists can attain salvation. Bullivant discusses some of the same theological developments as this thesis, but devotes less attention to

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7 Ibid., 152.
the historical conditions that influenced them or how they impacted the Church’s political and social outlook in the West.

The second body of scholarship to which this thesis connects is on Catholic higher education in twentieth century America. There is minimal scholarship on this subject with the exception of two influential scholars: Phillip Gleason and Alice Gallin. Gleason’s *Contending with Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (1995) describes how, by the 1970s, Catholic higher education transformed from a site of militant opposition to modernity to a secularized education system. Gleason describes how Catholic institutions between 1900 and 1940 actively combatted modernity by closing their campuses off from the intellectual developments that challenged traditional Catholic theology. Traditional Catholic theology, known as Thomism, allowed Catholic institutions to develop a self-enclosed universe that harmonized intellectual growth, morality, and spiritual fulfillment under a unified theological system.\(^8\) This insular educational model was challenged in the postwar period as Catholic students sought to demonstrate the compatibility between their faith and American identity.\(^9\) The changes in Catholic attitudes towards American liberalism, alongside the theological developments of Vatican II, argues Gleason, caused Catholic higher education to embrace modernity and turn away from its Catholic identity by the 1970s. Gleason primarily focuses on institutional changes, such as the appointment of lay board of trustees and the acceptance of

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\(^9\) Ibid., 284.
federal research funding, to show how Catholic higher education secularized its mission in its attempt to achieve academic parity with non-Catholic institutions.

Gallin’s *Negotiating Identity: Catholic Higher Education since 1960* (2000) examines how Catholic colleges and universities’ self-understanding as Catholic institutions experienced ambiguities in the post-conciliar period. Gallin argues that the rise of lay faculty and administrators, combined with an increased reliance on federal funding, challenged the identity of Catholic institutions.\(^{10}\) In addition to considering how the pursuit of academic excellence has complicated Catholic identity, she considers how the intellectual changes prompted by Vatican II have impacted academic curriculums. The positive reappraisal of secular vocations led Catholic institutions to emphasize disciplines other than theology, which, she argues, comprised theology’s central role within Catholic higher education.\(^{11}\) Unlike Gleason, Gallin argues that Catholic higher education has “negotiated” its identity rather than abandoned it. The acceptance of pluralism, academic freedom, and a laicized faculty, she argues, does not preclude Catholicism’s presence on campuses, but redefines the spaces in which it exists.

This thesis is connected to this body of scholarship insofar as it examines Catholic higher education’s efforts to respond to modernity. Whereas Gallin and Gleason look more broadly at how Catholic higher education has changed over the course of the twentieth century, I look specifically at how Catholic higher education changed in response to the threat of American unbelief. I evaluate in

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\(^{10}\) Alice Gallin, *Negotiating Identity: Catholic Higher Education since 1960*, (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 81.

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 20.
greater detail the pedagogic changes that occurred within Philosophy and Theology departments on Catholic campuses, and frame these changes within the context of the Church’s broader engagement with American unbelief. Like Gleason, I argue that Catholic higher education underwent a process of secularization in the aftermath of Vatican II, but I look more specifically at how its response to American unbelief inadvertently secularized the disciplines of Theology and Philosophy.

In scope, this project traces the Church’s response to atheism from its anticommunist crusade (1917-1958) to its engagement with American unbelief in the long 1960s. Unlike other approaches, Vatican II is at the center of this story, rather than its conclusion. It proceeds to situate the changes of Catholic higher education into a broader narrative about how the Church’s revised understanding of American unbelief fundamentally changed the parameters of where and how the Church should respond. This research will add to the existing body of scholarship by approaching the question of how Catholicism reappraised its relationship to modernity through the lens of its engagement with American unbelief.

**Terminology**

There are a number of terms and actors discussed in this thesis that merit preliminary discussion. As the title of this thesis suggests, the object of analysis is Catholic engagement with American unbelief. There are three terms that must be specified: Catholic, engagement, and unbelief. With over one billion members,
the Catholic Church represents a diverse and vast group of individuals whose ideas, attitudes, and opinions about their faith and Church differ dramatically. This thesis does not pretend to represent the viewpoints of all Catholics; rather, it is limited to the perspectives of three main actors within the Catholic Church: the Vatican, progressive American priests, and lay theologians and intellectuals. The Vatican refers to the central government of the Roman Catholic Church, composed of tribunals and offices through which the Pope governs. It is a relevant actor in this thesis because its decision to reevaluate its understanding of atheism and create the Secretariat is what enables American unbelief to become an object of study and engagement for Catholics. Progressive American priests represent a second major subset of actors as the Secretariat for Non-Believers was comprised exclusively of these individuals. Therefore, most Church-sponsored interactions between Catholics and non-believers occurred between progressive priests and non-believers. Lay Catholic theologians and intellectuals, more broadly, comprise the final set of actors in this narrative. Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, lay Catholics (those who are neither clergymen nor members of a religious order) increasingly pursued academic careers as theologians or philosophers. Lay Catholic intellectuals in the United States began to publish theology journals concerned with the same questions with which the institutional Church was wrestling. A number of lay Catholic intellectuals were instrumental in considering how the Catholic Church should engage with American unbelief, especially within a university setting. While I frequently uses the terms priests

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and lay Catholic intellectuals throughout this thesis, I will also use the term “Church” to refer to these groups of actors, as they do represent a part of the Catholic Church and its position.

I have chosen the term engagement as a way to denote broadly all forms of intellectual and social interaction between Catholicism and American unbelief. Engagement suggests a form of contact that is neither explicitly adversarial nor completely harmonious. As will be shown throughout this thesis, engagement between Catholicism and American unbelief was realized through peaceful means. The primary means of engagement was through dialogue, which the Secretariat for Non-Believers defined as a form of communication that aimed for “a movement of rapprochement and a deeper understanding of both sides.”

Dialogue with non-believers occurred primarily in formal academic settings or in academics journals that invited Catholics and non-believers to publish contributions on shared political or intellectual concerns.

This leaves us with the subject of unbelief itself. I have chosen unbelief, instead of atheism, as the primary object of study because of its scope. Unbelief refers to the absence of religious belief, while atheism implies an explicit rejection of the belief in God. The Church recognized that atheism was not the only type of unbelief in the world, particularly in the U.S. context. Unbelief as a term can be used to include various subsets of non-believers (those without faith). These include: atheism - the outright denial of the existence of God; systematic

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atheism – the political manifestations of godless philosophies, such as Marxism; 
agnosticism – the position that one did not know and could not know whether
God existed; indifference – which refers to a position of disinterest in God, rather
than an intellectual rejection of religion; secular humanism – the assertion that
science and human values are sufficient to make sense out of life. In the United
States, secular humanism is repeatedly identified by the Secretariat as a prominent
form of unbelief.

Catholics understood secular humanism to be intricately connected to
continental philosophy, which is a term used to refer to a series of post-
Enlightenment Western philosophical schools and movements associated
primarily with Germany and France. While continental philosophy includes
German idealism and Marxism, the main movements to which Catholics
associated secular humanism were phenomenology and existentialism.
Phenomenology is a philosophical tradition launched in the first half of the
twentieth century by Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-
Ponty, and Jean-Paul Sartre. The discipline studies consciousness as experienced
from the subjective or first person point of view. Existentialism, a mid-20th
century philosophical movement associated with Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de
Beauvoir, and Albert Camus, was similar to phenomenology in that existence was
understood as particular and individual. Both of these schools of thought are
affiliated with secular humanism because they offer theories of knowledge that

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14 These definitions are drawn from Michael Paul Gallagher, *What Are They Saying About
allow for the human life to achieve meaning without making reference to a divine
creator or an objective and unchanging form of human nature.

Chapter Outline

This thesis is divided into three chapters, which address how the Catholic Church
understood and responded to atheism between 1917 and 1958; how the reforms of
Vatican II informed the activities of the Secretariat for Non-Believers in the
United States during the long 1960s; and how the threat of American unbelief,
and the responses of the Catholic Church to that threat, transformed Catholic
higher education. It begins in the interwar period, with the Church’s aggressive
crusade against atheistic Communism after the Russian Revolution and the
establishment of the USSR as the world’s first political regime explicitly
committed to atheism, and closes in the late 1960s, with the transformation of
Catholic higher education into a peaceful, yet largely theoretical, site of
engagement with American unbelief.

The first chapter, “A Battle Begins: Catholic Responses to the Threat of
Atheism,” looks at Catholic responses to atheism from 1917 to 1958 by
examining papal encyclicals on the topic of unbelief; various anticommunist
pamphlets disseminated by the American Church between 1939 and 1958, and
Cross Currents, a progressive, American Catholic theology journal that
challenged the Vatican’s official understanding of atheism. I discuss how the
Vatican’s initial understanding of atheism was linked to Soviet Communism,
which the Vatican viewed as a dangerous political ideology that threatened to
upend the Church’s political and moral authority. Within this framework, the Vatican viewed liberalism, democracy, and secularism as catalysts to Communist ascendancy and consequently positioned itself in staunch opposition to liberal democratic ideals such as ecumenism and religious freedom. In the aftermath of the Russian Revolution – as the social devastation of the interwar period, especially with the coming of the Great Depression in the 1930s, made socialism’s answer to the political and social questions of the day appear increasingly viable across Europe – the Vatican sought to curtail its appeal by launching a full-fledged crusade against Soviet Communism. The Vatican pressured Western states to halt commercial trade with the Soviet Union;\textsuperscript{16} used propaganda to depict Communism as a fundamentally godless force;\textsuperscript{17} and relied on clergymen and laypersons to report on Communist activity in their respective regions.\textsuperscript{18} The Church’s crusade against atheistic Communism moved Communism away from its historical association with liberalism and recast it as the work of Satan himself.\textsuperscript{19} Whereas in the interwar period, the Vatican saw Communism as the logical conclusion of liberalism, in the context of the Cold War, the Vatican began to revise this assessment as their anticommunist agenda increasingly aligned with liberal democracies in the West. This allowed American Catholics to join the anticommunist crusade in the postwar period without disavowing their country’s liberal political system.

\textsuperscript{16} Chamedes, \textit{A Twentieth Century Crusade}, 126.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 152.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 135.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 195.
In the early Cold War period, American Catholics, like their conservative European counterparts, forcefully opposed atheistic Communism. However, unlike them, their commitment to democratic norms and the “American way of life” led them to view liberalism, ecumenism, and religious liberty as safeguards against the Communist threat rather than pathways to it. This position, which allowed for a liberal approach to religious questions within the parameters permitted by the Church, would become essential when the Vatican revised its understanding of, and position on, atheism in the 1960s.

I proceed to examine how Catholic intellectuals in the United States and Europe sought to respond to unbelief. In the United States, I look at how Catholic higher education responded to atheism in the American context between 1940 and 1960. I show that while the majority of Catholic educators argued that Catholic students should be shielded from the intellectual developments behind atheism, a handful argued that Catholics students needed to be familiarized with secular worldviews. Their argument foreshadowed the Vatican’s approach to unbelief in the post-conciliar period and would become essential in shaping the reforms within Catholic higher education during the 1960s. I then conclude the first chapter with a discussion of nouvelle théologie, a French theological movement that sought to bring the Church into contact with the “modern world,” particularly with intellectual worldviews – including Marxism, existentialism, and atheism – that challenged the tenets of Catholicism. Nouvelle théologie was a response to the social and intellectual despair created by World War I and the Great Depression. Working in the 1930s, these theologians, including Yves Cognar and
Henri de Lubac, were among the first Catholic intellectuals to identify atheism in Western Europe as a phenomenon distinct from Communism. Instead, they saw it as a phenomenon that engaged with continental philosophy and social issues in new ways. In the 1950s, their ideas circulated among Catholic intellectual circles in the United States through the publication of *Cross Currents*, a theological journal dedicated to engaging with the secular world and cross-confessional cooperation for the advancement of social justice.

The second chapter, “Courting the Enemy: Vatican II, the Secretariat for Non-Believers, and American Unbelief,” deals with the social and political context that gave birth to the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Believers, focusing in particular on the distinct objectives of its American branch. Through the archives of the U.S. Secretariat for Non-Believers, I analyze the constitutions and decrees from Vatican II and the ways in which these informed the activities of the American Secretariat. I also examine Catholic American theology journals, such as *Cross Currents* and *Continuum* to evaluate how progressive American priests and intellectuals sought to engage with non-believers, intellectually and politically. Finally, I bring in the personal archives of John Courtney Murray, an American theologian. Murray promoted the concept of religious liberty at the Second Vatican Council and served as a member of the U.S. Secretariat. I look at how the rise of Christian Democracy in European politics, combined with the paradoxical decline in religious observance in Western society, created a situation wherein religion was simultaneously more present in public life in liberal democratic regimes, but, at the same time, in retreat on the level of society. As a
response, the Catholic Church convened the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and fundamentally reappraised the Church’s relationship with the modern world.

The Vatican merged the perspective developed by American Catholics a decade earlier – that liberalism, religious liberty, and ecumenism could function as safeguards against atheistic Communism - with the outlook advanced by de Lubac and Cognar, which argued that unbelief was present in the West, but in an entirely different form than in the Soviet Union. Rather than its initial coupling with atheistic Communism, unbelief in the West was now associated with humanism, existentialism, and continental philosophy. The Vatican turned to direct engagement because it realized that it could no longer rely on Western states to realize its social and political vision. As strategies like concordat diplomacy fell out of favor, the Vatican turned to society directly and sought to promote the Catholic worldview through dialogue and persuasion. The Vatican Secretariat for Non-Believers was created to engage with this new form of unbelief directly.

The Secretariat’s understanding of unbelief was developed within a European context. It emphasized the intellectual foundation to unbelief and identified Marxists and secular humanists as the primary archetypes of non-believers. As such, it encouraged regional offices to pursue engagement through academic conferences between educated priests and non-believers. The Secretariat’s origins and activities in the United States were thus grounded in the assumption that American unbelief was analogous to its European counterpart. This led the Secretariat to appoint a number of American priests, educated in
Europe and trained in continental philosophy, to engage with the type of unbeliever the Secretariat expected to find in American universities, namely: secular humanists and Marxists. While a handful of secular humanists and Marxists existed, the Secretariat neglected to identify the counterculture and practical indifference as important drivers of unbelief in American society.

Engagement with American non-believers was further driven by the progressive political orientation of the priests involved with the Secretariat. As progressives, they sought to advance the causes of civil rights and nuclear disarmament, and assumed that American non-believers, as principled humanists, would share their goals. The lack of identifiable non-believers led the American Secretariat to have minimal direct encounters with non-believers, but the Secretariat and Catholic intellectuals continued to imagine engagement with American non-believers through their writings in theological journals. In one instance, for example, *Cross Currents* invited the director of the American Institute for Marxist Studies to write about the ideological combability between Marxist economics and Catholic social teaching.20

Ultimately, I argue, Catholics imagined two responses to American unbelief. The first emphasized an engagement with the intellectual foundations of American unbelief, which they understood to be grounded in continental philosophy. This group also argued that Catholics should seek common ground with non-believers through political collaboration. The second argued that Catholicism was at risk of secularization because Catholic proponents of dialogue

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emphasized religion’s ethical and intellectual values, but neglected defining the centrality of God to their worldview. As such, they contended that Catholics must show American non-believers what God and the paschal mystery added to humanist values. Because the majority of the Secretariat’s members, along with influential Catholic intellectuals, subscribed to the view that engagement should be informed by intellectual and political compatibility rather than theological apologetics, it was the first position that gained dominance in shaping Catholic engagement with American unbelief.

The third chapter, “Sites of Engagement: Catholic Higher Education Responds to Unbelief,” proceeds to explore how the changes discussed in chapter two impacted Catholic higher education, particularly its teaching of theology and philosophy. I examine newspapers from Catholic colleges and universities, specifically Boston College’s The Heights and the Catholic University of the America’s The Tower; progressive Catholic magazines, such as America and Commonweal; and writings from progressive Catholic theology journals. I will show how Catholic educators sought to transform both Catholic higher education and the role of Catholics on the “secular” campus. The secular campus to which Catholic educators spoke was indicative of the secularization of traditionally Protestant universities. By the 1950s, most Protestant universities and colleges abandoned their Christian identity as they admitted students from different religious backgrounds; strengthened social and natural sciences departments; and transformed theology programs into non-confessional religion departments.
With respect to the introduction of secular instructors and programs into Catholic higher education, Catholic campuses across the country built an educational apparatus designed to respond to the type of unbelief prevalent in European circles. As a result, American Catholic colleges and universities restructured their theology departments in two ways. First, theology departments hired laypersons instead of clerics to teach non-confessional and non-apologetic theology and religion courses. Second, philosophy courses found their way into newly created Philosophy departments, which were staffed by lay faculty who often had been educated in Europe and specialized in continental philosophy. These transformations demonstrate how the threat of American unbelief was still viewed through a Eurocentric lens, which caused Catholic educators to overlook the more plausible sources of unbelief in the United States, such as practical indifference and the rise of counterculture. However, rather than address the threat of unbelief, these transformations inadvertently secularized Catholic education by introducing a laicized faculty and a non-confessional curriculum across Catholic campuses nationwide.

With respect to the presence of Catholics on the secular campus, on the other hand, I consider the tensions inherent in entrusting the laity with the task of engagement with American unbelief. I will argue that Catholic professors and students on non-Catholic campuses interacted and engaged with non-believers, but that the Church’s inability to function as a mediating presence within these interactions made it difficult for the Church as an institutional body to understand the nature of unbelief on the secular campus. Its inability to understand the culture
on college campuses undermined its efforts to engage with unbelief and caused the Church to overlook how changing attitudes within youth culture became a major source of American unbelief.

The emergence of unbelief as a social and political phenomenon represented one of the largest challenges faced by the Catholic Church. Over the course of the twentieth century, the Church witnessed the rise of Soviet atheism, a massive decline in church attendance in Europe, and an American youth culture that challenged the essence of Christian morality. When the Church revised its approach to unbelief at the Second Vatican Council, it constructed an approach that would ultimately undermine its authority in the West. Instead of launching an attack against American unbelief or focusing on evangelization, the Church attempted bridge what it saw as a credibility gap between its teaching and the modern world. In doing so, the Church both misapprehended the climate of American unbelief and failed to advance its belief system.

The ineffectiveness of the Church’s diagnosis of and response to unbelief did not just cause its authority to stagnate; it compromised the identity of Catholic higher education and left the American Church completely ill-equipped to respond the major social shifts of the 1970s. The Church’s inability to uphold its identity in this period of cultural change becomes essential to understanding the conservative backlash within the Church today. From renewed efforts at evangelism in the West to pleas to retreat from a society seen in moral decay, engagement with unbelief has sparked internal dissent, the influence of which is felt beyond the boundaries of the Church.
Beginning in the 1930s, every Catholic parish in the United States supplemented their timeless liturgy with a prayer that addressed their own historical moment. Before celebrating the eucharist, congregants knelt beside one another and offered prayers for the reconversion of Soviet Russia. In the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, this act of piety revealed the anxiety and fear that Communism evoked among American Catholics. For the first time in history, atheism had evolved from a heretical opinion expounded by a handful of intellectuals to a well-ordered ideology propagated by an official political regime. The Vatican recognized this transformation long before the Iron Curtain divided the West and East between Christendom and godlessness. For it was not just the persecution of Christians that compelled the Church to condemn atheistic Communism. From its very inception, atheistic Communism was understood to be a mortal enemy of - and in direct competition with – religion in general, and the Catholic Church in particular.

The Ideological Origins of Catholic Opposition to Atheistic Communism

The Church responded so virulently to atheistic Communism, in part, because it was a betrayal of one of Catholicism’s most important virtues: order. The Catholic worldview cherished an ordered and integrated society united through its understanding of human nature, and Communism was seen as a radical movement
that undermined the pillars upon which Catholic civilization was built. As one Catholic pamphlet put it, “Communism is incurably revolutionary;”\(^\text{21}\) its only logical conclusion was the collapse of government, disintegration of the family unit, and desecration of traditions that had historically ensured the preservation of Catholic piety and Church authority. Indeed, the establishment of atheistic Communism not only physically restricted the Church’s sphere of influence within the Soviet Union, but also undermined its spiritual authority in the West. The Communist project potentially offered Western intellectuals and societies, especially workers, a model of a utopian order without God and Church. Communism, as the Church understood it, preached a gospel of deliverance and salvation achieved by human progress alone.\(^\text{22}\) The Church recognized that Communism was not merely a question of labor reform and social justice, but one of religion and atheism. As Dostoevsky had once put it, it was “the question of the tower of Babel built without God, not to mount to heaven from earth but to set up heaven on earth.”\(^\text{23}\) If the West looked to Soviet Communism as a model for establishing “heaven on earth,” the Church stood to lose its authority over millions of souls.

The threat posed by atheistic Communism was particularly salient in interwar Europe. World War I and the Great Depression catapulted the continent into a period of general instability, which made Communism appear as an

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increasingly-viable political system. The Vatican worried that the current economic situation would devolve into a world revolution to the Soviet Union’s benefit.\textsuperscript{24} The rise of Communist parties across Europe, and the strength of the Communist International (or Comintern), a Soviet-directed international organization that advocated world Communism, turned the universal aspirations of Soviet Communism from a theoretical possibility to an imminent threat. In 1931, the Vatican published \textit{Quadragesimo anno}, a papal encyclical that ascribed blame to liberalism for the current economic crisis and denounced it as a forbearer to Communism. The encyclical was an outgrowth and expanded version of the teaching in the Syllabus of Errors, an document issues by Pope Pius IX in 1864, which succinctly condemned liberalism, Communism, and socialism in one sentence.\textsuperscript{25} In the encyclical, Pope Pius XI (1922-1939) argued that liberalism had allowed economic life to become “tragically hard, inexorable, and cruel.”\textsuperscript{26} Liberalism had proven itself unable to solve the social problems created by its economic system, and promoted an ethos of greed and rampant individualism that had created one of the severest economic crises in history. Moreover, the encyclical stated, “let all remember that Liberalism is the father of this Socialism that is pervading morality and culture and that Bolshevism will be its heir.”\textsuperscript{27} In effect, the encyclical argued that the historical and ideological bonds linking liberalism with Communism made it impossible for a person to denounce

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., sec. 122.
Communism, but embrace liberalism. The Vatican held liberalism in contempt because of its association with secularism. Liberalism divorced politics from spiritual authority and consequently jeopardized Christian morality and piety. Thus, the Vatican did not perceive liberalism as a cure to socialism, but rather as socialism’s cause and evil twin.

The increasingly unstable political conditions in Europe led the Vatican to heighten its attack against Soviet Communism. In 1930, Pius XI appointed Eugenio Pacelli as the Vatican’s Secretary of State. Pacelli rejected the possibility of recognizing the legitimacy of Bolshevik rule; pressured European countries to halt commercial trade with the Soviet Union; and asked clergy to inform the Vatican about Communist party activities within their respective geographic regions. Beyond formal diplomatic policy, the Vatican used propaganda to disseminate a new framework for understanding Communism as a fundamentally atheistic force. Throughout the 1930s, the Vatican sponsored anticommunist novel competitions, traveling exhibitions, and radio programming that all stressed one message: Communism was aimed at destroying Christianity and promoting atheism. As historian Giuliana Chamedes shows, Vatican anticommunist propaganda was frequently designed around binaries: Moscow/Rome, godlessness/religion, darkness/light, chaos/order, violence/peace. For instance, one exhibition had attendees enter through a dark and chaotic room filled with Communist propaganda before entering a light and clean room decorated with

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29 Ibid., 135.
beautiful religious icons and well-designed publications.\textsuperscript{30} By staging the contrast in such Manichean terms, the Vatican casted Soviet Communism as evil incarnate.\textsuperscript{31} Such a framing made it impossible for a Catholic, or any God-fearing individual, to support Communist politics. To do so would be to act directly against God, for Communism was inseparable from atheism.

In 1934, the Vatican created the Secretariat on Atheism, the mission of which was to eviscerate atheistic Communism. The Secretariat served as a symbolic response to the Bolshevik Party, institutionally mirroring the party’s Central Committee.\textsuperscript{32} The Vatican saw the Comintern as the “only dynamic and truly international organization, other than the Catholic Church,”\textsuperscript{33} so the creation of the Secretariat served to globalize the Catholic response to atheism by promoting the Catholic Church as the only international power capable of curtailing the universal aspirations of Soviet Communism. The Secretariat worked closely with Catholic civil society organizations to make the mobilization against Communism the center of Catholic lay life. It published a monthly journal in French, Spanish, German, and English and used radio, literature, and traveling exhibitions to disseminate a vision of Communism that was consistent with \textit{Quadragesimo anno}. The Secretariat presented Communism as the logical consequence of liberalism. It argued that liberal democracies were unable to

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 163.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 147.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 136.
\textsuperscript{33} Quoted in ibid., 136.
respond adequately to the threat of global Communism, leaving the Holy See as the only institution qualified to respond.\textsuperscript{34}

The advent of the Popular Front governments in Spain and France, which were formed with Communist support, brought the Communist threat closer to home and made it assume a particularly perilous form.\textsuperscript{35} As a response, the Vatican published the encyclical, \textit{Divini redemptoris}, denouncing “atheistic Communism” on March 19, 1937. The publication date was not without significance: March 19\textsuperscript{th} was the feast day of St. Joseph, whose patronage Pius XI frequently invoked in the crusade to preserve the “Christian Social Order” against Communism.\textsuperscript{36} The encyclical was a comprehensive analysis and refutation of Communist ideology. It began with an examination of Communism’s Hegelian and Darwinian roots, proceeded to examine the reasons for Communism’s success, and concluded with a restatement of Catholic social teaching as the only adequate response to Communism. The encyclical was not a condemnation of the Soviet regime’s persecution of Catholics, but a comprehensive refutation of Communism in both theory and practice.

The central pillar of \textit{Divini redemptoris} was the fusion of atheism and Communism. Unlike \textit{ Quadragesimo anno}, which strongly condemned Communism but made no mention of atheism, \textit{Divini redemptoris} used the phrase “atheistic Communism” to denote all forms of Communism. The term reflected the encyclical’s larger claim about Communism - namely, that at the root of

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Ibid., 147.
\item Ibid., 273.
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Communism was an atheistic-materialist base that threatened the Christian social order by denying the existence of God. The encyclical depicted the divide between Communism and Catholicism as a “battle joined by the powers of darkness against the very idea of Divinity.” 37 The language of *Divini redemptoris* elevated the Catholic opposition to communism to a crusade. It repeatedly made reference to violent images with the use of words like “battle,” “war,” “fight,” and “blood.” 38 This moving of Communism away from its historical genealogy in liberalism and recasting it as the work of Satan himself had significant consequences. Among them, it allowed American Catholics, who, as Americans, had thus far had an ambivalent relationship with Catholic opposition to modernity because of their commitment to a liberal democratic system, to now play a pivotal role in the crusade against Communism.

**Joining the Ranks: American Catholics and the Anticommunist Crusade**

The American Catholic Church occupied a precarious position in the interwar period. It had historically been on the periphery of Vatican politics: a minority religion in a country the Vatican viewed with disdain. In the 1930s, Pius XI held the American creed of liberal individualism and free market economics responsible for the global economic crisis. 39 Yet, he also recognized the changing importance of America in world affairs and therefore of the new value of American Catholics in the Church. By the end of World War I, American

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37 Pius XI, *Divini Redemptoris*, no.72.
38 Chamedes, *A Twentieth Century Crusade*, 189.
39 Ibid., 126.
Catholics were making the biggest contributions to the financing of the Vatican, causing Pius XI to appoint three new American cardinals in 1922. The increased influence given to American Catholicism was also a consequence of its vigilant opposition to Communism. Unlike in Europe, American Catholic workers still strongly identified with their faith. Although the threat of Communism was far less imminent in the United States, the American Catholic Church vigorously prevented Communism from gaining appeal among its congregants. Pius XI was so impressed with their response to Communism that he sent Joseph Ledit, a priest who had been deported from the Soviet Union, to the United States to learn how American Catholics were responding to Communism. The Secretariat on Atheism published an English-language edition of its monthly journal, even including a few variations to adapt its contents to the American context.

The U.S. Catholic press made it a point to reprint what radicals were saying about the Church, while Church bulletin boards were filled with pamphlets like, “The Socialist Conspiracy Against Religion.” In 1935, the Catholic War Veterans, with the approval of the pope, launched their own anticommunist group called the “Father Pro Clubs.” Named after a priest killed by Mexican revolutionaries in 1926, the organization called Pro “the first martyr killed by Communists in America.” The organization distributed educational materials to parishes across the country to inform Catholics about the anti-clerical and anti-

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42 Chamedes, “A Twentieth Century Crusade,” 126.
43 Ibid., 192.
religious stance of revolutionary ideologies. In one pamphlet addressed to Catholic high school students, the organization identified “the denial of God and the suppression of religion, especially the Catholic Church” as Communism’s primordial concern.\textsuperscript{46} Moreover, the pamphlet stated that Communists used the working class “to pit the worker against the boss, to belittle the government, and to increase human misery in general.”\textsuperscript{47} Overall, Catholic anticommunist propaganda during the interwar period offered a twofold critique of Communism: first, that it denied individuals the right to religion, and second, that it did not actually represent the best interests of workers.

The Catholic anticommunist crusade leading up to World War II exacerbated an already present divide between Catholics and Protestants in the United States. Catholic support for Franco during the Spanish Civil War reinforced the perception that Catholics were hostile to democracy and sympathetic to fascism.\textsuperscript{48} In a collective letter, American bishops expressed their sympathy and admiration for Franco and his fight against Communism, while the Catholic laity formed lobbies to sway congressional opinion on Spain and influence political asylum policies regarding Spanish refugees.\textsuperscript{49} What was worse was that American Catholics traced Communism’s origins to the Protestant Reformation. Speaking at a Catholic anticommunist convention in 1937, John T. McNicholas, the Archbishop of Cincinnati, argued that the root of Communism

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{49} Chamedes, \textit{A Twentieth Century Crusade}, 182.
was in the errors of the Reformation, which infected the world with the belief that
the Bible should be the sole rule of faith; that civil authority should be in
command of religion; and that the legitimacy of “a supreme religious authority”
(the Church) could be repudiated. For Catholics, the Protestant division between
Church and state, between spiritual and secular rule, released politics from all
moral and transcendent authority, thus giving birth to atheism and Communism.
This argument not only distanced Catholicism from Protestant confessions, but
also from American democratic norms. The principles of religious liberty and the
separation of church and state were viewed with skepticism at best and severe
disdain at worst.

The American alliance with the Soviet Union during World War II led to
an even greater opposition to Communism among American Catholics. At a time
when it was impolitic to criticize Stalin or remind the public of the Soviet Union’s
Communist political system, American Catholics persisted in vocal criticism.
When Stalin ostensibly freed the Russian Orthodox Church in September 1943 to
resume its traditional role in society, Fulton Sheen, a famous priest and radio host,
quipped, "What were his [Metropolitan Sergey, the primate of the Church] first
words? Thanks to God? No, he asked for a second front." Here, Sheen was
referring to Stalin’s decision to reestablish the Orthodox Church Patriarchate and
allow the institution a limited role in Soviet life, within the parameters set by the
government. Churches reopened across the Soviet Union; the number of clergy

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50 Endres, “An International Dimension to American Anticommunism,” 94.
51 Udi Greenberg, “Catholics, Protestants, and the Tortured Path to Religious Liberty,” *Journal of
grew steadily; theological schools and monasteries began to function again; and
the Orthodox Church was allowed to publish an official journal. In return for
these privileges, the church was expected to endorse the war effort and call on the
Soviet people to resist the Nazis. Just days after Stalin appointed Metropolitan
Sergey as the Patriarch of the Orthodox Church, the Patriarch gave a speech in
which he called upon the Allies for increased assistance in the fight against
fascism. American Catholics viewed Stalin’s concessions to the Orthodox
Church as insincere and insufficient, causing them to view America’s alliance
with the USSR as shortsighted and naïve. For them, the success of the war would
be measured by what would happen in Poland and Lithuania, two Catholic
countries that had fallen under the Soviet sphere of influence during the war.

The Yalta Conference, a meeting between the three allies that effectively
permitted the Soviet Union to take control of the Baltic territories and Poland,
confirmed American Catholics’ worst fears. Catholic newspapers were quick to
denounce the conference as a sellout. They ran headlines like “President and
Churchill throw 9,000,000 Catholic Poles to Reds.” Stalin’s persecution of
Catholics in Eastern Europe mobilized the American Catholic community to take
action. When Archbishop Alojzije Stepnac, the prelate of the Yugoslav Church,
was sentenced to sixteen years in prison in September 1946, forty thousand
Catholics assembled in Philadelphia to demand his release. Within a year, New

53 Philip Walters, “The Russian Orthodox Church and the Soviet State,” The Annals of the
American Academy for Political and Social Science 483 (Jan., 1986), 139.
56 Ibid., 23.
57 Ibid., 23.
York’s Cardinal Spellman raised four million dollars to build the Archbishop Stepinac High School to bring attention to the persecution of Catholics in the Communist world.\textsuperscript{58} American bishops, meanwhile, lobbied the U.S. government to reverse its foreign policy toward the Soviet Union in response to the Potsdam Conference, which, in effect, ended recognition of the existing Polish government-in-exile.\textsuperscript{59} Local dioceses choreographed mass protests, calling for the removal of Soviet troops from Eastern Europe.\textsuperscript{60} The crisis abroad gave rise to American Catholic spokesmen, who warned Americans of “those whose hearts bleed for Red fascism.”\textsuperscript{61}

**The Americanization of Catholic Anticommunism, 1945-1960**

By the end of World War II, the American Catholic community had mobilized into an effective anticommunist bloc. However, it was not until the onset of the Cold War that nationwide anticommunism opened an entryway for Catholics, still perceived as an insular minority group, to assimilate into mainstream American culture.\textsuperscript{62} As anticommunism became a chief feature of American national identity, American Catholics departed from the Vatican’s approach to combatting atheistic Communism. While Pope Pius XII continued to interpret liberalism, religious freedom, and Protestantism as stepping stones to Communism and atheism, American theologians began to identify liberalism and Christian

\textsuperscript{58} Chamedes, *A Twentieth Century Crusade*, 244.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 244.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 244.
\textsuperscript{61} This was a comment made by Fulton Sheen on his radio show, *The Catholic Hour*. He was warning his listeners to be wary of fellow Americans who were sympathetic to Communism. Quoted in Powers, “American Catholics and Catholic Americans,” 24.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 29.
ecumenism as safeguards against atheistic Communism rather than pathways to it. This revised version of anticomununism gained traction among lay Catholics and the clergy thanks to the efforts of figures like Fulton Sheen (1895-1979), a priest and one of the most prominent Catholic public figures of the Cold War era, and the Jesuit theologian, John Courtney Murray (1903-1967).

Sheen hosted a regular radio program and television show between 1930 and 1957, and used his platform to develop a form of patriotism for American Catholics that involved supporting religious liberty and liberalism at home and condemning the repression of religious liberty in totalitarianism abroad. Sheen situated his anticomununism in an ecclesial foundation, whereby he grounded American citizenship in terms of one’s membership in a religious congregation. Beginning with the observation that America was a liberal democracy, Sheen argued that the nation depended on having virtuous people for its own legitimacy. No people unaided by religious instruction, Sheen argued, were sufficiently moral enough to establish a government capable of protecting liberties, with religious liberty above all others. An irreligious people would create a government that they hoped would feed them, no matter the cost to their personal liberties. But this kind of government, Sheen argued, inevitably tyrannized the people, becoming

“the spirit of the anti-Christ.” Sheen’s argument was essentially an extension of the one used to unify countless Protestant denominations in the nineteenth century - that the differences between denominations mattered less than the similarities across them. Sheen departed from the Vatican’s official stance in not just arguing that religious liberty was something to be tolerated, but that it was the fundamental condition that had to exist in order to safeguard a nation from the secularist temptations of Communism.

Although Sheen’s approach to combating Communism diverged from the Vatican’s, there was a continuity between the Vatican’s critique and his own understanding of Communism. Sheen viewed Communism as a historical consequence of a corrupted Western moral order. “Communism,” he argued, “is as related to our Western civilization as putrefaction is to disease.” A liberal economic order which prized profit over people, combined with the birth of secular philosophies, created a “bourgeois society that suffered from being un-Christian.” Such an argument was consistent with the Vatican’s analysis of atheistic Communism in Divini redemptoris, in which Pius XI argued that the “religious and moral destitution in which wage-earners had been left by liberal economics,” combined with active laicism, has left the West “de-Christianized.”

Sheen likewise recognized how the gradual de-Christianization of the West brought on by laissez-faire capitalism and secularism had left its civilization

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65 Quoted in ibid., 48.
66 Fulton J. Sheen, Communism and the Crisis of the West, (Pekin, IN: Refuge of Sinners Publishing, 1951), 49.
67 Ibid., 54.
68 Pius XI, Divini Redemptoris, sec. 16.
vulnerable to the economic and moral order envisioned by Communism. Where Sheen - and subsequently American Catholicism - departed from the Vatican's official stance, was in reconciling liberalism with Catholicism. By arguing that American democracy rested upon having virtuous (i.e. religious) citizens, Sheen was able to create a theology that refuted the Vatican’s notion that liberalism and the separation of church and state invariably led to atheism and Communism.

While Fulton Sheen convinced the public that religious liberty and liberalism protected the United States from drifting towards Communism and atheism, John Courtney Murray undertook a scholastic endeavor aimed at reconciling the institution of the Catholic Church with religious liberty. Murray’s initial interest in the question of religious liberty came from his desire to form an interfaith coalition for social justice in the 1940s. His early writings on ecumenism, social justice, and public theology drew him into internal Catholic doctrinal debates on the question of religious liberty. Murray did not feel the need to look towards the Soviet Union to grapple with the problem of atheism in his time. The “secularist crisis” - a word that appeared frequently in his writings - meant for Murray an “onrushing tide of religious indifference that threatened to empty Western civilization of its spiritual roots and put in its place a shallow humanism that could only lead to ennui and despair.” Even without the threat of Communism, he believed that the secularist crisis in the West had effected a social transformation that made the modern era completely alien to the believer. As Murray lamented,

The world today is alienated from the Church. It stands over against the Church as a closed system of life. And the faith of the ordinary Christian gets hardly any support from his environment. On the contrary, his greatest temptation is to live in the world, over against the Church.\textsuperscript{70} 

The alienation of the world from the Church formed the backdrop for his writings on the relationship between Church and state, ecumenism, and religious liberty.

Murray was adept in identifying the unique peculiarities of American secularism: it was neither anti-religious like the Soviet version nor as ideological as its European counterpart. Instead, the United States increasingly fell victim to a strain of secularism that would remove religious values from the public square as a consequence of Americans’ practical, meaning businesslike rather than philosophical, orientation. America’s “furious building” of a “City upon a hill” enclosed a vacuum of “intellectual, moral, and spiritual vacuities.”\textsuperscript{71} Recovering the role of religion in American society, Murray argued, required the Catholic conception of Christendom to include Protestantism. To respond to the secular crisis, Catholics and Protestants needed to build a relationship that “transcends a mere civic unity because its bond is religious - faith in God and love of His law.”\textsuperscript{72} Murray’s conception of Christian ecumenism was not based on political expediency, but on a genuine recognition of Protestantism’s fraternity with Catholicism. A “spiritual effort exerted on society from the bottom up” was the only thing that could “reverse the secularist drift.”\textsuperscript{73}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{70} Quoted in ibid., 10.
  \item \textsuperscript{71} Quoted in ibid., 16.
  \item \textsuperscript{73} Quoted in Greenberg, “Catholics, Protestants and the Tortured Path to Religious Liberty,” 470.
\end{itemize}
Although Murray’s understanding of ecumenism would come to be integral to the Vatican’s response to secularism after the Second Vatican Council, his initial scholarship on the subject was met with severe backlash. In his 1949 address, “On the Ecumenical Movement,” Pius XII prohibited Catholics from participating in ecumenical gatherings, even those intended to work “against the enemies of God who are now leagued together.”\textsuperscript{74} The following year, he censored ecumenist publications and ordered their removal from seminaries and libraries. Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviana, Secretary of the Holy Office, resurrected the prewar equation of Protestantism with Communism to denounce the ecumenical efforts of Catholic theologians.\textsuperscript{75} “We deplore and condemn,” the Cardinal said, “the calamitous error which invents an imaginary Church, a society nurtured and shaped by charity, with which it disparagingly contrasts another society which it calls juridical.”\textsuperscript{76} Under the leadership of Pius XII, the Vatican remained indifferent to the Catholic pleas to reform the Church’s approach to secularism. But over the course of the 1950s, as the Vatican continued to pursue a hardline approach that rejected liberalism, ecumenism, and religious liberty, social and political factors in the U.S., related to public education and racial politics, developed to facilitate American Catholic support for ecumenism.

American Catholics and Protestants increasingly found common ground, especially on religion’s place in public education and racial politics. Supreme Court rulings such as McCollum v. Board of Education (1948), which sought to

\textsuperscript{74} Quoted in ibid, 473.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 473.
\textsuperscript{76} Quoted in ibid., 473.
prohibit religious teachings in schools, led to joint protests and advocacy
groups. Likewise, mainline Protestants found allies among the Catholic clergy
on the issue of civil rights. When Catholic bishops in New Orleans and
Washington D.C. ended segregation in their churches, Protestant theologians, like
Reinhold Niebuhr, called them partners in rejuvenating “Christian justice.”

These social and political factors enabled American Catholic support for
ecumenism to persist despite the Vatican’s official decrees on the matter. As
Murray asserted in a private meeting with Protestant and Catholic clergy, it
seemed obvious that ecumenism was the only way to prevent “a victory for
secularism.”

The political contours of American Catholics’ response to atheism and
secularism went through three iterations between 1917 and 1960. The first phase
can be understood as a faithful adherence to the Vatican’s anticommunist crusade.
During this period (1917-1945), American Catholics were instructed to reject
Communism because of its atheistic and anti-Church characteristics. American
Catholics and theologians largely viewed atheism as an external threat that would
be brought about by the ascendency of Communism. Liberalism, religious
freedom, and the separation of church and state were understood to be pathways
to Communism and atheism. The onset of the Cold War introduced a new period
in the American Catholic response to atheism. During this period (1945-1960),
the Americanization of Catholic anticommunism, thanks to the efforts of Fulton

77 Ibid., 474.
78 Ibid., 474.
79 Ibid., 475.
Sheen, led American Catholics to view liberalism and religious liberty as integral to combating Communist and atheist ideologies.

John Courtney Murray was instrumental in arguing that ecumenism was a necessary condition for the preservation of Christendom in the West. His argument was groundbreaking not only because it was among the first to accept Protestants as true Christians, but because it disconnected atheism from the threat of Communism. Murray, aware of the peculiarities of American religion, identified a form of unbelief that emerged without a political attachment to Communism. Before this, the Vatican understood atheism to be a threat inextricably bound to the ideology of Communism. Outside of its political context, atheism had yet to be considered a serious threat to Catholicism. But studying atheism in the American context led Murray to imagine a form of unbelief that had no connection to radical politics. Americans were not immune to atheism simply because they opposed Communism; atheism and religious indifference were phenomena that did not need to be disseminated by a political apparatus to have salience among a population. American Catholicism’s innovative approach to responding to and understanding Communism, alongside distinct forms of unbelief, would become instrumental in shaping Catholic thinking on these issues during the Second Vatican Council, which will be discussed further in chapter two.
“A Fortress of Defense:” The Catholic University in an Age of Unbelief

Whether real or imagined, unbelief appeared as an existential threat to Christendom, even within the boundaries of the United States. As Murray understood it, the Catholic university faced a decision in the wake of the “secularist drift:” was it “a citadel, a fortress of defense, an asylum of escape?” or would it be “at the center of the present cultural crisis?” This very question was considered at the symposium on “Man and Modern Secularism - The Conflict of the Two Cultures Considered Especially in Relation to Education,” held in 1939. Sponsored by the National Catholic Alumni Federation (NCAF), the symposium intended to highlight the conflict between two cultures, secular and Christian. To that end, fifteen Catholic academics discussed the origins and developments of secularism, its exponents among American educators, its challenge to American culture, its effects on life and education, and the Catholic reaction against it.

The convening of such an event was significant in the history of American Catholic higher education. For most of their existence, Catholic universities in the U.S. functioned as culturally-isolated institutions designed to educate a community excluded from mainstream (i.e. Protestant) universities. The function of the Catholic university was to reproduce a high standard of belief, not to engage in broader debates surrounding American culture. It was no coincidence, however, that the NCAF decided to convene the symposium just two years after

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the Vatican launched its assault on atheistic Communism. “The preachers of Communism” Pius XI had warned in Divini redemptoris, “take advantage of the lack of orientation of modern agnostic science in order to burrow into the universities.”

Believing Communism to be effective in coopting academics to disseminate its ideas – atheism chief among them – Catholics educators argued that they could use their own institutions to advance Catholic culture by instituting a rigorous theological education.

The symposium on “Man and Modern Secularism” proposed the teaching of theology as a “new and concrete expression of integral Catholic educational life and an indispensable aid to the apostolate of Catholic action.” Here, it is important to note the distinction between theology and religious education. At most Catholic universities, undergraduates were required to enroll in religious education classes that were apologetic and catechizing in nature rather than scholarly and systematic. In effect, college-level courses on Catholicism continued to reflect the dogmatic and instructive nature of catechism classes taught at Sunday school. Students were passive receptacles of a prescribed set of religious instruction; they were not expected to approach the study of religion as an academic or critical endeavor. At the symposium, Gerald B. Phelan of the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies in Toronto argued that theology understood in the “scientific” sense should be taught for three reasons: first, because it was the highest and noblest of sciences; second, because it was

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83 Pius XI, Divini Redemptoris, sec. 15.
84 Quoted in Gleason, Contending with Modernity, 164.
85 Ibid., 163.
essential for the proper ordering of knowledge gained from other sciences; and third, because the special needs of the times made theological formation indispensable for educated Catholics.\textsuperscript{86}

The special needs of the times were, of course, the rise of atheism and secularism. In the minds of Catholics concerned with this problem, atheism – even its form within the United States – was a “dynamic anti-Christianity” supported by the resources of scientific and academic scholarship.\textsuperscript{87} Countering such an ideology required Catholic universities to provide students with a set of knowledge capable of rebutting the arguments espoused by atheism. While the teaching of theology was the most substantive and widely-accepted innovation proposed at the symposium, attendees highlighted the ambiguities and difficulty of implementing such a plan.

William McGucken, a Jesuit priest and specialist on the philosophy of Catholic education, raised the issue of teaching theology to students who did not have a thorough grasp of the philosophy that supported Catholic theology.\textsuperscript{88} McGucken identified a conflict that would come to prevent the realization of Phelan’s proposal by calling attention to the problematic relationship between philosophy and theology. As a consequence of the Thomistic synthesis, whereby Christian theology integrated Aristotelian philosophy into its own self-understanding, Catholic universities grouped the discipline of philosophy within the department of theology. The result of such a decision complicated the matter

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 164.
\textsuperscript{87} Murray, “Reversing the Secularist Drift.”
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 165.
of teaching students Catholic theology courses when they had yet to study the philosophy upon which Thomistic theology was built. It also left Catholic universities ill-equipped to study the philosophical developments upon which modern atheism was built. The absence of philosophy departments in most Catholic universities meant that there were few Catholic specialists in continental philosophy. Without a sufficient understanding of Marxism, phenomenology, and existentialism, Catholic scholars and educators were impotent in their attempts to create a theology curriculum capable of responding to the ideological phenomenon of atheism.

The symposium’s proposal to teach systematic theology to lay students was complicated further by an issue raised by John Courtney Murray. Murray asked whether systematic theology would really make laypersons effective in combatting the errors of secularism. Would teaching undergraduates a scientific theology that demonstrates the “truth from the revealed Word of God” truly “build up the Body of Christ” through action that is “characteristically social?”

Undergraduate theology courses capable of combatting secularism needed to focus on the “livability of the Word as God…in other words, that our courses of theology must be wholly oriented towards life.” Murray’s argument – that theology courses needed to relate the truths of Catholicism to problems encountered in the secular world – set off a pedagogical debate that lasted well into the 1950s.

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90 Ibid., 155.
The responses to Phelan’s proposal to teach theology to undergraduates and Murray’s proposal to only teach theology courses capable of responding to the issues of the layperson evolved into a contest between theology and religious education. For the next two decades (1940-1960), Catholic universities continued to give priority to the affective, rather than cognitive dimension of religious education. For the next two decades, Catholic universities continued to give priority to the affective, rather than cognitive dimension of religious education.

Put simply, inculcating a high standard of belief continued to be the main goal of theology departments at Catholic universities. Catholic undergraduates were not expected to understand the intricacies of theological discourse that would have allowed them to articulate their religion systematically. Instead, they were shielded from the intellectual developments occurring in disciplines that challenged their faith. Although the ostensible threat of secularism in mid-twentieth century America caused Catholic universities to remain an “asylum of escape,” the 1939 symposium on “Man and Modern Secularism” at least called attention to alternative approaches to combating secularism. The proposals to teach systematic theology courses, introduce robust philosophy departments, and prepare laypersons to combat the specific issue of secularism, while not implemented, did awaken a generation of Catholic educators to these problems. Educators would come to advocate for these changes in the years following the Second Vatican Council.

While a perceived rise in domestic unbelief caused Catholic universities to consider revising their curriculums, the threat of atheistic Communism abroad, combined with the postwar experience of Americanization, caused Catholic

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91 Gleason, Contending with Modernity, 258.
universities to widen student participation in American democratic norms through Cold War initiatives aimed at Soviet atheism. Thanks to the GI Bill and substantial investment in higher education, the number of Catholic colleges and universities increased by from 163 to 201; faculties grew from 13,142 to 24,255, and enrollments more than doubled from 162,000 to 426,000 between 1945 and 1960. World War II not only had a massive impact on the institutional size of Catholic higher education, but also deeply affected the thinking of Catholic educators. As the United States witnessed an ideological emphasis on democracy and the “American way of life,” Catholic educators sought to highlight its compatibility with Catholicism.

The onset of the Cold War provided a perfect entry point for Catholic participation in American democracy. Catholic opposition to atheistic Communism, educators argued, was entirely compatible with the American attack on Soviet Communism. Catholic universities subsequently formed student organizations aimed at combating Communism abroad. In 1946, the International Union of Students (IUS), a newly-founded organization in Prague, which was communist-leaning in orientation, allocated twenty-five spots to American students for the organization’s inaugural convention. The United States Student Assembly (USSA), the American committee responsible for filling the spots, allocated four of them to members of the National Catholic Youth Conference (NYCY).

In a piece titled, “Operation University,” Murray - at the time an

92 Ibid., 209.
93 Ibid., 211.
94 Ibid., 214.
adviser to *Pax Romana*, the international Catholic student organization funded by the Vatican - endorsed Catholic participation in the assembly, writing that “there is no doubt that Moscow understands the power of youth.” Catholic youth, he argued, needed to be used to combat Communist influence in international student movements. Under Murray’s guidance, the selected Catholic students attended a ten day orientation program in which they heard from specialists on Communism, analyzed the agenda of the Prague meeting, and learned about other international student organizations attending the event.

The Catholic delegates’ involvement in the conference represented a major turning point in how American Catholics approached their interactions with Communists. Although the delegates were convinced that the conference was “Communist inspired and Communist dominated,” they argued that American Catholic students could no longer “isolate themselves from the rest of the student world.” The delegates’ willingness to engage with an ideological camp diametrically opposed to their faith diverged from the Vatican’s injunction to combat, rather than work alongside, Communists. The delegates wanted “not an anticommmunist crusade…but a positive, constructive approach to the problems of modern living in each particular environment.” The delegates’ critical treatment of “red-baiting” and their willingness to approach Communists in good faith set a precedent for the subsequent generation of American Catholic students and

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96 Ibid., 28.
98 Quoted in ibid., 214.
99 Quoted in ibid., 214.
educators who would seek to treat atheists and non-believers as partners rather than enemies.

*Nouvelle Théologie: Encounters with European Atheism*

While American theologians and universities remained ill-equipped to study the intellectual origins of atheism, a number of French theologians, who were part of the *nouvelle théologie* movement, began to produce robust analyses of the philosophies that gave birth to modern atheism. *Nouvelle théologie* was an influential French reform movement that developed in the 1930s and 1940s. Composed primarily of Jesuits and Dominicans, *nouvelle théologie* was a response to a society in social and political crisis. It represented a generation of theologians who grew up among the carnage of World War I and witnessed the cultural and political effects of Marxism, fascism, and existentialism. These theologians sought to build bridges with modernity by utilizing the historical method, aspects of phenomenology, and social engagement.¹⁰⁰

At the heart of their enterprise was the belief that Neo-Scholasticism was strangling authentic Christian thought and had caused the crisis between the Church and the modern world.¹⁰¹ Neo-Scholasticism was a twentieth century theological movement aimed at reviving medieval theology, particularly the works of Thomas Aquinas, and applying them to the issues of the modern age. It represented the dominant school of thought at seminaries, and carried the

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¹⁰¹ Ibid., 3.
approval of the Vatican. The theologians associated with *nouvelle théologie* denounced Neo-Scholasticism as a static form of thought that was incapable of responding to the cultural dissolution with which their generation wrestled. They turned instead to Hegel, insisting that Catholic theologians must understand the spirit of their age through a deep historical, anthropological, and socio-phenomenological analysis.\(^{102}\) Theology, they argued, could only be real if it was contemporary, or attentive to the concrete. In effect, they identified the relation between the historical character of human existence and the supposedly unchanging truth of Christian revelation as the central issue confronting Catholic theology.

Atheism became a crucial focal point for study. It was a phenomenon that could not be explained by Neo-Scholasticism, yet desperately needed examination. There were two theologians in particular who were instrumental in creating a new Catholic approach to understanding unbelief. The first was Yves Cognar, a Dominican theologian. Cognar argued that the Church was “isolated from the movement of history,” for it had “enclosed within itself,” leaving an “immense segment of human activity…modern life with its science, its miseries, its grandeurs” without the “Incarnation of the Word; the Church has not given her soul to this body.”\(^{103}\) This isolation, he argued, left the Church unaware of the threat of unbelief. In 1935, he published an article in *La Vie Intellectuelle* entitled “The Reasons for Unbelief in Our Times.” Commenting on recent studies of the French working class, Cognar explored the social origins of unbelief. He

\(^{102}\) Ibid., 2.

\(^{103}\) Quoted in ibid., 167.
identified two main factors: the secularizing processes of modern society that have forced a separation between faith, and life and the Church’s reaction to these processes. As he put it, “She [the Church] fell back upon her positions, put up barricades and assumed an attitude of defense.”

Cognar was one of the first theologians to argue that the Catholic Church’s behavior was, in part, to blame for the rise of atheism in Western Europe and the Soviet Union. Instead of ascribing blame solely to the heretical writings of Marx and Lenin, Cognar argued that the Church was at fault due to its indifference towards the working class and economic issues.

While Cognar explained the rise of unbelief by identifying the Church’s failings and isolation from the world, Henri de Lubac, a French Jesuit theologian, argued that atheism could be explained by its positive attributes. In 1944, de Lubac published *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, which explored the mindset of atheists through an examination of Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, and Comte. He juxtaposed those individuals with Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard to show thinkers who explored atheism and overcame it. De Lubac concluded, “Contemporary atheism is increasingly positive, organic, constructive…Man is getting rid of God in order to regain possession of human greatness.”

Together, these two theologians represented a new chapter in the Catholic understanding of atheism. Instead of simply condemning atheism, theologians were, for the first time, identifying their institution’s complicity in inadvertently spreading atheism and

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treated atheism as a positive philosophy that people gravitated towards on its own merits.

With the publication of Cross Currents, a quarterly journal established in the fall of 1950, the pioneering scholarship undertaken by proponents of nouvelle théologie began to penetrate Catholic intellectual life in the United States. The journal’s mission was “to explore the implications of Christianity in our times” by reprinting “outstanding articles from foreign sources that indicate the relevance of religion to the intellectual life.”106 The majority of the articles reprinted in Cross Currents, particularly in its first publication, were written by theologians associated with nouvelle théologie. The date on which it was first published also bore significance; it came into print just months after Pius XII published Humani generis, a papal encyclical condemning the intellectual foundation of nouvelle théologie. The fact that American theologians decided to disseminate and popularize a strain of Catholic theological thinking that was explicitly repudiated by the pope represented the degree to which Catholic thinking on issues of modernity strayed from, and even rejected, the official position taken by the Vatican. Such a divergence helps to explain why these ideas would later gain traction at the Second Vatican Council, as it indicates how many theologians and clerics adopted a more progressive attitude towards unbelief despite the Vatican’s hostile and unyielding stance.

Despite the Vatican’s condemnation of both nouvelle théologie and ecumenism, Cross Currents developed a threefold mission to: engage in the

secular order and cooperate with all groups striving to transform social institutions in accordance with justice and charity; confront the problems raised by advances in modern thought; and welcome contributions from Christians and non-Christians alike on what it means to be a Christian today. The mission statement represented a major shift in how Catholic thinkers wanted to approach the modern world. The journal argued that practical cooperation could occur with any group so long as they strived towards charity and justice. Such a vision dramatically deviated from the official policies of the Vatican, which did not even permit Catholics to engage with Protestants on issues of shared concern. Cross Currents, conversely, implicitly permitted Catholic cooperation with atheists by using the phrase “all groups.” Likewise, the journal explicitly welcomed contributions from non-Christians to come closer to the knowledge of “what is means to be a Christian today.” This point is of extreme importance as it demonstrated that American Catholic thinkers not only believed that non-Christians could be partners in practical activism, but were also capable of interpreting and contributing to the Catholic understanding of their religion and place within the modern world.

Atheists and Communists were no exception to this claim. Throughout the 1950s, Cross Currents printed articles that examined the possibilities of collaborating with atheists on practical issues, and considered what Communism offered to Catholicism. The Communist critique of economic oppression and

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107 Ibid., 2.
class conflict resonated with many of these authors, and helped them identify a potential area of cooperation with Communists, which would positively assist the Church in preventing people from defecting to the side of atheism. The critique of economic oppression was part of a broader set of concerns Catholic theologians identified within the cosmos of atheistic Communism and secular humanism. These theologians came to realize that non-believers invested their energy into improving the conditions of humanity in this world, be it through economics, politics, or scientific advancements. As such, they argued, Catholicism had to orient itself towards the concerns of this world rather than towards the hope promised by life after death. As put by de Lubac, “Man’s task is not to liberate himself from time but to liberate himself through time; not to escape from the world but to accept it.” Only if Catholicism placed humanity’s temporal state at the heart of its theology could it effectively compete with secular ideologies whose entire orientation centered around improving the conditions of humanity. The consequences of such a theology would be made clear at the Second Vatican Council.

Even as the Vatican continued to wage a militant crusade against atheistic Communism, a number of changes occurred within the broader Catholic community that laid the groundwork for the Vatican to reappraise its

understanding of atheism in the 1960s. In the American context, Catholics, particularly John Courtney Murray and Fulton Sheen, recognized that liberalism, religious freedom, and ecumenism were not anathema to a Christian social order. Instead, they contended that these features of Western society had the potential to function as safeguards against atheistic Communism because they allowed for Christians to band together in the fight against Communism. The Vatican, as seen in the next chapter, would officially adopt this argument at the Council.

Likewise, even though the Vatican continued to understand atheism as a threat exclusively attached to Communism, a number of Catholic intellectuals, in the United States and France, identified other forms of unbelief unrelated to Communism. In the U.S., Murray identified practical indifference as a threat to Christian belief, while in France, Cognar and de Lubac recognized existential atheism and secular humanism as dynamic forms of unbelief that attracted a number of followers. The analytic framework developed by these thinkers with respect to unbelief, while condemned by Pius XII, would become essential to the Vatican’s understanding of atheism in the 1960s.
Chapter 2

Courting the Enemy:
Vatican II, the Secretariat for Non-Believers, and American Unbelief

In 1965, John Courtney Murray, who, just 20 years earlier, was condemned by the Vatican for encouraging ecumenism with Protestants, was appointed to the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Believers. The Secretariat, created in April 1965 by Pope Paul VI (1963-1978), aimed “to promote a more adequate knowledge of the different atheisms with a view to dialogue, and possibly, cooperation where it was possible.”110 The creation of the Secretariat – a clerical body intended to show the Church’s “interest in all men, even those most distant from her”111 – demonstrated the extent to which the ideas fostered by proponents of nouvelle théologie – the 1930s French theological movement that recognized atheism as a positive philosophy distinct from Communism - supplanted the Vatican’s previous crusade against atheism. The Secretariat existed neither to denounce nor convert non-believers. Instead, it began with the premise that all individuals were capable of striving towards universal principles of justice and charity. Based in Rome, it created offices around the world in hopes of establishing common ground with non-believers who would otherwise have no contact with the Church.

111 Ibid., 3.
The Secretariat was truly global in scope. Franz König, a Cardinal from Austria who actively promoted ecumenical initiatives during Vatican II, headed the organization. Under his leadership, he appointed twenty clerics across the globe to head regional branches in their countries.112 There were eight regional heads from Western Europe; three from Asia; two from South America; two from Eastern Europe (Poland and Yugoslavia); and one from the United States, Canada, Australia, and Syria, respectively. The global demography of the Secretariat was significant. It demonstrated that the Vatican no longer saw atheism as a phenomenon that was exclusively attached to a Communist political system. Indeed, the name of the office itself, the Secretariat for Non-Believers, showed that the Vatican did not view atheists as the only type of non-believers.

The Vatican’s decision to distinguish atheism from Communism can be attributed, nouvelle théologie and American Catholics, especially the scholarship of figures like Murray, Yves Cognar, and Henri de Lubac. All three theologians identified forms of unbelief in their respective countries – practical indifference in Murray’s United States and secular humanism in Cognar and de Lubac’s France – that were completely detached from Communism. These three figures were invited to participate in the Second Vatican Council and became key architects of the documents that addressed unbelief, which will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

The recognition of different types of unbelief led the Secretariat to develop an entire framework for categorizing unbelief’s various forms. As a term,

112 See Appendix 2 for a full list of members and locations.
unbelief was used to signify the general absence of religion and God, but there were a number of types of unbelief that were identified by the Secretariat. Atheism was the outright denial of the existence of God. Systematic atheism was the political manifestation of godless philosophies, such as Marxism. Agnosticism signified that one did not know and could not know whether God existed. Indifference implied a disinterest in God, rather than an intellectual rejection of religion. Secular humanism was the assertion that science and human values were sufficient to make sense of life.\textsuperscript{113}

The Vatican Secretariat expected its regional heads to send information about the different types of unbelief and non-believers in their respective areas. For example, Don Miano, the secretary of the Vatican Secretariat, sent questionnaires to ask about the conditions that would make dialogue with non-believers possible; the subject areas they planned to discuss with non-believers; the most prominent centers of unbelief; and the types of non-believers found in their countries.\textsuperscript{114} It invited its members and other clerics studying unbelief to submit publications to its quarterly bulletin. The journal included summaries of conferences held between non-believers and Catholics and in-depth regional studies of unbelief. One submission, for instance, provided an overview of a

\textsuperscript{113} Michael Paul Gallagher, \textit{What Are They Saying About Unbelief?} (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995), 11.

Catholic-Humanist dialogue on “Communication in a Pluralistic Society” that was held in Amsterdam in 1966.\(^\text{115}\)

But whom exactly did the Secretariat intend to study and with whom did it plan to engage in dialogue in the United States, a country in which, even in the 1960s, 97 percent of the population professed a belief in God?\(^\text{116}\) The composition of the American Secretariat sheds light on this question. John Dearden, the Archbishop of Detroit, served as the head of the American Secretariat. Throughout the 1950s, Dearden was an early supporter of civil rights. He helped inaugurate a program to ensure that blacks were not subject to job discrimination. He later founded “Project Equality,” which required companies doing business with Catholic churches to prove that they did not discriminate.\(^\text{117}\) Invited to participate in the Second Vatican Council, Dearden was instrumental in drafting *Lumen gentium*, which was the first document in which the Church explicitly declared that non-Catholics, including atheists, could be saved. Dearden’s decidedly progressive stance, in both politics and theology, set the tone for the American Secretariat’s mission: to dedicate itself to finding common ground with non-believers who were seen as equally committed to advancing the progressive causes of nuclear disarmament and civil rights.

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The American Secretariat identified scientific and academic circles in large universities as the most prevalent centers of unbelief in the United States.\textsuperscript{118} There were a number of reasons why the Secretariat associated unbelief with higher education. From a historical perspective, the philosophical and scientific developments that were viewed as the drivers behind atheism often originated in academic circles. Within the Secretariat’s own cultural moment, students were the center of the counterculture movement. Students across the country participated in the culture of free love and psychedelic drug use, supported causes like women’s rights, and were generally distrusting towards figures of authority. Student youth culture undermined the Church’s authority among college-educated Americans. Indeed, in the 1960s, the decline in church attendance was the greatest among the college-educated.\textsuperscript{119}

Dearden proceeded to appoint twenty-two clergymen to the American Secretariat whose specialties and areas of interest reflected the presumed intellectual and social profile of American non-believers.\textsuperscript{120} About half of the members were specialists in continental philosophy, with experts on Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Marx. The others were mostly university professors in the natural sciences, with interests in physics and chemistry. Donald MacLean, one of the Secretariat’s members, was a priest and professor of chemistry at Boston College. In addition to holding a PhD in Chemistry, MacLean spent several years studying theology under Karl Rahner, a famous German Jesuit

\textsuperscript{118} O’Hanlon, answers to questionnaire. 
\textsuperscript{120} See Appendix 1 for full list of members.
theologian whose work influenced the Church’s understanding of atheism at Vatican II.\textsuperscript{121} Another member, William Richardson was a priest and professor of philosophy at Fordham University. Richardson was an expert on Martin Heidegger, a seminal continental philosopher. In 1963, Richardson published an 800-page work entitled, \textit{Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought}.\textsuperscript{122} Christopher Mooney, another member, was a priest and professor of religious studies at Fairfield University in Connecticut. He held a master’s degree in law from Yale University and a doctorate in theology from the Catholic University in Paris. He published \textit{Teilhard de Chardin and the Mystery of Christ} in 1966, which evaluated the work of de Chardin, who was one of the most vocal Catholic proponents of the theory of evolution.\textsuperscript{123} The decisions made by the American Secretariat, in terms of its membership and political ambitions, reflected how the Church came to understand the majority of non-believers in the West as secular humanists guided by continental philosophy and concrete goals, like scientific innovation and social justice.

This chapter examines two things: first, the political and social context that motivated the Vatican to reappraise its understanding of atheism and create the Secretariat for Non-Believers, with particular reference given to its American

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office; and second, how the U.S. Secretariat, along with the broader Catholic intellectual community, understood and sought to respond to American unbelief. With respect to the first point, this chapter looks at how the success of Christian Democracy in Europe, combined with the paradoxical decline in religious observance in the West, created a situation wherein religion was not precluded from public life in Europe and North America, but was nevertheless in retreat. As a response, the Vatican convened the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) to, among other things, develop a new method for responding to unbelief. It will be argued that the Council adopted a society-centered approach that prioritized dialogue and political collaboration in its response to unbelief. Western states’ retreat from arbitrating morality and individual conscience motivated the Council to seek influence with non-believers directly. With respect to the second point, this chapter argues that the Secretariat’s origins and activities in the United States were grounded in the assumption that American unbelief was analogous to its European counterpart.

The Secretariat’s reliance on certain definitions and approaches borrowed from the European context led it to misread the American context and engage with a handful of Marxists and secular humanists without giving much attention to the problem of practical indifference. By addressing figures actively engaged with their philosophical and ideological commitments, such as Marxists and secular humanists, the U.S. Secretariat prioritized political collaboration and intellectual engagement above apologetics and theological discussion. However, an endogenous form of American unbelief, known as the Death of God...
movement, convinced some Catholic intellectuals to emphasize the spiritual insufficiency of their opponent’s worldview rather than just seek a movement towards political and intellectual rapprochement.

The Times Are A-Changin’: Reform and The Second Vatican Council

The death of Pius XII, on October 9, 1958, provided an opening for reform within the Church. Pius XII, a fervent antirevisionist who saw atheism and Communism as an interconnected outgrowth of a liberal world order, remained unwilling to alter the Church’s attitude towards liberalism and its relationship to Communism. Despite Pius XII’s unyielding opposition to liberal and communist political systems, others in the Church recognized that the modern world of the late 1950s looked strikingly different than the one against which Pius XI and Pius XII had launched their antirevisionist crusade. Liberalism in Western Europe no longer appeared to be linked intrinsically to atheistic Communism. The rise of Christian Democratic parties, which offered center-right, religiously defined platforms, demonstrated to many Church officials that Catholic identity could remain a key feature of political life in liberal democracies. Christian Democrats embedded tight church-state relations in new postwar constitutions, made antirevisionism a core tenet of party platforms, and supported policies that promoted a Christian vision of the family and social life.¹²⁴

In the Soviet Union, meanwhile, Nikita Khrushchev’s break with key tenets of Stalinism led to a period of liberalization that saw the release of millions

¹²⁴ Chamedes, *A Twentieth Century Crusades*, 236.
of political prisoners and a loosening of censorship in the arts and social life.

Although the Catholic Church remained unable to fulfill its pastoral duties in most parts of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, the Vatican believed that Khrushchev’s leadership offered the Church a greater chance of regaining its freedoms in the Communist world. The prospect of reform became attractive to the Vatican in light of these political changes. Democracy in the West no longer appeared to be linked inherently to secularism, while Communism in the Soviet Union no longer appeared to be as hostile to religion as it did under Stalin.

Although liberal democracy was not the Vatican’s preferred political system, the Vatican realized that the Church had to learn how to function within liberal democracies if Catholicism were to remain salient in political affairs.

The Cardinals selecting the next pope thus had the opportunity to either choose a successor who would continue to combat modernity, or one who was willing to revise the Church’s relationship with the modern world. In October of 1958, with the election of Cardinal Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, the Vatican took its first step towards reform. Within three months, Pope John XXIII (1958-1963) announced his decision convene “a general council for the universal Church” with the express purpose of “fostering the good of souls and bringing the new pontificate into clear and definite correspondence with the spiritual needs of the present day.”\footnote{Quoted in Bullivant, The Salvation of Atheists, 67.}

The Council, which was to be known as the Second Vatican Council, occurred over the course of three years (1962-1965). It fundamentally reassessed the Church’s relationship to the modern world and instituted a series of
liturgical reforms, such as the vernacular mass and the ability to take communion
in both kinds, which radically altered the practice of Catholicism. It was
inarguably one of the most important religious events of the twentieth century.

The Council met in four periods in the fall of every year from 1962
through 1965. Each meeting, which lasted approximately ten weeks, addressed a
different set of concerns. The first session was the planning period; the second
session dealt with internal Church liturgy; the third session focused on ecumenical
relations with other Christian confessions; and the final session dealt with the
Church’s relationship to politics, culture, and the non-Christian world. The first
session met under the pontificate of Pope John XXIII. Paul VI (1963-1978) took
over following John XXIII’s untimely death and presided over the Council’s
remaining three sessions. Approximately 2,200 bishops from around the world
attended the Council, along with hundreds of observers from other Christian
confessions, and dozens of Catholic theologians. The bishops in attendance
drafted and voted on a series of 16 documents that addressed everything from the
vocation of the priesthood to the Church’s stance on nuclear war.

The political context in which Vatican II occurred loomed large in the
minds of Popes John XXIII and Paul VI. The Berlin Wall was erected during the
Council’s planning phase; the Cuban missile crisis occurred during the Council’s
first session. Bishops from the Communist world, such as Cardinal Stefan
Wyszynski of Poland, brought personal memories of communist show trials to the
Council, while those in China and North Korea were prohibited from attending

altogether. Indeed, the policies of peaceful coexistence and de-Stalinization that made the possibility of reform attractive quickly collapsed as the Council unfolded. Here was a time in which the United States and the Soviet Union constructed a world defined by bipolarity. At the height of the Cold War, the messianic ideologies of Soviet Communism and American liberalism competed on social, political, and technological battlefields to assert the superiority of their respective ideologies. Such competition led to dissonance, fragmentation, and discord in geopolitics, leaving the prospect of nuclear war palpable. The Vatican was confronted with two options: it could use the Council to stand with the West and condemn Communism in the harshest terms, or it could try to overcome the East-West binary in order to depict the Church as an institution that transcended political conflicts and spoke for all of humanity. The topics that the Council hoped to address, and atheism in particular, showed that the Vatican chose to pursue the latter approach.

John XXIII identified modern atheism as one of the main reasons for convening the Council. In his apostolic constitution proclaiming Vatican II, he spoke of “something new and frightening” in the world - “a whole party of men who deny the existence of God and are organized on what amounts to a military basis, and it has extended its influence to many nations.”127 In preparation for the Council, the Roman Curia sent questionnaires to thousands of Catholic bishops, theologians, canon lawyers, and heads of religious orders, seeking input on issues

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that needed to be addressed; many replies mentioned atheism.\textsuperscript{128} From the Council’s inception, atheism was a central concern; however, the very political situation that made the Council possible also made it difficult to prioritize and address atheism. The Council was convened because the Vatican’s previous anticommunist crusade had failed to curtail the development of liberal political systems in the West and the authority of the Soviet government in the East. The Church had to develop an approach for influencing society and effecting political change that neither depended on the apparatus of the state nor alienated societies that did not readily embrace the Church’s teaching. This was especially true with respect to Communism and atheism. If the Council took too strong a stance in condemning Communism as an ideological or political system, the Soviet Union could further limit the Church’s authority in the East and prevent Soviet and Eastern European bishops from participating in the Council. Moreover, the Vatican recognized that inserting the Church as an overt political institution into an embittered battle between the West and East could exacerbate what were already deadly risks. John XXIII intentionally moved away from anticommunist rhetoric and towards the language of peace and the pursuit of the common good because he recognized that the division of the world in two hostile camps could likely result in nuclear war.\textsuperscript{129}

The other central paradox implicit in addressing atheism at the Council was related to the decline of Christendom in the West. Mainstream thinking in the Church understood atheism as a phenomenon that was exclusively attached to a

\textsuperscript{128} Huff, “Catholic-Atheist Dialogue,” 5.
\textsuperscript{129} McLeod, \textit{The Religious Crisis of the 1960s}, 74.
Communist political system. Yet, even as Europe witnessed the success of Christian Democratic parties, there was a marked decline in religious attendance. In addition, there was a dramatic increase in the number of public proponents of secular worldviews, such as existentialism, that were atheist in nature, but ideologically detached from Communist political systems. In West Germany, the membership of parish youth organizations fell from 860,000 in 1953 to 450,000 in 1964, while the number of infant baptisms in the Church of England fell from 601 per 1,000 in 1956 to 526 per 1,000 in 1964.\textsuperscript{130} Alongside the general decline in religious attendance was a redrawing of public and private boundaries in Western societies. In the 1950s, social norms of decency and discretion ensured that forms of behavior regarded as immoral were surrounded with taboo, and there was an implicit agreement to avoid discussing religious doubts publicly. At the same time, when perceived as necessary, the state entered the private sphere to punish morally unacceptable acts, such as homosexuality and abortion.\textsuperscript{131}

By the 1960s, all of these norms were called into question.\textsuperscript{132} Elite opinion began to contend that morality within the private sphere should be guided by individual conscience rather than law.\textsuperscript{133} Newly identified forms of unbelief had thus emerged by the time the Vatican decided to reevaluate its response to atheism. In its Western form, atheism could not be restrained by the means of state coercion. As governments retreated from their traditional role of upholding a Christian social order, and as societies increasingly lost trust in government

\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., pp. 63-4.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 67.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 67.
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 67.
officials, the Vatican had to conceive of a way to address and respond to non-believers directly.

The question of how to treat the problem of atheism was met initially with divided reactions. Some bishops argued that atheism must be condemned in the harshest terms. Ermengildo Florit from Florence argued that atheism had no room for the spiritual soul or personal dignity. Niklos Elko from Pittsburgh argued that dialectical materialism was the ruin of social order. Antonio Pildain from Brazil stated that atheism represented the denial of all truth. However, the majority suggested that the Church had to approach the issue with compassion if it wanted to influence non-believers. Many contended, such as Giuseppe Ruotolo from Italy and Michal Klepacz from Poland, that the Church needed to initiate peaceful dialogue with atheists to show them how Catholic social teaching aligned more closely to the principles of justice and truth than Communism or socialism. Others, like Franz König from Austria and Pedro Arrupe from Spain, emphasized the need to study unbelief systematically in order to understand the mentality of non-believers. The conservative pleas to condemn atheism, particularly its Soviet form, fell on deaf ears, as the majority of bishops recognized that the best way to respond to atheism was through direct and peaceful engagement with non-believers.

The Council’s response to atheism was built around four key features. First, the Council identified the difference between atheistic Communism in the

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134 Comments found in *Concilio Ecumenico Vaticano II*, News Bulletin No. 9, 27. Sep., 1965, Box 13, Folder 12, Anna M. Brady Papers, Georgetown University Manuscripts, Washington, D.C.

135 Ibid.

136 Ibid.
Soviet Union and secular humanism and practical indifference in the West.
Second, the Council envisioned a mode of contact – dialogue – that could place
the Church into direct communication with non-believers on both sides of the Iron
Curtain. Third, the Council promoted practical collaboration with non-believers,
particularly on the issue of religious liberty, to secure the Church’s capabilities as
a religious and political institution. Lastly, the Council redefined membership
within the Church to ensure that dialogue and collaboration with non-believers
would not jeopardize the Church’s monolithic claim to truth among Catholics.
The steps taken by the Council with respect to atheism demonstrated how the
Vatican responded to social and political changes that necessitated a direct appeal
to society.

The Council’s response to atheism moved the Church away from the state
and towards society since, as discussed before, Communist states explicitly
promoted atheism while governments in the West no longer felt obligated to
promote a Christian worldview. If the Church was to realize a Christian social
order, it would have to work alongside non-Catholics and win them over through
an appeal to hearts and minds. Direct engagement with humankind in its entirety
was evident from the outset of *Gaudium et spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the
Church in the Modern World (1965). The constitution, symbolically promulgated
on the final day of the Council, sought to elucidate the Church’s relation to the
modern world; it devoted three chapters to the specific problem of unbelief. The
first part of *Gaudium et spes* considered the Church and the human vocation,
while the latter part considered five questions of urgency: marriage, culture,
economics, politics, and peace. The document began by defining its position and audience, stating that, “[The Church] addresses itself without hesitation, not only to the sons of the Church and to all who invoke the name of Christ, but to the whole of humanity. For the Council yearns to explain to everyone how it conceives of the presence and activity of the Church in the world of today.”

The Vatican created a universal audience to position the Church as an institution that encompassed all of humanity. It wanted this text to be made relevant for all individuals, irrespective of their ideological or religious affiliation, because it wanted the Church’s teaching to be heard by Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

The section addressing atheism began with the observation that the root of human dignity lied in man’s communion with God, but that many of the Church’s contemporaries did not perceive this vital relationship to God, or even rejected it explicitly. Atheism must, the text declared, “be numbered among the most serious matters of our time and merits more careful investigation.”

The opening lines of the text already integrated the drafters’ suggestions to encourage scholarship on the subject. Moreover, it departed from *Divini redemptoris*, the 1937 encyclical that fused atheism and Communism into a fixed political system, in recognizing that atheism was not exclusively the product of Communism. The text achieved this by identifying agnosticism, practical unbelief, and determinism as various forms of atheism. The text proceeded to identify the origins of unbelief. While it ascribed blame to those “who willfully try to drive God from their heart,” it also

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noted that Christians themselves “bear responsibility for this situation.”139 Such a self-admonition drew explicitly from the pre-conciliar works condemned by Pius XII in *Humani generis*, demonstrating once again the triumph of nouvelle théologie. Indeed, Henri de Lubac, who was the first Catholic theologian to identify the Church’s indifference towards economic oppression as a cause of unbelief, was instrumental in drafting this section of *Gaudium et spes*.140

The influence of *nouvelle théologie* was most clearly apparent in section 20, which addressed the differences between communist and existential strains of atheism. The text identified existential atheism as a positive force that drew people in by arguing that atheism “gives man freedom to be an end unto himself, the sole artisan and creator of his own history.”141 The focus on existential atheism reaffirmed the Church’s decision to distinguish atheism from Soviet Communism. The philosophies referenced with respect to this form of atheism were decidedly Western in both their origins and appeal. This recognition helped to explain why the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Believers opened an office in the United States, a country that most certainly was not on the road to atheistic Communism.

The section on atheism concluded with how the Church and Catholics should move forward. It explicitly repudiated atheism, but reaffirmed the Church’s commitment to detecting the causes of atheism. It encouraged Catholics

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139 Ibid., sec. 19.
to “reveal God’s presence” through “brotherly charity” and concluded by welcoming believers and unbelievers alike” to “work for the rightful betterment of this world in which all alike live; such an ideal cannot be realized, however, apart from sincere and prudent dialogue.” The call for a “sincere and prudent dialogue” with non-believers drew from an earlier encyclical, Ecclesiam suam (1964). Paul VI, who before the Council was known for supporting Catholic dialogue with communists in Italy, wrote the encyclical to demonstrate how vital it was for the Church and the world to “meet together, and get to know and love one another.”

Dialogue became the vehicle through which the Church and the world were to meet. The encyclical’s language was elevated and metaphorical, aimed at symbolically expanding the Church’s reach. “Our dialogue,” Paul VI wrote, “should be as universal as we can make it. That is to say, it must be catholic, made relevant to everyone.” The encyclical legitimized the theological thinking that had been conceived in American Catholic publications such as Cross Currents a few decades earlier. It recognized that those outside of the Church’s reach could not be won through force or by the apparatus of the state. Instead, the Church could only spread its teaching through dialogue. This was true even for Communists and atheists; the encyclical noted that dialogue, though difficult, was not impossible with adherents of those systems and regimes. “For the lover of truth,” wrote Paul VI, “discussion is always possible.” While neither Ecclesiam

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142 Ibid., sec. 21.
143 Paul VI, Ecclesiam suam, 1964, Vatican.va, last accessed Jan. 10, 2020, sec. 3.
144 Ibid., sec. 76.
145 Ibid., sec. 102.
suam nor Gaudium et spes defined the venues and participants for dialogue with non-believers, those parameters would be set by the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Believers, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Dialogue as a concept positioned the Church to engage with non-believers in the West and East. In the West, dialogue was the Church’s only option for political and social engagement with non-believers. Western societies were shaped increasingly by pluralism and the supremacy of individual conscience, which meant that the Church had to convince non-believers of their shared interests. In the United States, the Secretariat’s shared interests would be built upon global peace and social justice. In the Soviet world, dialogue could function outwardly as an ideologically-neutral form of engagement with atheists. Since the Catholic Church was persecuted in the Soviet Union, it could not expect any form of influence or cache with Soviet officials. If it wanted to advance its interests, it would have to do so through direct engagement with Soviet society. When Gaudium et spes called upon believers and non-believers alike to “work for the rightful betterment of this world,” it was pointing to one issue in particular: religious persecution.

Communist regimes worldwide routinely suppressed and persecuted millions of Catholics. In previous periods, the Church condemned those regimes solely on the basis of their persecution of Catholics, but the Council realized this strategy needed reform. Non-believers behind the Iron Curtain could become critical allies in securing the Church’s freedoms. As a result, the Council fully embraced religious liberty and condemned the persecution of any religion or
worldview. *Dignitatis humanae*, The Declaration on Religious Freedom on the Right of the Person and of Communities to Social and Civil Freedom in Matters Religious, promulgated on December 7, 1965, declared that all humans had the right to religious freedom and could not be coerced to act in a manner contrary to their own beliefs. Murray, who was largely responsible for drafting *Dignitatis humanae*, wrote that the document intended to protect the religious freedom of atheists by using the term “beliefs.” The decision to affirm even an atheist’s right to freedom of conscience was driven by the belief that the Church needed to build a coalition of Catholics and non-believers to safeguard the Church’s existence, particularly in the Soviet Union. The Vatican came to recognize human rights, with religious freedom chief among them, as a vehicle for protecting ecclesiastical authority from government suppression. By articulating a new doctrine in which all religions and worldviews were granted the right to freely exercise their beliefs, the Church could partner with non-believers to pressure governments to protect its freedom.

To be sure, *Dignitatis humanae* by no means intended to place other religions on equal footing with Catholicism in terms of teaching. It was rather a strategy to limit state encroachment on the Church’s authority. In effect, the promotion of religious liberty tacitly placed religion within the private sphere.

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without depoliticizing religious authority. Religious liberty transformed religion to a matter of individual conscience, wherein the state had no legitimate right to intrude. Yet the “privatization” of individual conscience did not entail the depoliticization of Catholicism. *Dignitatis humanae* limited the state’s involvement in religious life; it did not limit religion’s involvement in political life. This ensured that the Church could enlist the help of non-believers to protect the Church’s freedoms explicitly in the sphere of religion and implicitly in the sphere of politics. The fact that such an approach required the Church to recognize the right to religious freedom for non-Catholics was a necessary component to this strategy rather than an intrinsic goal.

The Church had to tread a fine line in promoting dialogue with non-Catholics, since too much concession to dialogue could jeopardize the Church’s claim to a monopoly on truth. If the Church instructed its congregants to cooperate with and learn from non-Catholics, it could potentially cause the Catholic religion to be viewed as one among many. But the Church did not want to relinquish its privileged position as an institution that had the final say in matters temporal and spiritual. It therefore had to justify dialogue and political cooperation with non-Catholics by redefining membership within the Church. This perceived need to redefine the polity of the Church to legitimize dialogue and cooperation traced back to Murray’s vision for Christian ecumenism, in which he argued that the Catholic Church’s conception of Christendom needed to include Protestants. Catholic fraternity with Protestants had to be based in their

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shared identity as Christians rather than mere civic unity. Such an argument would legitimize cooperation with non-Catholics among the Catholic laity and ensure that all cooperation and truth-seeking still occurred among members of the Church. The Council articulated this new conception of the Church in *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, promulgated by Paul VI on November 21, 1964.

*Lumen Gentium* defined the authority, identity, and mission of the Church. The text explained the salvific reach of God, and, for the first time, recognized the way in which the Church was “united in Christ” with other Christians.\textsuperscript{149} Beyond recognizing the fundamental Christian nature of non-Catholic Christians, the text asserted the possibility of salvation for non-Christians, stating “those also can attain salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience.”\textsuperscript{150} Salvation became possible not only to baptized and confirmed Catholics, but to all people of goodwill, whether they expressly recognized God or not.

The salvation of non-Catholics was premised around the notion of anonymous Christianity, a concept developed by the theologian Karl Rahner, who was deeply concerned with the fate the millions of souls living under atheist and secular regimes. For Rahner, the concept of anonymous Christianity meant that unbaptized individuals who live in the state of Christ’s grace through faith, hope,
and love, yet who had no explicit knowledge of the fact that their lives were oriented in grace-given salvation of Jesus Christ, could achieve salvation.\(^{151}\) Rahner’s concept became the theological argument underlying *Lumen Gentium*’s recognition of the possibility of salvation for non-Catholics. This concept, though developed by a theologian who genuinely wanted to reconcile the claim that God “desires everyone to be saved” (1 Tim. 2:4) with the necessity of membership in the Church for salvation, was of critical importance to legitimizing the Council’s project to build connections with the non-Catholic world. The concept of anonymous Christianity enabled the Church to maintain its privileged hold on truth by claiming all virtuous actions and sensibilities as implicitly Catholic. Such a conclusion allowed the Church to continue to define its teaching and membership in universal terms, despite its decision to accept the validity of religious liberty and dialogue with non-believers.

These doctrinal developments on atheism - the recognition of multiple types of unbelief; the use of dialogue; the call for practical collaboration; and the redefining of the Church’s membership – resulted in the creation of the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Believers. As discussed below, the Secretariat envisioned a dialogic and collaborative relationship between the Church and non-believers that was mediated through society rather than the state.


The Secretariat set off to achieve the first task identified in *Gaudium et spes*: to study various forms of unbelief. Cardinal Franz König, the head of the Vatican Secretariat, convened the regional heads for their first meeting in April, 1966.152 The Secretariat agreed that it had to document the philosophy of atheism and humanism before establishing the “rules of the game” for a dialogue between the Church and different forms of atheism.153 The Secretariat commissioned Theodore Steeman, a Dutch friar and sociologist, to conduct a sociological study of atheism and present his findings at the Secretariat’s next meeting in October. The report was made available to all members of the Secretariat and printed in *Information Documentation on the Conciliar Church*, a subscription-based publication that circulated widely in clerical and academic circles. Steeman’s study on unbelief would function as the standard for identifying and defining different types of unbelief and non-believers for both the Secretariat and the broader group of Catholic intellectuals concerned with unbelief.

The report defined atheism as the rejection of God. Atheism could appear as a conscious choice to reject God’s existence or as an unconscious decision to live a life without God.154 The distinction between the two was significant for how Catholics understood unbelief; it recognized the difference between ideological proponents of atheism and those who were indifferent to religion. The ideological proponents were those whose atheism was informed by an alternative

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152 See Appendix 2 for full list of global heads.
worldview, such as Marxism, existentialism, or humanism. The indifferent, meanwhile, were those whose irreligion was unconscious and not based on a defined, intellectual position. Because the report understood atheism as the negation of theism, it set out to identify the forms of theism that were rejected by atheists. It first proposed a definition of religion.  

Religion, by the report’s definition, provided four things: a motive to accept the task of living; a way of explaining the frustrations of life; a concrete perspective on the goals of life; practical prescriptions concerning the way of life.  

Ultimately, religion made sense out of life and gave it meaning.

The report’s understanding of religion in its most basic sense did not offer an explicit definition of God, nor did it make reference to the transcendent. This is both surprising and significant. It showed that the Secretariat used a sociological framework to understand religion as a human phenomenon rather than as a sacred truth. The author ultimately distanced the report from the Catholic faith in order to approach the study of religion and unbelief from a social scientific, and therefore ostensibly neutral, perspective. In effect, the report was not bound to Catholic teaching. By restricting the definition of religion to the human domain (i.e. what function religion fulfills for humankind in the concrete, material world), the report could more adequately investigate what motivated atheists to reject religion without delving into apologetics or explanations that appealed to the supernatural.

Only after providing the most basic definition of religion did the report explore religion’s transcendental dimension. It was this aspect of religion, the

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155 Ibid., 3.
156 Ibid., 4.
report concluded, that came into tension with the belief system of “modern man.”\textsuperscript{157} Modern man, whom the report neglected to define, was unable to acknowledge the existence of the God of the New Testament because it did not square with his conception of reality. The modern man to whom the report referred was most likely understood to be someone who was drawn away from religion by the demographic trends of urbanization and by the intellectual tenets of secular humanism and existential philosophy. Modern man, as pathologized in other Catholic writings, saw himself as the master of his own destiny and as the catalyst for progress on earth.\textsuperscript{158}

The report attributed the incongruity between modern man and the Christian religious experience to a process of rationalization whereby humankind supplanted religious explanations with scientific ones in order to gain control over the world.\textsuperscript{159} The rationalization of the world made it harder for humankind to find the transcendent in everyday life. No longer, the report noted, were sickness and ill-fate “direct expressions of the Holy Mystery.”\textsuperscript{160} God became “superfluous.”\textsuperscript{161} The report essentially adopted the Weberian concept of disenchantment to explain the devaluation of religion in Western society. Disenchantment, per Max Weber, meant that the sublime and transcendental values that had once defined public life were displaced by the processes of rationalization and intellectualization.\textsuperscript{162} For modern man, the report concluded,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 6.
  \item \textsuperscript{158} Christopher Mooney, “Vatican II and the Future of Theology,” \textit{CrossCurrents} 19, No. 4 (Fall 1969), 434.
  \item \textsuperscript{159} Steeman, “The Study of Atheism,” 13.
  \item \textsuperscript{160} Ibid., 15.
  \item \textsuperscript{161} Ibid., 15.
  \item \textsuperscript{162} Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” \textit{Daedalus} 87, No. 1 (Winter, 1958), 133.
\end{itemize}
the magical use of the sacred had lost all meaning, as basic needs no longer compelled him to call upon supernatural sources as part of his daily life. By rationally understanding the world he lived in, modern man no longer found the sacred within it.\textsuperscript{163} The theory that people turned away from religion because it was no longer seen as necessary to improving one’s conditions on Earth would cause Catholic theologians and academics to emphasize the aspects of religion that related directly to improving life in this world. This will be discussed later on in the chapter, but it is essential to first examine how the report classified different types of atheism.

The report defined atheism in two ways: positive and practical. Positive atheism was understood as “a definite choice against a religious orientation resting on well-established arguments and reasons.”\textsuperscript{164} Practical atheism was “the factual absence of God in the life of people without it being a reasoned decision.”\textsuperscript{165} The latter form, which became associated with American unbelief, was viewed as a passively received cultural influence rather than a considered position.\textsuperscript{166} For many in the West, the report suggested, the full religious experience was not attainable. Because Western cultures no longer imposed a religious interpretation on every experience, it became easier for individuals to divorce their identity from religion.\textsuperscript{167} People were free to dedicate their lives to political and economic issues without giving consideration to religious

\textsuperscript{163} Ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{165} Ibid., 1.
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid., 2.
\textsuperscript{167} Ibid., 3.
meaning.\textsuperscript{168} Religion, for practical atheists, “has become meaningless against the backdrop of modern man’s life experience…it is too far removed from what moves them: a medical practice, scientific discovery, or humanitarian enterprise.”\textsuperscript{169}

Positive atheism, as a category, was further subdivided into two groups: objectivistic and subjectivistic. Objectivistic atheism was defined as a form of atheism that rejected the existence of God because proof of God’s existence was lacking.\textsuperscript{170} This form represented the strain of rationalist thinking that ushered in an age of scientific and technological innovation. The two world wars, the report argued, minimized this strain of atheism, as people became less optimistic and confident in the “mighty powers” of rationalism.\textsuperscript{171} Instead, most positive atheists were seen as subjectivistic atheists – those who were more skeptical about why people believed in God than whether God actually existed.\textsuperscript{172} This type of atheism argued that people believed in God because they needed to believe; this became a sufficient reason to state that God did not really exist. These non-believers rejected religion because they thought it functioned as an escape from the human condition or as a justification for suffering and injustice.\textsuperscript{173} Marxists and humanists were categorized under subjectivistic atheism because their rejection of religion was understood to be concerned with why religious belief hindered mankind rather than with logical arguments concerning the existence of God. The

\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., 3. 
\textsuperscript{169} Ibid., 6. 
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid., 7. 
\textsuperscript{171} Ibid., 8. 
\textsuperscript{172} Ibid., 8. 
\textsuperscript{173} Ibid., 10.
distinction between objectivistic and subjectivistic atheism, combined with the belief that most positive atheists fell within the latter category, explained why harmonizing Catholic thought with the philosophical and political impulses of non-believers was more important to the Secretariat than adjudicating the conflict between scientific knowledge and Catholic theology.

This report was instrumental in shaping the presuppositions of Catholics entering into dialogue with unbelief. To begin, the report’s definition of religion put Communists and humanists in opposition to religious believers. The definition proposed by the report - that religion makes sense of life and gives it orientation towards a transcendent source – could be applied to the worldviews of the aforementioned groups. Communists and humanists, unlike the practical atheists, did subscribe to a particular belief system, yet the Secretariat still understood them as non-believers. Such a mischaracterization of belief would come to obstruct productive dialogue with “non-believers” because the Secretariat failed to see that many types of unbelief were, in fact, a form of belief. Moreover, the report concluded that intentional unbelief was a consequence of the way in which religion was presented. The report essentially implied that non-believers could come to accept Catholic truths so long as those truths were presented in a way that was compatible with the demands and reality of modern life. Catholicism had to present itself in a way that added meaning to the values of modern man, such as science and political progress.

There were two implications that should here be noted. The first was that the Secretariat identified science and political progress as areas that drew people
away from Christian belief. The Secretariat assumed that people were dropping religion because of those aspects of modern life. This presupposition will shape how the Secretariat understood non-believers’ values. The second implication was that the Secretariat would attempt to change the way in which Catholicism was presented without somehow altering the orthodox meaning of what it meant to be a Catholic. A final consideration for this report was the matter of practical atheism. The report and the Secretariat were adept in identifying practical atheism as a widespread phenomenon in the West. They understood that it was not connected explicitly with ideology, but was rather a passive dissociation from religious belief. Repeatedly, this form of unbelief would be identified as a serious threat in the United States, but the American office would be ill-equipped in responding to it partly because the Secretariat’s main instrument – dialogue – favored non-believers who were easily identifiable and capable of engaging in substantive conversation.

After the Secretariat defined unbelief, it established general principles for Catholics to engage in private and public dialogue with non-believers. *Humanae personae dignitatem* (August, 1968) was a document whose circulation reached far beyond the members of the Secretariat. It was published in the Vatican’s global newspaper, *L’Osservatore Romano*, and it welcomed laypersons to participate in the Secretariat’s efforts in dialogue; however, their invitation should be qualified. The document explicitly stated that dialogue was only profitable if those who engaged in it were “competent.” While Catholic higher education in the U.S. would go on to try to make students “competent” participants for
dialogue, the premise largely left clerics and academics as the only “qualified” participants for events sponsored by the Secretariat. The document stated that dialogue with non-believers served two purposes: it led the faithful to a fuller recognition of human values and to a better understanding of their own religion. The statement reflected a sentiment echoed in Cross Currents’s mission statement two decades earlier. It declared that non-Catholics could give insight on what it meant to be a Christian in the modern world. Now, the Secretariat argued the same thing: that dialogue with non-Christians somehow added value to the Catholic’s understanding of his faith. This showed that the Secretariat did not just exist to understand unbelief and non-believers, but to deepen the Church’s understanding of itself. In this sense, the Secretariat truly did aspire to function as a two-way street.

The document proceeded to emphasize how dialogue implied the mutual recognition and worth of the other party as a person. Dialogue, in this sense, functioned as a movement of rapprochement and deeper understanding. As such, the Secretariat identified two preconditions that must exist for successful dialogue: a recognition that every individual has a contribution to offer in the search for truth, and a recognition that dialogue aimed not at destroying one position, but rather at clarifying both sides, and – as far as possible – bringing them closer together. These stipulations reflected the general shift within the Church’s post-conciliar thinking. The Church began to defend individual freedom and human rights, especially with regards to conscience. While, as the document stated, this conclusion did not exclude apologetics or confrontation, it did
demonstrate how the Church had reframed its relationship to certain aspects of modernity. Instead of condemning liberalism and civil liberties, the Church recognized that it could work within those parameters.

Practical cooperation on political affairs helped to explain why the Church, and the Secretariat for Non-Believers in particular, embraced pluralism and individual freedom. The Vatican had ceased its attempts to restore an integral Catholic political culture. Moral and spiritual renewal instead had to occur through voluntary cooperation with those outside of the Church’s traditional reach. This revision not only widened the Church’s potential allies, but also implied a limitation on state power. The Church saw human rights and freedom of conscience as a check against a state’s power to restrict religious influence. As such, the document encouraged collaboration towards fixed practical objectives with non-believers.

An Imagined Ally: Catholic Cooperation with American Non-Believers

The political aims embraced by American Catholics in the post-conciliar period created a perceived site of convergence with American non-believers. John Dearden, the head of the American Secretariat, listed international peace and social justice as the most important subject areas for dialogue with non-believers. The political initiatives imagined by the U.S. Secretariat reflected the social approach endorsed at the Second Vatican Council. In the United States, Catholic anticommunism no longer mapped on as smoothly to the American

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174 O’Hanlon, answers to questionnaire on dialogue.
government’s agenda. The American Catholics involved with the Second Vatican Council and Secretariat for Non-Believers, along with thousands of seminarians and young priests who had closely followed the proceedings, embraced socially radical policies that increasingly put them at odds with the U.S. government’s response to domestic and international issues. Domestically, American Catholics expressed dismay at the lack of progress on civil rights. As the Civil Rights Movement went North in 1966, many nuns and priests championed the right of African Americans to live in white neighborhoods and attend white schools.\textsuperscript{175} Dearden himself was one of the most prominent Catholic voices in the Civil Rights Movement, which explained why he sought to use the Secretariat to promote practical collaboration with non-believers on civil rights.

Internationally, progressive American Catholics grew alarmed by the Vietnam War and the prospect of nuclear war. By the late 1960s, the Vietnam War was a significant concern for radical Catholics; two priests ended up in prison because of their involvement in protesting the draft, while a Catholic layman, Roger LaPorte, inspired by the example of Buddhist monks, burned himself to death outside the United Nations to protest the Vietnam War.\textsuperscript{176} Progressive American Catholics, which represented the entirety of the Secretariat’s membership, lost faith in their government during the 1960s. Like countless other demographic groups in the U.S., left-leaning Catholics no longer expected their leaders to pursue rightful actions without first being pressured by society. As such, progressive American Catholics felt it necessary to build broad

\textsuperscript{175} McLeod, The Religious Crisis of the 1960s, 97.  
\textsuperscript{176} Ibid., 97.
coalitions with other American groups that likewise strived for international peace and social justice.

Part of the reason why progressive Catholics sought to collaborate on political issues with non-Catholics had to do with the political divisions within the American Catholic community. The generation of priests who received their education in the midst of Vatican II, along with senior American clerics who participated in the Council, were substantially more progressive than the American laity. Many white Catholics believed that their clergy had betrayed them, especially on the issue of civil rights. In July 1966, a group of Catholic parishioners hit a nun with a stone as she marched at a civil rights protest.\textsuperscript{177} From Baltimore to Cleveland, to Chicago, there were reports of priests being abused by Catholic parishioners because of their involvement in civil rights protests.\textsuperscript{178} The sharpening tensions within the American Catholic community, between progressives and conservatives, weakened Catholicism’s salience as a unifying identity. In effect, progressive Catholics believed they now shared a greater affinity with progressive Jews or Protestants than they did with conservative Catholics.

Among all the groups with whom progressive Catholics could collaborate, non-believers appeared an unlikely choice. From a demographic perspective, the number of American non-believers was negligible. Even among the two to three percent of Americans who explicitly identified as non-believers, there were no obvious characteristics binding them together as a group other than the absence of

\textsuperscript{177} Ibid., 97.
\textsuperscript{178} Ibid., 98.
a belief in God. Therefore, to understand why the American Secretariat thought they could effectively collaborate with non-believers on issues of peace and social justice requires an examination of not who American non-believers actually were, but whom the Secretariat imagined them to be. Before the Secretariat had even interacted with an American non-believer, it had already painted a clear and comprehensive portrait of that person as an ideal type. For the Secretariat, the non-believer was a humanist, guided by concrete moral imperatives, and persuaded by continental philosophy. The non-believer rejected God because he believed in man’s greatness, and, while believing in virtue and justice, he contended these could be known without divine revelation.

The problem was that the American Secretariat imported this portrait of the non-believer from France, applying the scholarship of theologians like Yves Cognar and Henri de Lubac without first considering whether the American and French contexts were similar. The reality was that they could not have been more different. Reports suggested that almost one-fifth of France’s population identified as atheists in the 1960s, making non-believers a far more significant demographic there than in the U.S.\textsuperscript{179} As to the matter of existentialism, the threat of believers swapping the Bible for Sartre should have appeared far less tenable in the United States than it did in France. Suffice to say, the Secretariat’s assumptions concerning American non-believers were almost certainly misguided. Instead of attempting to study or interact with the group of practical atheists identified in Steeman’s report, the Secretariat set off to engage with the

handful of Marxists and secular humanists found in American universities and think tanks that resembled the Secretariat’s image of non-believers.

Academic conferences were the Secretariat’s preferred domain for engagement with non-believers. One such conference was held at Alma College, a Jesuit seminary in California, in September, 1966. The topic was non-theism and contemporary theology. The American Secretariat invited members from the New Society for Ethical Culture, the ACLU, and the American Ethical Union. The conference was not “meant to provide an institutionalized rebuttal, but rather a searching probe into our own convictions and into those different from our own.”

The advertisement for the conference was covered in buzzwords that would be discussed at the event. The phrases included we shall overcome, LSD, civil rights, peace, protests, dialogue, abortion, Vietcong, resist, nuclear, birth control, and hope. The non-believers invited represented the type of unbelief with which the Secretariat was familiar: secular humanism, while the topics discussed reflected political issues the Secretariat believed would be fruitful areas for dialogue and collaboration.

The handful of conferences organized by the Secretariat followed this pattern, whereby it invited secular humanists to speak on a panel with Catholic intellectuals on topical political issues like the Vietnam War or nuclear disarmament. Sometimes, the Secretariat would organize academic conferences concerned with the question of unbelief itself. Sociologists of religion (seen in the

180 Invitation for Conference on Secular Humanism and Christianity: A Confrontation of Values, Sept., 1966, Box 12, Folder 13, John F. Dearden Papers, University of Notre Dame Archives, South Bend, IN.
Secretariat’s eyes as non-believers) would join Catholic scholars to discuss secularism and atheism.\textsuperscript{181} While participants often found themselves in agreement on the need for disarmament or racial integration at the politically-oriented events, their discussions never materialized into political activism. Even so, these conferences demonstrated whom the Secretariat identified as non-believers and the political areas they hoped to address. Moreover, the conferences encouraged Catholic intellectuals unaffiliated with the Secretariat to conceive of ways in which to engage with non-believers.

Catholic intellectuals imagined political endeavors with non-believers in the pages of theological journals. The 1960s witnessed the creation of new Catholic scholarly publications aimed at widening Catholic contact with the non-Catholic world. One such journal was \textit{Continuum}, a quarterly publication founded in 1963 and sponsored by St. Xavier College in Chicago. \textit{Continuum} declared itself “committed to a lived pluralism, to rule of law in foreign affairs and to civil liberties at home, to a gradualist disarmament position, to Newman’s ‘freedom of opinion’ in the Church, to a theology of proclamation, to a Christian esthetic.”\textsuperscript{182} \textit{Continuum} was decidedly interested in orienting Catholicism towards secular affairs, and its contributors sought to demonstrate that Catholicism was vital to responding to secular concerns. Its first issue explored the topics of the Cuban missile crisis and nuclear armament.


\textsuperscript{182} “Introduction,” \textit{Continuum} 1, No. 1 (Spring, 1963), 2.
American Catholics acutely felt the pangs of disastrous Cold War policy after the Cuban missile crisis. As Americans, they bore the responsibility of representing the Catholic conscience in the nation that was almost singlehandedly responsible for shaping the West’s actions in the Cold War. The fact that their nation’s president brought the world to the brink of nuclear war profoundly affected their thinking on nuclear armament and foreign policy. Reflecting on the crisis, Justus George Lawler, the editor of *Continuum*, used his first editorial to criticize the American national security apparatus:

> We have already made a fetish of Guantanamo, of on-site inspection, of the status quo in Berlin; we have reduced the insanity of thermonuclear war to a commonplace item on the agenda of diplomats and have made its avoidance a mere occasion for scoring points against our rivals. We have developed a game theory for international relations, which, whatever its incidental benefit, has had the consequence of negating them as existential realities. We talk about the ‘drama’ of Cuba, about strategists doing ‘their homework,’ and characterize the President's decision as a ‘brilliant gamble.’ We have split the image from the substance and are playing with our own reflections; we have become spectators whirled into a frenzy by every newsreel, forgetting that it is we who are implicated in the event, and that no matter how much solidarity there may be on our team, no matter how many fans on our side, no matter how many bonds of blood brotherhood may unite us, this is not a game, and there shall be no winners.183

Lawler’s indictment reflected the new incongruity between American Cold War policy and progressive Catholic thinking on foreign affairs. The security decisions executed by intelligence officers took on an inhumane and mechanical character that offended Catholic sensibilities. Catholic intellectuals thought the threat of nuclear war no longer carried the existential gravity it needed to caution

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183 Justus George Lawler, “The Aftermath of the Cuban Crisis,” *Continuum* 1, No. 1 (Spring, 1963), 49.
strategists. Instead, the logic of the Cold War trapped U.S. and Soviet policymakers into a scenario that attempted to quantify the incalculable. Catholics recognized that Americans were playing a game which, as Lawler wrote, no side could win. Nuclear war, on a scale without precedence, jeopardized the integrity of human life, and Catholics felt the moral imperative to prevent such a brutal assault on God’s creation. This was especially true for American Catholics after the publication of Pacem in terris (April, 1963), a papal encyclical written in response to the Cuban missile crisis. The encyclical argued that “the recognition of man’s dignity cry out insistently for a cessation to the arms race.”

What was unique to the encyclical was not just the call for nuclear disarmament, but the audience to whom the message was addressed. The encyclical, unlike any written before, addressed not just Catholics, but “all Men of Good Will.” The universal implications and threat posed by nuclear war, combined with the perception that nation states were increasingly unable to promote international justice, motivated Catholics to seek allies among those they previously condemned.

Catholic intellectuals wrote prolifically about the possibility of collaboration with American non-believers on the topic of peace. They imagined non-believers as humanists guided by definite moral imperatives that shared common ground with the Catholic worldview.

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184 John XXIII, Pacem in terris, papal encyclical, Vatica.va, promulgated April 11, 1963, sec. 112.
185 Ibid., preface.
186 See Joseph Walsh, “The Confrontation between Belief and Unbelief,” Cross Currents 15, No. 1 (Winter, 1965), pp. 44-45. Walsh argues that non-believers generally exist in university settings and share a vision of a better society that is shaped by study, reflection, and affection. See Leslie Dewart, “Christians and Marxists in Dialogue,” Continuum 1, No. 2 (Summer, 1963), pp. 149-153. Dewart argues that Catholics bear an active responsibility in peacemaking and must seek out the assistance of Marxists when their values are shared. See John McMahon, “What Does Christianity Add to Atheistic Humanism?” Cross Currents 18, No. 2 (Spring, 1968), pp. 129-150. McMahon
believers was, like the Secretariat’s, shaped by European thought and the most perceptible pockets of unbelief in the United States, namely, self-identifying humanists and atheists in academia. Liberal theological journals interested in unbelief welcomed American non-believers to contribute articles about the shared values between the Catholic and atheist worldview. These contributors represented different forms of unbelief, but often took on the form of Marxist atheism or secular humanism. In one instance, Herbert Aptheker, the Director of the American Institute for Marxist Studies, published an article that argued that Catholic clerics were beginning to recognize the incompatibility of the gospel’s message and the Vatican’s economic and political power.\footnote{Aptheker, “Marxism, Religion, and Revolution,” Cross Currents 18, No. (Spring, 1968), 153.} He cited Paul VI’s encyclical, \textit{Populorum progressio} (1967), which stated that “private property is not an absolute and unconditional right for anybody,” and that “wherever a conflict arises between acquired property rights and the cardinal needs of society, it is up to the public authority to resolve the conflict.”\footnote{Ibid., 157.} Aptheker argued that Paul VI’s statements were consistent with the early Church fathers’ teaching, which was revolutionary and communitarian.\footnote{Ibid., 156.} By making such a point, Aptheker highlighted the combability of Marxism and Christianity rather than just advocating for a practical rapprochement on economic issues.

Such efforts to synthesize Christianity and Marxism became the foundation for political collaboration between Christian and Marxist scholars in
Western Europe and the Eastern Bloc. However, while the possibility of Christian-Marxist collaboration on economic issues was discussed in some American theological journals, it was largely a moot point. American Marxism lacked the salience it carried for intellectuals and labor groups in Western Europe. As such, pleas to build a Catholic-Marxist front for revolutionary politics in the United States failed to materialize beyond the confines of a few scholarly articles. Like the Secretariat’s formal conferences with non-believers, the discussions that occurred in journals revealed more about how the Catholic presentation of Catholicism had changed than how Catholics actually engaged with non-believers. Catholics felt it imperative to address political and economic issues, not just because those were areas that concerned them, but because they saw those areas as the most compelling issues for non-believers. If they wanted Catholicism to remain relevant, they had to relate it to the concerns that moved non-believers, which, in the mind of Catholics, had to do with progressive political initiatives. In this sense, Catholics did not just want Catholicism to be in dialogue with non-believers, but with secular concerns more broadly.

There was one form of American unbelief that tested the limits of the attempt to make Catholicism relevant to secular concerns. In the mid-60s, a group of American scholars, led by Thomas Altizer, a professor of Religion at Emory University, began to advocate a “Death of God” theology, which called for the

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demythologization of Christianity. Christian Atheism, a term coined by Altizer, attempted to remove God from Christianity while preserving the secular Christian values of morality and justice. This form of unbelief was distinct in that it preserved the basic moral framework of Christianity, but argued that God, while existing at one point in history, had undergone a process of self-extinction that culminated with the Incarnation.\textsuperscript{191} Death of God theology became a particularly identifiable and visually prominent form of unbelief in the United States thanks to Time magazine’s cover story, “Is God Dead?” (symbolically published on Good Friday in April 1966).\textsuperscript{192} The article gave visibility to the purveyors of Christian atheism, who reimagined Christianity without God and traditional ecclesiastical authority. The media attention given to Altizer’s theology motivated Catholic theological journals and symposiums to engage with his ideas.

In the spring of 1967, the Catholic University of America invited Altizer to deliver a speech on “Catholic Philosophy and the Death of God,” which was subsequently published in Cross Currents. Altizer tried to convince his Catholic audience that there was an “inherent possibility of Catholic atheistic theology.”\textsuperscript{193} Such a proposition was fundamentally different from the Marxist push to highlight the compatibility of Marxism and Christianity. Death of God theology was not an attempt to integrate any external philosophical doctrine into Christianity. It was an attempt to remove God and the Church from Christianity while preserving the religion’s basic social teaching. While Death of God

\textsuperscript{192} John T. Elson, “Is God Dead?” Time, Apr. 8, 1966.
\textsuperscript{193} Altizer, “Catholic Philosophy and the Death of God,” p. 272.
theology appeared to be, in many ways, more compatible with Catholic social teaching than Marxist-atheism, it was viewed as a pernicious threat that some Catholic scholars and clerics quickly identified.

The convergence of values between Christian atheism and Catholicism made it theoretically possible for the two schools of thought to cooperate on political concerns. Christian atheism contended that it shared the same ethical code and moral framework with Catholicism; the only feature lacking was the belief in God. If Christian atheism offered individuals the same basic responses to moral issues, Catholics had to show why the Christian belief system was as integral to social justice as Christianity’s ethical framework. While it was true that Catholics were willing to find common ground with non-believers on political issues, they worried their religion would undergo a process of secularization if they exclusively concerned themselves with temporal issues. For many, Christian atheism became the logical consequence of emphasizing the secular virtues of Christianity.\textsuperscript{194} If Catholics were to find complete agreement with Christian atheists on ethical and moral questions, what was to become of faith in God and the paschal mystery? Was the Church to function as a philanthropic organization and nothing more? A number of theologians responded to this problem by arguing that the hope offered by the resurrection of Christ had to be at the heart of Catholic involvement in secular affairs, even for issues on which they found

common ground with non-believers. Put simply, these Catholics argued that Christian ethics would be insufficient in responding to secular problems if they were not accompanied by a belief in God and the hope offered by the resurrection of Christ.

Take, for example, the message offered by American priest and peace activist, Philip Berrigan. Berrigan was the first American priest jailed for a political crime. He served a poor black parish in Baltimore and devoted himself to antiwar protests, which was what eventually landed him in jail after he burnt hundreds of draft cards with gasoline. It is sufficient to say that Berrigan was tuned into the protest movements of the 1960s. Yet he too expressed concern for the secularization of political issues. In response to the March on Washington, Berrigan lamented the lack of religious initiative. He argued that while the March was moral in tone and expression, it was “a social protest controlling a moral issue instead of the other way around.” Secularists, he deplored, have taken the practical aspects of the “revelation of Our Lord” and synthesized it into a “fixed moral system” used to support social and political issues. This form of humanism, though consistent with the social teaching of the Gospel, he argued, was “inconsistent with our way of life” because “service without worship” became an “illogical ethic of desperation.” If worship was dichotomized from

197 Ibid.
199 Ibid., 521.
200 Ibid., 522.
the notion of service, he concluded, people would “disembody” themselves from
the common nature they share with “Christ and all men.” In effect, Berrigan
argued that the ethical framework provided by Christianity could not stand on its
own. Without the sacraments and prayer, humanity would alienate itself from the
source that nourished its capacity for good.

Berrigan’s message – that social justice within the secular realm could not
be realized without the spiritual nourishment of the sacraments and prayer – was
emblematic of many Catholic responses to Death of God theology. As one
Catholic newspaper noted, hope could serve as a “check against” Christian
atheism by its insistence on the resurrection and Christ’s “real and continuous
intervention in our history.” In 1967, the second annual workshop on Theology:
Search and Service at Woodstock College, a Catholic theological seminary in
Maryland, dealt with theme of “the living God” as a rebuttal to Death of God
theology. James Shenkel, a priest in attendance, argued that the crucial task of the
Church was to “formulate a theology which tells modern man how God is acting
in history now.” Avery Dulles, a Jesuit priest, theologian, and later Cardinal of
the Catholic Church, contended that Death of God theology replaced the worship
of God with the “worship of man.” The God of Christianity, Dulles noted, was
“widely felt to be irrelevant in our day.” As a result, Christian atheists

201 Ibid., 522.
202 “Hope,” Catholic Transcript, Mar. 29, 1968, last accessed Mar. 28, 2020,
https://thecatholicnewsarchive.org/?a=d&d=CTR19680329-01.2.25&srpos=64&c=---196-en-
20--61--txt-txIN-%22death+of+god%22--.--.
accessed, Mar. 28, 2020, https://thecatholicnewsarchive.org/?a=d&d=CTR19670818-
01.2.68&srpos=7&e=---196-en-20--1--txt-txIN-death+of+god--.--.
204 Ibid.
205 Ibid.
attempted to substitute God with an image of Jesus as a paragon of worldly virtues.\textsuperscript{206} To use Jesus as a mortal example of goodness was insufficient. For humankind to imitate Christ’s charity, Dulles argued, required the Church to make Christ’s presence felt and known through “rituals, sacraments and images.”\textsuperscript{207} The remarks made by these participants implicitly reflected the tensions inherent in the Church’s turn towards political collaboration and rapprochement with non-believers. Death of God theology secularized the Gospel’s message by using Jesus as an ethical, yet mortal, figure that offered an example for how to respond to the complex social and political issues of the present day. In using the Council to demonstrate how vital it was for the Church to turn its attention to secular affairs in order to reach out to secular society, the Council also risked the possibility of secularizing Catholicism into a system of ethics that was only concerned with the temporal realm.

Indeed, John Courtney Murray recognized this tension in an address he gave on Death of God theology in 1967. Murray noted that Christian atheism attempted to move Christian ethics into the world to become more involved with man and society.\textsuperscript{208} The Second Vatican Council, remarked Murray, likewise urged a “renewal of this movement into the world.”\textsuperscript{209} The difference that existed and must be highlighted between the two, as Murray noted elsewhere, was that Catholics recognized that the salvation of humankind, even if salvation was meant

\begin{footnotes}
\item \textsuperscript{206} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{207} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{209} Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
as the realization of justice on earth, was “dependent upon a mode of salvation of which theandric history is the bearer.”

By this, Murray meant that human progress was inseparable from divine operation. The Church must, Murray argued, stand as a sign and sacrament of “Christ who is here and now with us in in the Spirit according to His promise.”

It was the emergence of Death of God theology that caused some Catholic intellectuals to recognize the dangerous parallels between post-conciliar Catholic teaching and Christian atheism. Resolving this issue required American Catholics to highlight the fundamental relevance of the Church as a sacramental body to the project of improving the temporal conditions of humanity.

The Catholic analysis of American unbelief can be divided into two approaches. The first, which was most strongly pursued by the U.S. Secretariat and American participants in Vatican II, understood American non-believers as humanists and Marxists whose unbelief was developed as a consequence of an alternative ideology, such as existentialism or Communism, that conflicted with the belief in God. The U.S. Secretariat tried to highlight the political compatibility between Catholic and secular worldviews because it genuinely thought meaningful political collaboration could result from dialogue and because it thought highlighting political combability was the best way to reach out to American non-believers. The second, which was developed by a far smaller group of Catholic

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211 Ibid., 72.
theologians, sought to respond directly to Death of God theology, a school of
tought that was distinct to the American context. While Christian atheism was
understood as a form of humanism, it provoked a different reaction among the
Catholic thinkers who engaged with it. Although these thinkers saw a
fundamental political compatibility between the Christian atheist and Catholic
worldviews, they worried that concessions to the Christian atheist movement
could inadvertently secularize Catholicism. If the Church was only concerned
with Christian ethics and political affairs, it risked neglecting its primary function
as a religious institution dedicated to the salvation of souls.

Catholics who recognized this risk argued that the Church needed to
engage with non-believers on secular issues, but also demonstrate what the
Christian message of hope, and the Catholic devotion to sacraments in particular,
added to the realization of social justice in the temporal realm. The former school
prioritized the intellectual and political components of unbelief – favoring
academic scholarship on secular philosophies and direct collaboration (at least in
theory) on political issues. The latter emphasized the spiritual limitations of
unbelief and sought to win over non-believers by emphasizing the value of
religion. There were thus two approaches that could be pursued and advanced by
American Catholics. As will be seen in the next chapter, influential Catholics,
particularly in the sphere of education, chose to respond to American unbelief
through an intellectual and political lens without considering how such an
approach might secularize the identity of Catholicism.
Chapter 3

Sites of Engagement:
Catholic Higher Education Responds to Unbelief

In the fall of 1967, the Center for the Study of Contemporary Values, an institute in the Bay Area, held a conference on the “The Quest for a New Humanism.” Over the course of three days, nearly 500 students and faculty members crowded into a packed auditorium to listen to a panel of theologians, Marxists, physicists, and philosophers discuss new visions of humanism. A philosophy professor from the University of Pennsylvania praised the advancement of human rights in the Soviet Union, while another from Stanford University discussed ways to resolve the intellectual conflict between Marxism and Christianity.\footnote{\textquoteleft\textquoteleft New Humanism’ Theme of Inaugural Colloquium,\textquoteright\textquoteright The Santa Clara, Oct. 12, 1967, last accessed Apr. 3, 2020, \url{https://content.scu.edu/digital/collection/broncoseg/id/8835}.} One could easily imagine an event like this occurring on Berkeley’s campus, but this conference was hosted 50 miles south of the cultural home to student radicalism. It was at Santa Clara University, a small Jesuit university founded in 1851, where Eugene Bianchi, a priest and professor, hosted the conference as an attempt to spread Christian-Marxist dialogues to Catholic campuses nationwide.

Christian-Marxist dialogues were a form of engagement that emerged between Christians and Marxists in the Eastern Bloc in the late 1950s. Marxists who were disturbed by the authoritarian tendencies of Communist states sought to build a more inclusive and democratic form of socialism that allowed for religious liberty and freedom of conscience.\footnote{For more information see Paul Mojzes, “Christian-Marxist Dialogue in Eastern Europe: 1945-1980,” \textit{Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe} 4, No. 4 (1984), pp. 13-53.} Dialogue, understood as a form of
interaction that attempted to further understanding, engage in ideological compromise, and find common ground for cooperation, enabled Marxist academics and Christian clerics to recognize their common humanity in the face of oppressive totalitarianism. In Western Europe, Christian-Marxist dialogues flourished as well. In countries like France and Italy, Communist parties sought to demonstrate the compatibility between Marxism and Christianity in order to build a political front comprised of Marxist intellectuals and the religious working class. But how did Catholic campuses in the United States come to envision themselves as an ideal site of engagement between Christians and Marxists? And why, in the midst of the youth countercultural movement and the birth of the New Left, did Marxists continue to figure so prominently in the Catholic conception of American unbelief?

Catholic education in the United States had historically served as a sphere in which Catholic identity and piety were reproduced. As waves of Catholic immigrants poured into the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century, state governments were implementing public education systems.214 The new system of public education tied patriotism to Protestantism and often demonstrated explicit hostility to Catholicism. Because Catholics could not attend American public schools without abandoning or jeopardizing their Catholic faith, the American Church hierarchy formally commanded all parish priests to ensure that Catholics had access to a parochial education.215 While Catholic education

215 Ibid., 303.
developed as a consequence of external discrimination, the American Church hierarchy made attendance at Catholic schools an essential obligation of Catholics.\textsuperscript{216} By reinforcing the boundaries between the Catholic and Protestant population, the Church ensured that American Catholics would remain attached to the religion and community that protected them from a country that was hostile to Catholicism. This model of education continued into the mid-twentieth century and similarly applied to Catholic higher education.

Before the Second Vatican Council, Catholic colleges and universities functioned as an extension of a dogmatic, parochial education. Students were required to enroll in religious education classes that were taught by priests who functioned as enforcers of belief. Teacher-priests received their educations at Catholic seminaries that prepared them to catechize congregants, not impartially instruct students on systematic theology. Catholic students received a college education that was designed to uphold their faith. They were educated by Catholic priests, learned alongside other Catholic students, and were sheltered from ideas, such as Marxism, that were seen to be in conflict with Catholicism. The isolationist model embraced by Catholic higher education collapsed in the post-conciliar period due to both external and internal factors. Externally, the processes of Americanization and suburbanization made it harder for the Church hierarchy to maintain firm control over Catholic identity. Internally, the ethos embraced by Vatican II, which called for greater dialogue and openness with secular

\textsuperscript{216} Ibid., 304.
worldviews, rendered the catechizing theology and philosophy courses offered on Catholic campuses obsolete.

The postwar trends of suburbanization and Americanization brought Catholics into the fold of mainstream (i.e. Protestant) culture. As various ethnic groups moved into suburban neighborhoods, the previous boundaries between Protestant and Catholic, Irish and German, became less salient markers of difference. Protestants increasingly viewed Catholics as Americans as confessional disputes diminished in cultural significance. Likewise, the process of Americanization, whereby American Catholics began to identify as Americans and not just Catholics, motivated Catholics to assimilate into American society. For many ethnic groups that were on the outskirts of American society, the experience of fighting in World War II made American patriotism more central to their identity. These developments made it possible for American Catholics to enroll in non-Catholic colleges and universities, leading many Catholic students to aspire to attend America’s elite universities. As a result, American Catholic students protested the internal Church policies that required them to receive written consent from a parish priest to attend a non-Catholic college.217 These developments forced Catholic higher education to reevaluate its isolationist mentality. Because Catholic higher education was now competing with non-Catholic colleges for Catholic students, it would have to understand what Catholics found attractive about a non-Catholic education. Many Catholic educators identified the cultural and intellectual openness of non-Catholic

campuses as a main source of attraction. As such, they sought to reproduce that environment on their own campuses.

The spirit of Vatican II likewise rendered the isolationist mentality of Catholic higher education obsolete. Vatican II advocated for greater dialogue and understanding between the Catholic Church and the non-Catholic world. According to the Council, Catholics needed to familiarize themselves with secular philosophies, such as existentialism and Communism, before they could adequately engage with non-believers. The U.S. Secretariat also contended that Catholic participants in dialogue needed to have a thorough understanding of their religion so that they could respond to the questions raised by non-believers.

Catholic higher education was not prepared to meet these demands. The religious orders that oversaw Catholic colleges reinforced notions of Catholic piety and identity by closing their institutions off from intellectual developments, like materialism or secular humanism, that conflicted with the Catholic worldview. Philosophical writings associated with atheist thought, such as Marx’s *The Communist Manifesto* or Camus’s *The Stranger*, were not allowed on Catholic campuses. The reforms of Vatican II called such censorship into question. A number of Catholic educators, such as John Courtney Murray and Theodore Hesburgh, the President of the University of Notre Dame, argued that Catholic students would invariably come into contact with individuals and ideas that would challenge their worldview and potentially draw them away from Catholicism. College students, they argued, needed to be exposed to secular philosophies within a Catholic context. There were two reasons for this. First, so that they
could engage in informed dialogue with non-believers. Second, so that their exposure to secular worldviews occurred within an environment that was moderated by a Catholic perspective. Those who advocated for increased rigor of theological studies and exposure to secular worldviews received greater institutional support on account of the intellectual developments fostered by the Second Vatican Council and the demographic transformations that brought Catholic Americans into the fold of mainstream American society.

By the mid-1960s, Catholic higher education was prepared to transform its institutions to meet the challenges posed by the cultural and intellectual developments of the postwar period. It was willing to transform its campuses into centers of intellectual engagement with unbelief and non-believers. Philosophy departments would seek out lay faculty whose academic specialties reflected the presumed intellectual profile of American unbelief: continental philosophy. Centers and institutes would organize events like Christian-Marxist dialogues to bring students into contact with what were seen as widespread forms of American unbelief. However, these reforms were dead on arrival; for Catholic higher education transformed its campuses into centers of engagement with a form of European unbelief that had no bearing on the cultural context of the United States in the 1960s. As Catholic campuses invited obscure Marxists to participate in dialogue and offered philosophy courses on Jean-Paul Sartre, an entire cultural revolution was underway to which Catholic educators were blind. Young people across the country were leaving organized religion and tuning into a culture of sexual liberation, psychedelic drug use, and rebellion. Although these trends
genuinely threatened to upend America’s Christian social order, the Church largely failed to identify them because it was still operating under the assumption that Marxist politics and continental philosophy were the drivers of unbelief.

This chapter will evaluate how Vatican II’s understanding of the laity and dialogue transformed the way in which the Church responded to unbelief on Catholic and non-Catholic campuses in the United States. On Catholic campuses, professors built an educational apparatus designed to respond to the type of unbelief prevalent in European intellectual circles. As a result, American Catholic colleges and universities fundamentally restructured their theology departments in two ways. First, theology departments hired laypersons instead of clerics to teach non-confessional and non-apologetic theology and religion courses. Second, philosophy courses found their way into newly-created philosophy departments, which were staffed by lay faculty who often specialized in continental philosophy. These transformations will be used to demonstrate how the threat of unbelief fundamentally changed the pedagogical model of Catholic higher education to respond to a specific form of unbelief, one that was exported from its European home, but that did not easily map on to the U.S. context. Paradoxically, rather than address the threat of unbelief, these reforms inadvertently secularized Catholic higher education. Meanwhile on non-Catholic campuses, Catholic students and professors were identified by the Secretariat as ideal instruments for initiating dialogue with non-believers. However, due to the lack of an institutional presence on non-Catholic campuses, the Church as an ecclesiastical body was unable to moderate engagement between Catholics and non-believers, which left
it mostly unable to detect the cultural changes that occurred on non-Catholic colleges and universities.

**The Apostolate Laity: Preparing Catholic Students for Engagement with Unbelief**

The decision to circumvent the state and appeal directly to society was the central shift to occur as a consequence of the Second Vatican Council. As examined in chapter two, the Vatican understood that it could no longer rely on the state to realize its goals. This was especially true with respect to unbelief. In the Soviet world, atheism functioned as a quasi-religion of the state, and in the West, liberal democracies neither imposed religious belief nor curtailed the spread of atheism. If the Vatican wanted to respond to unbelief, it would have to engage with society directly through the instrument of dialogue. As dialogue became the primary means through which the Church communicated with secular society, the laity became increasingly central to realizing the Church’s goals. It was the layperson, not the priest, who could mediate between the Church and the secular world.

When the Church referred to the “secular world,” it meant everything that was divorced from religious life. The secular world, as the Church understood it, was comprised of culture, law, politics, and economics; in effect, areas of life that were neither under the direct authority of the Church nor explicitly related to salvation and everlasting life. The Catholic laity was the part of the Church that functioned most prominently in the secular world. Unlike priests and members of religious orders, the laity’s vocations and lifestyles immersed them more fully into a pluralistic and modernized society, making them a vital lifeline between
Catholicism and unbelief. The laity could interact with non-believers more effectively than ecclesiastical figures because their daily lives were, in many ways, quite similar to those of the non-believers’. Non-believers and Catholics worked in offices together; attended the same cultural events; and lived in the same neighborhoods. The laity could bring the Church’s teaching into areas of the world where non-believers were already present.

The Council elucidated this newfound role for the laity in *Apostolicam actuositatem*, the decree on the apostolate of the laity, promulgated by Pope Paul VI on November 18, 1965. The document declared that the laity had “the power to draw men to belief and to God,” and called upon the general laity to diligently “explain, defend, and properly apply Christian principles” in light of the circulation of “very serious errors” that “tend to undermine the foundations of religion, the moral order, and human society itself.” The error of which the document spoke was atheism, and it was the laity who were expected to stand as a testament to the Church and its teaching in an age of unbelief.

Young people were identified as an especially important group within the Catholic laity, “Their heightened influence in society demands of them a proportionate apostolic activity…They should become the first to carry out the apostolate directly to other young persons, concentrating their apostolic efforts within their own circle, according to the needs of the social environment in which they live.”

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219 Ibid., no. 7.
220 Ibid., no. 12.
highlighted the importance of the youth. Broadly speaking, Catholicism, like every other religion/ideology, recognized that its existence depended upon the reproduction of belief. Inculcating a high standard of piety among the young ensured Catholicism’s survival. However, the document did not just recognize the significance of youth generally, but of its “heightened” importance within the historical moment. Student movements, youth activism, and popular culture situated young people at the center of culture and politics in the 1960s. If young people moved society forward, the Vatican wanted to prepare young Catholics to influence and push society towards the Church’s teaching.

Preparation for such a task was to occur at Catholic educational institutions. *Apostolicam actuositatem* called upon Catholic colleges and universities to “develop a Catholic sense and apostolic activity in young persons.”221 The laity, the document declared, must be “specially formed to engage in conversation with non-believers, in order to manifest Christ’s message to all men.”222 But first, it noted, they must diligently learn the doctrines of “different forms of materialism” that were “spread far and wide.”223 The radical nature of the Vatican’s proposal cannot be overstated. Ten years earlier, Catholics were not even permitted to read the King James Bible, and now the Church was not just permitting, but exhorting them to read Feuerbach and Marx. In the pre-conciliar period, Catholic lay life was built around political groups that pressured governments to pursue a hardline anticommmunist policy. The laity’s exposure to

221 Ibid., no. 30.
222 Ibid., no. 31.
223 Ibid., no. 31.
Communist and atheist ideologies was filtered through propaganda disseminated by the Church. But now, the Catholic laity was expected to develop a comprehensive understanding of “materialist doctrines” because the Vatican wanted them to engage with non-believers directly.

Catholic higher education in the United States was ill-equipped to prepare students for intellectual engagement with atheism. To begin, Catholic colleges and universities did not have philosophy departments. The philosophy courses that were offered, such as metaphysics and epistemology, were used to reinforce and support Catholic theology. New philosophy departments needed to be created in order to facilitate classes on Marxism and existentialism. Second, the faculty at Catholic colleges and universities had no specialized knowledge in secular philosophies. Until the 1960s, humanities departments were staffed by priests. Teacher-priests often had no formal academic training beyond a seminary education, which meant that they lacked familiarity with the people and ideas associated with secular philosophies.

In response to the Church’s call to educate students on the philosophical foundation of unbelief, Catholic colleges and universities created independent philosophy departments with courses that were no longer tied to Catholic theology. These departments were not staffed by seminarian priests for the reasons explained earlier. Instead, hiring panels looked toward a generation of American Catholics who sought their education abroad. Since there were almost no doctoral programs in philosophy at American Catholic universities in the pre-conciliar period, American Catholic laypersons interested in philosophy often
went to European universities to pursue PhDs. Those who studied philosophy in the 1950s at institutions like the Sorbonne were at the intellectual epicenter of unbelief. They acquired an interest in the works of Hegel, Marx, Marcel, Heidegger, Sartre, and other exponents of phenomenology, existentialism, and Marxism. They interacted with the theologians affiliated with *nouvelle théologie* and began to reject the notion that Thomism, the traditional synthesis between Catholic theology and Greek philosophy, was the basic criterion by which to judge all philosophical systems of thought.\(^224\)

It was this group of American Catholics that staffed newly-created philosophy departments on Catholic campuses. By 1966, 25% of PhD-holding philosophy professors at Catholic colleges and universities had earned degrees in Europe; 20% of those teaching philosophy identified as existentialists or phenomenologists.\(^225\) As professors, they invited the European philosophers and theologians under whom they studied to speak as guest lecturers.\(^226\) For instance, a professor at Salve Regina College, a small Catholic school in Rhode Island, invited one of his professors from the Sorbonne to deliver a lecture on “Existential Drama” in 1966. The talk consisted of a comparison of Jean Paul Sartre and Gabriel Marcel’s plays “from the points of view of their philosophical meaning.”\(^227\) Meanwhile, Boston College, a Jesuit institution, added 64 new

\(^{224}\) Gallin, *Negotiating Identity*, 3.
\(^{225}\) Ibid., 3.
\(^{226}\) Ibid., 3.
electives to its Philosophy Department in 1965. Course offerings included titles like “Ethics and the Secular City,” “Hegel to Marx,” “The Problem of God,” and “Existentialism.”

The impetus to hire philosophy professors with the aforementioned background was grounded in the assumption that the meaning and role of unbelief was the same across borders, and that American unbelief was analogous to its European counterpart. These professors thought it necessary to instruct students on secular philosophy because they assumed it would prepare students to engage with non-believers and prevent them from abandoning their Catholic faith in favor of atheism. With respect to former, Catholic educators believed studying secular philosophies would prepare Catholics for engagement with American non-believers because that was their experience at elite universities in Europe, particularly in France. The emergence of unbelief in Europe was most certainly more political and philosophical in nature. From a political perspective, the Communist party made far greater inroads with the French working class, especially on the topic of religion. From a philosophical perspective, France had become the intellectual home to a number of atheist worldviews, like existentialism, that provided a case for unbelief unrelated to materialism or Marxism.


While figures like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus became intellectual posterchildren for atheism in France, the same could not really be said for any proponent of atheism in the United States. The three theologians, Paul van Buren, Thomas Altizer, and William Hamilton, behind Death of God theology represented the public face of atheism in the United States. Their argument – that Christianity could be redefined as an ethical system without the existence of God – drew heavy media attention after Time Magazine’s 1966 cover story about Christian atheism. However, the story received severe public backlash. Time received nearly 3,500 incensed letters from readers, while the academics behind the Death of God movement received stark criticism in academic circles.\footnote{Lily Rothman, “Is God Dead? At 50,” Time, last accessed Apr. 4, 2020, \url{https://time.com/isgoddead/}.} Even Bob Dylan said in response to the cover story, “I think our country’s gone downhill since that day.”\footnote{Quoted in Nadine Epstein and Rebecca Frankel, “Bob Dylan: The Unauthorized Spiritual Biography,” Moment, Oct. 13, 2016, last accessed Apr. 4, 2020, \url{https://momentmag.com/bob-dylan-unauthorized-spiritual-biography/}.} Americans were not persuaded by Death of God theology, and they most certainly were not identifying as Christian atheists.

However, Christian atheism identified, albeit in inflated terms, a form of practical atheism that was unconsciously permeating American society. In effect, the decline in religious attendance in the United States did not indicate that American unbelief was explicitly informed by secular humanism or continental philosophy. Instead, it suggested that many American non-believers, as one Catholic observer reported to the Secretariat, were indifferent to the belief in God, but did not take issue with Christianity’s moral framework or intellectual
foundation. "The great American proposition," said Murray, "is ‘religion is good for the kids, though I’m not religious myself.’" While many American non-believers may have been disinterested in organized religion and the notion of God, they did not adopt an worldview that was explicitly to hostile to religion or Christianity’s social structure. The implicit Christian atheism of this group of American non-believers did not place religion into competition with an alternative philosophy, but Catholic philosophers too often failed to identify practical atheism as a dominant form of unbelief in America because that was not their experience in Europe.

The other form of American unbelief that received minimal attentional from Catholic educators was one found among the counterculture and explicitly at odds with Catholic teaching and belief. By the mid-1960s, the United States was experiencing monumental cultural change. In 1967, Timothy Leary, a Harvard psychologist and public proponent of LSD, appeared on William F. Buckley’s show, The Firing Line. Leary, donned in mala beads and Eastern dress. He tried to convince his opponent that the psychedelic experience was the “religious language of the future.” Buckley, a public commentator and hardline Catholic, conservative, and anticomunist, described Leary’s argument as “utter, total gobbledygook.” Though Buckley was quick to reject Leary’s prophecy, the photographs and stories from Haight Ashbury suggested that many young

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233 Quote from Elson, “Is God Dead?”
Americans readily embraced Leary’s message to “turn on, tune in and drop out.” Across the country, young people experimented with psychedelics and marijuana to encounter new possibilities of self-discovery. Their long hair, beads, flowers, and peace signs symbolized their rejection of social norms. They expressed outward hostility towards the nuclear family and advocated for free love.\(^{235}\) The counterculture saw belief in God, adherence to formal morality, and loyalty to any institution as anathema to self-realization.\(^{236}\)

In retrospect, it is apparent that the counterculture represented an affront to the Catholic worldview. Loyalty to the Church and respect for the family and traditional morality were central pillars of the Church’s teaching. Yet, Catholic higher education failed to identify and respond to the threat posed by the counterculture. The failure to do so can be attributed to a number of factors: bureaucratic inertia, Eurocentrism, and a lack of information. Their inability to square the counterculture with their conception of unbelief appears to be the most plausible reason as to why they neglected the issue. Catholic academics continued to understand unbelief as an intellectual, rather than social phenomenon. In effect, they continued to see unbelief as an occurrence that resulted from an academic perspective, such as existentialism, rather than from cultural change. The unbelief of the counterculture was not a coherent and identifiable doctrine. Many of these non-believers identified as spiritual, experimented with eastern religions, and sought to encounter some transcendent sense of being. What they rejected was the Christian conception of God and organized religion. As Catholic intellectuals

\(^{236}\) Ibid., 130.
continued to engage with a form of unbelief that was more relevant to its European context two decades ago, a new form of unbelief emerged largely undetected.

The confused and misguided understanding of unbelief held by Catholic academics is revealed in the figures they invited to Catholic campuses as representatives of unbelief. In 1966, for instance, Roger Garaudy spoke at Saint Louis University, a Jesuit institution in Missouri.\footnote{Gallin, \textit{Negotiating Identity}, 105.} Garaudy was a French Communist who actively promoted Christian-Marxist dialogues. He wanted to build a Communist front with Catholics in France, but his efforts ultimately led to his expulsion from the French Communist party.\footnote{Carl F.H. Henry, “Christian Marxist Dialogue,” \textit{Christianity Today}, Aug. 12, 1977, last accessed Apr. 4, 2020, \url{https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1977/august-12/footnotes-christian-marxist-dialogue.html}.} 2,200 priests, nuns, students, and faculty listened to Garaudy deliver a 40-minute address. Garaudy argued that Christians and Communists should work toward the common good in order to secure world peace.\footnote{Doug Sutton, “Marxist Talks at St. Louis University,” \textit{UMSL Current}, Dec. 16, 1966, last accessed Apr. 4, 2020, \url{https://www.umsl.edu/~libweb/university-archives/Student%20Newspaper/Current%201966-1969/1966/December%201966.pdf}.} His speech was met with a standing ovation. Meanwhile, at the Catholic University of America (CUA) in Washington D.C., Milan Machovec was invited to campus in 1969. Machovec was a philosophy professor from Prague who promoted Christian-Marxist dialogues in the Eastern Bloc. While at CUA, Machovec defended Marxism and called for greater political collaboration between Christians and Marxists.\footnote{Eleanor Mikucki, “Czech Reformer Defends Marxism, Explains Results of Soviet Invasion,” \textit{The Tower}, Feb. 21, 1969.} As the Christian-Marxist dialogue hosted at Santa Clara University demonstrated, European Marxists and humanists were not
just invited to Catholic campuses to expose students to strands of unbelief in Europe. Professors used these figures as examples for the kind of participants they intended to find in the American context. The Christian-Marxist dialogue at Santa Clara, for example, sought out American Marxists and humanists to recreate the type of interactions prominent in European academic circles.

The problem with the strategy was that the views expounded by these participants were so far outside the mainstream of American culture that there was no way in which these interactions could have allowed Catholic students and academics to glean information about the majority of non-believers in the United States. Likewise, the fear of losing Catholic students to an intellectualized version of atheism seemed misplaced. Catholic educators frequently argued that students must engage with and be exposed to ideas that would inevitably challenge them in the “modern world.” 241 However the modern world of unbelief to which these thinkers referred was the modern European world, not the American one. There was no substantive evidence to suggest that Catholics would come into frequent contact with American non-believers whose unbelief was informed by European philosophy. The problem was one of selection bias. Catholic philosophy professors kept bringing Catholic campuses into contact with a handful of Marxist and existentialist atheists who were on the margins of American society, but ended up at the center of the Catholic conception of American unbelief.

The imagined non-believer did not just cause Catholic colleges and universities to hire a cadre of experts in existentialism and Marxism for newly-

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241 Rosemary Lauer, “St John’s II: The Closed University.” *Continuum* 3, No. 4 (Winter 1966), 244.
established philosophy departments; it also caused Catholic educators to restructure theology departments. As with philosophy courses, theology courses had historically served to reinforce what was taught in catechism class at Sunday school. Students were instructed by priests who rarely held PhDs or pursued academic scholarship in systematic theology. This was to change in the post-conciliar period. Catholic educators began to believe that students needed to receive a more critical and thorough understanding of Catholic theology if they were to communicate their religion effectively to non-believers.

Theology departments believed that they had to hire lay faculty if their students were to receive an academic, rather than pastoral, theological education. Teacher-priests were viewed as unqualified both because they lacked PhDs and were seen as uncritical defenders of the Church. As a result, theology departments witnessed a substantial rise in the number of lay faculty members. The development of lay faculties in theology departments created a precarious situation for Catholic education. Lay theology professors received their education not at seminaries, but in theology departments at non-Catholic universities. While many theology professors were Catholics themselves, neither their education nor research was tightly monitored by ecclesiastical authorities. They had the potential to introduce heterodox ideas to Catholic theology departments because they were under no obligation to use their vocation as a vehicle for transmitting Catholic dogma. The shift from teacher-priests to lay scholars made the authority of the Church less visible on campus. Instructors no longer donned religious

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habits, and their teaching was no longer monitored by religious orders. In the past, faculty handbooks and contracts set clear limits on academic freedom. Professors could not question the immortality of the human soul or the existence of God.\textsuperscript{243} But lay faculty developed a sense of their professional rights and advocated for the same degree of academic freedom found on non-Catholic campuses.\textsuperscript{244} Lay professors emphasized that it was not their job as professionally-trained theologians to indoctrinate students.\textsuperscript{245} College-level theology, they argued, was meant to provide an intellectual framework to speak of the relationship of Christianity to the lives of intelligent and educated people.\textsuperscript{246} The views expressed by lay faculty in terms of their professional rights and obligations to the Church were an integral reason as to why they were hired initially. Catholic educators wanted nonpartisan and well-trained theologians to teach Catholic students because they thought it was the only way in which students could receive a theological education that could withstand the scrutiny of non-believers.

Catholic educators consistently argued that young Catholics needed to acquire a deeper understanding of theology if they were to be capable of responding to unbelief. Part of the reason why Catholic educators wanted to elevate the discipline of theology to a serious academic endeavor was related to their fear of how poorly-educated Catholics would convey their faith to non-believers. Educators worried that Catholic students were “at risk of degrading

\textsuperscript{243} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{244} Ibid., 13.
\textsuperscript{245} Michael P. Sheridan, “Theology and Academic Freedom,” \textit{America}, May 6, 1967.
their faith because of their ignorance.”247 If a non-believer asked the average Catholic student about the doctrine of transubstantiation or intercession, Catholic educators wanted to ensure that their students could respond skillfully. These concerns stemmed from the Catholic conception of the non-believer. Non-believers were viewed as sophisticated thinkers whose atheism was grounded in intellectual ideas and principles. A Jesuit professor at Georgetown University described non-believers as people with “definite ideas about what constitutes the good life.”248 Another professor of philosophy at Georgetown argued that Communism’s strongest asset was its philosophy; it visualized man as the “shaper of the universe and his own destiny.”249 One professor from St. John’s University suggested that the non-believer was formed by historicism and the natural sciences and was uninterested in a life of mysticism and religious emotionalism.250

Catholic professors imagined American unbelief to stem from an intellectual basis, which explained why they wanted to approach non-believers through an academic framework that emphasized the cognitive, rather than emotional, dimension of Catholicism. Therefore, they believed that it was only through an erudite appeal to the mind that Catholic students could communicate their faith effectively to non-believers.

248 Walsh, “The Confrontation Between Belief and Unbelief,” 44.
The Ecumenical Pivot: Theology and Philosophy on Catholic Campuses

The project of teaching Catholic theology to the laity to combat unbelief was complicated by another strategy pursued by Catholics educators: ecumenism. Vatican II made it clear that dialogue and engagement with other religions was to become an essential part of Catholic life.251 Non-Catholic Christians were to be viewed as brethren in the pursuit of universal truths, while members of non-Christian faiths were viewed as people of goodwill who were capable of contributing to the common good. Catholic colleges and universities took heed of this message by embracing an ecumenical outlook within their theology departments.

In the mid-1960s, Catholic colleges started to transform theology departments into religious studies departments, following a trend started by Protestant universities. In 1963, the Association of Biblical Instructors, an association of Protestant theology professors, reorganized to form the American Academy of Religion (AAR). The AAR wanted to divorce spirituality from the academic study of religion. It presented religious studies as a discipline that sought to understand religion as an important human concern, not as an endeavor that fulfilled a pastoral of confessional function.252 Theology departments on Catholic campuses followed this initiative by moving towards an interdenominational and scholarly perspective. For the first time, Catholic students could enroll in theology and religion courses that were unrelated to

251 See Unitatis redintegratio and Gaudium et spes.
Catholicism. Religious studies departments invited individuals from other religions to speak on Catholic campuses, while hiring policies sought out non-Catholic faculty.\(^{253}\) By the spring of 1967, 82 Catholic colleges and universities had chairs of ecumenical studies directed at promoting dialogue with non-Catholics.\(^{254}\) These reforms were driven by the same impulse that led to the teaching of secular philosophies. Catholic educators wanted to expose students to various ideas and religions to ensure that they were able to engage with a pluralistic society, yet maintain their distinct Catholic identity despite their immersion in the secular world.

The ecumenical movement within Catholic theology departments, combined with the professionalization of theology and religious studies faculty came into conflict with the educational response to unbelief. While educators hoped that a rigorous and pluralistic theological education would make students well-versed in their own faith and others, it ultimately achieved neither. Instead, it inadvertently secularized the discipline that was once at the heart of Catholic higher education’s confessional and pastoral mission. Part of this had to do with other pedagogical changes. The push for open curriculums that impacted non-denominational campuses in the 1960s affected Catholic campuses as well. By 1970, all Jesuit colleges agreed that undergraduates were required to take just two courses in religion, neither of which had to be related to Catholic theology.\(^{255}\) Catholic students were now taught by professors who no longer viewed it as


\(^{254}\) Ibid., 106.

\(^{255}\) Ibid., 110.
appropriate to use their position as a platform for preaching.\textsuperscript{256} Moreover, Catholic students could graduate without having taken a single course in Catholic theology. Their two theology requirements could be fulfilled by studying Hinduism or Buddhism. There was no longer an ordered and integrated curriculum to ensure students would graduate with a thorough understanding of Catholicism and the world around them. Instead, the incorporation of religious diversity and a laicized faculty jeopardized Catholic colleges and universities’ integrity as Catholic institutions. By introducing courses on other religions and secular philosophies, Catholic thought had lost its privileged role within Catholic higher education.

This was especially worrisome for philosophy courses on existentialism and Marxism because there was no way to guarantee that the students enrolled in those classes would not be “won over” by secular worldviews. As one Jesuit philosophy professor from Fordham noted, the absence of an ordered and integrated Catholic curriculum left students free to construct their own philosophy from an incoherent set of classes.\textsuperscript{257} This, he worried, would make students “more or less agnostic” with “no real certitudes about anything.”\textsuperscript{258} The fears expressed by the likes of this professor were not without cause. At Duquesne University, a Catholic institution in Pittsburgh, a group of graduate students and faculty members came into conflict with the school’s administration in 1966. The school decided to deemphasize the Existential-Phenomenology tracts in the Philosophy

\textsuperscript{256} Dugan, “Sell-Out in College Theology.”
\textsuperscript{257} Joseph Donceel, “Philosophy in the Catholic University,” \textit{America}, Sep. 24, 1966.
\textsuperscript{258} Ibid.
and Psychology Departments. Existential-Phenomenology merged Kierkegaard’s existentialism with Husserl’s phenomenology to form an analytic framework for understanding “man as he lives in concrete reality.” It was a philosophical movement Catholics historically associated with secular humanism; for it understood human nature as constructed and subjective rather than endowed by God and unchanging. However, some Catholic philosophers educated in Europe attempted to apply Existential-Phenomenology to Catholic thought.

Under the leadership of Father Henry Koren, a Dutch native educated in Rome, Duquesne’s Philosophy Department heavily integrated Existential-Phenomenology into its course offerings and research specialties. Koren was asked to step down by the administration and was replaced by Dr. John Pauson, who sought to reorient the Philosophy Department towards traditional Thomistic philosophy. Eight of 17 members in the Department refused to recognize Pauson as the acting chairman. Students joined in the protest and stood outside the administration’s offices with picket signs that read “Save Existential Phenomenology.” Pauson wrote that while he wanted Catholic philosophers to open a dialogue with Existential-Phenomenology, he was concerned that it could jeopardize the identity of Catholic higher education. The administration

261 Ibid.
262 Ibid.
264 Ibid.
supported Pauson’s position, which led to the resignation of five faculty members, with Koren among them.265

The Duquesne protests demonstrated the tensions inherent in the policies pursued by Catholic universities in response to unbelief. Philosophy departments with offerings on humanist ideas were introduced with the intention of studying unbelief and preparing students for engagement with non-believers. But this initiative took on a life of its own as professors and students began dropping traditional Thomistic philosophy for ideas that dangerously treads the boundaries between belief and unbelief. Not only could students curate their coursework around existentialism without having to study Catholic theology, but the faculty members who taught them were free to present heterodox ideas in any way they sought fit.

In the summer of 1967, Theodore Hesburgh, the president of the University of Notre Dame, gathered Catholic university leaders together to draft and sign the Land O’Lakes Statement. The document asserted that Catholic universities must have “a true autonomy and academic kind of freedom in the face of authority of any kind, lay or clerical… Institutional autonomy and academic growth are the essential conditions of life and growth.”266 The statement guaranteed professors complete academic freedom on Catholic campuses, especially for lay faculty. While clerical faculty were still restricted in what they

265 “Five Quite Faculty at Duquesne in Philosophy Department Dispute,” Catholic Transcript, Apr. 8, 1966.
could say by their respective religious orders, lay faculty had no obligations to the Church’s teaching beyond what their conscience compelled. This statement, which was adopted by almost every Catholic college and university in the United States, was of immense significance in transforming Catholic higher education. No longer could a Catholic philosophy or theology professor’s position be jeopardized because of the research she pursued. The academic freedom guaranteed to professors made it that much easier for the initiatives taken in response to unbelief to backfire.

Ultimately, the efforts to prepare Catholic students to engage with secular ideas from a Catholic perspective inadvertently secularized Catholic higher education in two ways. First, it effectively neutralized the discipline of theology/religion. Catholic theology lost its central role in theology departments across the country, as professors lost both the right and responsibility to use college-level theology courses as a platform for catechizing. This transformation in and of itself did not make Catholic colleges and universities centers of unbelief. By secularization, in this sense, one means that Catholic colleges and universities lost their Catholic identity by placing all religions on equal footing within theology departments. The second way in which these policies secularized Catholic higher education was explicitly related to the threat of unbelief. The creation of philosophy departments with a strong emphasis on ideas that were viewed historically as antagonistic to Catholicism introduced a fifth column of sorts within Catholic higher education. Catholic philosophy professors increasingly appropriated ideas and methods that came close to contradicting the
Church’s teaching. Like the teaching of other religions alongside Catholicism, the teaching of these types of philosophy had the potential to cause students to adopt heretical ideas or at worst, leave the Church altogether.

**On Foreign Territory: Catholics on the Secular Campus**

At the same time Catholic educators were reforming their institutions, they were responding to the increased Catholic presence on non-denominational universities. By the late 1950s, Protestant universities underwent a process of secularization, whereby universities once affiliated with a specific denomination became nominally religious at best. Students began to enroll at America’s most prestigious universities, irrespective of their religious background. Catholic students were no exception to this trend. Once the processes of Americanization and suburbanization moved Catholic identity into mainstream American culture, Catholic enrollment at Protestant universities increased dramatically. In 1965, for every Catholic student on a Catholic campus, there were more than two enrolled at a non-Catholic college. The growth of Catholic students on non-Catholic campuses provided both challenges and opportunities for Catholic engagement with unbelief. In one regard, Catholic educators worried that young Catholics would lose their Catholic identity on the “secular” campus. Those who were more optimistic thought that the presence of Catholic students on secular

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269 Catholic writers and educators constantly referred to all non-Catholic colleges as secular colleges even if they were still affiliated with a specific Protestant denomination.
campuses could provide a perfect site of engagement with non-believers. As discussed in chapter two, the U.S. Secretariat identified colleges and universities to be the most prominent centers of American unbelief, which explained why Catholics referred to all non-Catholic campuses as “secular.” The secular campus did not just refer to a college’s non-denominational status, but to its hostility towards religious belief. The Secretariat made specific reference to the threats of science and secular philosophy on non-Catholic campuses.270 As Catholics emerged on these campuses, the Secretariat saw an opportunity to promote dialogue and to glean information about the climate of unbelief. However, the Secretariat’s desire to facilitate dialogue on non-Catholics campuses was undermined by its inability to organize and oversee events. The Secretariat had no Catholic institutional ally on the non-Catholic campus to support dialogue. This meant that the Church as an institution did not have a direct connection to or understanding of the type of unbelief found on non-Catholic campuses in the 1960s, which ultimately helps to explain why Catholic higher education’s response to American unbelief was so misguided.

There was no obvious way in which the Secretariat could compel or convince Catholic students to spend their free time entering into Church-monitored dialogue with non-believers. There were two reasons for this. First, the Secretariat lacked an institutional ally on non-Catholic campuses. Second, Catholic students and professors were not eager to function as instruments of the Secretariat’s agenda. With respect to the first point, the Church’s most visible

270 Daniel O’Hanlon, answer to questionnaire.
presence as an institution on non-Catholic campuses was found in Newman Centers. The Newman movement began at the end of the nineteenth century and sought to keep Catholics on non-Catholic campuses in touch with their religious identity. Newman Centers ensured that Catholic students could attend mass, receive the sacraments, and learn more about Catholic thought. However, Newman Centers were neither willing nor equipped to prepare Catholic students for engagement with non-believers. The institutes were designed to foster a strong Catholic identity that could withstand a predominantly non-Catholic environment. They achieved this by creating an insular Catholic culture that was removed from the broader university.\textsuperscript{271} As described by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1985, Newman chapters, well into the 1960s, “were characterized by a defensive and even hostile attitude…toward the academic world, which was perceived as dominated by a secularist philosophy.”\textsuperscript{272} As a conservative institution that rejected many of the reforms of Vatican II, Newman Centers did not want to function as facilitators for dialogue between Catholics and non-believers. This meant that the Secretariat could not rely on the clergy who staffed these centers to help organize events dedicated to dialogue or engagement. Since Newman Centers were the only institutional form of Catholicism on non-Catholic campuses, even those Catholic students and professors who wanted to

\textsuperscript{271} J.A. Appleyard, "The Priestly Mission in the Life of the University," \textit{Continuum} 3, No. 4 (Summer 1966), 189.
engage in dialogue would largely have to do so without the institutional support of clergy on campus.

There was conversation surrounding how to reform the clergy’s presence on non-Catholic campuses. One professor at Boston College noted that the pastoral model needed to change if Catholic students were to be capable of engaging with unbelief. In order to prepare Catholic students for engagement, he argued, the priest “should not become a professionally-equipped stranger to the community of the university,” but should “take meaning from the community itself.” In effect, priests on secular campuses had to understand the ethos of their community to avoid isolating themselves and their congregants from the broader cultural and intellectual trends that surrounded them. If this suggestion were realized, it would have meant that priests would have interacted and engaged with non-Catholic students, which would have helped the Church understand the climate of unbelief. However, this suggestion did not materialize because the Newman model continued to be the dominant type of clerical presence on non-Catholic campuses.

Even if there was institutional support for Church-sponsored dialogue, it was unclear whether Catholic students and faculty wanted to function as visible representatives of the Catholic Church. At the same time Catholic students matriculated into non-Catholic universities, Catholic professors began to join their faculties in increasingly large numbers. Once Catholics were no longer discriminated against in the hiring process, they accepted positions at colleges and

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universities across the country. Their presence was particularly felt in the newly-restructured departments of religious studies. As discussed earlier, traditional Protestant universities underwent a period of transformation in the 1950s whereby divinity schools and theology programs became religious studies departments. Religious studies departments treated the study of religion as an academic endeavor concerned with an important human issue. They separated the discipline of religion from apologetics and evangelism. The shift from theology to religious studies secularized religion departments at historically-Protestant universities. The departments became neutral zones where scholars were free to approach the study of religion from different perspectives and confessions.

Religious studies departments hired scholars on Catholicism to chair Catholic studies programs. Catholic studies treated Catholicism as an object of study rather than as a set of canonical codes.²⁷⁴ It offered students a chance to encounter Catholicism through history, literature, and culture. Specialists in the field were as, if not more, concerned with studying popular Catholic identity as they were with studying ecclesiastical history. The proliferation of Catholic studies programs at secular universities was problematic for the Church as an institution. These programs were removed entirely from the Church’s direct sphere of influence. Neither religious orders nor clergymen could dictate how professors presented Catholicism in these departments. Professors of Catholic studies on secular campuses were endowed with the same degree of academic

freedom as any other professor. Even if this were not the case, the Church as a clerical institution recognized that it could not get involved with shaping the curriculums of Catholic studies programs. The reforms that took hold as a consequence of Vatican II made it abundantly clear that the Church could not function as a paternalistic and controlling force in secular, including academic, life. The Church believed that Catholicism would lose its legitimacy if it continued to use the strategies of censorship and coercion that had kept the Catholic community intact in the pre-conciliar period. Now that the Church recognized pluralism and the integration of Catholics within it as a fait accompli, it could only encourage the laity to take it upon themselves to present Catholicism in a way that was compatible with the Church’s aims and teaching.

Catholic professors at non-Catholic universities may have embraced the Church’s model of dialogue and presented Catholicism in a way that was compatible with the Church’s official teaching, but they never became self-identifying instruments for realizing the Church’s agenda. If anything, most desired not to be treated any differently than other professors on campus. In 1966, America, a Jesuit magazine, ran a feature story about Catholic professors on the secular campus. The magazine asked Catholic professors across elite universities what they believed their responsibilities were in representing Catholicism on the secular campus.²⁷⁵ All of the professors interviewed noted that it was not their role to evangelize non-believers. Many felt that they could better represent Catholicism and connect with non-believers by pursuing academic excellence and

overcoming the stereotype that Catholics were anti-intellectuals. For instance, Michael Novak, a humanities professor at Stanford, argued that the Catholic professor’s primary task was to excel at teaching, while Robert McNally, a professor of Catholic studies at Brown University, argued that Catholic professors must “revise the view of Catholics as uneducated and prejudiced by showing true liberality by engaging with other modes of thought.”

Some argued that Catholic professors should engage in dialogue. For example, Ronald Murphy, a professor at Yale Divinity School, noted that Catholic visibility among the faculties of secular universities would “have the effect of releasing the individual from his narrow circle, creating a real dialogue.”

The opinions expressed by these professors were not antagonistic to the goals identified by the Secretariat for Non-Believers or the principles developed at the Second Vatican Council. The American Secretariat wanted Catholic academics to pursue rigorous research in order to show non-believers that the Catholic worldview was equally supportive of pioneering scholarship. The Secretariat did not intend for Catholic students or professors to act as evangelists; it wanted them to function as participants in dialogue with non-believers. However, Catholic professors did not see it as their primary responsibility to promote dialogue or shed light on the Church’s teaching. While dialogue most likely did occur between Catholics and non-believers in private settings, it did not materialize into a reportable phenomenon that could be understood by the Church.

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276 Ibid.
277 Ibid.
278 Daniel O’Hanlon, answers to questionnaire on dialogue.
279 Ibid.
Catholic students shared private conversations in dorm rooms about the nature of God and life, while Catholic professors engaged in friendly debate with colleagues on theological and philosophical topics. As one Catholic student reflected, she reached out to non-believers in her dorms as she would with any other student: she offered her insights in communal living, love, and human suffering. The “sincere and prudent dialogue” called for in *Gaudium et spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, undoubtedly occurred as Catholics and non-believers met on one of the few sites where American unbelief was prominent, or at least visibly perceptible. What the Secretariat failed to achieve was to make the institutional presence of the Church felt on the secular campus.

The matter of dialogue between the Catholic and non-believer on the secular campus was a private, rather than public affair. While the post-conciliar Church identified the laity, in this case students and professors, as central to bringing the Church into dialogue with non-believers, it perhaps did not realize how this strategy would fail to bring the Church as an institution into contact with unbelief. Because it was not priests who were engaging in dialogue with non-believers on college campuses and because Catholic students and professors were not relaying information back to the Church hierarchy, the Church had no direct access to understanding unbelief on college campuses. This explains part of the reason why the Secretariat struggled to understand the source of American unbelief on college campuses.

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The Secretariat was left to rely on academic scholarship to form their understanding of unbelief. They analyzed obscure philosophy professors’ secular worldviews and took those as representative of the college campus at large. This continued to occur even as Catholic students and professors entered the secular campus because the Secretariat never meaningfully established contact with those Catholics. So as the Secretariat continued to rely on academic scholarship and European philosophy to understand American unbelief, an entire cultural revolution occurred on college campuses. Nationwide, students rejected the social norms of previous generations in favor of free love, disobedience, and psychedelics. The counterculture of the 1960s was only the beginning. What might have originated as a youth-driven movement that was dismissed as something young people would grow out of, transformed into a political movement that fundamentally realtered American society. The gay rights and feminist movements of the 1970s were inherently connected to the student counterculture of the 1960s, but the Catholics concerned with unbelief never adequately recognized the counterculture as a force with which to be reckoned. This left the Catholic Church unprepared to respond to the seismic cultural shifts that occurred in the 1970s. Instead of looking towards the “secular” campus and detecting genuine sources of unbelief, Catholic educators relied on an outdated conception of European humanism and continental philosophy to prepare Catholic students for engagement with a largely imagined version of unbelief. The increasingly large Catholic presence on the secular campus did not correct the
Secretariat or Catholic higher education’s conception because meaningful relations were never established between the two groups.

The reforms in Catholic higher education, combined with the Secretariat’s failure to interact with the actual sources of unbelief on the secular campus, reinforced the perception that American unbelief was informed by the same intellectual sources as its European counterpart. As Catholic campuses sought to bring their students into contact with the modern world, they looked toward a generation of American Catholic philosophers educated in France to guide their efforts. Philosophy departments offered courses on Heidegger and Sartre, while humanities institutes organized Christian-Marxist dialogues to expose students to the non-believer’s political outlook. If these were the only changes to have occurred on Catholic campuses during this period, it would have perhaps only led to a misperception of American unbelief. However, these reforms were implemented in tandem with other significant changes that ultimately secularized the mission of Catholic higher education.

The other significant changes that transpired occurred within theology departments. Theology departments attempted to increase academic rigor by hiring lay theologians who were trained in religious studies departments or divinity schools rather than seminaries. This was in part driven by the assumption that students needed to have a thorough grasp of Catholic theology in order to explain their worldview to non-believers. But the laicization of theology
departments did not translate into a rigorous Catholic theological education because, at the same time, theology departments were moving away from their monolithic Catholic identity and integrating courses on other faiths and approaches to studying religion. Students were no longer required to pursue coursework in Catholic theology and the professors who taught them were no longer bound by codes of conduct that required them to assert that the Catholic Church’s teaching was absolute. These reforms ultimately weakened the Catholic identity of Catholic higher education because they removed the mechanisms that reproduced Catholic faith. The secularization of Catholic higher education, combined with the undetected cultural changes that occurred on the secular campus, would go on to undermine Catholicism’s influence in American society. As new social norms were gaining traction on the secular campus, especially with respect to sexual morality, Catholic morality and thought were becoming more relativized on Catholic campuses. This would ultimately undercut the Catholic Church’s ability to respond to the appeal of progressive social causes in the 1970s.
Conclusion

Within the course of 30 years, the Catholic Church had so significantly altered its understanding of atheism that it transformed a militant battle against atheistic Communism into a peaceful exchange between Catholicism and various forms of unbelief. In its American context, the Church’s revised understanding of atheism led to dramatic reforms within Catholic higher education. Its attempts to prepare Catholic students for engagement with an imagined form of unbelief caused Catholic higher education to inadvertently secularize its mission and overlook the more likely causes of unbelief in American society: practical indifference and the student counterculture. As an entire youth movement sought to upend Christian morality, Catholic educators and the Secretariat for Non-Believers continued to understand atheism as an intellectual phenomenon that emerged from Marxist thought and continental philosophy. How did this happen?

Although the Vatican did not revise its understanding of atheism until the Second Vatican Council, a number of French theologians laid the groundwork for such a transformation decades earlier. *Nouvelle théologie*, the school of thought with whom these theologians, such as Henri de Lubac and Yves Cognar were affiliated, grew out of the specific social and intellectual context of interwar France. These theologians grappled with the political appeal of Marxism and the intellectual appeal of existential-phenomenology. They witnessed the French working class abandon the Church in favor of Communist politics, and they experienced the intellectual inadequacy of Thomistic thought in the face of philosophical developments that depicted atheism as a positive and intellectually
coherent worldview. The school of thought was instrumental in disentangling atheism from its Communist identity, but was also responsible for connecting atheism’s Western form to continental philosophy. The influence of nouvelle théologie on Vatican II and the creation of the Secretariat cannot be overstated. It was these theologians who drafted the key texts related to unbelief and successfully advocated for the Church to pursue social and political rapprochement with non-believers in the West. Although each regional office of the Secretariat had autonomy in determining how to most effectively engage with unbelief, the American members of the Secretariat remained attached to the French conception of unbelief because so many of them studied in Europe and read writings affiliated with nouvelle théologie in theological journals like Cross Currents.

American participants in the Council and Secretariat were so enthrenched in the intellectual milieu of European thought that they often failed to consider how to distinguish American belief from its European form. Furthermore, the political interests of the American priests and intellectuals who engaged with unbelief predisposed them to interact with humanists and Marxists. John Dearden, the head of the U.S. Secretariat, wanted to use the office as a way to advance the causes of civil rights and nuclear disarmament. While these were important concerns, they did not necessarily reflect the actual values of American non-believers. The practical non-believers who preferred to go to the movies instead of church on Sunday were not necessarily individuals whose unbelief was shaped by a deep concern for humanity or a fascination with continental philosophy.
Interestingly enough, progressive Catholics could have found an ally among non-believers who shared their political goals and constituted a more substantial portion of American unbelief. The student counterculture and youth movement were instrumental in advancing civil rights and promoting global peace. Their worldview should have qualified them as non-believers because they mostly rejected organized religion and the Abrahamic conception of God. Yet, no subset of the Catholic Church sought to establish contact with the counterculture, or even identified it as a source of unbelief. Its failure to do so can be attributed to the Eurocentrism of those engaged with unbelief alongside the Church’s inability to establish meaningful contact with the physical location of unbelief: secular universities.

The U.S. Secretariat was adept in identifying universities as centers of unbelief, but its conception was still guided by European impulses. Universities were seen as sites of unbelief because they were home to science and philosophy departments that produced research which challenged Catholic teaching from an intellectual standpoint. While this may have been the case, academic scholarship was not the driver of American unbelief. The source of unbelief on college campuses stemmed from new social attitudes embraced by students. Their quest for self-discovery through psychedelics, sexual liberation, and rebellion represented as great a challenge to the Church’s authority as Communism. But even as Catholic students and professors increasingly populated these centers of unbelief, the Church’s perception was not corrected; for Catholics on the secular campus did not want to function as instruments of the Church’s agenda. The
failure to understand the climate of unbelief on college campuses dramatically weakened the position of Catholicism within American society. First, by failing to establish contact with the counterculture, the Church was unable to detect the seismic changes that would go on to undermine its teaching and authority. Second, the misinformation about unbelief caused Catholic higher education to undermine its own authority and identity, as it sought to expose students to different worldviews without adequately inculcating a strong sense of Catholic identity.

The Catholics charged with responding to American unbelief could have served as an effective bridge between the counterculture and the Church’s social teaching. Progressive Catholics shared the counterculture’s commitment to civil rights, economic justice, and nuclear disarmament. There would have been legitimate grounds for political collaboration between the two groups. Had dialogue been established, Catholics would have had the chance to expose the counterculture to the progressive elements of their faith, and they would have been able to detect the changing attitudes of the counterculture. Establishing contact with them would have helped the Church identify what was about to transform from a culture on the outskirts of society to a social movement at the center of American politics. The students of the New Left carried their worldview into the political arena in the 1970s. Abortion, gay rights, and feminism gained substantial support during this period, most likely to the Church’s surprise. In effect, the Church lost considerable ground on critical social issues because it was engaged with a form of unbelief that was anachronistic to its time. Even as a
social revolution occurred in the United States and sought to upend Christian morality, the Church remained preoccupied with secular humanism and Marxism. The Church’s preoccupation with secular humanism and Marxism did not just result in its inability to detect major cultural changes; it compromised the mission and identity of Catholic higher education. In the pre-conciliar period, Catholic higher education reproduced and reaffirmed Catholic identity. Students were taught by priests who promoted an explicitly Catholic worldview; they were required to attend mass daily; and their private behavior was tightly regulated by codes of conduct. These elements of Catholic higher education disappeared in the wake of Vatican II; the Church accepted pluralism and the supremacy of individual conscience. Catholic educators sought to prepare Catholics for engagement with unbelief by establishing philosophy departments with extensive course offerings in continental philosophy. Whereas Catholic universities and colleges in the past censored such writings, colleges and universities in the 1960s actively encouraged students to take classes on thinkers like Hegel, Heidegger, and Sartre. The decision to introduce these courses was grounded in the assumption that students needed to be familiarized with continently philosophy and Marxism before they could effectively engage in dialogue with non-believers. However, these classes took on a life and mission of their own. Professors appropriated the analytic techniques of the philosophies affiliated with unbelief and they were under no obligation to frame their teaching around a Catholic perspective.
Likewise in theology departments, professors received complete academic freedom to explore religion and theology from multiple perspectives. Faculties now included a substantial number of laypersons who were trained at non-denominational universities. These professors did not see it as their responsibility to produce faithful Catholics. Instead, they wanted to produce rigorous academic research that treated religion as a set of important human concerns rather than as a set of sacred knowledge. Here again, Catholic educators thought this strategy would lead to a higher level of theological understanding among students, but its result was the very opposite. This was in part due to the ecumenical attitude of religious studies departments, which introduced courses on other religions and allowed students to graduate without having to study Catholic theology. These changes ultimately secularized Catholic higher education. Students were under no obligation to study Catholic theology or attend mass. Not only did colleges and universities abandon their mission to reproduce the Catholic faith, but they also introduced coursework on texts that would have led to one’s excommunication from the Church had they read it 30 years earlier. In effect, these reforms did not just diminish Catholicism’s significance on Catholics campuses; they introduced ideas that were explicitly hostile to the Catholic worldview.

Within every level of the Church, Catholics have questioned and moved away from this model of engagement with unbelief. Pope John Paul II (1978-2005), who closed the Secretariat for Non-Believers, moved the Vatican away from dialogue and towards evangelization. In his 1990 encyclical *Redemptoris missio*, John Paul II called for a “new evangelization” in countries where “entire
groups of the baptized have lost a living sense of the faith, or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church.”

Pope Benedict XVI (2005-2013) created the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization in 2010. He explained that the new council would “promote a renewed evangelization” in countries where the Church had long existed, “but which are living a progressive secularization of society and a sort of eclipse of the sense of God.” Indeed, even Pope Francis, who has often focused on progressive political causes and downplayed his predecessors’ decision to reaffirm the Church’s traditional teachings, said that the secularization of the West “necessarily entails changes” to the Vatican’s offices for doctrine and evangelization.

The move towards evangelization has led to a serious reappraisal of how to understand unbelief, particularly in the United States. Instead of understanding non-believers as atheists, humanists, or Marxists, the Church has identified the “nones” as the most prevalent type of non-believers in contemporary American society. The nones are those who do not identify as religious, but who also do not subscribe explicitly to an atheistic worldview. Robert Barron, a Bishop from California, has led the American Church’s efforts in evangelizing the nones. Rather than emphasizing the intellectual foundation of atheism or seeking public proponents of atheism with whom to engage, Barron has utilized social media to

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communicate Catholic theology and teaching directly to the nones. Barron’s YouTube videos and podcasts, which draw hundreds of thousands of views, do not minimize the centrality of God or the sacraments to the Catholic worldview. Indeed, Barron and the Church at large, emphasize their religion and teaching as the only guarantee to absolute truth in a relativistic society. They have moved away from dialogue and towards evangelization. This transformation underscores how the Church thinks its previous strategy led to too much concession to secularization and the social outlook of their opponents. Dialogue promoted compromise and toleration, while evangelization aims to make the non-believer accept all of the moral and social tenets of the Church’s teaching. These changes are dramatic and they reveal the contemporary Church’s discomfort with Vatican II’s decision to seek rapprochement, rather than confrontation, with unbelief.

The disillusionment with the Church’s efforts to reconcile with liberal modernity, more broadly, is quite prevalent among portions of the American Catholic laity today. In 2016, R.R. Reno, the editor of First Things, an influential Catholic journal, wrote an article called, “Against Human Rights.” In it, he declared that, “our moment calls for witness, not dialogue…[for] to speak of dialogue in 2016 risks baptizing our compromising complicity with the present age.” Likewise, Rod Dreher, the NYT bestselling author of The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation (2017), has argued for Catholics to fully isolate themselves from secular society because

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contemporary Christianity is “highly susceptible to being colonized by modernity.”

Taken to another extreme is an argument advanced by Taylor Marshall, a lay Catholic academic whose YouTube videos attract hundreds of thousands of viewers. In his book, *Infiltration: The Plot to Destroy the Church from Within* (2019) Marshall repudiates Vatican II as a demonic plot created by “Modernists and Marxists” to subvert the Catholic Church. The backlash against the reforms of Vatican II, particularly its concepts of dialogue and pluralism, demonstrate the cultural unease American Catholics feel today towards the concessions the Church made to modernity in the 1960s. Such a trend is not unique to Catholicism.

Across the globe, Islam, Protestantism, and Judaism are witnessing a resurgence in their fundamentalist and conservative branches. From the ubiquity of megachurches in the United States to the rise of Orthodox Judaism in Israel, congregants are reacting against the secularizing trends within and outside of their religions. The Catholic Church’s failed attempt at rapprochement with unbelief in the long 1960s might offer one reason, among many, as to why Catholics today express disillusionment with their religion’s attempt to embrace liberal modernity.

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Appendix 1: Members of the American Secretariat for Non-Believers as of 1966

John Dearden | Director of the U.S. Secretariat | University of Notre Dame | South Bend, IN

Rev. William Scott | Le Moyne College | Buffalo, NY

Rev. Paul S. Naumann | Canisius High School | Buffalo, NY

Rev. Theodore Taheny | University of San Francisco | San Francisco, CA

Rev. Willis J. Egnan | Loyola University | Los Angeles, CA

Rev. Joseph Cahill | Bellarmine School of Theology | North Aurora, IL

Rev. William McFadden | Georgetown University | Washington, D.C.

Rev. Caroll J. Bourg | Baltimore, MD

Rev. Maurice Holloway | Rockhurst College | Kansas City, MO

Rev. J. Pfister | Loyola University | New Orleans, LA

Rev. James Yamauchi | Spring Hill College | Mobile, AL

Rev. Edward MacKinnon | Weston College | Weston, MA

Rev. Leo Kaufman | Mount St. Michael’s College | Spokane, WA

Rev. William LeRoux | Seattle University | Seattle, WA

Rev. William Richardson | Fordham University | New York, NY

Rev. W. Norris Clarke | Fordham University | New York, NY

Rev. Donald MacLean | Boston College | Chestnut Hill, MA

Rev. Christopher Mooney | Fordham University | New York, NY

Rev. Daniel J. O’Hanlon | Alma College | Alma, CA

Rev. Patrick Reid | Providence College | Providence, RI

Rev. John Courtney Murray | Woodstock College | Woodstock, MD

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## Appendix 2: Members of the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Believers as of 1965

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Country</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joe Blomjous</td>
<td>Italy</td>
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<tr>
<td>William Brasseur</td>
<td>Philippines</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alex Carter</td>
<td>Canada</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gerard De Vet</td>
<td>Holland</td>
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<tr>
<td>John Bokenfohr</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thos Cahill</td>
<td>Australia</td>
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<tr>
<td>John Dearden</td>
<td>United States</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neophytos Edelby</td>
<td>Syria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angelo Fernandes</td>
<td>New Delhi</td>
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<tr>
<td>John Gran</td>
<td>Norway</td>
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<td>Thos Holland</td>
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<td>Spain</td>
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<td>Janez Jenko</td>
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<td>Boleslaw Kominek</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marc Lallier</td>
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<td>Ntale Mosconi</td>
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<td>Edw. Pironio</td>
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<tr>
<td>L. Satoshi Nagae</td>
<td>Japan</td>
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<tr>
<td>H. Wittler</td>
<td>Germany</td>
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