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## BOOK REVIEW

### ***Church Refugees: Sociologists Reveal Why People are Done with Church But Not Their Faith.* By Josh Packard and Ashleigh Hope, Loveland, CO: Group, 2015, 143 pp.**

Tracking trends in religion is done most easily and objectively by census and survey research that yields quantitative data. The most pronounced current trend in North America is the rise of the “nones,” which includes both those who adamantly reject religion and those who are only indifferent to religion, claiming no religious preference, affiliation, or identity. In the US, the nones rose from 16% of the population in 2007 to 23% in 2015, and are now more numerous than Catholics and mainline Protestants, second only to evangelicals (Pew). In Canada, the nones rose from 4% in 1971 to 26% in 2015 (Angus Reid).

Beyond people simply self-identifying as religious or not lie questions about their strength of identity and commitment. Among the faithful, strength of commitment is commonly measured behaviorally (versus valuatively) by frequency of attendance at services, though “religious decline” is evident even in the measurement itself – “regular attendance” has traditionally been defined as weekly, but is increasingly defined as monthly. The gap between the larger percent who identify as Christian and the smaller percent who also maintain practices of church attendance and membership has long been explained by labels such as “private theists” or “cultural Christians,” with the assumption that religion is less important to them in their everyday lives. For example, Smith and Denton’s term of “moralistic therapeutic deism” described a theologically vacuous and self-serving faith that hardly fits conventional concepts of religiosity.

However, those in the gap between the church and the unchurched deserve more nuanced qualitative scrutiny free from the implicitly negative characterization typically rendered by the church. Not all outside the Christian church and other world religions are without strong religious faith, nor are they necessarily among the 37% of US adults whom the Barna group says currently qualify as “post-Christian.” Some, say Packard and Hope, are persons of deep Christian faith who have reluctantly despaired of the church and become dechurched. They are not religious “nones;” they are religious “dones,” those simply done with church, but not their faith. Packard and Hope coin the term “church refugees” to describe those “who’ve been forced from their homes – where they’d prefer to stay – for fear of persecution.... (who) tell stories of frustration, humiliation, judgment, embarrassment, and fear that caused them to leave.... (who) worked diligently for reform within the church but felt the church was exclusively focused on its own survival and resistant to change.... They’re people who’ve made

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an explicit and intentional decision to leave organized religion. They didn't drift away casually" (pp. 15-16).

*Church Refugees* is a slim, easy-reading monograph, with no bibliography or index, infrequent references to other scholarship, written explicitly for a non-academic, churched audience. It rarely employs sociological concepts, and always explains them when it does. Instead, it offers numerous first-person quotes from respondents to the research project, and highlights the key sentences of the authors in bold, enlarged font. Josh Packard's previous book was on *The Emerging Church: Religion at the Margins* (2012), and he continues here to examine a demographic that is discontent with traditional church practises. Though his methodology and approach are similar to Phil Zuckerman's study of the irreligious in *Faith No More* (2012) and Linda Mercandante's study of the "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR) in *Belief Without Borders* (2014), Packard's subjects remain differentially and decidedly Christian in their worldview. In a separate quantitative report entitled "Exodus of the Religious Dones" released two months after *Church Refugees*, Packard put their number at 30 million Americans.

Here, with his assistant Ashleigh Hope, Packard reports on qualitative data collected from a chain-referral (snowball) sample of over 100 in-depth interviews (over 1,000 pages of transcriptions) that is diverse geographically, socioeconomically, generationally, and with regard to gender (though 92% were white). Many of them were pastors, church staff, or very active volunteers with substantial church capital, the very opposite of free riders, what Bauman termed inhabitants versus mere residents. Significantly, they had substantially higher average levels of education than those remaining churched. Because the researchers initially hypothesized that this social phenomenon had something to do with the dominance of conservative Christianity and the misbehavior of its church leaders, they administered a validated scale of religious fundamentalism to each respondent to control for theological variables. When the incoming data was too unbelievably consistent, they continued conducting interviews past the point of saturation, where they kept hearing the same things repeatedly.

What they heard had nothing to do with the theological character of the church or the morality of its leaders. Instead, they heard reverberations of the general societal shift away from institutionally organized life, and more lucidly and emphatically, the loss of trust in, and relevance of, the church in particular. Increasingly, people "see the church as a kind of niche political institution.... inwardly focused and consumed by the politics of its own survival" (p. 18). Nonetheless, the dechurched are not angry with the church; not a single respondent left after just one bad experience, and the average number of churches attended before leaving permanently was more than four. Instead, most were just bored and feeling stunted spiritually, convinced that they had to get out if they were to survive spiritually. Packard and Hope summarize in separate chapters the four primary factors that drive church refugees from their church homes.

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First, church refugees wanted community, but got judgment instead. More than just a social club, the community of a church is crucial to comprehending God, because although sermons may explain God cognitively, relationships reveal God experientially. “A sense of community is so important that it will keep people in churches they don’t otherwise care for” (p. 31). And “community is so important that it’s often the only thing our respondents miss when they leave, and it’s the first thing they seek to re-create outside of church” (p. 38). This finding corroborates the analysis of Butler Bass that people initially become Christian through a process of belonging, then behaving, and finally believing, not the traditional insistence on first believing, then behaving, and finally belonging. “Instead of understanding that shared life leads to shared beliefs, churches frequently want to make sure that everyone signs on to a common belief system before they can begin to do life with each other” (p. 40). Therefore what people encounter first and foremost is judgment. They feel watched, and in response become defensive and withdrawn from the group. “Forgiveness, grace, humility, and love are absent in the moment of judgment, and those are the theological tenets held most closely by our respondents” (p. 43). As is often observed, a true sense of community comes only from a common unity, not an imposed uniformity. Said a 84-year-old lifelong church goer, “I’m tired of being lectured to; I’m just done with having some guy tell me what to do” (p. 47), though she still attends the church quilting group.

Second, church refugees wanted meaningful activity in the life of the church, but got bureaucracy instead. Over a century of sociological scholarship has elaborated Weber’s seminal explication of bureaucracy, Michel’s iron law of oligarchy, and O’Dea’s dilemmas of institutionalization as applied to religion in particular. While all organizations are inherently conservative, and above all self-sustaining, “heavily centralized and hierarchical organizations tend to concentrate power and gradually compel all activity inward, stifling innovation, creativity, and opposing ideas” (p. 56). As functional and inevitable as some bureaucracy is in formal organizations, the dechurched experienced it as dishearteningly off-putting in the church, as they constantly found themselves doing mostly “housework” to keep the organization going. Ironically, such activity tends to reward the least involved church adherents the most, and the most involved the least.

The dechurched felt they were unable to give meaningful life to the church, or influence its direction. They felt they were basically working as entry-level employees doing mundane and unfulfilling work for a large corporation in which the senior pastor had 51% stock, and thereby retained all the authority to make the most meaningful decisions for everyone else. Said a 59-year-old counsellor, “systems will always preserve the system at the expense of the individual, because the system is bigger and more important.... So I don’t think organized church works.... If it’s formal, and if there’s a talking head, just shoot me” (p. 64). The issue is not the personality or character of individual leaders. Rather, the issue is the structure itself that is geared toward stability and growth over all else, toward ever more bodies in the pews

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and/or dollars in the collection plate. Said a 43-year-old urban missionary, “The machine just eats you up.... There was too much at stake for the organization to change” (p. 73). So instead of a “depersonalized machine or system that serves only its own purposes” (p. 67), the dechurched “tend to construct church alternatives through political and civic engagement, small groups or house churches, or informal but spiritually meaningful gatherings” (p. 68) where they share a meal, discuss a book, or watch a video.

Third, church refugees wanted conversation, but got doctrine instead. Said one respondent, “It’s in relationships and conversations that I find God. It’s not a real conversation if you’re trying to convert me to your position. That’s an argument. I’m not interested in arguing. That’s not a real relationship either” (p. 78). The dechurched are not looking for theological agreement and closure, and certainly not via lectures or dictatorial inculcation, precisely because they find mystery, and the questioning and exploration it evokes, more spiritually vibrant. As important as the teaching ministry of the church may be, its primary pedagogy turns many away. Prepackaged dogma destroys the lived experience of the priesthood of all believers. Though the dechurched “bristle at the notion that unity means uniformity” (p. 93), they are still far from espousing an individualistic theology. What emerges is a carefully considered and clearly argued theological position of communal “do it ourselves,” not merely “do it yourself.” From an organizational perspective, the problem with bureaucratic churches is the expectation that they be places that offer products and services for consumption, rather than places where people are invited to produce together themselves. In so doing, churches undermine themselves by their complicity with religious consumerism, even when, ironically, “the nature of the modern bureaucracy is to erase individual desire” (p. 95).

Fourth, church refugees wanted meaningful engagement with the world, but got moral prescriptions instead. They felt that the church was more interested in policing personal morality, such as sexuality, than in working to counteract larger issues of social injustice, such as the economy, and therefore only scratched the surface of what it means to be Christian. “The church is mostly interested in controlling people rather than helping them” (p. 100), and by focusing on personal lifestyle, it ignores the systemic, root causes of evil. Lest this be mistaken as a liberal bias, none of the respondents expressed disagreement with their church’s theology, or dislike of certain people in it. “Those are the reasons people switch churches. People opt out of organized religion altogether because they think the structure is fundamentally flawed” (p. 104). Said one respondent, “I went to church because I thought I could do some good there that I couldn’t do alone, not to come home angry because they said my friends would burn in hell for who they loved, while they debated how much money to spend on the new church parking lot” (p. 103). On the question of homosexuality, “respondents didn’t necessarily disagree with conservative church views..., but they found the issue to be relatively minor compared to the amount of division and distraction it created” (p. 105). Said a

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70-year-old former pastor, “There are too many words spoken in church, and too little action in society. I’m done with that” (p. 106).

Packard and Hope care deeply about the well-being of the church, and remain guardedly hopeful, arguing that “more than anything what the dechurched want is a home in the truest sense of the word. A place that’s safe and supportive and refreshing and challenging” (p. 29). Packard is a scholar of organizational theory and behavior, and excels at unpacking the dysfunctionality of the modern church as corporation, compared to the early church. So it is no surprise that the potential solutions they recommend in the closing chapters are structural. Though most of the dechurched gave no indication of willingness to return, Packard and Hope elaborate four strategies that might encourage their re-engagement. 1) Invite participation that is granted real control, within limits. 2) Undermine the bureaucracy that concentrates power. 3) Be truly relational by doing things with people, not running programs for them. 4) Impact your community, and be willing to be impacted by it. Unfortunately, too many contemporary churches are not so inclined.

So what do the dechurched take with them when they leave? Organizationally, they take considerable church capital, and if education is at all correlated with “the best and the brightest,” that loss is significant. Personally, they take an often freed and deepened belief in God. They take their love of community, often into new communities they create. And they take their need to be actively engaged. “We expected to find a lot of overworked, stressed-out people opting out of leadership responsibilities so they could take a break. This could not be further from the truth. The dechurched are, as a general rule, leaving to do more, not less” (p. 133). Sadly, “they’re so skeptical of organized religion that they aren’t even inclined to go to church with close friends and family members” (p. 134). But strategically, the “dones” remain the strongest potential bridge to the religious “nones.”

The larger cultural shift of the Western postmodern turn is no doubt at work in this social phenomenon. Church refugees wanted the interpersonal relationality, meaningful activity, authentic conversation, and worldly engagement of a postmodern community, but got the judgmentalism, bureaucracy, doctrine, and moralism of a modern church instead. It would be easy to suggest an alternative interpretation and dismissal of these findings as nothing but a small sample of networked, self-selected, individualistic, postmodern consumers leaving the church simply because they are not getting what they want, instead of humbly submitting to the historic truths and forms of the church. But that in itself would be too easy an equation of current claims of Christian truth and forms of Christian organization with God’s intent for the church. And it would be a grievous injustice to those who have devoted most of their lives to finding spiritual service and fulfilment within the church, and are now done with church, but not their faith. See “The Dechurched of America” at [www.dechurched.net](http://www.dechurched.net).

Dennis Hiebert  
Providence University College