



Defining God: Former-Catholic Young Adults Describe Their Relationship with God and Religious Identity



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Background

- Fifty percent of Catholic-raised individuals under the age of 30 identify as Former-Catholics (Manhlos-Weber & Smith, 2018).
- Of this group of Former-Catholics, 57.3% still believe in a higher power and 81% still pray occasionally (Manhlos-Weber & Smith, 2018).
- Therefore, understanding how Former-Catholics define and interact with their higher power is a question worth exploring.

Participant Demographics

Twelve junior and senior students at a Catholic University were interviewed. All participants were Catholic-raised adults.

		n	%
Gender Identity	Female	8	66.7
	Male	3	25.0
	Other	1	8.3
Religious Identity	Agnostic	3	25.0
	Atheist	3	25.0
	Spiritual	2	16.7
	None	1	8.3
	Unsure	1	8.3
	Christian	1	8.3
	Not religious	1	8.3
Racial Identity	White	6	50
	Latinx	3	25.0
	Multi-racial	2	16.7
	Black	1	8.3
Sexual Orientation	Heterosexual	8	66.7
	Gay	2	16.7
	Other	1	8.3
	Bisexual	1	8.3
	M (range)	SD	
Age	21.17 (19-25)	1.70	

Who/What is God?

God is:

- **Separate from organized religion**
“Still believe in God, but I wouldn’t say that I’m part of the Catholic religion or any institutionalized religion.”
- **A higher power (not necessarily the Christian God)**
“Just like feeling like there’s something bigger than us going on, and I feel like practicing like there was always a God.”
- **Watching over me**
“Um, when I’m talking to myself or thinking things through I do ask some higher being for guidance, um, but I don’t label it is God, or says a set prayer, or anything like that.”
- **A comforting presence**
“Like ther-I feel like there’s like a lot of structure with how I’m like living life right now with like my relationship with God, which is fine. I’m happy with it.”
- **A benevolent father figure**
“I was like if he’s our father, why do we feel our, why do we fear our father? There’s no point- we are, we’re his children. He should love his children, like any good parent.”
- **Supportive & proud (if I am a good person)**
“Cause I, like, I just like go about my day and I feel like, like if I’m happy and like doing good things then God’s happy and like proud of me.”
- **Active in the daily lives of humans**
“Like... ‘help me with this tests’ or like, ‘help me figure out like where I’m going with my life or my love life,’ or whatever it is um, instead of just kind of like, ‘why this, why that,’ like more of like guidance type of conversation.”

There is No/ There May Be No Higher Power:

- **There is no God**
“Umm, and I remember one time at the afterschool program, it was one of the last times I went, I told one of my friends, I was, we were doing like Bible study, I was like, I don’t believe in God.”
- **Active Questioning**
“Um, this is actually the point in time which I started losing a little bit of my faith because when it is is that I started second-guessing myself, saying “How do I know there is a God?” You know, this is where I get to science and mathematics and electronics, and then I realized stuff can be explained, uh, scientifically.”
- **Questions God’s existence**
“Um and so I had alternating stages in high school where I tried to really commit to it and be really devout, and I would go to confession, and I would pay really close attention at Mass, and sit up straight while praying, and just really trying to get all the details down right, and then alternate that with being challenging of the Church itself; asking if there was a God, really starting to identify as an Atheist.”
- **Doubts God’s existence**
“The more I thought about God not existing, made more sense than for him to exist.”

Communicating with God/Higher Power

To Whom

- Higher being
- Buddha
- The Universe
- “God”

58.33%
of Former-Catholics
pray to a God
or Higher Power

How/Why

- Pray occasionally
- Casual Conversations
- Asking for help

Discussion

- More than half of the Former-Catholic young adults still believed in a God or Higher Power and maintained a relationship with them through prayer.
- Former-Catholics who still believed in a God or Higher Power found their presence “comforting” and saw them as “benevolent”.
- Less than half of the Former-Catholic young adults actively questioned God or a Higher Power’s existence and did not actively interact with them.

Implications/Future Directions

- The fact that more than half of participants who no longer identified as Catholic still maintained a relationship with their idea of a Higher Power suggests further exploration of these relationships may provide insight into how best to support the religious/spiritual needs of these individuals.
- A future study could explore how Current-Catholics describe God in comparison to Catholic teachings on who/what God is.
- An longitudinal approach could explore how an individual’s definition of God changes over their lifespan.
- Exploring how individuals from other faith backgrounds who disaffiliate, define God in comparison to previous-Catholics.