

causes of ecclesial malaise and applying the Church's tradition to offer a better ecclesial community and life. Despite years of revelations of clerical abuse and the scandal of bishops who look the other way, transfer priests, and silence victims, the hard reality of abuse remains. While the Roman Catholic Church appears to be the major locus of such abuse—and the further abuse of inaction—no church

body is immune. And while some will recoil at his criticisms and suggestions for reform and renewal because of their belief in a sacred status quo, DeVille makes a convincing case that this is but another delusion we must be ready to confront. In place of such delusions, *Everything Hidden* offers a holistic vision that is hopeful and solid, worthy of careful reading and reflection. ✱

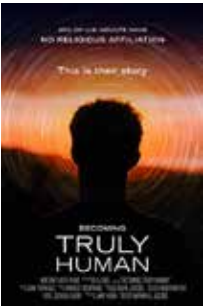


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READING ROOM

The AOC Reaches Out to the Nones: Review of *Becoming Truly Human*

Liesl Coffin Behr



Becoming Truly Human. Ancient Faith Films, 2017.

The rise of the nones has not escaped the eyes of the Orthodox Church, at least not in the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America (AOC). In 2015, the AOC launched a diocesan outreach project called “Becoming Truly Human,” and subsequently sponsored a support documentary film of the same name.¹ The film, released in 2017, was written and produced by Nathan Jacobs, a professor of philosophy and religion at Vanderbilt College and a visual artist, in conjunction with Ancient Faith Ministries. It enjoyed a very limited release in US cinemas and remains available for purchase on most digital platforms (including Amazon Prime) or on DVD through Ancient Faith Publishing. Dr. Jacobs is a convert to

the Orthodox Church and a former “none.” This made him just the man for the Antiochian’s project, and gives the film a distinctive, personal sensibility.

The basic structure of the documentary is a series of interviews between Jacobs and eight so-called nones in which they share their beliefs and express their discontents with religion as they know it. Woven among these interviews is Jacobs’s own story in which he moves from religious non-affiliation through a halfhearted Evangelical phase and ultimately to Orthodox Christianity. The aesthetic of the film is hipster and emotionally evocative; the interviews are conducted in what appears to be an abandoned country church, a soundtrack alternating

“emo” and traditional liturgical music fills the empty space, and small-town Kentucky with its sprawling fields mirror the film’s themes of spiritual vacancy and renewal. The whole is tied together by a uniting visual motif: Jacobs’s piecing of a collage that will, by the end of the documentary, reveal itself as the icon of Christ.

As we meet the eight nones through these spliced interviews, their worldview unfolds. What we discover is not so much what they don’t believe (they don’t know much about the history or theology of the Christian churches from which they come), but rather a distinctively metaphysical moral vision they almost unanimously affirm. It might be summed up as, “Think and do good things” and “What goes around, comes around.” Most are open to religion, comfortable holding quasi-religious beliefs, and a far cry from New Atheists. Of the eight, only one person objects to religion on the basis of a scientific-rationalistic outlook, and this, Jacobs explains, is a more or less accurate demographic sample.

What these interviews reveal, above all, is a lot of pain in the subjects’ experience of Christianity and a rejection of religion that is emotional, visceral. They express sentiments such as, “In religion, you’re not allowed to ask questions,” and, “Religious people have all the answers, but their answers don’t line up with what I observe and experience.” There are also more philosophical concerns about the problem of evil: “If God is good and all-powerful, why do bad things happen to good people?” Interestingly (and this is one of the major points Jacobs draws out in his later commentary), these nones who have trouble believing in a good God don’t have any problem believing in a meaningful universe. Almost all of them express ideas about the interconnectedness of all things and the

resonance of thoughts and actions throughout the universe.

Refreshing, and even surprising, is that rather than offering up apologetics in the traditional sense, Jacobs presents his own story of faith lost and found—an approach in keeping with his personal encounter with Orthodoxy and his turn from the ceaseless arguments and rebuttals of Western Scholastic writers toward the more existential theology of Athanasius. Jacobs, who in the film goes by his baptismal name Basil, recounts his discovery of Athanasius’s writings as something completely unfamiliar. He was struck by the theologian’s explanation of life and death as a journey of the soul, rather than in the legal or moral terms found in the Scholastics and Luther. Through his encounter with the Eastern fathers, he discovered a God who is significant not as an all-knowing heavenly authority but as the source of life and, as such, is intimately tied to his creation. By studying these writings, Jacobs gained a new perspective on the incarnation: a theology of God’s saving participation in his creation rather than a theory of atonement. Through the Eastern fathers, he felt that God became meaningful, relevant, tangible.

The relevance of praxis to the life of the Orthodox Church was another determining factor for Jacobs’s conversion. His conviction that important beliefs should be upheld by important practices was something lacking in his life as a “spiritual but not religious,” and fully upheld by the traditions large and small of the Orthodox Church. For him, in order to believe in God, he needed to believe in a tried-and-true path of moving toward such a God. He found Christianity singular among the world religions in its insistence that

¹ Charles Ajalat et al., “An Invitation to Become Truly Human,” *The Word*, June 2015, <http://ww1.antiochian.org/invitation-become-truly-human-temp>. “Becoming Truly Human - Trailer,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AMYyIkhOOUk>.

the path to God is through Christ. Moreover, he found Orthodoxy singular among Christian churches in its claim that the path to Christ is through the Orthodox Church. This defined praxis appealed to Jacobs. He describes his conversion to Orthodoxy as beginning with his gradual adoption of practices such as fasting, and in his gratitude when he discovered that smaller acts, such as lighting a candle, could serve as a form of prayer in times when there were no words.

Implied through the film's juxtaposition of these broken vignettes and Basil's holistic experience of the Church is that the theology of the Eastern fathers might be just what these nones are looking for. This is the crux of Jacobs's argument. The nones are not a group of rationalist determinists; what they reject is not metaphysical belief but Western religion with its alter calls, Thomistic categories, and a capricious, Augustinian God. The film suggests that there is a clear cultural trend toward "Eastern" ideas of interconnectedness, and that what the nones seek might therefore be met by the Orthodox tradition—a tradition that, as he sees it, affirms these "intuitions" about a universe enlivened by spirit, where humans, in their essence and in their action, embody meaning on a spiritual and material level, and where God is no longer an arbitrary dictator in the sky but the lover of mankind. Orthodoxy, in other words, is the antidote to the tired Evangelical and Catholic worldviews nones are walking away from.

On one level, Jacobs's thesis is convincing. One might indeed find common ground between the "Easternness" of Orthodoxy and the new age spirituality that appeals to

many nones. But two concerns, strikingly absent from this documentary, cast doubt on this argument. The first is that we do not hear from any *Orthodox* nones, of whom we know there are many and who would presumably have imbibed this Eastern theological worldview from birth. Second, not one of the nones interviewed takes issue with the social questions we know press upon the conscience of the average millennial. It seems that, in Jacobs's mind, once these millennials understand the common philosophical underpinnings of their mystical Eastern yearnings, a new wave of nones will come knocking down the doors of a church that is by all measures Byzantine, patriarchal, and unwelcoming to LGBTQ people.

Here it is interesting to turn away from the content of the film itself and toward a series of lectures and interviews Jacobs gives about the documentary, particularly a three-part lecture he delivered at the 2019 Clergy Convocation of the OCA's Diocese of the Midwest.² When, at the end of this lecture, attendees asked about the absence of Orthodox nones, Jacobs related that the omission was in no way intentional but due purely to the financial and logistical aspects of his project. In other words, there are no Orthodox nones in his documentary because they didn't show up at a casting call in small-town Kentucky. The second explanation for this omission was even more interesting: the money slated for this project was granted specifically for research on "nones," not "dones" (those who still claim religious affiliation but are no longer practicing; one might conjecture that, for reasons of ethnic attachment, more Orthodox fall into the category of dones than nones). When another attendee inquired about the absence of social questions—questions he himself is often confronted with—such as those surrounding sexuality and women's issues, the response was

² Nathan Jacobs, "Reaching the Nones and Dones," 3-part lecture, OCA Diocese of the Midwest 2019 . Clergy Convocation, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ME-54BibXfYs>.

the same. In the midwestern demographic Jacobs was interviewing, these issues did not seem to be of particular concern. While both of these omissions seem incredibly convenient to Ancient Faith and the Antiochian Archdiocese, with its growing base of culture-war conservative converts, it is surprising that Jacobs, who comes off as a sincerely inquisitive and academically rigorous researcher, wouldn't insist on searching deeper.

The fact that Jacobs's research is none-centered doesn't mean he hasn't given thought to the dones. The last segment of his third lecture is dedicated to this subject. Interestingly, he doesn't think the Church need overly concern itself with the particular discontents of the dones. Rather, he suggests, it should focus its attention on those cradle Orthodox who have remained practicing Christians and see if a common denominator can be identified—probably something about the way religion was lived out in the childhood home—and at this point, the Church should aim to bolster these common elements, whatever they be, so as to make up for the deficiencies in individual households.

Furthermore, he suspects that Orthodox Christians suffer in their situation as a cognitive minority, and cites the sociologist Peter Berger's book *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural*. The idea here is that because Orthodox Christians hold a minority belief

system, they face particular pressure to abandon it and join the cultural majority. To illustrate this point, he quotes a long passage from one of C. S. Lewis's Narnia novels, in which the protagonists are taken in by the Queen of the Underworld. Through prolonged exposure to her sweet perfume, soft music, and seductive mantras, their memory of Narnia (a metaphor for paradise), turns hazy and they fall under her spell. This he likens to modernity: a kind of persistent haze that threatens to erode the Orthodox Christian's thirst for God. It is all this smoke, and not internal problems or problems of individual conscience, that explains Orthodox dones.

It is much easier to look at the sliver in your neighbor's eye than the plank in one's own. It would be a mistake to think that the Orthodox Church need not look at its own house—nor its home in the Near East, where, as one of the OCA priests points out to Jacobs, all the same currents of diminished church attendance are on display. For the smoke and incense, gold embroidery, and chant of Orthodox liturgy can have their own magic, their own powers of illusion. The notion that we can be the Church by gathering our cultural discontents and escaping into a Byzantine past constitutes a kind of smoke in which some are happily blinded and others are burned. Those seeking a real vision of what the Orthodox Church has to offer must wipe it willingly from their eyes. ✿

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