

Preachers Who Don't Believe - The Scandal of Apostate Pastors

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Are there clergy who don't believe in God? That is the question posed by a new report that is certain to receive considerable attention - and rightly so. Few church members are likely to be disinterested in whether their pastor believes in God.

The study was conducted by the Center for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University, under the direction of Daniel C. Dennett and Linda LaScola.

Dennett, of course, is one of the primary figures in the “New [Atheism](#)” – the newly aggressive and influential atheist movement that has gained a considerable hearing among the intellectual elites and the media.

Dennett is a cognitive scientist whose book, *Breaking the Spell*, suggests that belief in God must have at one point served an important evolutionary purpose, granting an evolutionary advantage to those who had some belief in an afterlife as compared to humans without such a belief. The reality of death, Dennett surmises, might well have been the precipitating factor. In order to make life meaningful in the face of death (and thus encourage reproduction), Dennett suggests that primitive humans invented the idea of God and the afterlife. Now, he argues, we have no more need of such primitive beliefs.

Interestingly, Dennett also proposes a new interpretation of theological liberalism. Noting that many modern people claim to be Christians while holding to virtually no specific theological content, Dennett suggests that their mode of faith should not be described as “belief,” but rather as “believing in belief.”

Given Dennett's own atheistic agenda, we can rightly assume that he would be thrilled to see Christian ministers and believers abandon the faith. Indeed, the New Atheists have made this a stated aim. Thus, this new research report, “Preachers Who Are Not Believers,” should be read within that framework. Nevertheless, it must be read. This report demands the attention of anyone concerned with the integrity of the Christian church and the Christian faith.

Dennett and LaScola undertook their project with the goal of looking for unbelieving pastors and ministers who continue to serve their churches in “secret disbelief.” Their “small and self-selected” sample of ministers represents a microcosm of the theological collapse at the heart of many churches and [denominations](#).

In their report, Dennett and LaScola present case studies of five unbelieving ministers, three from liberal denominations (“the liberals”) and two from conservative denominations (“the literals”).

Wes, a Methodist, lost his confidence in the Bible while attending a liberal Christian college and seminary. "I went to college thinking Adam and Eve were real people," he explained. Now, he no longer believes that God exists. In his rendering, God is a word that "can be used very expressively in some of my more meditative modes" and "a kind of poetry that is written by human beings."

His church members do not know that he is an atheist, but he explains that they are somewhat liberal themselves. His ministerial colleagues are even more liberal: "They've been de-mythologized, I'll say that. They don't believe Jesus rose from the dead literally. They don't believe Jesus was born of a virgin. They don't believe all those things that would cause a big stir in their churches."

Rick, a campus minister for the United Church of Christ, perhaps the most liberal Protestant denomination, was an agnostic in college and seems to have lost all belief by the time he graduated from seminary. He chose ordination in the UCC because it required "no forced doctrine." Even as he graduated from seminary, he knew, "I'm not going to make it in a conventional church." He knew he could not go into a church and teach his own theological views, based on Paul Tillich and Rudolf Bultmann. He did not believe in the doctrinal content of the Christian faith from the beginning of his ministry. "I did not believe the traditional things even then."

He does not believe "all this creedal stuff" about the incarnation of Christ or the need for salvation, but he remained in the ministry because, "These are my people, this is the context in which I work, these are the people that I know." In the pulpit, his mode is to talk as if he does believe, because "as long as ... you are talking about God and Jesus and the Bible, that's what they want to hear. You're just phrasing it in a way that makes sense to [them] ... but language is ambiguous and can be heard in different ways."

He doesn't like to call himself an atheist, but: "If not believing in a supernatural, theistic god is what distinguishes an atheist, then I am one too."

Darryl is a Presbyterian who sees himself as a "progressive-minded" pastor who wants to see his kind of non-doctrinal Christianity "given validity in some way." He acknowledges that he is more a pantheist than a theist, and thinks that many of the more educated members of his church hold to the same liberal beliefs as his own. And those beliefs (or unbeliefs) are stated clearly: "I reject the virgin birth. I reject substitutionary atonement. I reject the divinity of Jesus. I reject heaven and hell in the traditional sense, and I am not alone."

Amazingly, Darryl is candid about the fact that he remains in the ministry largely for financial reasons. It is how he provides for his family. If he openly espoused his beliefs, "I may be burning bridges in terms of my ability to earn a living this way."

Adam ministers in the Church of Christ, a conservative denomination. After years in the ministry, he began to lose all theological confidence. After reading a series of books, he became convinced that the atheists have better arguments than believers. He has moved fully into an atheist mode, yet he continues to lead his church in worship. How? "Here's how I'm handling my job on Sunday mornings: I see it as play acting. I see myself as taking on the role of a believer in a worship service, and performing."

This “atheistic agnostic” stays in the ministry because he likes the people and, “I need the job still.” If he had an alternative source of income, he would take it. He feels hypocritical, but no longer believes that hypocrisy is wrong.

John is identified as a Southern Baptist minister who has primarily served as a worship leader. He was attracted to Christianity as a religion of love, but his pursuit of Christianity “brought me to the point of not believing in God.” As he explains, “I didn’t plan to become an atheist. I didn’t even want to become an atheist. It’s just I had no choice. If I’m being honest with myself.”

He is clearly not being honest with his church members. He rejects all belief in God and all Christian truth claims out of hand. He is a determined atheist. Once again, this unbelieving minister admits that he stays in the ministry because of finances. Amazingly, this minister even names his price: “If someone said, ‘Here’s \$200,000,’ I’d be turning my notice in this week, saying, ‘A month from now is my last Sunday.’ Because then I can pay off everything.”

Early in their report, Dennett and LaScola point to a problem of definition. Many churches and denominations have adopted such fluid and doctrineless identities that determining who is a believer and who is an unbeliever has become difficult. Their statement deserves a close reading:

The ambiguity about who is a believer and who is an unbeliever follows inexorably from the pluralism that has been assiduously fostered by many religious leaders for a century and more: God is many different things to different people, and since we can’t know if one of these conceptions is the right one, we should honor them all. This counsel of tolerance creates a gentle fog that shrouds the question of belief in God in so much indeterminacy that if asked whether they believed in God, many people could sincerely say that they don’t know what they are being asked.

In other words, some theologians and denominations have embraced a [theology](#) so fluid and indeterminate that even an atheist cannot tell the believers and unbelievers apart.

“Preachers Who Are Not Believers” is a stunning and revealing report that lays bare a level of heresy, apostasy, and hypocrisy that staggers the mind. In 1739, Gilbert Tennent preached his famous sermon, “[On the Danger of an Unconverted Ministry](#).” In that sermon, Tennent described unbelieving pastors as a curse upon the church. They prey upon the faith and the faithful. “These caterpillars labor to devour every green thing.”

If they will not remove themselves from the ministry, they must be removed. If they lack the integrity to resign their pulpits, the churches must muster the integrity to eject them. If they will not “out” themselves, it is the duty of faithful Christians to “out” them. The caterpillars are hard at work. Will it take a report from an atheist to awaken the church to the danger?