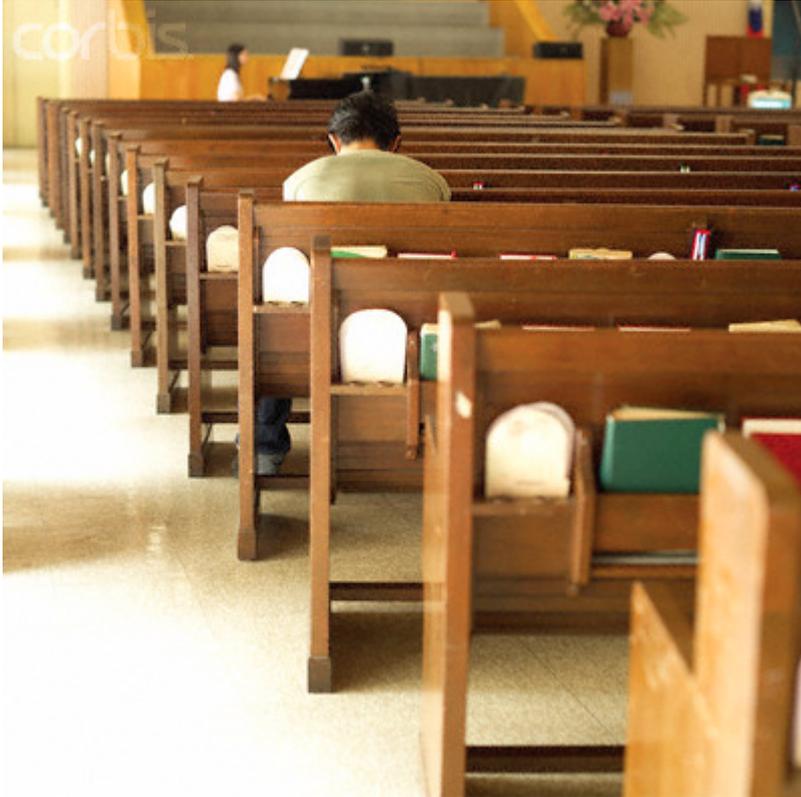


A while ago, Dan Sperber [blogged](#) about research by Daniel Dennett and Linda LaScola on atheist clergymen. Their paper, which is [available in open access here](#), provides a fascinating qualitative study on atheist clergymen from various denominations, all of whom were anonymously interviewed about their doubts and loss of religious belief. It found out they risked losing their job at the very least, and being expelled from the religious community that had been their home for so long. Yet, many of them expressed moral qualms about not coming out: was their silence a form of hypocrisy, or was it all for the best?



Could Christian atheism rekindle an interest in religion?

"I'm where I am because I need the job still. If I had an alternative, a comfortable paying job, something I was interested in doing, and a move that wouldn't destroy my family, that's where I'd go. Because I do feel kind of hypocritical." (Dennett & Lascola 2010, p. 137)

In Christianity, endorsing the central creeds is very important. This is what Dennett and Lascola term "belief in belief". They write: "The fact that they [i.e., the atheist pastors that were interviewed] see it [religious belief] in such morally laden terms shows how powerfully the phenomenon of belief in belief figures in our lives. Most people believe in belief in God; they believe that it is a state one should aspire to, work strenuously to maintain, and foster in others - and feel guilty or dismayed if one fails to achieve it. Whether or not our pastors share that belief in belief - some still do and others no longer do - they recognize only too well that revealing their growing disbelief would have dire consequences for their lives. So they keep it to themselves" (Dennett & Lascola 2010, p. 125)

Harvey Whitehouse (2000) has argued that this emphasis on doctrinal correctness is typical for religions that rely substantially on repetitive rituals to get transmitted. He makes a distinction between the "doctrinal" and "imagistic" modes of religiosity. The former rely for their transmission on frequently performed and routinized rituals, whereas the latter rely on rare rituals that are highly emotionally laden and that create charged episodic (i.e., autobiographical) memories – such rituals can include initiation rites that involve fear and pain. Christianity belongs more to the "doctrinal mode" (although this division is not absolute – there are also more imagistic branches of Christianity that have features like snake handling). Whitehouse argued that repetitive rituals can get boring; people typically "go through the motions" without reflecting much on their religious belief (or lack thereof). While the repetitiveness enhances the accuracy of the transmission, it may decrease motivation. In order to keep religious practitioners motivated, religions that rely on the doctrinal mode of religiosity need to firmly establish belief in a set of central tenets, such as the existence of a supernatural omniscient, omnipresent agent. This, according to Whitehouse, provides an explanation for why doctrinal religions tend to place much emphasis on having the correct beliefs.

An interesting paradox occurs when people who are very interested in religion, reflect on their belief. Whereas normally adherents to doctrinal-style religions do not reflect much on their beliefs, pastors and other professionals do. It is therefore not very surprising that those who make religious reflection their profession frequently encounter doubt. Pyysiäinen observes that atheism is very common in theologians, although he doesn't offer quantitative data "Intellectual unbelief is typical of intelligent people, especially scientists and— surprise!—theologians. It is typical of theologians because doing theology entails that one adopts a representational theory of mind and regards religious beliefs as something to be reflected upon".

It is perhaps paradoxically because of the centrality of belief in belief that doubt is a recurrent feature of Christianity (and I expect also of other doctrinal type religions), as amongst others the candid and insightful book on this topic by philosopher of religion Kelly James Clark indicates.

However, despite this belief in belief, it seems that the phenomenon of atheism in Christianity gets increased attention. For example, in the Netherlands there is an [atheist clergyman](#) who came out of the closet: he openly regards God not as a supernatural being, but as a natural phenomenon, i.e., something relational that happens between people. The recently published book *The Christian Atheist*, written by theistic reverend Brian Mountford who has sympathy for Christian atheists has the fitting subtitle "Belonging Without Believing".

What is the significance of doctrinal religions without the doctrine? Could a doctrinal-type religion without belief ever be stable, from the perspective of cognitive science of religion. Can it help rekindle an interest in religion in those who are agnostic or atheist, but do not want the package deal? From Whitehouse's point of view, one would predict not, since the doctrines are central to doctrinal mode of religiosity. But perhaps other cognition and culture perspectives could shed a different light on the matter.

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