

Original Article/Essay

Preachers Who Are Not Believers

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Abstract: There are systemic features of contemporary Christianity that create an almost invisible class of non-believing clergy, ensnared in their ministries by a web of obligations, constraints, comforts, and community. Exemplars from five Protestant denominations, Southern Baptist, United Church of Christ, Presbyterian, Methodist and Church of Christ, were found and confidentially interviewed at length about their lives, religious education and indoctrination, aspirations, problems and ways of coping. The in-depth, qualitative interviews formed the basis for profiles of all five, together with general observations about their predicaments and how they got into them. The authors anticipate that the discussion generated on the Web (at On Faith, the Newsweek/Washington Post website on religion, http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith//2010/03/disbelief_in_the_pulpit/all.html) and on other websites will facilitate a larger study that will enable the insights of this pilot study to be clarified, modified, and expanded.

Keywords: religion, clergy, disbelief, Protestantism, qualitative, interviews

Introduction

Are there clergy who don't believe in God? Certainly there are former clergy who fall in this category. Before making their life-wrenching decisions, they were secret nonbelievers. Who knows how many like-minded pastors discover that they simply cannot take this mortal leap from the pulpit and then go on to live out their ministries in secret disbelief? What is it like to be a pastor who doesn't believe in God? John Updike gave us a moving account in his brilliant novel, *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (1996), which begins with the story of Reverend Wilmot, a Lutheran minister whose life is shattered by his decision to renounce the pulpit in the face of his mounting disbelief. But that is fiction and Wilmot's period of concealment is short-lived. What is it like to be a pastor who stays the course, in spite of sharing Wilmot's disbelief?

With the help of a grant from a small foundation, administered through Tufts University, we set out to find some closeted nonbelievers who would agree to be intensively – and, of course, confidentially – interviewed. The interviews were all conducted by Linda LaScola, a clinical social worker with years of professional experience as a qualitative researcher and psychotherapist, and, until recently, a regular churchgoer. Like her co-author, philosopher Daniel Dennett, the author of *Breaking the Spell* (2006), she is an atheist who is nevertheless a sympathetic and fascinated observer of religious practices and attitudes. For this pilot study we managed to identify five brave pastors, all still actively engaged with parishes, who were prepared to trust us with their stories. All five are Protestants, with master's level seminary education. Three represented liberal denominations (the liberals) and two came from more conservative, evangelical traditions (the literals). We decided to concentrate this first project on Christians, and we would have included a Roman Catholic or Greek Orthodox priest, for instance – if we had encountered any, but we didn't. We initially had six participants, but one, a woman in the Episcopal church, had a change of heart as we were about to go to press and, at her request, all further references to her and quotations from her interviews have been removed.

Our sample is small and self-selected, and it is not surprising that all of our pastors think that they are the tip of an iceberg, but they are also utterly unable to confirm this belief. They might be deluding themselves, but in any case their isolation from others whom they suspect are in the same boat is a feature they all share, in spite of striking differences in their stories and attitudes. While we couldn't draw any reliable generalizations from such a small sample of clergy, the very variety of their stories, as well as the patterns discernible in them, suggest fascinating avenues for further research on this all but invisible phenomenon.

Materials and Methods

How on earth did we recruit them? By spreading the word discreetly. Eighteen people were contacted to participate between September 2008 and April 2009. Initial recruiting attempts were made via personal contacts (e.g., clergy and seminary acquaintances, non-believing clergy who had retired or left the profession). When approached, potential respondents were told that the intent was to “learn more about the issues that clergy face when their beliefs are not in synch with church teachings.” Dennett mentioned the study at conferences he attended. Ultimately, the five participants came from two sources: two from a list of clergy who had originally contacted the Center for Progressive Christianity (TCPC) for general information, and three from people who had personally contacted Dan Barker, co-director of the Freedom from Religion Foundation. Barker is a former minister and author of two books about losing his religious beliefs. Jim Adams, a retired Episcopal priest, author and the founder of TCPC, provided a list of 28 names. Of those, nine were contacted and two of the nine participated in the study. Four people contacted Dan Barker directly. Of those, two agreed to participate. One contact who was a former clergyman, and therefore not eligible to participate, referred a colleague who then agreed to participate. Three women who expressed interest were not asked to participate: one because she was no longer in a pastoral role and two because their denominations were already represented in the study. Four men declined to participate: two did not follow up after showing initial interest; two others cited concerns about the term

“non-believing.” Though neither of them believed in a supernatural god, both strongly self-identified as believers.

But what do they mean by this? Are they perhaps deceiving themselves? There is no way of answering, and this is no accident. The ambiguity about who is a believer and who a nonbeliever 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.

This is not just agnosticism, the belief that one does not (or cannot) know whether God exists, but something prior: the belief that one cannot even know which question – if any – is being asked. Many people are utterly comfortable with this curious ignorance; it just doesn't matter to them what the formulas mean that their churches encourage them to recite. Some churches are equally tolerant of the indeterminacy: as long as you “have faith” or are “one with Jesus” (whatever you think that means) your metaphysical convictions are your own business. But pastors can't afford that luxury. Their role in life often requires them to articulate, from the pulpit and elsewhere, assertions about these very issues.

A problem of definition

I think my way of being a Christian has many things in common with atheists as [Sam] Harris sees them. I am not willing to abandon the symbol “God” in my understanding of the human and the universe. But my definition of God is very different from mainline Christian traditions yet it is within them. Just at the far left end of the bell shaped curve. (Rick, one of our participants)

A spectrum of available conceptions of God can be put in rough order, with frank anthropomorphism at one extreme – a God existing in time and space with eyes and hands and love and anger – through deism, a somehow still personal God who cares but is nevertheless outside time and space and does not intervene, and the still more abstract Ground of all Being, from which (almost?) all anthropomorphic features have been removed, all the way to frank atheism: nothing at all is aptly called God. To some people, deism is already atheism in disguise, but others are more flexible. Karen Armstrong (2009), for instance, dismisses both the anthropomorphic visions (“idolatry”) and the various brands of atheism, while claiming, as she recently put it while speaking with Terry Gross on *Fresh Air*, that “God is not a being at all.” Assuming that she meant what she said, she claims, by simple logical transposition, that no being at all is God. That would seem to be about as clear a statement of atheism as one could ask for, but not in her eyes.

There is no agreement at all, then, about where to draw a line across this spectrum, with belief in God on one side and non-belief on the other, and many people are quite content to ignore the question. But two of our pastors have felt the need to draw the line, and to recognize that, given where they draw the line, their own view has crossed it: they no longer *deserve* to be called believers, whatever others may think. The other three say that they may not believe in a supernatural god, but they believe in something. Still, they all find themselves with a secret: they don't believe what many of their parishioners think they

believe and think they ought to believe.

The fact that they see it 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.

Results

After introducing them, we will explore the most interesting similarities and differences we discovered. We have given them fictitious names and scrambled the inessential details of their stories that might serve to identify them, so any similarity seen between their stories and known individuals should be viewed as mere coincidence. Here are their stories.

Wes, the Methodist – Making Clergy Obsolete

Wes, age 42, has been the pastor of a liberal Methodist church in the Northwest for 10 years. He has a 10 year old son and is married to a schoolteacher who shares his views about religion. Wes and his wife are raising their son to recognize that Bible stories are not factual:

And so when we talk to him about Bible stories, we remind him constantly that these are just stories. These are stories; think about them in no different way than you would any other stories.

Wes was raised Baptist in the South and attended a liberal Christian college and seminary before moving west. Although he rejected his family's conservative views as a young adult, he was positively involved in the life of the church in his youth:

I felt very surrounded by people who were concerned about me. I was very comfortable in that environment. And I suppose I've always been, perhaps, most comfortable in a church environment. I flourished there. I was the one that answered all the questions. I cared about all this kind of stuff ... Bible trivia. It made me think I knew the Bible.

From liberal to literal

Once in college, he was surprised by what he learned:

I went to college thinking Adam and Eve were real people. And I can remember really wrestling with that when my Old Testament professor was pointing out the obvious myths and how they came to be. And I kind of joked at the time that I prayed my way all the way to atheism. Because in the early days, it was wrestling with God; praying to God.

Wes decided to go on to seminary because the credits he would receive there could be applied either to PhD studies in the philosophy of religion or to a career in the clergy. Looking back on it, he realizes that he also felt limited in his choices:

If you finish your junior year, if you're going to declare a new major, now you're setting yourself back. And I'll be the first to admit that my upbringing placed limitations on what I thought was possible for me, which is something I've sworn to not do with my son.... Not that I believe in such things, but it was almost predestined that I would be a minister because of my role as a kid in church, my parents' role.... I'd love to be a scientist. I think that would be wonderful.

When in seminary, he noticed the differing reactions that his classmates had to the scholarly information they were receiving about biblical history:

I would guess if there were 30 people in the archeology class, there would be 25% of them who would become very defensive and argumentative with the professor. And probably only one or two of the 30 would be open to it. The rest would just not say much.

Eventually, he decided to pursue a career in the ministry. It seemed like a natural fit:

So I kind of thought, well, you know I really know religion; I know Christianity. It's been in my blood. And I suddenly felt like there was a certain strand of Christianity that I could identify with. And the Methodist Church --- was different ... really, it's a very progressive church. So I felt at home there.

Wes has had some qualms about his role as a non-believing minister, but overall he thinks he is being true to the very worthy mission of developing liberal, democratic values among his church members:

My first few years of doing this were wracked with, "God, should I be doing this? Is this ---? Am I being ---? Am I posing? Am I being less than authentic; less than honest?" ... And, I really wrestled with it and to some degree still. But not nearly as much.

I will be the first to admit that I see Christianity as a means to an end, not as an end unto itself. And the end is very basically, a kind of liberal, democratic values. So I will use Christianity sometimes against itself to try to lead people to that point. But there's so much within the Christian tradition that itself influenced the development of those liberal values, you know. They didn't arise through secular means. They came out of some religious stuff.... I could couch all that in very secular language. If we were in a college setting, I would. But we're in a religious setting, so I use the religious language.

Demythologizing religion

Wes thinks that what separates him from people who identify themselves as atheists is his openness to using the word “God”:

The difference between me and an atheist is basically this: it’s not about the existence of God. It’s: do we believe that there is room for the use of the word “God” in some context? And a thoroughly consistent atheist would say, “No. We just need to get over that word just like we need to get over concepts of race. We quit using that word, we’d be better off.” Whereas I would say I agree with that in a great many cases, but I still think the word has some value in some contexts. So I think the word God can be used very expressively in some of my more meditative modes. I’ve thought of God as a kind of poetry that’s written by human beings. As a way of dealing with the fact that we’re finite; we’re vulnerable.

He says he is happy in ministry, knowing that it provides a flexible and comfortable lifestyle and an opportunity to positively influence people’s lives. Although he thinks that religion will be around a long time, he sees that part of his role is to help make his job obsolete. He thinks many of his liberal Christian colleagues have similar views, which they would express if they had a suitable opportunity:

My colleagues here are very educated, very well read, and do not believe the significance of Christianity lies in whether it’s literally true. They do believe that it is metaphorically describing something that is real. Something spiritual that we cannot get at, that is a presence in this universe. That’s where they differ from me. But the way we use the language is going to be very similar, and the reason it’s going to be similar is that our goals are the same. Our goals are to help people become freer than they were before, and to be transformed. So if becoming a Christian transforms a person’s life for the better, I have no problem with them becoming a Christian. But I also have no problem with it if it means betraying Christianity, if that’s what helps them. And I think many of my colleagues, if they were in this kind of environment [confidential interview], would admit to that. They wouldn’t, though, in front of their bishops.

They’re very 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. But that’s not uncommon in mainline denominations, or even in the Catholic Church. I mean, you have a professional class of people, basically, who are working with an organization of non-professionals.

Coming Out to a Friend

Wes has confided his non-belief with one of his church members. He and Wes

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became close friends while working on various church projects over a period of several years:

We kind of felt each other out over the course of time ... just a little bit of self-revelation at a time. And we got to the point, you know, where he felt comfortable saying things to me.

Perhaps he was the one that maybe kind of initiated asking questions, trying to figure out what I thought of some things. I can't remember exactly what he said, but he brought it up: "Do you think there is a being out there somewhere?" And at that point, I knew him well enough, so I said "Oh, no." He absolutely died laughing! And he said, "You know, I've really been wrestling with that myself, but I've never met anybody who just said, "Oh, of course not!" He hasn't been privy to all my years of struggle. He was just shocked that I was just so matter-of-fact.

Offering Community

Wes thinks he is especially effective at offering community to people who doubt they would fit into a Christian community:

I'm interested in community, relationships. And I believe the argument could be made that that's what Jesus was interested in anyway. So I can do that at the local church level. And I'm also there for people who are recovering Christians. There are a lot of people out there who have been damaged by Christianity. And they feel guilty that they're not a Christian --- or that they're not practicing or whatever. I'm their ideal pastor, because they can come to me and be told that they don't need to feel guilty.

Rick, the UCC Campus Minister – Social Justice Through the Church

Rick is a 72 year old United Church of Christ (UCC) minister receiving a full pension from the church and a monthly stipend for his part-time work as a campus minister at an academically top-ranked university. He has served in campus ministry throughout his long career because it has allowed him to pursue his interests in social causes. While working on various campuses across the country, he has worked in civil rights, gay rights and women's rights, including assisting women who were seeking abortions before they were legalized nationally. He specifically chose the UCC denomination because it had "no forced doctrine," offered "a lot of freedom to believe what you want to believe," and had a large and active social justice mission.

The Accidental Minister

Rick's family was not very religious, but attended a socially liberal mainline protestant church when he was growing up. While in college, he says:

... like many students, I became agnostic – I didn't believe any of it. I wasn't reacting against it; I wasn't abused, as many I talk to are. But I just

said, “there’s nothing much there.”

He majored in philosophy, political science and English and would likely have entered his father’s profession of law if the Korean War hadn’t intervened. He learned that he could avoid the draft by signing up for seminary. That wasn’t his only motive, though. He was truly interested in learning more about Christianity:

I didn’t believe in God, but I thought, before I reject the street version of Christianity, I’ll go to seminary for a year. And I’ll argue with the best theologians and the best religious scholars, and then I’ll get out. I’m not going to leave the church; I’m not going to leave what I was formed in until I have a chance to confront the scholars and argue and see what’s going on. Is there anything in this God business? That was the way I kind of put it. Is there anything to this? So I determined to enter seminary.

It was a good move for him and he decided to see it through. He enjoyed his professors, describing them as, “people of faith who were also deeply intellectual and critical.” He respected the fact that they could, “hold the life of the mind and the life of the faith together.” He also realized that, unlike many of his classmates, he was not destined for parish ministry. He remembers his reaction when a professor said:

When you get into your own churches, you’ve got to realize that there’s these two things that are important that you’ve got to do: you’ve got to raise money, and you’ve got to recruit members. And I checked out.

It was not just the responsibilities of parish life that held him back, it was the beliefs:

I knew I’m not going to make it in a conventional church. I didn’t believe the conventional things, even then. I mean, sure, I’m studying theology with Paul Tillich --- and Bultmann who says we can’t know much about Jesus, and Paul Tillich’s philosophical stuff about “God is the ground of being.” I’m not going to go into a church and talk like this; I’m not going to, I’m not going to --- I did not believe the traditional things even then.

Choosing the Christian Tradition

When asked about how his classmates reacted to learning the details of Christian history, he said:

Well, they sat through the same Old Testament courses I did, and half of them were fighting against it the whole way. Because they didn’t like the scholarship, they couldn’t --- it was a challenge to their faith. Well, I didn’t have to deal with that; because I wanted to know what it was. They felt threatened; they pulled back. ...they would fight the professor about his interpretation about Old Testament passages. They were kind of literalistic about it. And when we’d talk about myth and stories, they’d say, “No, it happened!” So there was kind of a clash. They didn’t like to have their

literalistic interpretation of the Bible undermined by an Old Testament scholar. It was quite a thing to see!

Still, Rick identifies strongly as a Christian:

These are my people, this is the context in which I work, these are the people that I know. These are the communities I've worked with. These are the communities where I can make a difference.

While he does not believe "all this creedal stuff" about Jesus dying for our sins, being God or being incarnate, he is attracted to Jesus as "...somebody who was concerned about social justice" and "...a compelling vision of what it means to be human, and what it means to --- live life fully in the world." He acknowledges that:

...if I'd been born in China, I'd be a Buddhist. I wasn't. I was born here, and I was formed here.... I do not see the passion for social justice in the Buddha. Jesus was born a poor peasant, and worked with the poor, and talked about the poor.

According to Rick, his UCC ordination does not require taking vows. He made "a statement of faith," which meant presenting a paper to clergy in his Conference (i.e., the association of local churches). His paper was on liberal scholars Paul Tillich and Rudolf Bultmann. This was adequate, he says, because:

...as long as ... you're 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.

A Place to Question and Grow

Campus ministry gave him freedom within the structure of the church, allowing him to work with students who were questioning as much as he was. He could "run and be creative," making his own "exciting programs" without having too many people "in authority" over him.

He especially enjoys doing adult education and sees his goal as liberating people from "bad ideas" about Christianity, saying, "Can you imagine the pain that people suffered with? 'I'm going to hell if I don't believe this?'" He feels some of them have been "wounded, like an alcoholic" and points out that they will "invariably" ask, "Why didn't they teach us that in church? If I'd known this 25 years ago, I wouldn't have had to carry this burden around!" So he feels he's playing "a kind of a therapeutic role."

When asked his opinion of why ministers do not pass on their knowledge of Christian history to parishioners, he said:

They don't want to rock the boat. They don't want to lose donations. They want to keep their jobs. They don't want to stir up trouble in the congregation. They've got enough trouble as it is, keeping things moving along. They don't want to make people mad at them. They don't want to lose members. What they will often do is bring in someone like me to be a

lightning rod, and teach it, and they'll follow up on it.

He expressed more about his views on God after the interviews, commenting on an article he emailed that was written by atheist author Sam Harris (2006b). He felt that he'd been "educated and sensitized" by the article, saying, "If not believing in a supernatural, theistic god is what distinguishes an atheist, then I am one too." But he also said, "I don't consider myself an atheist" and, "I am not willing to abandon the symbol 'God' in my understanding of the human and the universe."

Darryl, the Presbyterian - Transcendancy of the Human Spirit

Darryl is a 36 year old Presbyterian minister with a church outside of Baltimore. He is married and has three young children. After an initial phone conversation about the study, he sent an email further explaining his desire to participate. In it, he wrote:

I am interested in this study because I have regular contact in my circle of colleagues – both ecumenical and Presbyterian – who are also more progressive-minded than the "party line" of the denomination. We are not "un-believers" in our own minds – but would not withstand a strict "litmus test" should we be subjected to one. I want to see this new movement within the church given validity in some way.

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.

I am a "Jesus Follower" for sure. It is arguable whether I am also a "Christian." I can't imagine continuing in this work if I did not have a strong personal faith of some kind. My cognitive dissonance revolves around the urge to rescue others who find themselves in the same boat – and who still strongly believe in God in some sense, and find Jesus a compelling religious figure.

His Beliefs and Others'

He described himself as a believer in God, but not in the traditional Christian God:

...it's not that I'm not a believer. I do believe in God. But I find that the character of my belief is much closer to that pantheist view than the typical theist.

He says he and his wife are "very similar theologically," and he doesn't think she has any problems with where he is. She's "very progressive, very liberal."

He also thinks his seminary professors and some of the members of his congregation have similar feelings:

...certainly the professors I respected at seminary were very open minded

people. And for the most part, with education comes a healthy skepticism, but not necessarily disbelief. I think most of the academics in my congregation would agree with me that --- that God is not the literal God from the bible that the tradition has somewhat purported. I don't think that these men and women in my congregation, for the most part, believe in the virgin birth. I know that some of them don't. I had these conversations with some of them. That it's something that's just not important to them.

Following the Call

Darryl was raised in the Presbyterian Church and was drawn to the ministry as a youth after a playmate was killed in a terrorist attack while abroad on a family vacation. After experiencing frightening thoughts of suicide, he decided that:

Whether there was a God or not, I would choose to live as if there was a God. Because I didn't like the alternative. I didn't want to kill myself. The alternative was despair.

He felt that "there was always this sense of call in my life. The process of becoming a pastor was exploring this sense of calling from God."

He enjoyed his seminary experience, saying that it "blew open" Christian doctrine, allowing him to realize that Christianity wasn't "black and white, it was plaid, polka dot --- there was just such a variety of thought that went in every different kind of direction."

At some point in his studies, he gave up the idea of an afterlife that was an extension of our current consciousness. He started thinking in terms of "a transcendency of the human spirit" that he has difficulty describing, saying, "I know that it's not going to be something that I can comprehend with my mortal brain." Still, believing in something is important to him. He thinks clergy would be "really sad individuals if they just didn't believe in anything and that they're just sadly going through the motions of the job."

He likes his work and the flexibility his job offers. He'd like an opportunity to openly minister to people like himself:

I do feel called to work with people who have the same doubts and questions.... I think there's room in Christianity for this. Is the Presbyterian Church willing to make that room within its own? I don't know.

Considering Other Options

He also thinks about the freedom he'd have if he left or retired from the church, specifically mentioning Jack (John Shelby) Spong, the retired Episcopal Bishop who writes and speaks openly about how Christianity needs to modernize in order to survive:

Well that guy has a glow to him; he's just fantastic. But he can say whatever he wants because he's got his nest egg. He's not concerned about his retirement or anything like that. Liberating!

He expressed concern about the possibility of moving to a more conservative presbytery where he might not be able to honestly respond to the doctrinal questions he could be

asked:

If I had to jump through too many hoops, ... I just have to look and see how genuine I would be, and how comfortable I would feel.

He has broached the subject of his lack of traditional beliefs with a few colleagues whom he thinks are like-minded, but has not talked as directly with them as he talked during the interviews. He did talk fairly candidly with a trusted older colleague whom he felt had similar beliefs:

I doubt [he] believes in the virgin birth. And probably wouldn't admit that he didn't believe Jesus was God. ... and I did tell him that I didn't think Jesus was God necessarily.... We talked about whether it would be a problem if at some point, I transfer.

After seeing *Religulous*, Bill Maher's (2008) comedy documentary about religion, he had good things to say about Maher:

He's a genuine, honest guy who's acknowledging the questions in his heart, and is fed up and passionate and angry about the religious violence in the world. And there's a lot of justification for that. And I'm right there on 80-90% of the stuff, so we'd have a lot to talk about. You know, we'd go out and have a beer together. And I think we agree on a lot of stuff, and I think he would criticize me about just sticking with this right now.

And despite his many stated concerns, he also had good things to say about the role of the church in his life:

The church has been a positive thing in my life overall. It's been a place of affirmation, it's been a place of comfort, it's been a place of ritual and wonderful mystery.

Practical Concerns

During the interviews, he often discussed his feelings toward the ministry and how his changing beliefs could affect his family. For instance, he said:

This is not only the course of my life I've chosen to pursue, but I provide for my family this way. So if I'm having this cognitive dissonance, then sure, I've got to come to terms with how I do this in a genuine way. And at what point do I not do it any longer.

So maybe there'll be a divorce between myself and the Presbyterian Church. I need to feel fulfilled, and I need to provide for myself and my family. I can go back and get new education and training, but I've got to do something. And so do I completely pitch this? Well, I don't think it's completely without value.

I realize that if I come out a little more, I may be burning bridges in terms of my ability to earn a living this way. At some point, that may be less important. But it still would be something I would grieve, because this has been a meaningful experience in my life even though there are parts of the hierarchy of the church that I have become dissatisfied with.

He also raised the possibility of being defrocked at different points in the interviews:

To a certain extent, I don't care if I get defrocked. I really don't. If people don't want me in this, I'll do something else. I might try and do hospital chaplaincy.

I'm really not afraid of anything coming as a result [of these interviews]. I'm not afraid of being defrocked just because I'm not interested in being afraid.

Adam, Church of Christ – A Hunger for Learning

Adam decided to obtain a Master of Arts in Religion to be a minister in the Church of Christ, a denomination that does not require master's level education for its clergy:

I hungered to continue learning; I felt like it was very applicable; I felt like it would prepare me more to minister. And I was very focused on the practical ministry side. I wasn't so much into deep theology or --- world missions, or --- philosophy of religion.... I mean, there were theology classes and philosophy classes and all that. And I had to have one year of Hebrew, two years of Greek.

Over 20 years later, that same desire to learn led him away from religious belief. It started when he read David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons' (2007) *unChristian: What a New Generation Thinks About Christianity – and Why It Matters*, a Barna Group publication that rebuts common criticisms people have about Christianity. His intention was to become more skilled at defending his faith, but as he tried to "step back" to look at Christianity from a non-believer's perspective, he found that he became more swayed to that point of view:

If God is God, he's big enough; he can handle any questions I've got. Well, he didn't. He didn't measure up! And that sounds, you know, so funny, because if I heard somebody else saying that a year ago, I'd have thought, "You are such a sacrilegious person. God's going to strike you dead by lightning or something!" I've actually thought and tried to pin-point, but I can honestly say that intellectually, from within the first few weeks of my studies, I thought, "Wow! Could this be true?" So almost from that point on, it's almost been downhill if you're Christian; uphill if you're a non-believer. Coming to the truth --- and I always thought there was absolute

truth out there. Now I'm a lot more relativistic.

I tell you, the book that just grabbed my mind and just twisted it around, was Christopher Hitchens' *God is Not Great*. It was shocking, some of that stuff – the throws and jabs against faith and stuff. I would think, “He’s crazy.” But then I’d say, “No. Step back and read it for what it is.” And that’s also the same time when I thought, “I’m going to balance my study. I’m not going to over-balance myself with atheist writers.”

In the past year, Adam has absorbed over 60 books, videos or podcasts addressing a wide variety of views. He was especially impressed by debates on religion:

Probably one of the most mind-opening things was listening to all these debates from top people of Christianity; or believers vs. non-believers. And I tried to do the same thing: be open and listen, and use my mind and reason, I guess. And almost undeniably, even being a believer and knowing the Christian claims and scripture, you know what? This guy won in the debate. He’s a non-believer. Why?

Wanting a Life that Mattered

Adam is a 43 year old worship minister and church administrator currently working in a large Church of Christ congregation in South Carolina. He was raised Presbyterian and became involved with conservative Christianity while dating his future wife. He decided to enter the ministry not because he felt a “calling” or had a “mystical experience” but because he wanted “a purpose that was beyond just existing”:

I wanted my life to matter. To connect. For something bigger and better, beyond what I was doing.

Even in seminary, when confronted with questions and contradictions in the study of academic Christianity, he stayed focused on his desire to help people live a Christian life that would ultimately lead them to eternal life:

OK, here’s what Biblical scholars are saying, and there’s some questions over here, but I just trust God, and know he’s guiding me, and I’m learning this so I can be a minister and help people. When I was working with people, it was a lot more practically focused on, “OK, here’s what the Bible says, how do we live it out? How do we encourage other people? What’s the whole evangelistic side of Christianity? How can we win more people into Christ.” I mean you’re sincere; that’s what your goal is. You don’t want anybody to miss out and to go to hell.

I don’t remember stressing a lot over doubts that were raised by the study, undergraduate or graduate. At the graduate level, I was challenged a little bit more by the theology and the philosophy – like suffering in the world. Which in the last year was probably one of my major wake-up calls. Like,

how can there be a living God with the world in the shape that it's in? But looking back at it, I learned what I learned to get through so I could focus on things. My intentions were the greatest and the purest.

During the time when I was introduced --- even in undergraduate to textual criticism --- looking at how we got the scriptures that we have, and the textual variances. I just kind of learned what I needed to learn to pass the test, and didn't really --- I mean, I thought, "Well, how do we know what was the right variant that was chosen that we now have as the scripture?" But I really didn't --- I had way too much going: I was too busy working full-time and going to school, and a family, and small children.

Now, when Adam thinks about leaving the ministry, one of the hardest things to contemplate giving up is the rich community life that his religion has provided:

I will say one strong aspect of any religion, I'd guess, that I've been in is the community life. You have great friends who are close; you can depend on them. When there's hard times, financially, emotionally, whatever, you've got a support group.

Anguishing about Change

He also fears for the effect leaving could have on his family, because his wife and teenage children are very religious. While he has conducted his current religious study surreptitiously, he has expressed some of his changing views to his wife. At her urging, he has been talking about it with an old seminary professor. However, their meetings have not affected Adam's changing ideas:

He's done everything he knows to do. He's prayed for me; he's shared with me. And I said, "One of the fears is that I'm going to sway you, and you're going to lose your faith. If I see that happening, I'll back off."

Adam does not want to make trouble in his friend's life or to let down the people in his church:

And if they knew what I believe right now ... some would [be against me] and some would try to keep working with me, and minister to me, and help me.

At the same time, he thinks there could be a benefit to his church family knowing about how he has changed:

And the other part of me thinks: "You know what? It'd be good for people to grow up and to think things through at least. If they decide to keep their faith, that's fine. But if they don't, let's be real about it."

But he also wonders if he should leave well enough alone:

Even if Christianity isn't true, is it best to leave the people alone in their ignorance? And I struggle with that feeling of superiority intellectually, which I've read all kinds of faith literature, and they say that's just a struggle you've got to deal with. But is it better to leave them ---? And they're happy, and they have hope in a life to come, and so it helps them through their suffering, which is a strong selling point of Christianity. You know what I'm saying? I look at things a lot more in kind of a marketing form now.

Meanwhile, he struggles through his job, hiding his beliefs:

Here's how I'm handling my job on Sunday mornings: I see it as play acting. I kind of see myself as taking on a role of a believer in a worship service, and performing. Because I know what to say. I know how to pray publicly. I can lead singing. I love singing. I don't believe what I'm saying anymore in some of these songs. But I see it as taking on the role and performing. Maybe that's what it takes for me to get myself through this, but that's what I'm doing.

He'd like to get out of this situation, but hasn't yet figured out how to do it:

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. It used to be the word "hypocritical" was like a sin. I don't hold that view anymore: there is goodness, and there is sinfulness; it's one or the other. It's black or white. That there's ultimate absolute truths that are mandated in scripture or given by a supernatural being. I don't see those anymore, so I use the word "hypocritical" differently, as in, I'm just not being forthright. But, at the same time, I'm in the situation I'm in, and rationally thinking about it is what I've got to do right now.

He considers himself an "atheistic agnostic" and wonders how non-believers fill the void left by loss of faith, or even if they feel a loss. For his part, he says:

I've got to the point where I can't find meaning in something that I don't think is real anymore. I guess mostly inside I do toy with the fact that, "OK, what's driving me to get up every morning?" I used to be very devotional-minded. Get up, and maybe read a passage of scripture; say a prayer; ask God to guide me through the day, totally believing that he would. Now it's like, "You don't have that." So there's a lack of guidance. But at the same time I find it more free, where I create my own day.

He thinks of himself as being through with religion. He's not interested in a more liberal form of Christianity or in a non-supernatural concept of God:

I've thought I could stay in church work, and I could become more liberal. But it's like, what have you become at that point? It's really like any other organization.... I mean, if you take God out of it, I don't understand why you would go to the trouble of being religious.... If it's only your natural abilities, why mask it as something religious? Other than the fact you don't want to make waves; you want to fit in with society without causing problems for yourself.

I don't see nature as a God; I just see nature as nature. I can admire the beauty and the horror in it at the same time and don't have to cast a religious tone on it.

Right now, he is still studying and wondering where it all will lead:

Honestly, there's been times when I thought, "You're going to drive yourself crazy dealing with all this." It's like, I just --- I get through it, kind of keep plugging along even though I don't know what is ultimately going to happen. So it's just kind of like --- take a day at a time; a week at a time. Kind of look at certain things. Keep studying; keep my options open.

Jack, the Southern Baptist - A Bunch of Bunk

Jack, age 50, has been a Southern Baptist minister for 15 years, serving mainly as a worship leader in churches in various southern states. He has a bachelor's degree in religion from a liberal Baptist Christian college and a master's in church music from a Southern Baptist seminary. He's been married for 25 years and has three teen-aged children.

He was raised nominally Christian, but his parents, who were abusive to each other and their children, did not attend church. As a child, he did not know the basic tenets of Christianity and did not think of Christmas as a Christian holiday. He first became involved in church activities in high school at the invitation of a classmate. He stayed involved, as he put it, because of the love:

My attraction was the talk of love. So I said, "OK, I'm going to go toward this. I'm going to explore this. I want this. The greatest love of all." Who wouldn't want that, as a human? Especially one who had been deprived of it, of some of the basic needs of love, you know, from your parents.

About 10 years ago, he decided to read through the Bible very carefully. He did this completely on his own, as a way to get closer to his faith. However, his study has had the opposite effect:

The pursuit of Christianity brought me to the point of not believing in God. Not that somebody did something mean to me. Let me tell you; ain't nothing anybody did in a church can compare to what my parents did to me, OK?

I didn't plan to become an atheist. I didn't even want to become an atheist. It's just that I had no choice. If I'm being honest with myself.

I've just this autumn, started saying to myself, out loud, "I don't believe in God anymore." It's not like, I don't want to believe in God. I *don't* believe in God. And it's because of all my pursuits of Christianity. I want to understand Christianity, and that's what I've tried to do. And I've wanted to be a Christian. I've tried to be a Christian, and all the ways they say to do it. It just didn't add up.

The love stuff is good. And you can still believe in that, and live a life like that. But the whole grand scheme of Christianity, for me, is just a bunch of bunk.

He initially resisted his changing views:

I wanted it to be true. And I kept telling myself, "I don't understand." And, you know, I devoted my whole life trying to understand. And finally I got to the point where --- I've got to admit to myself this is how I feel. I can't pretend any longer. You know, this is probably just --- I really started getting this way probably in the last 10 years. Realizing, "Hmmm, you know you've really given this one a chance, OK?" It's not like on a whim I decided to do something that didn't work out. You know what I mean? I've given it a good chance.

He related numerous examples of biblical thought that did not make sense to him, for example:

OK, this God created me. It's a perfect God that knows everything; can do anything. And somehow it got messed up, and it's my fault. So he had to send his son to die for me to fix it. And he does. And now I'm supposed to beat myself to death the rest of my life over it. It makes no sense to me. Don't you think a God could come up with a better plan than that?

What kind of personality; what kind of being is this that had to create these other beings to worship and tell him how wonderful he is? That makes no sense, if this God is all-knowing and all-wise and all-wonderful. I can't comprehend that that's what kind of person God is.

Every church I've been in preached that the Jonah in the Whale story is literally true. And I've never believed that. You mean to tell me a human was in the belly of that whale? For three days? And then the whale spit him out on the shoreline? And, of course, their convenient logic is, "Well, God can do anything."

Well, I think most Christians have to be in a state of denial to read the Bible and believe it. Because there are so many contradicting stories. You're encouraged to be violent on one page, and you're encouraged to give sacrificial love on another page. You're encouraged to bash a baby's head on one page, and there's other pages that say, you know, give your brother your fair share of everything you have if they ask for it.

But if God was going to reveal himself to us, don't you think it would be in a way that we wouldn't question?... I mean, if I was wanting to have ... people teach about the Bible ... I would probably make sure they knew I existed.... I mean, I wouldn't send them mysterious notes, encrypted in a way that it took a linguist to figure out.

Even before he rejected belief in God, he rejected aspects of Christianity that didn't make sense to him:

I do remember this a couple of years down the road after being a Christian – this concept and idea of hell. I was going, “Hell? What do you mean I was going to hell? Why? What's hell, and where is it?” And I've never believed in hell. I just never bought it. There's a place where people go when they die, and they burn eternally? No.

The whole heaven thing makes no sense either. Why would I want to walk on streets of gold? I know people think that's literally how it's going to be. If we have no value system in heaven, as far as monetary or value system like we have here on earth, why would I want to walk on streets of gold? And I have people who believe they're going to have a physical body, and we're going to be in the new Earth ... and we're not going to die, and we're not going to grow old, and we're not going to have pain. Why? That all makes no sense to me.

Settling into the Ministry

After traveling the country with a theater group, and marrying a woman of strong Christian faith, he decided to become a minister. It seemed like a natural fit. He and his wife were very involved in the life of the church, he felt he could make a special contribution to the church through his musical abilities and he was known for being sensitive and compassionate.

And that's what people told me my best skills were – dealing with people.... I can be with somebody and genuinely have empathy with them, and concern and love and help them get through a difficult situation. And every time that I did it, those people thought that I was wonderful. And they would just bend over backwards to tell me, “Thank you.” That was one of my strengths.... Being with somebody when their husband died. And just holding their hand, or putting my arm around them. But I never said “Now, he's in heaven. Aren't you glad for him?”

He felt the education he received in religion was high quality and objective, even though it was limited to Christianity:

You know, where my degree says “Religion”, it really should say “Christianity”, because it wasn’t a degree in religion because we did not study any other religion. But it still was an academic approach to Christianity rather than, “You will believe *this*.”

Looking back on his education, he remembers other students being very upset about what they were learning:

We had people that would cry in class because they were challenged on what they were thinking. And I’m going, “That’s what we’re supposed to be doing. Why are you so upset?” I could never get that. And actually, some professors got in trouble because they challenged the students’ belief systems. Well, that’s what it’s about. That’s part of what a philosophy class does.

He also recalls that he simply compartmentalized information that he didn’t understand:

I just attributed [biblical inconsistencies] to the fact that I didn’t understand, and I compartmentalized it. I probably learned that as a child, because that’s a survival technique. You know, my parents are the source of all my pain, physical, emotional, and otherwise. But then, they’re my parents.

Once he was ordained, he took on the role of worship leader rather than pastor. This allowed him to focus on doing readings and music for the services. He much preferred this to preaching, which he has avoided as much as possible throughout his career:

I didn’t enjoy it [giving sermons] because of the issue of, “OK, what am I going to talk about, and what I’m *not* going to talk about?” This was very tricky.... I kept it very broad. And I didn’t say, “You’ve got to believe in Jesus or you’re going to hell.”

When I read a prayer, they’re generic. They usually border on making people feel good. You know, “May we think these thoughts and do these kinds of things.” I’ve never prayed out loud even, “May all these people be saved from hell.” ... I like to leave them open to their own interpretation.

Ongoing Empathy for Believers

While personally rejecting Christianity, he understands why others find it appealing and has no desire to change their views:

I kind of understand where all those people are coming from. You know – of wanting to believe in God and wanting some higher power that’s really

looking after me. Especially me coming from the childhood that I had. I can understand that. It'd be nice if I had an omniscient big brother up there, wouldn't it? Saying, "Don't worry about it. I got it covered. I know they were mean to you. But don't worry; I'm going to take care of it." But that's not reality. I wished it was God still, but it's not. I wished it was like that.

I don't think less of them for being a Christian.... Matter of fact, I understand them, because I was there too.

Well, I'm not going to go on a campaign to try to convince people to become an atheist. It's my journey.... Everybody has their own journey; and this is my journey. And how I kind of look at it, I journeyed through it and came here.

Still, even when he was a believer, he had difficulty identifying with others' experience of God:

[People would say] "I had this wonderful experience with God." I'd say, "I want that. Give it to me." Why didn't God ever give it to me? I think they're making it up in their mind. I never had one of those. I never heard God speak. I don't know how many people, I can tell you, come up and told me, "God told me to tell you this." I feel like saying, "Well, I think he could probably tell me himself, couldn't he? Because I've got my ear open."

Planning His Exit

He is firm about his decision to leave religion entirely, stating that, "I took many years making my mind up on this issue; I don't need to try another brand of it." He is planning to leave the ministry as soon he finds another way to support his family. He would leave sooner, if he had enough money to pay off his debts:

If somebody 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.

In the meantime, he is quietly pursuing another career. His wife is aware of his plan to switch careers, but he hasn't told her yet of his reason for the change. He thinks she will be both upset and supportive of whatever he wants to do. Mutual support has been the pattern in their marriage:

I couldn't ask for a better wife. I was very fortunate. We get along great. We support each other, and always give each other words of encouragement, and just support each other in every way we can think about.

She doesn't need to hear this right now. It's not going to serve any of us. I feel like when the time's right, I can talk to her about it. She won't like it, but I will share it with her. And after I share it with her, I will start sharing it

with other people. But she's going to be first. Because I know it's going to be --- it's going to turn her life upside-down ... she's a very dedicated Christian. Very devout.

He thinks she is aware that he has been changing, but she doesn't press him about it and he has no intention of trying to change her beliefs:

I think she definitely sees me pulling away from it though. And we've talked about it, but in very superficial ways. I don't get into details about it.

I'm not going to try to force her to change her mind. And if she wants to continue to live her life that way, I'll be supportive of her. And I'm not going to try to demean her or belittle her or belittle her beliefs.

He thinks his children won't have a problem with his change in beliefs. They haven't seemed to notice or care that he no longer says prayers before meals. Recently, he was very open with his son who asked him about some Bible passages:

We were talking about some scriptures in Revelation and some other things. He said, "Dad, do you really believe?" Before I could think, I said, "Son, I don't believe any of it. No way." He just smiled.

Discussion

The not so tender trapⁱ

All of our pastors were grateful for the opportunity to talk candidly about their quandaries with an interested outsider who would challenge and probe them without judging them. This was, in most cases, the first time in their lives that they could speak aloud about these matters. As Wes said:

So it's been very helpful, and --- I was concerned at first that it might reawaken in me some of my old anxieties and depression about maybe I shouldn't be doing this for a living, and stuff like that. But it has not done that. If anything, it's --- it's kind of convinced me that I'm over that stage in my life.

The loneliness of non-believing pastors is extreme. They have no trusted confidantes to reassure them, to reflect their own musings back to them, to provide reality checks. As their profiles reveal, even their spouses are often unaware of their turmoil. Why don't they resign their posts and find a new life? They are caught in a trap, cunningly designed to harness both their best intentions and their basest fears to the task of immobilizing them in their predicament. Their salaries are modest and the economic incentive is to stay in place, to hang on by their fingernails and wait for retirement when they get their pension:

I think I'm doing it now because financially I don't have a choice. I could

quit and go in there today and say today, “I’m not coming back.” But it would cause a huge financial burden on me. I mean, how would I continue to make my house payment and support my family? (Jack)

Pastors who are provided a parsonage to live in are even more tightly bound: they have no equity to use as a springboard to a new house. But economic worries are not the only, or even the primary, consideration, in the eyes of some of our five:

Because there have been times when I’d say, “You know what? I’m just going to tell everybody, and whatever happens happens.” And then I think, “Gosh, I can’t do that.” I think I could handle it, but it’s other people that I’m worried about. And I think, “by gosh, do I still care too much about what other people think of me or something?” (Adam)

I’m thinking if I leave the church --- first of all, what’s that going to do to my family? And I don’t know. Secondly is, I have zero friends outside the church. I’m kind of a loner. (Jack)

As Jack says about telling his wife: “It’s going to turn her life upside down.”

Another says it’s his wife’s family that is holding him back. They didn’t approve of him in the first place, and will make her miserable. The tangle of conflicting motives is vividly captured in a single rambling reflection from Adam:

...right now is a time of limbo, because there is so much more at stake than just my peace, or my intellectual pursuit. Because it’s practically going to affect a lot of people that I really care about. And I’ve even thought, “Gosh, just keep doing it.” I’ve thought, just keep along with it, buckle down and tell yourself that this is for the greater good for the people I care about, even though I don’t believe it. Just stick with what you’re doing; it pays good. It --- you’re not harming anybody, I don’t think [chuckle]. You’re doing good in your community; you’re respected. But it’s just gnawing away inside.

Confiding their difficulties to a superior is not an appealing option: although it would be unlikely to lead swiftly and directly to an involuntary unfrocking. No denomination has a surplus of qualified clergy, and the last thing an administrator wants to hear is that one of the front line preachers is teetering on the edge of default. More likely, such an acknowledgment of doubt would put them on the list of problematic clergy and secure for them the not very helpful advice to soldier on and work through their crises of faith. Speaking in confidence with fellow clergy is also a course fraught with danger, in spite of the fact that some of them are firmly convinced that many, and perhaps most, of their fellow clergy share their lack of belief.

What gives them this impression that they are far from alone, and how did this strange and sorrowful state of affairs arise? The answer seems to lie in the seminary experience shared by all our pastors, liberals and literals alike. Even some conservative seminaries staff their courses on the Bible with professors who are trained in textual

criticism, the historical methods of biblical scholarship, and what is taught in those courses is not what the young seminarians learned in Sunday school, even in the more liberal churches. In seminary they were introduced to many of the details that have been gleaned by centuries of painstaking research about how various ancient texts came to be written, copied, translated, and, after considerable jockeying and logrolling, eventually assembled into the Bible we read today. It is hard if not impossible to square these new facts with the idea that the Bible is in all its particulars a true account of actual events, let alone the inerrant word of God. It is interesting that all our pastors report the same pattern of response among their fellow students: some were fascinated, but others angrily rejected what their professors tried to teach them. Whatever their initial response to these unsettling revelations, the cat was out of the bag and both liberals and literals discerned the need to conceal their knowledge about the history of Christianity from their congregations.

A gulf opened up between what one says from the pulpit and what one has been taught in seminary. This gulf is well-known in religious circles. The eminent biblical scholar Bart D. Ehrman's widely read book, *Misquoting Jesus* (2005), recounts his own odyssey from the seminary into secular scholarship, beginning in the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, a famously conservative seminary which required its professors to sign a statement declaring the Bible to be the inerrant word of God, a declaration that was increasingly hard for Ehrman to underwrite by his own research. *The Dishonest Church* (2003), by retired United Church of Christ minister, Jack Good, explores this "tragic divide" that poisons the relationship between the laity and the clergy. Every Christian minister, not just those in our little study, has to confront this awkwardness, and no doubt there are many more ways of responding to it than our small sample illustrates. How widespread is this phenomenon? When we asked one of the other pastors we talked with initially if he thought clergy with his views were rare in the church, he responded, "Oh, you can't go through seminary and come out believing in God!" Surely an overstatement, but a telling one. As Wes put it:

...there are a lot of clergy out there who --- if you were to ask them --- if you were to list the five things that you think may be the most central beliefs of Christianity, they would reject every one of them.

One can be initiated into a conspiracy without a single word exchanged or secret handshake; all it takes is the dawning realization, beginning in seminary, that you and the others are privy to a secret, and that they know that you know, and you know that they know that you know. This is what is known to philosophers and linguists as mutual knowledge, and it plays a potent role in many social circumstances. Without any explicit agreement, mutual knowledge seals the deal: you then have no right to betray this bond by unilaterally divulging it, or even discussing it.

Don't Ask; Don't Tell

Circumstances conspire to encourage everyone to cooperate with this arrangement. The bishop, as already noted, is certainly not motivated to expose any doubters or outright atheists among his subordinates. For instance, Adam did confide his difficulties to a pastor in another church who counseled him on several occasions, and said:

Preachers who are not believers

Well, first of all, I know the trouble you're going through. I know you're sincere in it. I'm praying you're going to come out OK on the end of it. So I don't see you as a non-believer still.

And of course Mother Theresa encountered the same response from those to whom she confided her loss of faith. Nobody in any church wants to learn that a person of God has lost their belief in God. Even parishioners who harbor suspicions about their pastor's doctrinal commitments may well decide to leave well enough alone, especially if he or she is doing a fine job holding the congregation together. This incuriosity begins at ordination, when the candidate for a pulpit is examined. Nobody in our small sample was asked by their inquisitors if they actually believed in God. That would be rude, of course, and officially unnecessary. Indeed, it's likely that none of our pastors has *ever* been asked point-blank, by anyone – parishioner, fellow minister, or superior – if they believed in God. “The ‘borderline fundamentalists’ ask you about your beliefs, but never about whether you believe in God” (Wes).

This is a relief to them, since an honest answer would set off an avalanche of problems. There is variation in the severity of the ordination questioning, with more conservative churches asking more pointed questions about doctrine, but even here there are circumlocutions that pass muster. Candidates are typically well aware of what will be expected from them at the hearing, and Rick, the UCC minister, having recounted a successful dodge that slid him into a college chaplaincy remarked: “Now I might not have been able to get away with that in, say, Kansas.” As Wes puts it, “There are poisonous questions that have no business being asked. And one of those questions might be, ‘Do you believe in the virgin birth?’”

Among their fellow clergy, they often develop friendships, and suspecting that their friends share their views, they gingerly explore the prospect, using all the ploys that homosexuals have developed over the centuries: “And I let on like I do have an uncle who's a non-believer, and he always said, ‘You know, it's...’” (Adam). Probably both knew that this was no uncle he was talking about.

Recall Wes saying of his friendship with a parish leader who had attended seminary:

He would joke about things. I mean, some of the times --- I think some of the times he was taking a little risk with me. We kind of felt each other out over the course of time, and he could tell that I was joking. The things I would joke about were not the kinds of things he was accustomed to hear joked about. And so he just kind of --- just a little bit of self-revelation at a time. And we got to the point, you know, where he felt comfortable saying things to me.

Plausible deniability is maintained by both parties, just in case either of them is making a dangerous mistake. It seems that atheist “gaydar” is not yet a well-developed sensitivity among the clergy, and one of our pastors acknowledged that his efforts at sounding out his friends struck him as much like the forays of homosexuals in earlier times, when so much calamity could be triggered by coming out.

Creative Wiggle Room

Most clergy take beliefs metaphorically, not as literally true. Given that assumption, there is quite a lot of creative wiggle room. (Wes)

None of our five pastors has come up with any particularly original ways of evading or softening the issue of God's existence, but they all exploit many of the available moves. Among the favorites are variations on what a philosopher would call a "use-mention error": conflating the name (or concept) of a thing with the thing itself. When Karen Armstrong writes *A History of God* (1993), she is talking, of course, about the history of the *concept* of God, a topic that is as readily researchable by atheist scholars as, say, the history of (the concept of) Santa Claus. And when Robert Wright publishes *The Evolution of God* (2009), this must be the concept of God he is writing about, not God himself (or itself), but it is convenient for authors to blur the distinction. A nice example comes from Rodney Stark's *One True God: Historical Consequences of Monotheism* (2001):

All of the great monotheisms propose that their God works through history, and I plan to show that, at least sociologically, they are quite right: that a great deal of history – triumphs as well as disasters – has been made on behalf of One True God. What could be more obvious? (p1)

"Sociologically" apparently means, here, that Stark is writing about the concept of God, and the role it plays, not the role that God plays (if any). Sometimes our pastors produce inadvertently comical versions of this popular obfuscation: "God is literally what we would call a metaphor" (Wes) (Think about it). "...the difference between me and an atheist is basically this. It's not about the existence of God. It's do we believe that there is room for the use of the word 'God' in some context?" (Wes again). But even atheists find plenty of room for *using* the word "God"; it is well-nigh indispensable, for instance, in denying the existence of God.

Another familiar theme borrows heavily from postmodernism, with its attempt to subvert the very idea of truth. For instance:

When I lived in New Mexico, I heard these Native American story tellers tell creation stories. Or other stories about their tribe. Then they'd say, "Maybe it didn't happen this way, but the story's true." Meaning there's truths *in* the story, but they're not literally true. (Rick)

Where, we wonder, did the Native American story tellers get this idea?

Somewhat more inventive is this nice twist on literalism: "If you read the Bible literally, you're not taking the Bible seriously" (Darryl). And Rick has a deft way of using quotation marks to save him from assertion: "But when I say the creed, what I say is 'Let us remember our forefathers and mothers in the faith who *said*, "dot, dot, dot, dot".' Again, it's the historical connection that I kind of appreciate."

The Slipping Ratchet

This constant spin doctoring takes its toll, apparently, but it also subverts a mission that the liberal pastors claim for themselves: staying in the church in order to liberalize it, in order to make it a saner, wiser, more tolerant institution. "My goal is to become

obsolete,” says Wes. And according to Rick:

One of my strategies to stay in the church, is to *change* the church. I mean, I want the church to hear this stuff! I want the church to deal with me. I want the church to know that there’s a progressive way of thinking out there. I want the church to know that there are people who are thinking really radical stuff about theology.

Bit by bit, day by day, they would like to lift their parishioners closer to their own way of seeing the world, but by not speaking their minds, their *sincere* minds, they squander most of the opportunities to lead their congregations to new ways of thinking. In fact, there is a sort of Hippocratic Oath that all five seem to follow: *In the first place, do no damage to any parishioner’s beliefs*. Sometimes this is obviously the right thing to do, what anyone would do:

But he’s still dying of cancer; [his faith is] not changing the situation. It’s changing his acceptance of things; it’s allowing him to cope with it. And I’m certainly not going to pull that rug out from under him. (Darryl)

And sometimes concern for others is arguably the dominant motive:

I say I never try to take away from somebody something they believe unless I can put something better in its place, as opposed to just attacking. (Rick)

But other times this policy seems more self-protective than altruistic: “So it’s like you want to build their faith, not tear down their faith. So you do your work carefully. (Adam)

Do they *ever* volunteer their radical ideas to parishioners? One tactic they have discovered is the book club or study group, where self-selected parishioners get to read one of the controversial books by Bart Ehrman (2005) or Bishop John Shelby Spong (1994; 1998), or even Sam Harris (2004; 2006a), or to watch the 21 week Lutheran DVD series *Living the Questions*, a carefully open-ended exploration of the issues. Those who participate are alerted to the nature of the materials in advance and are then gently encouraged to discuss the ideas, in an unusually tolerant atmosphere, a sort of holiday from the constraints of dogma. Here the pastors can demonstrate their open-mindedness and willingness to take these shocking ideas seriously, and let the authors be the mouthpieces for what is in their hearts. Again, they need to have plausible deniability: they aren’t *preaching* these ideas, just acquainting their parishioners – those who are interested – with them. Not surprisingly, they draw a sharp distinction between what they can say from the pulpit, and what they can say in these less official circumstances:

Well, because on the pulpit, on a Sunday morning, you get people in all different stages. And if I laid that out there, then again, people would not hear the point of the sermon. (Wes)

Those in the congregation who are already liberal can easily tolerate the otherwise incredible assertions, because they have internalized the message that whenever they need to, they can treat what they hear as merely metaphorical. Those of less liberal, more literal, creed are reassured that their pastor is still four-square on their side – and so the whole spectrum of congregants can “hear the point of the sermon.”

But still, the pastors often find themselves put on the spot. When asked what he would say to a new widow who says, “Now he’s in heaven,” Jack replied, “I’m very good at holding my tongue.” And if a parishioner volunteers that he’s been born again, or just talked to God, Rick says, “I let them talk about it. I let it be meaningful. I don’t try to dissuade them from their opinion, or evangelize my better, broader understanding of the Lord to them.” And then there are noncommittal responses designed to go unnoticed. Jack’s favorites are, “Well, it’s good to see you today” and “Well, that’s nice of you to say that.”

So in spite of their best intentions, these pastors do not manage to exert very much pressure on their congregations to evolve their own beliefs in liberalizing directions. Instead, they find their own ways of dealing with the widening gap between what they find they can say, and what they know their parishioners take them to be saying:

I don’t feel like a hypocrite. I feel very authentic and very credible when I say things to my people.... The real truth of the matter is that I’m not being more honest with you than I am with my church. I’m not being more candid here. I’m just in a different context that requires a different kind of conversation. Because I don’t ever have the feeling at church of withholding, or ... playing ... I feel very authentic; very genuine with them. I don’t feel like I’m being more of myself here than I would be there. And in some ways, I feel like perhaps I’m more of myself there than I’m being here. It’s really strange. (Wes)

What will happen to these pastors?

Are they, in fact, in a good position to lead their congregations towards their own understandings, or are they condemned by their own commitments – to parishioners, their families, their colleagues – to perpetuate the double standards of sincerity that they have crafted so unwittingly over the years? We all find ourselves committed to little white lies, half-truths and convenient forgettings, knowing tacitly which topics not to raise with which of our loved ones and friends. But these pastors – and who knows how many others – are caught in a larger web of diplomatic, tactical, and, finally, ethical concealment. In no other profession, surely, is one so isolated from one’s fellow human beings, so cut off from the fresh air of candor, never knowing the relief of getting things off one’s chest.

These are brave individuals who are still trying to figure out how to live with the decisions they made many years ago, when they decided, full of devotion and hope, to give their lives to a God they no longer find by their sides. We hope that by telling their stories we will help them and others find more wholehearted ways of doing the good they set out to do. Perhaps the best thing their congregations can do to help them is to respect their unspoken vows of secrecy, and allow them to carry on unchallenged; or perhaps this is a short-sighted response, ultimately just perpetuating the tightly interlocking system that

maintains the gulf of systematic hypocrisy between clergy and laity. Perhaps new institutions will arise, siphoning off the congregants into more open allegiances, in which creeds need no special defense or interpretation, since they are already so credible and honorable. Perhaps congregations can transform themselves into such institutions. Only then will Wes get his wish and become obsolete, and in the meantime, we can expect that many others will go through the trials and temptations that our five clergy have weathered.

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ⁱ One of our five informants, Rick, on reading this report, told us that while he found his profile accurate, he himself has never felt trapped, so we wish to correct the impression that all of our pastors consider themselves caught in a trap.