

“ON FAITH” Essays – Washington Post, March 2010

Responses to “Preachers who are not Believers” by Daniel C. Dennett and Linda LaScola

These 27 essays were originally published on the Washington Post, “On Faith” Web site, which is no longer functional. All the essays are reprinted here, including two by Daniel Dennett, in the order in which they were posted. Non-functioning URLs have been removed or replaced. Some of the essays are also available on the new “[OnFaith](#)” site operated by FaithStreet.com since January, 2014. The essays were written by regular contributors to the Washington Post site, which posted a weekly religion-related question and asked its panelists to respond to it. The following question on the subject of “Disbelief in the Pulpit” was posted on March 15, 2010:

What should pastors do if they no longer hold the defining beliefs of their denomination? Do clergy have a moral obligation not to challenge the sincere faith of their parishioners? If this requires them to dissemble from the pulpit, doesn't this create systematic hypocrisy at the center of religion? What would you want your pastor to do with his or her personal doubts or loss of faith?

Read “[Preachers who are not Believers](#),” a study by Daniel C. Dennett and Linda LaScola of the Center for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University.

Non-Believing Clergy – A Silent Majority? - Daniel C. Dennett

DANIEL C. DENNETT is University Professor and Austin B. Fletcher Professor of Philosophy and Co-Director of the Center for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University.

Here are some questions that have haunted me for years. How many preachers actually believe what they say from the pulpit? We know that every year some clergy abandon their calling, no longer able to execute their duties with conviction. This can never be a decision taken lightly, and many of them labored on for years before taking the leap. Are they the tip of an iceberg? Is there a problem of deep hypocrisy separating many pastors from their flocks? What is it like to be a non-believing preacher? How do they reconcile their private skepticism with the obligations of their position? And how did they get into their predicament?

Several years ago I set out to get some answers, in collaboration with Linda LaScola, a clinical social worker with years of experience as a qualitative researcher. I had told her of my interviews with deeply religious people while writing my book, “[Breaking the Spell](#)” (2006), and of my surprise at how many of them were eager to tell me, in confidence, that they didn't believe a word of the doctrines of the faith to which they were devoting their lives. Was this also true of ordained clergy? With some help from me and a network of advisers, LaScola identified some brave informants, all currently Protestant pastors with congregations, and interviewed them at length and in depth--and of course in deep confidence.

Our report tells the different--and moving--stories of five good people who find themselves caught in a trap that only someone intent on doing good could fall into, a trap that nobody invented but that subtly and ingeniously blocks the exits. Of course we don't know how many variations on these stories are yet untold. We hope our presentation of these pioneers will encourage others to tell us their stories, so that the world can know something more about this phenomenon, which can only grow in importance as more and more religious leaders confront the flood of ideas and information that we in the developed world are swimming in today. BY DANIEL

C. DENNETT | MARCH 15, 2010

Don't fake faith - Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite

PROFESSOR, CHICAGO THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY Former president of Chicago Theological Seminary (1998-2008), Thistlethwaite is a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress

These are questions seminary students often ask me in class. Suppose I lose my faith, should I pretend to have faith for the sake of the congregation's faith? If I disagree with the church's teachings, should I keep my dissent to myself, or say what I really think?

First of all, don't fake faith. The great Medieval mystics teach us that the journey of doubt, what they sometimes called "the dark night of the soul," is part of the mystery of faith. When you stand in the pulpit and look out at the congregation, you need to know that many of those sitting in the pews are struggling with doubt. This is true every Sunday of every week of every year. Even more of those struggling with doubt are no longer in the pews, feeling it is hypocritical to come to church when they are feeling grave doubts. Acknowledge that doubt is part of the life-long journey of faith. Do so often, and provide biblical and theological resources so people will not feel alone in these struggles.

On the other hand, if you as a pastor of the church suddenly begin to experience grave doubts, seek out a spiritual adviser to work through your own crises of faith privately. Don't use your congregation as your spiritual advisers. Your job is to do that for them. Indeed, I recommend that all clergy continue to seek out opportunities for spiritual advising all through their ministries. You should acknowledge to the congregation that you as a pastor are well acquainted with doubt--this is a helpful part of teaching that doubt is part of faith. But don't abuse the congregation by making them into a support group for you.

The same principle applies to doubts about the teachings of the church, whatever they may be. Nobody believes 100% of what their church teaches; that would make church members into robots, not people of faith with robust and active consciences. Acknowledge often that we need to examine and question the teachings of the church, and provide many adult education opportunities, with biblical and theological resources, to examine these teachings. Share what you believe is theologically and biblically sound, and do not hesitate to engage people both from the pulpit and in classes about their own questions and doubts about church teachings.

On the other hand, when you as a pastor and teacher of a Christian denomination no longer subscribe to most of the fundamental teachings of your faith tradition, you need to work through those struggles individually with a spiritual adviser. It may be that you need to find a different spiritual home where you can affirm the majority of the church teachings.

Does this perspective make me a liberal Protestant? You bet it does. But I wasn't always a liberal Protestant. I left a more conservative denomination and chose the United Church of Christ for that very reason. I can't fake my faith and I think it is immoral to even try. BY SUSAN BROOKS THISTLETHWAITE

| MARCH 15, 2010; 5:32 PM ET

Honesty is the best policy – Herb Silverman

PRESIDENT, SECULAR COALITION FOR AMERICA Silverman is Founder and President of the Secular Coalition for America, and Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Mathematics at the College of Charleston

Perhaps the two best known professions in which leaders are expected to have strong religious beliefs are clergy and politicians. And they often give similar rationales for lying or evading questions about those beliefs: namely, that they can do a lot of good if they don't get sidetracked by superfluous issues. Translation: "I don't want to lose my job."

I can make a very mild case for their rationales. Some clergy focus on good works of a particular faith tradition, and feel the community would suffer if a replacement focused primarily on doctrine. Some politicians care about issues that have nothing to do with religious belief, and fear a replacement might turn a secular issue into a religious one.

Now to tell you what I really believe, this atheist will quote from John 8:32: "The truth shall set you free." I respect people for being honest, whether I agree with them or not. And how does a skeptic like me decide when clergy or politicians are honest? When they say something that is more likely to hurt than help their careers. And a bonus for doing that, as John indicates, is a certain personal freedom that comes with telling the truth.

Best of all, sometimes you can be honest and still keep your job. The good news is that every member in the club of open congressional atheists has overwhelmingly won reelection. The bad news is that there is only one member in this club: Rep. Pete Stark (D-Cal).

I expect that many, if not most, clergy have lost some of the beliefs of their youth. I like to think that Paul had the "talking snake" crowd in mind when he said in 1 Cor.13:11: "When I was a child, I spoke and thought and reasoned as a child. But when I grew up, I put away childish things." Perhaps many parishioners would better be able to identify with and respect a preacher whose belief system has changed and matured.

While politicians are certainly justified in saying their personal religious beliefs are nobody else's business, I had an unusual reverse experience in my church. (Yes, I do belong to a church. I joined the local Unitarian Church in Charleston after I was invited to give a sermon on "Positive Atheism," and a significant number of congregants told me they agreed with what I said.)

At this church, a search committee invited members of the congregation to interview a new candidate for minister. At a private discussion with the candidate, I asked him about his personal theology, and was quite surprised when he told me he remembered at least eight of his past lives. I mentioned this in a discussion about the candidate by the congregation, and many of them were also surprised. But the search committee said the candidate had met other important criteria, and they didn't feel it would have been appropriate for them to ask him about his religious beliefs. I didn't vote for this honest minister, but he was hired, once again confirming that honesty is the best policy. BY HERB SILVERMAN | March 15, 2010; 6:23 PM ET

Pastors' professional integrity - Willis E. Elliott

MINISTER, TEACHER, AUTHOR A United Church of Christ and American Baptist minister, Elliott has been a pastor, teacher, lecturer, dean, church executive. He is the author of six books.

1.....What should scientists - Daniel C. Dennett, for example - do if their opinions develop in a direction they know would be at least distasteful to their peers? Two recent articles in major publications revealed scandalous behavior among scientists more interested in advancing their careers and maintaining their peer status than in advancing truth and the public interest.

2.....I'll skip scandalous behavior in the medical profession and in the legal profession and in politics and journalism and in entertainment and come right down to scandalous behavior in the clergy, especially pastors. This week's question should be responded to in the context of the present-day public belief that professionals are not to be trusted. But I must remark the ironic humor that the source of this week's question about pastors is a prominent atheist, Daniel C. Dennett. In interrogative mode, the questions are indicative *attacks on the pastoral profession*.

3.....While other employees are hired to promote the interests of their employer, pastors are hired *to promote the interests of God*, who calls on them to love their congregations and "speak truth to power," sometimes preaching what their people would rather not hear. Pastors are primarily servants of God, who "calls" them into their "vocation," and only secondarily servants of the particular congregation employing them. (The questions assume the pastor-people relationship in the so-called "free" churches, in which the employer is the congregation.)

4.....The moral dimension of the questions' economic context is the employee's integrity in relating to the employer. Confront your employer, and your job is at stake. Think of the COURAGE it takes to pastor: one aspect of your job is to confront, even at times to cross the interests of, your employers, the members of the congregation singly and collectively! No one

should be surprised to learn that long pastorates are extremely rare, or that the courage of some pastors fail.

Now to the questions, in order:

A.....*Move on.* It's part of the courage the profession requires: you no longer fit in a corporation (a denomination, wider church) whose "defining beliefs" you no longer hold. But this is true of all jobs, not just pastoring.

B.....The question is laughably inauthentic. On its basis, hirelings could argue that in preaching what the people want to hear, they are fulfilling a "moral obligation"! Further: Ordained to "speak the truth in love," pastors cannot accept beliefs wholly on the basis of sincerity: every human being is, sometimes, both *sincere and wrong*.

But a wide belief-gap between pastor and people doesn't last long: the pastor leaves disheartened, or the market takes over.

C.....Nothing "requires" a pastor to "dissemble from the pulpit." My long experience in the education, continuing education, counseling, and mentoring of pastors laughs at the question's expression, "systematic hypocrisy." The notion is *an invention of novelists*, not a description of reality. I was ordained as a pastor 70 years ago, and I have never met a pastor I could call hypocritical.

D.....For reasons too numerous to list here, every pastor should be in weekly conversation with a mentor. Life is change and can also be growth, development, including the increase of appreciative and critical awareness to the glory of God and the good of humankind and the good earth. *On the triangle of people / pastor / mentor*, all can be agents of this increase, servants of God and of one another. BY WILLIS E. ELLIOTT | MARCH 15, 2010; 10:31 PM ET

Integrity vs. job security - Max Carter

DIRECTOR OF FRIENDS CENTER, GUILFORD COLLEGE - A recorded Friends minister, he serves on the Board of the American Friends Service Committee and the Advisory Board of the Earlham School of Religion.

The question about how forthcoming clergy ought to be when standing in front of their congregation (or over coffee in parishioners' homes, or in the privacy of their offices) is one which depends on an understanding of the function of clergy. Is the one who "stands before and proclaims" a mere vessel for the transmission of orthodoxy? Or is s/he expected to be self-revealing and share her/his own sense of unfolding revelation from God? Is the person to be a source of infallible wisdom or a "wounded healer," a beggar helping other beggars find bread? And especially, how is the person to practice integrity while also "speaking truth with love?" In my own tradition, there are no ordained clergy, but rather ministers who share their particular abilities in facilitating others' access to the truth which already lies within them.

In that regard, sharing ones own insights, ones own struggles, discoveries, doubts, fears, and moments of revelation are part of an ongoing process of seeking together for a Truth beyond what any one person could know. In my own work as a Quaker campus minister at Guilford College, I have found that my students are best helped in their own spiritual journeys when I share mine, warts and all; when I express my own doubts, my own struggles with the "orthodoxies" in my own tradition. Above all, I have found that I must live a life of integrity, of "letting my life preach," if my students are to take me seriously. I can't proclaim one thing and behave - or believe - differently; I can't urge them to be open to continuing revelation if I am

closed to it myself. College students can smell hypocrisy the way they can sniff out the next campus party!

But I know that congregational pastors are faced with a different set of circumstances. In most cases their livelihood depends on "pleasing" their congregation (a major flaw, I feel, in the "hireling" ministry!), and flying in the face of orthodox religious, social, or political belief is a recipe for unemployment. Recent history is replete with examples of clergy who have been forthcoming from the pulpit about their own doubts or new understandings of truth - and gone on to see membership, contributions, and job security evaporate.

One answer is to cultivate the nimbleness of "speaking truth with love," of finding a way to couch personal doubts in the form of loving promptings to the congregation to "consider it possible thou might be mistaken," in the words of the old Quaker query. Or, less forthrightly, if the person is the product of a fine seminary or divinity school, s/he can practice the fine art of obfuscation - of using terms that mask one's own real belief and meaning. Graduate schools of religion are brilliant at it - but it doesn't necessarily pass the "smell test" of integrity.

If one has already "drunk the Kool-Aid" of depending for one's livelihood on the whims of a congregation, then one has to face the reality that religious bodies are typically inherently conservative. The decision can be made to "say what they want to hear," find a way to couch doubts in creative ways, or keep one's bags packed for the inevitable invitation to find a home in a more liberal setting!

BY MAX CARTER | MARCH 16, 2010; 7:53 AM ET

Doubt is a part of faith – Brad Hirschfield

RABBI, PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL JEWISH CENTER FOR LEARNING AND LEADERSHIP Named as one of the nation's 50 most influential rabbis in Newsweek, and one of the top 30 "Preachers and Teachers" by Beliefnet.com

Common assumptions to the contrary, doubt is not the opposite of faith, it is a part of faith. In fact the faith journeys of virtually all great spiritual teachers included moments of genuine doubt. From Abraham and Moses to Jesus and so many more, wrestling with doubt is one of the ways in which good people become great spiritual masters. And far from having an obligation to "protect" congregants from doubts and questions of faith, clergy are obliged to share those issues with those they lead.

Doubts and questions are vehicles for clarifying one's faith and for maintaining personal integrity. If one's faith is nothing more than a source of static answers, it quickly becomes a mindless rhetoric with God as its footnote. That is hardly what most of us who subscribe to any faith believe in.

The challenge for clergy, not to mention any person of faith, lies in admitting the doubts and questions without turning them into new articles of faith which demand the denigration of the previously held beliefs. When that happens, the clergy should relinquish their pulpit. Religious leaders should not use the pulpit to simply hammer away at the very ideas which people come to have affirmed, but neither should they shy away from leading people in the evolution of their own faith. That, too, is a failure of leadership which should lead to their relinquishing the pulpit.

Responsible religious leaders must find a balance between helping their congregants to wrestle with tough questions and offering them secure answers. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said it best when he remarked that, "the purpose of religion is to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted".

Applied to here, that teaching translates into the demand that spiritual questions and doubt should afflict the spiritually certain, while spiritual answers and faith should offer security to the afflicted. BY BRAD HIRSCHFELD | MARCH 16, 2010; 9:46 AM ET

Pulpit disbelief is nothing new – Tom Flynn

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, COUNCIL FOR SECULAR HUMANISM executive director of the Council for Secular Humanism and editor of its magazine *Free Inquiry*

The problem of clergy who lack belief in their churches' teachings is nothing new. In his 1996 historical novel *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, John Updike portrayed an early 20th-century cleric who read the published speeches of agnostic orator Robert Green Ingersoll and became convinced that Christianity was false. His love of truth was so strong that he abandoned the church. His clerical training having prepared him for no other line of work, leaving the pulpit sentenced his family to poverty. The account is fictional, but it resonates precisely because the character's ethically upright but personally destructive choice was so unusual.

Indeed, since the early 20th century the unspoken secret festering at the heart of most American mainline Protestant churches has been the yawning gulf between what ministers learn in their seminaries and what church members believe in the pews. For better or worse, the norm has been that aspiring ministers are introduced to the latest scholarship on Christian origins, the literary development of the Bible, and similar topics - meaning that they enter their ministries with a view of the life of Jesus and the development of the early church that most secular humanists would applaud. Yet they find themselves ministering to congregations that, since 1970 or so, have gotten comfortable with the fact that Adam and Eve are allegories, but otherwise still take most of what's in the Good Book at face value. The overwhelming majority of ministers cave in to congregational expectations. For proof we need only recognize how exceptional figures like the retired Bishop John Shelby Spong or bestselling author Bart Ehrman are in their willingness - or should we say insistence? - to challenge lay believers to accept a more modern understanding of Christianity.

Granting for the sake of argument that there *was* a historical Jesus, he almost certainly never thought of himself as the incarnate son of God. Much of what is central to early Christianity came not from Jesus but Paul, and much of the rest grafted itself onto the tradition between the dawn of the faith and the time of Constantine as the young church struggled to come to terms with its turbulent times and its own shifting identity. And this is only the beginning of what highly educated mainstream clergy come out of their seminaries knowing, and seldom, seldom share from the pulpit. Does it create "systematic hypocrisy at the center of religion" when dedicated laypeople are three or four generations behind their pastors in their views of their faith? I think it does - and I suspect that the institutional weakness this creates at the heart of the more sophisticated denominations (among many other factors) helps to explain the greater vitality of evangelical and fundamentalist denominations relative to the mainline churches which has made American Christianity, on balance, more primitive than it was, say, circa 1950. BY TOM

FLYNN | MARCH 16, 2010; 10:01 AM ET

Pastors must relate to their congregations honestly – Welton Gaddy

LEADER OF THE INTERFAITH ALLIANCE Pastor for preaching and worship at Northminster (Baptist) Church in Monroe, LA, Gaddy has written more than 20 books and hosts the weekly radio show, *State of Belief*

Pastors and other religious leaders charged with the care and spiritual nurture of a congregation have no greater responsibility than relating to their congregations honestly. When honesty is the norm, seldom will the congregation be caught off guard or surprised by its religious leader's

doctrinal beliefs or ethical principles. That being said, however, the situation is neither as simple nor as easy as it seems.

In today's world of schisms in all major religions, though a religious tradition does not change, the leaders of the institutions in that religious tradition change. Such was my experience as a pastor in the Southern Baptist Convention founded on the "historic Baptist tradition." In a pre-announced political movement aimed at taking over the leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention, fundamentalist Baptists successfully ousted cooperative leaders in the convention committed to the priesthood of every believer, the autonomy of each local congregation, church-state separation and a congregational polity. New leaders were elected and unprecedented emphasis was placed on creedal orthodoxy, biblical literalism, pastoral authority and a form of religious freedom that permitted entanglement between institutions of religion and government. My personal conviction was shared by many long-time members of that Convention: "I have not moved away from the convention, the convention has moved away from me." Indeed, my Baptist identity would have been compromised by remaining a part of that movement.

At no time during that transitional period did I *not* speak to the congregations I served openly and honestly about what was happening and how it was affecting me. Currently, I do sermon feedback sessions that allow members of the congregation to question what I have said from the pulpit. Regularly, I challenge members of the congregation to evaluate what I have said and to form their own biblically-based conclusions about it.

Differences of opinion do not destroy a congregation; they may even strengthen it. However, a lack of communication between people with different opinions can be seriously destructive. Dishonesty can be damaging beyond measure. Nowhere should efforts at communication be stronger than between a religious leader and those whom the leader serves. Out of such interaction comes mutual respect and spiritual growth for all involved.

Finally, if careful communication ultimately reveals that a religious leader no longer represents or advocates the theological and moral views of a particular congregation, the leader has a responsibility to resign. Such action preserves the integrity of both the leader and the congregation and represents a commitment to authenticity that is absolutely essential to spirituality.

BY WELTON GADDY | MARCH 16, 2010; 10:58 AM ET

I'll be writing in the sand if anyone needs me – Matt Maher

Catholic musician, recording artist - Maher is a recording artist on Essential Records. A Catholic musician originally from Newfoundland, Canada, he later relocated to the Phoenix area of Arizona

I'm sorry, but we all seem to be armed to the teeth with rocks, ready to stone each other to death. So if anyone needs me, I've decided that I'll be trying to figure out what Jesus was writing in the sand when the Pharisee's were getting ready to stone the woman caught in adultery to death. It seemed to disperse the crowds long enough for everyone to realize the error of their ways.

To me, the first question the Church should ask is, "Why is it having to receive government funds?" Aren't there enough Catholics in the US to help support such a valuable ministry, that it shouldn't need government support? and if they're not tithing, isn't that a huge social sin on our part? Aren't we as believers supposed to be the front line in caring for the poor? Why are we looking for help from a secular institution? We're not bailing out planned parenthood, so it seems to me that we shouldn't expect it any other way - and maybe the fact that we have hasn't been a good thing....

The work that Catholic charities does is of valuable importance to the community; but it is because it is given the freedom to express the charism of who it is and what it stands for; and for

an organization to be targeted as being hateful for not agreeing with someone's lifestyle is a dangerous disposition to have. To me it speaks of the same judgmental behavior that you are resisting. By Matt Maher | March 16, 2010; 11:28 AM ET

Say what you believe – David Wolpe

RABBI OF SINAI TEMPLE IN LOS ANGELES Named the No.1 Pulpit Rabbi in America by Newsweek magazine, Wolpe is the Rabbi of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles and currently teaches at UCLA.

That preeminent American spirit, Ralph Waldo Emerson, began his life as a preacher. Indeed, in an image I have always relished, he wrote his sermons in the notebook that his father used, after tearing out his father's more pious writings. (Paper was scarce, and Emerson was an independent mind from the start.)

When Emerson discovered that he no longer believed in the divinity of Jesus, he resigned, with the sad acquiescence of his congregation. For he could no longer administer the Eucharist: To observe the Lord's Supper would be "to produce confusion in our views of relation of the soul to God." For Emerson this was sufficient. The congregation required someone who could administer the sacrament, and he could not. "It is my desire, in the office of a Christian minister, to do nothing which I cannot do with my whole heart."

Is there more to be said? If one discovers that belief has changed, it is a simple obligation to explain that to the congregation. A person of conscience and probity will take the repercussions. The congregation may continue to treasure the Rabbi or Minister; they may not. In any case a compact must be reached. To do otherwise is a fraudulent imposition. Such a position may be defensible in marketing (you can sell a soap you think second rate, though it may cause you a twinge of discomfort) but in a clergy person whose currency is conviction, to pretend is unworthy. Say what you believe. Surely the congregation deserves no less? As the Talmud teaches "The seal of God is truth." BY DAVID WOLPE | MARCH 16, 2010; 12:05 PM ET

Many kinds of faith, many kinds of doubt – Martin Marty

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR AND PROFESSOR EMERITUS, UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO Historian, author, professor emeritus at the University of Chicago, where he taught religious history, chiefly in the Divinity School, for 35 years.

The last thing one would want to do is encourage "bad faith," which would appear or occur if someone simply "pretended" faith in order to hold a clergy job--not the most alluring way to find financial security, high prestige, or deal with one's insecurities in any case. Anything done to help bad-faith clerics move along and out would be good for congregations and causes of truth and integrity. I suppose there's some of that going around, but it's a moral issue that afflicts clergy and laity alike, but should not be the form of un-faith that monopolizes the discourse.

There are more interesting kinds of doubt. Some of them have to do with details of the defining faith of their denomination. How does one define what is defining? For example, when I was ordained as a Lutheran I promised to be faithful to the Lutheran "confessions," seeing them being faithful to the Scriptures. Seminary professors delighted in showing us that somewhere in one of them it taught that garlic applied to magnets led them to lose their magnetism (or gain more; I don't remember). I think that if laity who were told that and then learned that their preacher didn't agree would see good faith in her stance.

The confessions also teach that the Pope is the Antichrist, and some Lutheran bodies still have that on the books. And then along comes Pope John XXIII, and Lutheran churches mourned when he died. The conservative head of a conservative Lutheran body referred to Pope John Paul

II as "dear brother in Christ" for his anti-abortion stance. How could the Antichrist be so addressed What was and is defining in these cases

Now, there are certainly beliefs that do define. Jose Ortega y Gasset spoke of "creencias," not as "ideas that you hold" but "ideas that you are." In my tribe the fact that God loves the unlovable, accepts the unacceptable, and that we don't earn or merit grace is a defining belief.. Anyone who studies Lutheran sermons will often find the fallible, mortal, limited, but in-good-faith preacher lapsing into "you gotta" language, yet he or she would not consider such lapses to be defining. But if one decides that God's love is not shown in Christ and that we have to be busy-busy impressing God would likely want to step away.

There are many kinds of doubt. The question is often posed cognitively: does the preacher assent to this or that proposition? That is nowhere near what most experience believers experience as doubt. If that were the vital issues, the company of those I call "virtuosos of doubt" would multiply. I know you can make a splash by showing how daring you are by remaining in a faith-tradition and each week parading how deliciously you balance on the tight rope between faith as agreement and doubt as disagreement. A virtuoso! All the others seem dull by contrast.

Most congregations have matured beyond the point where they need their doubts to be nurtured each week. They are more serious than that. They care about the bone-deep doubt that can come in five-second flashes, five-decade undertones of living faith, or any other way which challenges their very existence and all that they hold dear. Good preachers live with such doubt enough that their people welcome the way they find affirmation. Paul Tillich wrote that doubt is not the enemy of faith; it is part of faith. Martin Luther saw doubt as the fuel off which faith feeds. He believed that bone-deep doubt (an untranslatable word "Anfechtung") was a temptation to doubt that did not come from the devil but from God. So something good had to come of it.

Some congregations may want as preachers some unthinking automatons, some wind-up robots who are never assailed or enriched by doubt, people who can spout the "defining doctrines" and go hunting for and purging others who they think deviate a bit. Millions of others like to be ministered to by real men and women who share their doubts and faith and see God working through both in a world where the lines are never totally and unwaveringly clear. That, they believe and show that they believe, is the world where divine grace is sought, preached, believed in, and lived. BY MARTIN MARTY | MARCH 16, 2010; 12:20 PM ET

Honesty the most faithful policy - Cal Thomas

SYNDICATED POLITICAL COLUMNIST Thomas, a veteran of broadcast and print journalism, writes a twice-weekly column that appears in over 500 newspapers around the world.

Resign. Sell cars. At least with cars, you know you're getting a "sales job." The Scriptures warn of what happens to anyone who adds to, or detracts from God's Word. The penalties are especially serious for those who are ordained to preach God's Word as He caused it to be recorded for our sake and who either do not preach and teach it, or have lost their faith in it and in God. Most evangelical ordinations require a new pastor to state publicly if his views change. The hypocrisy comes from one who accepts money from parishioners who believe, when the receiver no longer believes. BY CAL THOMAS | MARCH 16, 2010; 2:29 PM ET

Disbelief or just different beliefs? Marcus Borg

FORMER PRESIDENT, ANGLICAN ASSOCIATION OF BIBLICAL SCHOLARS Borg holds the Hundere Chair in Religion and Culture at Oregon State University. A fellow of the Jesus Seminar, he was president of the Anglican Association of Biblical Scholars

If a pastor/priest loses his/her faith in the sense of agreeing with "the new atheism" as expressed in the recent bestselling books by Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens, then

I think it would be hypocritical for them to continue in their professional role. Or they might give themselves a brief period of time to see if this is their settled opinion.

But I don't think this is the issue that many clergy face. Rather, the issue is what they learned in divinity school versus what they think that many in their congregations think. Contemporary seminary education -mainline Protestant and Catholic - leads to a different understanding of what it means to be Christian than what much of "common Christianity" affirms.

By "common Christianity," I mean what most Christians took-for-granted until a generation or two ago - and perhaps about half (or more) of American Christians still assume to be the heart of Christianity. This "common understanding" sees the afterlife as the central issue that Christianity addresses. Our problem is that we are sinners and deserve to be punished, indeed condemned. This is where Jesus comes in: his death was the payment for our sins, and those who believe this will be forgiven and thus go to heaven.

In most mainline Protestant and Catholic seminaries, with varying degrees of intensity and clarity, this understanding is undermined by what candidates for ordination learn about the Bible and the Christian tradition. Christianity is not primarily about the afterlife, despite the emphasis placed upon life after death by much of common Christianity.

It is about transformation this side of death - the transformation of ourselves and of the world.

When clergy sense a difference between this understanding and what their congregation thinks, I encourage them to be discerning. If their congregation is mostly elderly and unlikely to survive beyond the death of its members, and if their elderly flock is not using "common Christianity" to judge and beat up on other people, then there may be no need to try to change them. Clergy in situations like this might see themselves as chaplains in an old folks home.

But if clergy are in intergenerational churches with a potential future, then I encourage a different approach. Seek to bring your understanding of Christianity into your congregation. This can be done in sermons, but especially in adult theological re-education. It is a crucial need in our time, and there are resources: reading groups; video series groups, especially videos produced by "Living the Questions." Clergy can lead these, though they need not. Laity can also do so.

My impression: the timidity - apprehension, fearfulness - of some mainline Protestant and Catholic clergy to convey their richer understandings of the Bible and Christianity has contributed to the decline of Christianity in our time. There are millions of people who cannot accept the beliefs of "common Christianity." Let conservative Christianity have a monopoly on "common Christianity." But those of us who care about Christianity and its future should not imitate that.

BY MARCUS BORG | MARCH 16, 2010; 3:16 PM ET

A crisis of faith is one thing, a rejection of faith another – Jason Poling

FOUNDING PASTOR, NEW HOPE COMMUNITY CHURCH

Rev. Poling is a member of the Evangelical Theological Society, and board member of the Ecumenical Institute of Theology at St. Mary's Seminary & University in Baltimore.

Temporarily a pastor and a congregation and a denomination may be able to duct-tape something together. But ultimately they're working at cross purposes.

I grew up in a very liberal church in a very liberal denomination. Attending a picnic at the parsonage while I was going through confirmation, I remember sitting across from the minister and wanting to ask him, "Do you really believe this stuff?" Sometimes I wish I had; perhaps if he

had said he did I might have looked more deeply into the words of the Creed I was memorizing (along with several fascinating points of denominational history) to pass my examination.

But what if his answer had been, "No." Worse, what if he'd wanted to answer that way but didn't feel like he could say that to a kid in his congregation?

In just about every situation, I think the initial answer to your question is that a pastor experiencing a crisis of faith should avoid doing anything rash while she works through that crisis. A wise pastor will surround himself (even if virtually) with trusted friends and colleagues with whom he can be completely honest. Most are in a situation where a decision to leave the ministry (or to put oneself in a position where s/he will be asked to leave) will have a significant effect on others' lives.

Even the most devout and confident among us will have days when we step into the pulpit praying, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief." I think we're called to live in the tension between faith and doubt. Doubt keeps us honest; it protects us from naïve arrogance. Faith, likewise, protects us from despairing unbelief. It's not dishonest for someone who is struggling with a particular theological point to still affirm wholeheartedly the Creed of his tradition because he has continued to identify himself with that tradition and in a sense to submit himself to it as he works through his difficulties.

At the end of the day, though, I have to reject the notion that over the long term someone who cannot uphold the essential tenets of the Christian faith should serve a church in a leadership role. Temporarily a pastor and a congregation and a denomination may be able to duct-tape something together. But ultimately they're working at cross purposes.

For every one of the rare ministers who has moved sincerely from belief to unbelief, there are many more who have moved from belief to vague opinion, not holding firmly to the distinctive commitments of their traditions but not really letting go of them either. Many no longer feel called to pastoral ministry but can't figure out how they'd make a living doing something else, so they phone it in while waiting until the denomination says they can retire.

Meanwhile, across town a diligent bivocational pastor works late into the night on his sermon for Sunday. BY JASON POLING | MARCH 16, 2010; 3:47 PM ET

The fine line between hypocrisy and reform - Deepak Chopra

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Chopra is the author of more than fifty books translated into over thirty-five languages. His latest books are the "Ultimate Happiness Prescription" and "Reinventing the Body, Resurrecting the Soul."

Religion poses many tests of conscience. This isn't a drawback. If anything, it's one of the reasons organized faith exists. But of course there are extremes of opinion about how acceptable it is to disagree with church doctrine. My insistence that religion must teach people how to think about God for themselves would be seen as extreme -- or even heretical -- by those at the opposite end of the spectrum. We've witnessed the tide of tolerance ebb and flow in the Catholic Church. We've seen gay Episcopal bishops advance in a liberal climate only to cause a schism among conservatives.

Millions of people have left the church, or quietly rebelled while keeping their place in the pew, because they feel too confined by dogma. Is this hypocrisy? Of course it can be, as witness the "good Catholics" who practice birth control. Not that they are to be singled out. Millions of gay worshippers in every denomination are forced to walk a fine line between what they do and what they are told to believe.

In a healthy climate this tension gives rise to reform. Battles of conscience come to the surface instead of remaining hidden, and although not every battle leads to progress, progress requires a fight when it comes to organized faiths. In India the fight may be over the caste system; in Judaism it may be over marrying outside the faith or giving up orthodox rules about the Sabbath. The dividing line between hypocrisy and reform is drawn by silence. If you silently go along with what is wrong -- however you define wrong -- then you are verging on hypocrisy. If you speak out, you are inciting reform.

And attracting hostility at the same time. After 9/11 there was an interfaith gathering in Yankee Stadium that had a tremendous healing effect. Yet some participants, because they came from rigidly fundamentalist congregations, were condemned merely for appearing on stage with members of other faiths. This is arrant bigotry, and painful as it may be, those preachers who were condemned should resign their positions. The only other course for a person of conscience is to fight for what you believe in.

These comments apply to all believers equally, I think. There isn't a special category for ministers and priests. Their vows may hold them to a higher standard, but silent dishonesty is what it is, just as outspoken honesty is what it is. BY DEEPAK CHOPRA | MARCH 16, 2010; 9:58 PM ET

A dilemma worthy of literature – Rebecca Goldstein

Award-winning novelist and philosopher, MacArthur Fellow, author of eight books, most recently "36 Arguments for the Existence of God: A Work of Fiction."

The dilemma in [this study](#) has the emotional and ethical complexity of literature, as I well know since I've explored it in a novel, with a character who faces an even more extreme form of the crisis. And it's this quality that makes a definitive answer to the question so difficult. Is there some way that every clergyman who finds himself in this miserable circumstance ought to act, or is the right decision situation-sensitive? All five of the anguished pastors speak of the effect of their own personal decision on the well-being of others--their families, of course, but also their congregants.

On the one hand, there is a strong ethical intuition that a clergyman, of all people, must be committed to the truth. If his intellectual struggles have led him to the conclusion that the majority of his flock believe falsehoods, then it is his obligation to help them to see the truth. But this is perhaps to think of a clergyman on the model of a philosophy professor. Yes, the clergy are like philosophy professors in that they are supposed to understand matters of metaphysics and ethics, but still they have functions that go beyond those of professors. They are also doctors of the soul, charged with easing the existential anguish of their flock. How then can they justify increasing that anguish by challenging the very truths that draw the flock together? This is the rationalization that runs through all five stories, allowing the pastors, although tormented, to keep both their positions and their silence.

All of the ministers interviewed here sincerely believe--I trust their sincerity--that speaking the truth as they have come to know it would cause distress, not only for their families but their parishioners. I do think they may be exaggerating the distress of their congregants (their family is another matter). Those whose faith will be tried by the spectacle of a man of faith renouncing his faith will be, even on these pastors' accounting, taking a step toward the truth, surely a good thing. And those parishioners--the great majority, I should think--whose faith will be left untouched will write off the wayward former clergyman as a kook, congratulating themselves on having ferreted him out as they listen to his replacement sincerely sermonizing. We all tend to think we are more irreplaceable than we really are.

And when you think more about it, the two pastoral functions--truth-seeking and soul-doctoring--are surely related. Why would one entrust one's soul to the care of a person unless one felt he had a greater knowledge of ethical truths? And as Socrates long ago taught us, to know ethical truths is to do them. As much as one sympathizes with the men caught in this dilemma, is there not a contradiction implicit in justifying one's dishonesty by claiming the functions of comfort that one can perform for others precisely because they perceive you to stand at a raised ethical height?

More than anything, the dramatic quandaries presented in this paper show the systemic problems with an institution, religion, which forces people to choose between intellectual freedom and loyalty to community. BY REBECCA GOLDSTEIN | MARCH 17, 2010; 12:00 PM ET

Afflicting the comfortable comes with the call – Janet Edwards

CO-MODERATOR OF MORE LIGHT PRESBYTERIANS Rev. Dr. Edwards is a Presbyterian minister living in Pittsburgh. She currently serves as co-Moderator of More Light Presbyterians

If seminary has done its job, the difference between the pastor and the sincere faith of his or her parishioners begins the first day. It is a dilemma every ordained minister faces.

At its best, theological education expands the students' faith and knowledge. Biblical studies, church history and systematic theology are *meant* to challenge the assumptions the seminarians enter with so that, by building on study and prayer, the believer called to ministry is able to lead the Church with energy, intelligence, imagination and love.

This inevitably includes challenging the sincere faith of our parishioners.

Indeed, one of the common definitions of preaching is "to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable." This includes our comfortable assumptions, which members often insist are firmly rooted in the defining beliefs of a denomination or branch of Christian tradition. And it often feels like affliction for both pastor and pew to distinguish between what is central and what is not, what is faithful to Christ and what is extraneous.

Yet this is exactly what the minister is called to do. It is nothing new; this dynamic was at work among the first Christians, as the letters in the New Testament make clear.

The comfortable, sincere assumption of the first followers of Jesus was that Jewish law defined their faith. Jesus had said that He came to fulfill the law and they continued to abide by it. Both Peter and Paul challenged this sincere faith after the Holy Spirit inspired them to see a deeper essential tenet that brought Jew and Gentile together in the Church. And though much of Paul's letters testify to the discomfort and difficulty felt by his parishioners, Paul had a moral obligation to challenge the traditions they assumed to be essential tenets of faith in Christ.

Take, for example, Paul's fierce words toward those who insisted upon strict adherence to Jewish law (Gal. 3:1-3). Paul sensed that this assumption, though comfortable to Jesus' earliest followers, would stifle and kill the growth of the church. We don't know what would have happened if those calling for adherence to Jewish law had won out, but we can guess that the rich diversity of the Church that includes everything from Celtic Christianity to Russian Orthodoxy to Presbyterianism would likely not have emerged from a community for whom Jewish laws were defining beliefs.

Just as Paul challenged the early Christians with the idea that Jewish law is not an essential tenet of Christian faith, today, too, it is the duty of pastors to challenge the sincere beliefs of their

parishioners and help our flocks to separate assumptions about "the way things have always been done" from the truly defining beliefs of our faith.

Our defining beliefs are difficult but not mysterious: they are to love God through Christ and love our neighbor. This is what Jesus insisted upon. If a pastor no longer holds to these tenets, he or she needs to stop and take a deep breath. I would want my pastor to be able to honestly face his or her doubts and work them through.

But if a pastor is struggling with a conflict between his or her faithful knowledge of Scripture and the traditional assumptions of the congregation -- even when congregants hold to them tightly as defining beliefs -- then welcome to ministry. There is no getting around the fact that afflicting the comfortable is an aspect of our calling. BY JANET EDWARDS | MARCH 17, 2010; 12:41 PM ET

None of us now possesses the whole truth – John Shelby Spong

FORMER BISHOP, EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF NEWARK

His best-selling books include "Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism," "A New Christianity for a New World," "Why Christianity Must Change or Die," and "Eternal Life."

This question assumes that there is something called revealed truth that constitutes the content of a faith system. That is simply not so. Christianity is an ever evolving faith. Miracles do not enter the Christian story until the 8th decade; the Virgin Birth and understanding the Resurrection as the physical resuscitation of a deceased body enters Christianity in the 9th decade, the story of the Ascension of Jesus is a 10th decade addition.

The creedal development that created the doctrine of the Incarnation and the Trinity are 4th century additions. The Protestant Reformation brought other profound changes to Christianity in the 16th century. Christianity is a not a faith tradition that was "once delivered to the saints."

Pastors have a responsibility to pursue truth, not to enforce institutional propaganda. The pastor needs to help believers grow, not to affirm them in their Sunday school security systems.

Christianity at its best is a journey into the mystery of God; at its worst it burns people at the stake who do not affirm the literal boxes of yesterday.

In the 4th Gospel the Johanne Jesus is recorded as saying that the "Holy Spirit will lead us into all truth." That statement assumes, I believe, that none of us now possesses the whole truth. The question posed here assumes that we do or that some version of religion is "The Truth." It is not.

BY JOHN SHELBY SPONG | MARCH 17, 2010; 12:49 PM ET

Non-believing clergy: Now what shall we do? - Daniel C. Dennett

DANIEL C. DENNETT is University Professor and Austin B. Fletcher Professor of Philosophy and Co-Director of the Center for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University.

I get the impression that most if not all of the early commentators haven't read our report. They are unanimous in favor of honesty (and apple pie), and are happy to condemn hypocrisy in the pulpit, but few of them show any sign of appreciating what terrible predicaments our good pastors are in. Resign, leave the church, find a congregation more in harmony with your creed, they urge--but apparently without having read the profiles of those they are advising. Let's suppose that Martin Marty and Marcus Borg and John Shelby Spong are always utterly forthright when they hold forth in churches, "speaking truth to power," challenging the conservative "common Christianity" that they have moved beyond, but how often--if ever--have they had to face a congregation that could ruin their careers if pushed too hard?

Besides, they and others temper their calls for courage. Brad Hirschfield says that "Responsible religious leaders must find a balance between helping their congregants to wrestle with tough questions and offering them secure answers." In other professions that is known as spin doctoring. Borg encourages the clergy "to be discerning": an elderly congregation might be better served with a less forthright challenge to the views that have comforted them, but in "intergenerational churches with a potential future" he calls for a more aggressive approach. From the pulpit? No, that would upset the old folks; in "adult theological re-education." Yes, we discussed that approach in our report, and our pastors engage in it. But how should they deal with their duties in the pulpit? Borg gives no advice about that. Similarly, Janet Edwards sees the conflict and calls for "afflicting the comfortable" but gives us no examples of how she does this afflicting from the pulpit while sparing those who are afflicted.

Martin Marty sees that "Anything done to help bad-faith clerics move along and out would be good for congregations and causes of truth and integrity." Obviously, but how does he suggest we do this? Richard Dawkins has proposed the creation of a fund to provide retraining and support for those who find their consciences can no longer permit them to fulfill the duties of a minister. I hope that Marty would make a handsome contribution to that fund and encourage all his colleagues to do likewise. And how will he draw the line between "bad-faith clerics" who should be firmly removed from their positions and those good-faith clerics who are just in the temporary doldrums of doubt? Mother Theresa soldiered on, and that is the standard private advice given by mentors to ministers who find themselves in this predicament. Inevitably they are advised to keep saying the liturgy, keep hanging in there, until faith returns. And if it doesn't? Well, then, you're a "bad-faith cleric" and should be ashamed of yourself for your impostures. You have, says David Wolpe, "a simple obligation to explain that to the congregation." Simple indeed, but just when does the obligation arise, and how does it balance your obligations to your spouse and children?

Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite tempers "don't fake faith" with "Don't use your congregation as your spiritual advisers." How do you follow both policies? You hang in there, keeping your specific doubts and convictions to yourself apparently. If and when "you as a pastor . . . no longer subscribe to most of the fundamental teachings of your faith tradition, you need to work through those struggles individually with a spiritual advisor. It may be that you need to find a different spiritual home where you can affirm the majority of the church teachings." Most of the fundamental teachings? It is precisely this tolerance that creates the slippery slide to perdition that has caught our victims. If it weren't for this "wobble room" (as one of our informants calls it) few would make it through seminary. And while this spiritual advising is going on discreetly backstage, what do you say from the pulpit? You say what our brave pastors, and no doubt many other pastors, say. You find disingenuous circumlocutions that get you through Sunday morning without telling any outright lies.

It is a nice irony that of the first dozen commentators only Max Carter, the Quaker (whose tradition has no ordained "hireling" clergy) and Rebecca Goldstein, a Jewish atheist, see the torment of these clergy for what it is. Denial is an amazingly powerful force.

We hope that volunteers for our future (confidential) studies will not be put off by the reactions this pilot study has provoked. BY DANIEL C. DENNETT | MARCH 17, 2010; 1:21 PM ET

Good pastors are not parrots – Ramdas Lamb EX-HINDU MONK, PROFESSOR Hindu monk in India from 1969-1978. Professor, University of Hawai'i, world religions and contemporary American religion

People become members of religious denominations for a variety of reasons. Often, they are simply following their parents or family members, a spouse, or the dominant religious form in their community. None of these reasons necessitate a deep thinking about the beliefs of the

particular denomination, but only a passive acceptance of them. This is the way in which most American and European Christians are connected with their respective religious denominations. For the most part, they know little about many of the doctrinal beliefs or pay little attention to them as they impact their lives. A relatively common term for such individuals is "C and E" Christians. The letters refer to Christmas and Easter, the only time many of them think much about their religious affiliation or attend a religious service.

For those who become members of the clergy, on the other hand, one would hope that they have thought deeply about and hold dearly to the defining beliefs of their denomination or their religion, at least initially. However, because clergy are expected to devote their lives to studying these beliefs, the scenario may well arise that some clergy will grow in their understanding of the Divine and of life, and their beliefs may change as a consequence of their study and experience. They may then find that their views and values no longer parallel the rhetoric of their denomination. This can be a natural result of a deep and open-minded study, and such growth should be encouraged. After all, what is the role of the clergy? Is it not to devote their lives to knowing God and truth more intimately each day than those to whom they preach and minister? If the clergy are only hired to memorize and spout doctrine without any allowance for growth and change in their understanding of the Divine, then they are expected to be little more than talking mannequins. Moreover, if they are not allowed to grow in the realization, they will either stagnate or die spiritually. For those who do grow and find a separation between their evolving beliefs and the doctrine of their denomination, what are they to do?

The answer depends a great deal on the denomination or religion to which they belong. According to the 2001 edition of the [World Christian Encyclopedia](#), there are more than 33,000 denominations of Christianity worldwide. Because many of these denominations claim to have the ONLY truth or true form of Christianity, clergy from these groups are more likely to face a conflict if any of their views change than clergy from denominations or religions that accept and allow for a broader spectrum of beliefs. As a consequence, when clergy from denominations that narrowly define truth no longer believe the doctrines, they should drop out and not "dissemble from the pulpit." Hopefully, they would have enough self respect as well as respect for their parishioners to leave that position than to remain and be hypocrites. I have known several Christian clergy members who found themselves in this situation. A few quit, while at least one chose to remain for financial reasons. Unfortunately but predictably, he is not a person at peace with himself.

Many of the various religious traditions in the world, small and large, are open to their clergy growing, expanding, and realizing a broad approach to God and to Truth. Some are Christian denominations, many have other labels. Unlike fundamentalists, I don't believe the label is all that important. My own religious teachers encouraged me to trust my inner voice and my inner experience and to question any external teaching that does not "sit well" in a composed and quiet heart. Many traditions, and many Christians, say that God lives within. If that is the case, then learning to purify oneself to be able to listen to the Divine within is a better path to finding truth than memorizing answers in some text, no matter how great its promoters claim it to be. A religious teacher, or any other kind of teacher, should not simply be a parrot. Those for whom I have the greatest respect are individuals who teach what they have experienced and realized, not what they have read and memorized. BY RAMDAS LAMB | MARCH 18, 2010; 5:13 AM ET

Preachers who don't believe: The scandal of apostate pastors – R. Albert Mohler Jr PRESIDENT, THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Mohler became seminary president after serving as editor of The Christian Index, the oldest of the state papers serving the Southern Baptist Convention.

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 demythologized, 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.

Jack 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 Tennett preached his famous sermon, "On the Danger of an Unconverted Ministry." In that sermon, Tennett 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? BY R. ALBERT MOHLER JR.

| MARCH 18, 2010; 9:09 AM ET

God, yes; organized religion, no - Susan K Smith

SENIOR PASTOR, ADVENT UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST IN COLUMBUS, OHIO Smith, a Yale Divinity School graduate, is author of "Crazy Faith: Ordinary People; Extraordinary Lives", a winner of the 2009 National Best Books Award.

Mahatma Gandhi was said to be studying Christianity and was impressed with Jesus. He was studying law in South Africa, and was on his way toward becoming a Christian. He decided to go to a Christian church to worship.

A white elder met him at the door and asked him what he was doing; Gandhi said he wanted to enter the church to worship. The elder told him he'd do no such thing: "There is no place for you here, Kaffir. Go away or I will throw you down the stairs."

Gandhi left, and later said, when asked about Christianity, "I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians." He admired Jesus but said that followers of Jesus were not like their Christ at all.

I say all of that to say that I believe in God, but I believe less and less in organized religion. Christianity is a disappointment, not because of God and not because of Jesus, but because of people.

As an African American, I believe with every fiber of my being in God. It has been God, surely, who sustained black people through the horrors of what we have been through in this country. It has been God to whom we have turned for supernatural strength to hold on and push on, despite great barriers put before us.

But Christianity, or more specifically, Christians, have been a disappointment. Following Jesus should mean people know what Jesus taught and seek to do it. That has not been the case. Christians, too many of them, are Christian in name only.

Christians have been taught by organized religion, and organized religion and its dogma and doctrine are as far away from the ideal and idea of God that I hold onto as the east is from west.

Organized religion has pushed my idea and ideal of God to the side and replaced it with human desires and interests. Organized religion has denigrated my idea and ideal of God.

But therein lies a big problem: there is no ONE theology. Niebuhr says that theology is anthropology; he says that theology is "interested language," meaning the language about God is shaped by the interests of the people who are teaching God.

So, too often, God has been taught as an arm of people who oppress others and use God as justification. This God has been at the helm of oppression, sanctifying racism, sexism, heterosexism, militarism, and exclusion of others.

My God is not an exclusionist. My God is love. My God demands that we love and accept other people. To me it is not rocket science.

I am not surprised that there may be a lot of preachers/pastors who are non-believers, and the reason I am not surprised is because the state of the world bespeaks the phenomenon. We either have non-believers or fundamentalists. Non-believers leave God out of the picture; fundamentalists push a mean-spirited, racist, controlling God down our throats.

When I was at seminary I was surprised when, on my first Sunday there, instead of heading out to church, many of my classmates were heading to the tennis courts.

I could not understand it. Why come to seminary if you're not going to go to church?

I now believe that even as they began to study, they did not believe in God. Seminary was just a step toward getting to where they really wanted to be.

On the other hand, "believers" came to seminary with zeal and excitement, but sadly, many of them have used God to their purposes, to manipulate and control people to do their bidding. God is no more in their pulpits than in the pulpits of the non-believers.

I struggle with God, though I believe in God. God does not make sense to me, and really, can make no sense to anyone, Tillich and other theologians notwithstanding. We have an anthropomorphic way of relating to God, and an anthropomorphic way of understanding God, myself included.

So, when God does not do our bidding, which is often, we are at a loss. We wrestle with theodicy; we come up wanting.

Many of us in the pulpit wrestle with this God whom we do not understand, and try to figure out what we do not understand to our flocks.

And yet, at the end of the day, I still believe that people need God. I teach God as I can; how a person receives it (or not) is not up to me. My prayer is that whatever I teach deepens their belief in God, so that when the earth drops from under their feet, as the earth is wont to do from time to time, they will have something more than their fear, anger or confusion to latch onto.

I pray that whatever I teach about this mysterious God will sustain them, and that they will not fall into despair.

That's all I can do, and frankly, sometimes it feels like it is not even close to being enough.

But I believe in God. I accept the stories in the Bible as stories, but with inherent lessons that are valuable. I accept that I will not ever understand God. I believe in this God. I believe in Jesus, and I believe that both God and Jesus would hate how organized religion devalues them.

Like Gandhi, I love Jesus. It is the followers of Jesus, we Christians, with whom I struggle. We Christians who build the doctrinal and dogmatic walls of organized religion. BY SUSAN K. SMITH | MARCH 18, 2010; 9:43 AM ET

Doubt, truth and wonder in ministry – John Mark Reynolds

DIRECTOR OF THE TORREY HONORS INSTITUTE, BIOLA UNIVERSITY Professor of philosophy for Biola, Reynolds blogs regularly at Scriptoriumdaily.com along with other faculty from the Torrey Honors Institute, a great books program

Every man wonders, and a man who is sure, beyond any doubts, has no faith. Without faith it is impossible to please God and a man displeasing to God has no business speaking for Him. The man without wonder is unfit for philosophy let alone ministry.

It is the great mistake of the age to think that the believers are the ones invested with certainty. We are people of faith and living by faith is sure evidence that we don't claim to know, if by knowing one means being beyond doubt.

A good person looks at the world and wishes it were not the way it is. There is much good to see, but too much that falls short of easily imaginable glory. Most of us realize that is and ought are two different things and we long to see what ought to be.

Of course, it is possible that this longing is a delusion and that the world is not a fit place for human dreams. Nature may have produced, by perversity, beings that wish they did not live by the mere laws of nature. Humanity may be alone in a great empty cosmos and left in sorrow. Perhaps this is true, or perhaps not. Perhaps there is room for hope, and out of examination of reality motivated by hope can come enough evidence to make hope reasonable.

Religious people call reasonable hope, based on evidence and experience, faith. When we are very sure of something, because of accumulated evidence and experience, religious people are apt to go ahead and say they know, but this sense of knowing does not preclude continued doubts.

It demands them.

Many different religious answers have tried to answer the demands of hope, but only Christianity fully succeeds in doing so. Christianity refuses to give up on reason and live as if all hope is lost. A sort of cocky confidence that does not belong to a religion of faith can be found in both some atheists as well as those who try to live as if wishes were reality.

We know that this side of death all knowledge, such as humans can have it, will begin with wondering and that wondering will never end. We believe and ask God to help our unbelief. Recently a study showed that many ministers don't believe what they preach. This is disturbing for many reasons, but the worst is that most of the people cited in the study have stopped wondering. They claim to know what they preach is wrong, but go on preaching it.

The odious stink of their hypocrisy is only exceeded by the stench of a mind gone rotten. To take money for teaching what you believe is infinitely worse than not believing it. It is even worse to give up on faith and live in the dreadful certainty, the mental death, that is at the heart of so much that is wrong with the world.

History shows that the man to be feared is the one certain of atheism, as in North Korea, or certain of some form of theism, as in Iran. The man of faith is too humble to kill for his beliefs, because he has found them too wonderful to stain with blood.

A man should boldly proclaim what he knows, because only then can his community and experience fully reveal any errors he has made. The Christian pastor risks his mostly deeply held beliefs to public scrutiny every time he preaches a sermon. To lie about what one holds to be true is to remove oneself from any check.

It is the habit of the budding tyrant to dissemble and placate his audience to get from them what he wishes.

What is the alternative?

Honesty and a continued journey of wonder is demanded of all men, but especially those in ministry. Any person who writes or speaks about their beliefs and what they think is true should acknowledge the ever-present gap between faith and certainty.

We know partly, but long to see fully. This kind of doubt is part of the journey of faith and is compatible with ministry, but when a man is certain that a religious view is wrong, then he must leave that tradition and stop being paid to work for it. He may not be a criminal if he continues, but he is surely a cad.

The problem is not wondering, but when the wondering ceases and the pastor thinks he knows his religion is wrong. At that point, he either ceases to wonder, becoming a humbug, or he must leave in a quest of better answers. He must seek out the community of like-minded people to test out his newfound beliefs. If he cannot commit himself, he will never see.

If he cannot stand leaving the community he is in or living with those of like beliefs, then perhaps that should caution him about the value of his new found faith. And do not be deceived, for modern secularism has many "churches" and varieties of "unbelief." There is much to wonder about once one accepts the assumptions that all is matter and energy in mindless motion, but the man who thinks that not being religious settles all philosophic questions about meaning will stagnate intellectually.

He will not be an admirable secularist still seeking for hope, but a lazy not-theist.

Christians hope for a faithful ministry. We know that our pastors will have doubts and will fall short of ought. We long for mercy and so we try to be merciful in our judgments, but we must not tolerate those who have lost the capacity for wonder in the certainty of their unbelief. We hope for better things and our experience and best reason suggests that they are possible.

BY JOHN MARK REYNOLDS | MARCH 18, 2010; 2:46 PM ET

Ending the pretense of faith - Paula Kirby

A former Christian, Kirby is a writer, consultant and project manager, specializing in freethinking and secular organizations. She lives in Scotland.

Dan Dennett's and Linda LaScola's excellent study is fascinating - and rather moving - for a number of reasons. It is clear that the pressures and obstacles confronting a pastor who has lost his beliefs are even greater than those facing the rest of us when we need to make a major career change: if the very roof over your family's head belongs to the church for which you no longer feel able to work, the practical difficulties of changing direction are very great indeed. What's more, the church is all-consuming: not just a job, not just a home, but a whole life: it is always

hard to make major changes, but how much harder when those changes will entail turning your whole life upside down, losing your closest friends, losing your sense of place in a community. Bad enough for an 'ordinary' churchgoer: how much worse for a pastor. It's terribly hard, and I empathize. I empathize, too, with their desire to persuade themselves that, by staying in their roles, they are somehow contributing to the greater good: it's an all-too human thing to do when leaving is such a daunting prospect.

What's more, I think it genuinely can be argued that these people are doing some good by staying in their posts, if only through the avoidance of harm. Even though, as Dan and Linda's report points out, they are mostly avoiding seriously challenging the most extreme of their parishioners' beliefs, at least they are not reinforcing them. There is no danger of these pastors exhorting their congregations to live their lives in joyful expectation of the Rapture, or to hate atheists or gays; no danger of them abusing young children with monstrous tales of hell, no danger of them opposing the proper teaching of science in their local schools, or exhorting the sick to seek their cure in prayer and repentance rather than the more reliable methods offered by medical science. If all churches simply reinforced people's natural impulses to be good and caring, and offered them a sense of being part of a kindly and supportive community, there would be far less to object to in them.

There remains the question of integrity, and I would not want to downplay that for one moment. Personally I could not remain in a post that required me to dissemble, no matter how difficult it might be to find a way out. But the nature of religious belief is such that we might feel justified in challenging the integrity of *every* pastor, no matter how truly committed to the role: for each and every one of them stands in front of their congregation week after week and preaches his personal beliefs as though they were indisputably true - even though none of those beliefs is founded on anything more reliable than the pastor's subjective wishes, desires, hopes and fears. Some of them 'know' that every word of the Bible is literally true, others 'know' that it needs to be interpreted metaphorically; some 'know' that God is loving, compassionate and eager to forgive, others 'know' that he is angry, jealous and quick to punish wrong-doing; some 'know' that God has more important things to worry about than what we do - and with whom - in bed, others 'know' that sexual impurity offends him more than anything else; some 'know' that Jesus is the only way to God, others 'know' that all religions are different routes to the same destination; some 'know' that hell is a terrible fiery reality and others 'know' it is merely a metaphor. And so it continues. Those whose personalities lead them to embrace the world and other people in a spirit of openness, generosity, warmth and tolerance 'know' that God does the same. Those who lack the confidence for that and consequently see the world as a place that is threatening and evil and bad, 'know' that God sees it that way too. Not one of them has stronger objective grounds for accepting that which they accept than for rejecting that which they reject. Yet week after week they preach their own preferred version as though it were unquestionably true.

Well, we are all entitled to our different personalities and different preferences. It is the elevation of our personal preferences to the status of truth, and the exploitation of the psychological authority of the pulpit to proclaim that 'truth', that lacks integrity. At least the doubting pastors in the Dennett/LaScola report have had the integrity to acknowledge that their former beliefs had no empirical foundation and therefore could not be relied on as a guide to truth.

(At this point I will pre-empt an objection that will inevitably be popping up in many readers' minds. Is it not the case that atheists' disbelief in gods is every bit as much the product of personal preference and lack of empirical evidence as the beliefs of the religious? Well, no, it is not. Atheism is not the holding of a belief for which there is no evidence but the *refusal* to hold a belief for which there is no evidence. This is more than a play on words, for there is no end to the

number of invented entities it would be entirely **impossible to disprove**, yet for which we would require some positive evidence of existence before we would be justified in believing in them.)

The very fact that we can even ask the question whether clergy have a moral obligation not to challenge the sincere faith of their parishioners is hugely revealing about the nature of faith itself. Does a geography teacher have a moral obligation not to challenge the sincere belief of his pupils that Spain is a country in Africa? Does the fact that the pupils have a concept of Spain *at all* matter more than that they have the correct one? Does a medical doctor have a moral obligation not to challenge her patient's sincere belief that cigarettes won't damage his health? Does the fact that the patient acknowledges the existence of health *at all* suffice? Of course not. But for some reason when it comes to religion, there is a general feeling that it doesn't really matter *what* people believe, provided they believe *something*, and that this belief, no matter how ill-founded, must be cherished and protected at all costs. What clearer evidence could there be that religious faith is not particularly interested in truth? And, that being so, does it really matter what the man in the pulpit does or does not believe?

That said, I dislike pretense of any kind, and I would hope it wouldn't be too long before the pastors in this report have the courage to break away altogether and make a completely new life for themselves, a life that doesn't require them to conceal their true thoughts from anyone. But when it comes to honesty and integrity, I would say they have already travelled considerably further than most of their colleagues: these pastors, at least, have begun the important process of being honest with themselves. BY PAULA KIRBY | MARCH 19, 2010; 1:39 PM ET

The faith trap – Richard Dawkins

Former Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford; author of "The God Delusion" and "The Greatest Show on Earth."

At a lunch party I was placed next to a well-known female rabbi, now ennobled. She asked me, somewhat belligerently, whether I said grace when it was my turn to do so at High Table dinner in my Oxford college. "Yes," I replied, "Out of simple good manners and respect for the medieval traditions of my college." She attacked me for hypocrisy, and was not amused when I quoted the great philosopher A J (Freddy) Ayer, who also was quite happy to recite the grace at the same college when he chanced to be Senior Fellow: "I will not utter falsehoods", said Freddy genially, "But I have no objection to making meaningless statements."

Humor was lost on this rabbi, so I tried to see if a serious explanation would go over any better. "To you, Rabbi, imprecations to God are meaningful, and therefore cannot sincerely come from an atheist. To me, 'Benedictus benedicat' is as empty and meaningless as 'Lord love a duck' or 'Stone the crows.' Just as I don't seriously expect anybody to respond to my words by hurling rocks at innocent corvids, so it is a matter of blissful indifference to me whether I invoke the mealtime blessings of a non-existent deity or not. Non-existent is the operative phrase. In the convivial atmosphere of a college dinner, I cheerfully take the road of good manners and refrain from calling ostentatious attention to my unbelief - an unbelief, by the way, which is shared by most of my colleagues, and they too are quite happy to fall in with tradition." Once again, the rabbi didn't get it.

On the face of it, the disillusioned clergymen who form the subject of Dan Dennett's and Linda La Scola's study are less immune to the charge of hypocrisy. They are professionals, who accept a salary for preaching Christianity to a trusting flock. And what is true of atheist clergymen is scarcely less true of those who shelter behind Karen Armstrong-type apophatuousness, or 'ground of all being' obscurantism. That won't wash, for the simple reason that it wouldn't wash with the parishioners. To the trusting congregation, Karen Armstrong would be nothing more than a dishonest atheist, and who could disagree? You can just imagine the shocked bewilderment that would greet a 'ground of all being' theologian, if he tried that on with

churchgoers who actually believe that Jesus was born of a virgin, walked on water, and died for their sins.

These dissembling pastors might therefore be accused of betraying a trust when they continue, Sunday after Sunday, to get up in the pulpit and bemuse churchgoers who take seriously the words that the clergyman himself does not - and yet continues to speak. Are they not grievously culpable for deceiving their congregation and accepting a salary for doing so?

No, their personal predicament warrants more sympathy than that. They know no other way of making a living. They stand to lose friends, family, and their respected place in the community, as well as salary and pension. All the more praise to Dan Barker, who had the courage to throw over the whole nonsensical enterprise and jointly found the admirable Freedom from Religion Foundation. But even Dan preached on for a year before taking the plunge.

As Dennett and La Scola mention, one of the things I would consider doing, if my charitable foundation managed to raise enough money, would be to endow retraining scholarships for clergymen who have lost their faith. Perhaps they could retrain as counselors, teachers, policemen - or even join the hallowed profession of carpenter?

The singular predicament of these men (and women) opens yet another window on the uniquely ridiculous nature of religious belief. What other career, apart from that of clergyman, can be so catastrophically ruined by a change of opinion, brought about by reading, say, or conversation? Does a doctor lose faith in medicine and have to resign his practice? Does a farmer lose faith in agriculture and have to give up, not just his farm but his wife and the goodwill of his entire community? In all areas except religion, we believe what we believe as a result of evidence. If new evidence comes in, we may change our beliefs. When decisive evidence for the Big Bang theory of the universe came to hand, astronomers who had previously espoused the Steady State Theory changed their minds: reluctantly in some cases, graciously in others. But the change didn't tear their lives or their marriages apart, did not estrange them from their parents or their children. Only religion has the malign power to do that. Only religion is capable of making a mere change of mind a livelihood-threatening catastrophe, whose very contemplation demands grave courage. Yet another respect in which religion poisons everything.

By RICHARD DAWKINS | March 20, 2010; 6:51 AM ET

If a pastor loses faith? Resign first – Julia Neuberger

Neuberger is a trustee of the British Council, Jewish Care, and the Booker Prize Foundation, as well as founding trustee of the Walter and Liesel Schwab Charitable Trust.

If pastors lose their faith, or no longer agree with the tenets of the faith that their congregants hold (or most of them anyway), I think they have to act in accordance with their conscience and resign. Of course they can preach and argue and debate.

But, in the end, if a pastor loses his/her faith, or a rabbi or imam for that matter (though it's a bit different), they must offer to resign and perhaps should do so, and then work out how they wish to take their changed faith, or lack of faith, or agnosticism, forward personally. But to believe one thing personally and to proclaim another publicly seems to me to be very wrong. By JULIA

NEUBERGER | March 22, 2010; 11:19 AM ET

For Judaism, doubt is not hypocrisy – Steven Wernick

The rabbi is Executive Vice President and CEO of United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism.

In the Bible, Job doubts God's justice and refuses to believe that the sorrows that have descended upon him in any way related to his deeds. God does not dispel Job's doubt but asks Job to accept

the gift of life in a wondrous world where there are no complete explanations for either the good or the bad we experience. We do not have all answers, so all of us are in some state of doubt. Faith, as Soren Kierkegaard taught, is a leap. Not all of us can make that leap. But our humanity is not diminished according to which side of the chasm we find ourselves, although some of us will have bridged the gaping hole and others will not have jumped it. Doubt urges us to help our fellows as if there is no God to help them, and so both believer and doubter can rise to be angels ministering to a suffering humanity.

Too much is made of the divide between believers, doubters, and non-believers. For Jews, doubt is not hypocrisy. Instead, it is a necessary ingredient of faith. There are many examples from Jewish texts that indicate as much. Jacob, while nervously anticipating his reunion with his brother Esau, wrestles with a mysterious being through the night. As daybreak approaches he captures the being and insists on a blessing before releasing it. The blessing is a new name, Yisrael (Israel), meaning "he who wrestles with God." To be a member of the Jewish people is to be b'nai Yisrael, a child of Israel, a part of the ongoing wrestling match between humanity and God.

Uncertainty and doubt have been present in Judaism since the beginning. And why would we ever think that would not be so? Consider for a moment all the meaningful relationships in our lives: our relationship with our parents, our children, our siblings, our friends, our spouse, our co-workers. Are any of these relationships free of uncertainty and doubt? How often are they tested? It is because we value them so that we constantly recommit ourselves to them in spite of the occasional uncertainty and doubt. Why would we think that our relationship with the Master of the Universe, with God, would be any less challenging? In fact it's the opposite. Precisely because it matters so much, it is filled with uncertainty and doubt. Those people who engage in the struggle, those who acknowledge and face their doubts, are the ones who have true religion and faith.

BY STEVEN WERNICK | March 23, 2010; 5:01 PM ET