

A COMMENTARY:

ATHEIST PASTORS, THANK GOD

For over twenty years in their professional careers, Bill and Tom were Southern Baptist pastors in the American Bible Belt. They were involved in the business of peddling a particular brand of religion about the Bible, sin and salvation, and what one must do and not do. More than anything else, they told everyone else to whom they've been a pastor what they must believe about it all. The problem is, they were also self-confessed closet atheists, who didn't believe any of it anymore.

With their voices garbled and faces shadowed, so as not to reveal their true identities and jeopardize their jobs, these two clerics appeared on ABC World News one night.

"I spent the majority of my life believing and pursuing this religious faith, Christianity," one said. "And to get to this point in my life, I just don't feel like I believe it anymore. The more I read the Bible, the more questions I have."

To illustrate his point, his colleague related as more than a little troubling what he called "inconsistencies" and the "improbabilities" of such stories as Noah's Ark, the apocalyptic coming of the last days, and the proper place of women in the scriptural world. "Reading the Bible," he said, "is what led me not to believe in God."

Understandably, he also admitted it was "a little difficult" to continue his ministry. "I just look at it as a job and do what I'm supposed to do. I've done it for years."

"And no one knows?" the reporter asked. "Not even your wife?" Apparently not, the pastor confessed, out of fear it could jeopardize not only his ability to make a living and his standing in his community, but his marriage as well.

"Oh gawd ..." I initially groaned out loud at the end of the broadcast. Another typical example of secular sound-bite media reporting; reflecting the superficial stereotyping of professional religious types as pathetic, pathological crackpots and buffoons, enmeshed in a web of hypocrisy and self-deception that has finally caught up with them.

It's usually about some salacious scandal, exposing the human foibles of some revered cleric caught falling short of practicing what they preach. So many of these stories look so much alike after awhile. This time there was a twist. Millions of viewers knew about the secret life of a couple of pastors. Presumably, only their congregations were still left in the dark.

But then I thought of Bill and Tom's particular predicament, and I thought to myself, "Thank God." As in, they should thank God. There were so many things I'd like to have said to those two tormented souls, such as:

Your "inconsistent" god is too small, thank God.

Or, those mythical stories that trouble you and comprise so much of the Biblical narrative have nothing to do with their believability, let alone probability; but rather go deeper, and look for truths they might nonetheless convey.

And finally instead, thank a God you don't believe in, or have never considered, for the gift of your unbelief. As "inconsistent" and "incompatible" as that might sound, it could be your own peculiar form of salvation.

If only they might consider the very real possibility that there's something more authentic and meaningful to be discovered in the ensuing chaos and confusion and disillusionment of their unwelcome wilderness; something *more* than the world they've left behind.

Lord knows, as difficult as it must be to try to sell something you don't believe in yourself, it must also be rather frightening to relinquish that illusion of certainty that comes with the unexamined life.

Literalists can't do it. It's too terrifying for them. Taken to the extreme they become extremists. Sometimes we call them terrorists. Whichever perverted form of religion they practice doesn't matter. But fortunately, by the time someone like Bill or Tom begin to question what no longer works for them, it's too late. The train has already left the station.

But that's not the end of the story. Because unfortunately somewhere down the tracks for these two, something else got derailed.

Somewhere between first believing what is too unbelievable to begin with, then eventually coming to believe in a life of *un-belief* as the only other option available to them, Bill, Tom and a fair number of other folks I've met over the years have missed out on something.

I've found it is possible to question and doubt just about everything one is *supposed* to believe, and yet still have faith. To do so however, one must first be willing to welcome the certainty of unknowing, and relinquish the illusion of certainty. Second, one must consider there's a difference between one's willingness to believe, and one's grateful acceptance of a gift called faith.

For years I was a pastor to a congregation comprised of a lot of sincere and well-meaning folks who'd come from a variety of different religious backgrounds and experiences. Many still carried with them the vestiges of a set of religious beliefs of one sort or another, often from their childhood, which had lingered unexamined for years.

Sometimes they brought with them little more than a mild curiosity, along with an open willingness to look and see what our particular faith community might have to offer. Sometimes there was a hunger and a hankering for something more than they had previously found in their life.

One of the first things I'd do is invite them to simply join me in a *journey* in faith; leaving behind all those cumulative assumptions about what everyone thought everyone else believed; or, at the very least, was *supposed* to believe.

And I'd invite them to look again, look beyond, look deeper into all those puzzling questions with a *suspension of belief*; in order to make room for an encounter of sorts, where their doubts and questions might be met by something more than they could possibly conjure up for themselves.

More often than not it was an easy sell, since the most obvious alternative was a rather too-easy trek down a short path that led nowhere, ending up with nothing. Might as well have just stayed put. Because when you think about it, there really isn't all that much difference between trying to believe in things that aren't all that believable, and believing in nothing at all.

So, Bill and Tom are a couple of pastors, who say they no longer believe what they once did. Secretly, they consider themselves to be non-believers, because they can't honestly believe in all the unbelievable things they used to profess and preach.

But instead of a feeling of emancipation, they feel trapped. To all outward appearances, they've apparently been quite successful in their concealment and deception. With their god-given talents, perhaps they should consider instead a more open acting career.

Meanwhile, I suspect they're absolutely right about one thing. Their congregations would not be pleased to find out they don't believe in what they're selling. But they shouldn't be surprised. Hypocrisy in either word or deed has been a longstanding problem around the temple. [The word hypocrisy comes from the Greek *ὑπόκρισις* (*hypokrisis*), which means "play-acting", or worse, "coward."]

The prophetic tradition of the Jewish scriptures, as well as the harsh and repeated critiques of the rebel rabbi from Galilee who's portrayed in the canonical gospels, can attest to that. It's almost a professional hazard. Ecclesiastical authorities seem to have a tough time keeping what they say, and what they do, aligned. The sharp pointed finger exposing the hypocrisy of the religious hierarchy was Jesus' most common response to his irritated opponents. But that's their problem.

More worrisome to me is the personal fate of a couple of guys named Bill and Tom, who are living in self-imposed exile, with a lie they call their life; for fear of being banished from a community to which they really no longer belong; a bunch who still believe in a very different kind of deity.

Looking at it that way, I certainly couldn't believe in a god who could possibly want that kind of an existence for anyone either.

Courage boys, and a little faith.

© 2010 by John William Bennison, Rel.D.

All rights reserved.

This article should only be used or reproduced with proper credit.

To read more commentaries by John Bennison from the perspective of progressive Christianity and spirituality go to the Words & Ways Archives: <<http://www.wordsnways.com>>