

Chapter 23. How deep is your love?

How deep is your love? The Bee Gees

*One would like to think that . . . devout Christians would also behave in a manner that is in accord with Christian ethics. But pastorally and existentially, I know that that is not the case--and never has been the case.*¹ Reverend Richard John Neuhaus

I want religionists to become atheists. Because of this, I am interested in how deeply they believe in their religion and therefore how open they may be to a different point of view. To a religious outsider such as me, it is difficult to imagine that even one person believes in religion. However, I cannot ignore conduct that demonstrates belief, such as flying airliners into buildings. But I remain convinced that a large number of people who say they believe, do not. My guess is that more than 50% of them have a “soft” belief in religion. They go through the motions of demonstrating belief, but in their hearts they know it is not so. If you were their best friend and they confided in you, they would admit that they do not believe in god. One way of examining the depth of belief is to look at what religionists do, another is to look at what they say.

What they do.

The way many religionists conduct themselves shows soft belief. One example is birth control. The Catholic Church condemns birth control and makes its users subject to eternal damnation in hell.² However, a study reveals that 97% of sexually active Catholic women have used church-prohibited birth control.³ Either they do not believe it condemns them to hell or they do not believe their god evaluates their every move. But whatever the reason, it means they do not believe a major tenet of their faith. Their conduct with regard to birth control shows that their belief is not very deep.

Another example is sex before marriage. Although most religions condemn premarital sex, one study estimates that 95% of Americans have sex before marriage and this has been going on for quite some time. For women born in the 1940's, nine out of ten reported having sex before marriage.⁴ In a nation where about 80% of the people claim to be religious and 95% engage in premarital sex, the numbers show that conduct and belief are inconsistent.

Another angle, true believers should be happy to die. In their belief system, death leads to an eternal paradise. That is one of the most effective sales gimmicks religion offers. Yet, very few religious people welcome death.⁵ Surprisingly, atheists, who accept that they will cease to be when they die, are more comfortable with death than religionists.⁶ The fact that most religionists fear death, rather than celebrate it, shows a lack of belief in one of the most important aspects of their faith. Similarly, when religionists are ill, most call for a doctor before they call a religious practitioner. It seems they find religion fine for ceremonies and holidays, but when their health is at stake, the majority of them prefer science.

Looking at morality and criminality, many religionists engage in conduct that, if they believed in their religious doctrine, would condemn them to hell. Clergy who sexually abuse children are an

example. Ted Haggard's story ([Chapter 17](#)) indicates he was much more concerned about being caught by his spouse and parishioners than answering to the god he claims to serve. The willingness of religionists to engage in patterns of illegal conduct shows both that they do not think their god is watching them and that they do not expect their god to punish them.

An interesting anecdote about what religionists do is one atheist's challenge to proselytizers who show up at his door. A sign on his front door says, "If your purpose is religious, to tell us about your God's love for us or to convince us that we need Jesus to be our personal savior, please don't knock. Instead, bow your head and pray as sincerely and intently as possible for this door to disappear. When it does, feel free to come on in . . . we will definitely want to hear what you have to say!" He relates his experience, "But no one tries. If they really believed, at least they would give it a try."⁷ Although many religionists are dramatic about their faith in public, in private they act as if they have no belief at all.

What they say.

According to a Gallup survey, 56% of church attendees say they are "spiritually committed," but only 15% answer individual questions the surveyors believed showed commitment.⁸ A Pew survey of church attendance similarly shows that only about 56% of Americans find their religion "very important" and only about 54% attend church once a month or more. About 49% say they receive answers to their prayers yearly or more frequently (and a full 43% seldom or never receive answers to their prayers).⁹ Only 32% of the U.S. population thinks the Bible should have more influence on U.S. laws than the will of the people.¹⁰ Although about 40% of Americans report they attend church weekly, studies show they overstate their church attendance and only about 20% actually attend weekly (providing another interesting comparison of what they say and what they do).¹¹

In response to an open-ended question of what was the most important reason they attended church or synagogue in a Gallup survey, only about 28% said they did so because of a belief in god or religion, 23% said they attended for spiritual growth and guidance and 20% because it grounded or inspired them. Thirteen percent responded that they attended church for the opportunity for fellowship or to be part of a community, 12% responded they were brought up that way or that it was a family value or tradition, and finally, 15% responded with the enigmatic, "It's my faith."¹² These self-reported numbers are a bit like the pattern of darts on a dart board. No single dart is definitive, but they demonstrate a pattern. Here the pattern shows that many religionists have a soft belief.

An expert, Robert Wuthnow, Director of the Center for the Study of Religion at Princeton University, agrees. He estimates that only 25% of the U.S. population is devoutly religious, 25% is secular, and 50% is mildly interested.¹³ This expert opinion supports in general numbers my guess that more than 50% of religionists have a soft belief. Although people tell pollsters they are religious, both examination of their conduct and deeper questioning of their replies shows otherwise.

Why do religionists run away?

Since starting work on this book, I have discussed religion with a wide variety of friends, acquaintances and strangers. One of the most surprising results has been the number of religionists

who refuse to discuss the subject and run away from the conversation. If the religionists possess a life-saving secret, especially considering that their religion encourages them to share the good word, they should jump at the opportunity to share their knowledge. To me, this would be a demonstration of the strength of their belief. But the majority of them run away. I think the people who refuse to discuss the issue know in their hearts that they do not believe. They are afraid an atheist will illuminate their non-belief. It is the people with strong belief who listen politely to the atheist and then present their life-saving knowledge. I have met very few of these.

Religion, for some, is as considered as wearing socks.

Recently, I went to lunch with a friend I have known for decades. I asked her if a pollster telephoned and inquired about her religion, how would she reply? “Christian,” she said. I was shocked because I have never known her to attend church, pray, or mention religion in any form. After talking about some of the issues in this book, and with no prompting or encouragement from me, she said, “I guess I would more classify myself as a ‘none.’” Although a pollster would have categorized her as a Christian, her response was not deeply considered.

Most atheists have thought long and hard about religion. For many of us, atheism is a cause, or at least a sport. But the majority of people have spent little time on the issue. Many spend as little time thinking about religion as I think about wearing socks. Socks are a part of my daily routine. I lay them out when I dress, I change them when they are dirty, but I spend very little time analyzing why I wear them and what they mean to me. Since my mother put socks on my feet as a child, I have worn them. It is likely I will continue to wear them for the rest of my life. But, I do not think much about socks.

Similarly, most people were provided a religion by their parents. They participate in religious ceremonies throughout their lives, but they rarely think about why or what they could do alternatively. They think about religion about as much as I think about wearing socks. In the example of my lunch companion, a pollster would have categorized her as a Christian, but her response reflected a belief soft enough to be changed by a passing conversation. Religion is almost never questioned or discussed, not by the media, not by “polite” company and not by the religionists themselves. This deference to religion helps to perpetuate it. But breaking the silence and discussing religion provides atheists with fertile ground for sowing the seeds of freethought.

Religion without belief.

There are countless reasons people participate in religion even if they do not believe it. For some it is a tradition, their family has always attended church, they have always attended church, and they indoctrinate their children into the church. It is the way things have always been done and will continue to be done. The lack of belief is inconsequential, tradition is preserved.

Others have no strong objection to religion and they go to church to appease a spouse, parent or other loved one. An hour or so a week of philosophical reflection does no harm, they think, and sometimes the music is nice, so they call themselves religionists even though they lack belief. They wear the religionist label just to get along.

Still others participate in religion for business reasons. Many Realtors, insurance salespeople and business owners make a good living serving members of their religious group. Religion provides a ready-made community to which they can hawk their goods and services. Whether they never had a belief to start with or if that belief has faded, the business reason for feigning belief continues.

In some rural communities, religious houses provide a rare opportunity to socialize. As a child, you meet your friends there. As a youth, you may meet your future spouse at a religious function. The house of worship serves as a community center where you meet your friends and neighbors. It marks the births, courting, marriage and death of each member. People who do not believe may continue to attend because they like the opportunity to socialize with their neighbors.

Additionally, some may stick with religion because they fear the social stigma of being labeled an atheist or non-believer. Atheists are one of the most despised minorities in the United States. In a small study by Altemeyer and Hunsberger, a solid majority of the people who left religion to become atheists said their decision “cost them a great deal.”¹⁴ Religionists who become atheists may face broken relationships and social condemnation. Some people call themselves religionists despite their lack of belief because they do not see the alternative as more appealing.

Are non-believing religionists liars?

I have labeled people who frequent temples, churches and mosques but do not believe as having a “soft” belief. But I have also asked myself, are they liars? To attend church and profess a belief you do not have seems dishonest. But on further thought, I could easily conceive of myself professing belief. For example, if a religionist pointed a gun at me and threatened to shoot unless I said, “allah is great,” I would do it. I would not believe it, but I would say it. Similarly, if I were hungry and homeless and the mission kitchen insisted I say a prayer before eating, I would do it. I would not believe it, but I would do it. If I had no job but had a family to support, I could see myself professing faith if it were the only way to get a job. In each case I would be lying, but with a reason. Lots of people lie, and some have good reasons for doing so. Further, considering that religionists with soft belief are an audience that is likely to be open to the atheist message, using strong labels like “liar” will do little to forward our cause.

Philosopher Daniel Dennett coined the term “belief in belief” to describe religionists who do not believe in god but yet profess belief. To my understanding, Dennett says they think it would be good to believe, so therefore they say they believe.¹⁵

To me, it matters little whether you call them liars, soft believers or believers in belief. The functional result is that a large number of religionists are like the crowd in *The Emperor’s New Clothes* before the child’s call, “he’s naked” filtered to them. They know the emperor is naked, but they still profess to admire his nonexistent splendid clothes.

Soft belief provides fertile soil for atheists who want to see religionists become atheists. It is up to us atheists to point out the emperor is naked, to get religionists to consider religion more deeply than they consider putting on socks, and to provide examples that life is better without religion. And it is up to us to change the negative image of atheism that religionists have propagated over the years.

The potential audience for atheist action goes beyond nones, agnostics, deists and the generally spiritual. Many of those sitting in the pews of the houses of worship are amenable to the atheist message. Avoiding answering the question of “how deep is your love” with an analogy using “soft” belief, let me use the analogy of the Platte river.¹⁶ For the majority of American religionists, their belief is a mile wide but only an inch deep. And after considering the specter of true believers using superlegal means to bring about their end times myths, the likelihood that many religionists have a soft belief is encouraging.

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