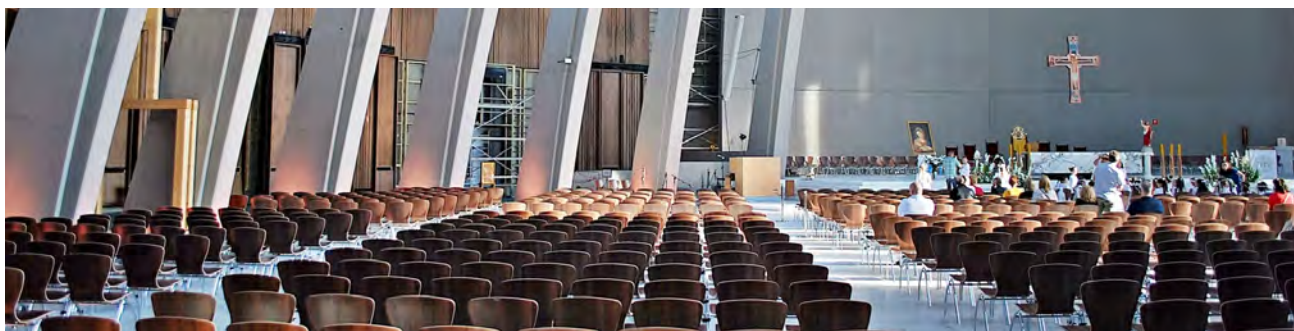




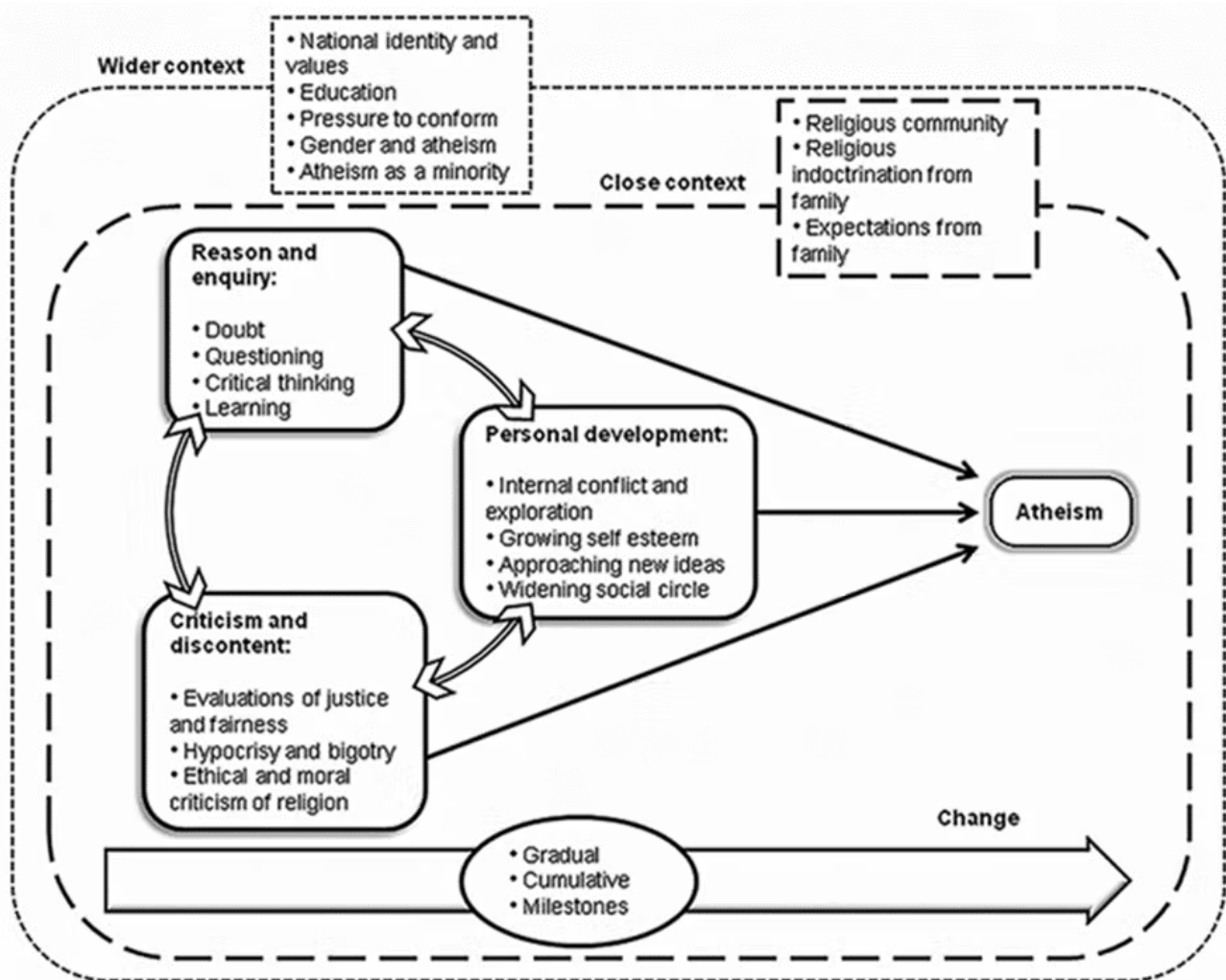
Preaching without Faith (on thecsf.xyz)

Because the brain is a belief machine believing is our default setting and hereditary, writes psychology professor and neuroscientist Michael Shermer. We are inundated with information, all day, every day. It would simply be too exhausting to question everything. So as a rule, we don't, and instead rely on a variety of short-cuts to determine what's true. We also tend to believe what others around us believe. He says many of our most fundamental beliefs, such as about religion and politics, are formed before we've had a chance to question them.

According to physician and neurologist Dick Swaab, it seems that religion must have afforded an evolutionary advantage. The most interesting question about religion, he says, isn't whether God exists but why so many people are religious. Receptiveness to religion is determined by spirituality, which is 50 percent genetically determined. Spirituality is a characteristic that everyone has to a degree, even if they don't belong to a church. Religion is the local shape given to our spiritual feelings. The decision to be religious or not certainly isn't "free." The surroundings in which we grow up cause the parental religion to be imprinted in our brain circuitries during early development, in a similar way to our native language. Chemical messengers like serotonin affect the extent to which we are spiritual: The number of serotonin receptors in the brain corresponds to scores for spirituality. And substances that affect serotonin, like LSD, mescaline (from the peyote cactus), and psilocybin (from magic mushrooms) can generate mystical and spiritual experiences. Spiritual experiences can also be induced with substances that affect the brain's opiate system.

Because of this genetical inclination changing one's belief is improbable, but not impossible. There is no thought system in existence, no matter how deeply entrenched, that cannot ultimately be undone. How opinions, convictions, and beliefs change has been studied widely.

Reason and inquiry (intellectual doubt), criticism and discontent (critical inquiry) and personal growth (in which emotional suffering could but not necessarily does play a part) are three core categories in the model of deconversion Perez and Vallières developed. They picture this process as follows:



Clergy also go through these processes and the phenomenon of clergy who doubt or change their faith and beliefs and those who stop believing keeps increasing. Those who don't believe in God or the creeds they profess from the pulpit has probably been around for centuries, unacknowledged and unimagined, except by those who were living through it, writes Daniel Dennett and Linda la Scola.

Nowadays it is easier to talk about non-belief and today we know a lot about the ongoing struggles some of the clergy without faith have, the peace some have made with their situations, and the major life changes some have experienced. A survey conducted by the Free University of Amsterdam back in 2006 found that one in six (17%) Protestant priests in Holland were either atheist or agnostic and another survey found that as many as 16 percent of the Church of England's licensed ministers by then have doubts about God. We also know that hundreds – if not yet more than several thousand – of clergy in or out of the closet have to date joined movements like The Clergy Project (a non-profit organisation providing support, community and hope for current and former religious professionals without supernatural beliefs) to help them navigate their situation.

Most men and women entered the clergy with the best of motives and intentions. They are not saints, but they are in general good people. Mostly they're more conscientious and honest than the average fellow citizen, all trying hard to help their neighbours and others, and not hurt a soul, trying not to lie or dissemble, but caught up in a web of tradition, and subtly imposed expectations – trapping them in a larger web of diplomatic, tactical, and ethical predicament.

"Losing" faith to clergy means losing much more than their faith during a wrenching process. Their worldview is shaken, and they also lose the beliefs and livelihood they've built on many years' of studying and seeking understanding. They lose what they believed was God. They lose connection, as well as the security and future they previously had imagining – believing – living with, experiencing, and serving God. And more.

Feelings of low self-esteem and unhappiness are usually associated with a time of crisis in religiosity. Depression is usually not seen as a cause nor consequence of unbelief, but rather as a state that once resolved, has a direct impact on the belief system of the individual. In some cases, deconversion is intertwined with a process of facing and overcoming fears, guilt, internal conflicts, depression, or family issues.

Knowing that they no longer hold the beliefs they previously had, or their parishioners think they do, have a gripping impact. Most of them still have a congregation awaiting them each Sabbath or Sunday, trusting them to speak the truth from the pulpit. This obviously cause inner conflicts and ongoing struggles. Many questions arise: What impact does the disconnect between what closeted nonbelieving clergy believe and what they preach have on their personal lives, their congregations, and society? What on earth could these nonbelieving clergy do? Where could they turn? How could they handle their precarious situations?

"When you are a member of the clergy – priest, minister, rabbi, imam – your loss of faith has a major psychological impact," writes Catherine Giordano: "Our profession is often very important to our sense of self, our identity, and our perception of who we are, and this is especially true if we are a member of the clergy." Clergy members who leave their ministry will lose not only their livelihood but also their sense of purpose. They face being alienated from their family (including spouse and children), and often are ostracized by their community. "Membership in a church is often so intertwined with every aspect of their life that leaving their faith may feel like being set adrift in the middle of an ocean." They're appropriately terrified of the financial calamity that will likely befall them should – or, rather, when – they lose their career. Having a family to support, children to send to college, no equity in a home, it is understandable that clergy experience turmoil trying to figure out how to live with the decisions they made many years ago and the realisations they currently experience.

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When they realise their predicament initially many of the Christian clergy deal with their cognitive dissonance by trying to redefine what it means to be Christian and part of the church. They start using little white lies, half-truths, and conveniently forget things, knowing tacitly which topics not to raise and what not with which of their loved ones and friends. They practice a "Christian Non-Realism" which treats God as "only" a symbol or metaphor. They demythologize Scripture and they preach and promote a social gospel by focussing on Jesus' love and compassion, on his moral teachings. They try to influence the church to evolve by joining a dialogue between yesterday's worlds and words and today's knowledge. They try find other wholehearted ways of doing the good they initially set out to do. Some try to reform the existing into "a secular church" where people can gather as a community, support each other, and do charitable work together in their community.



[Image credit: dreamstime]

Clergy who don't believe could attempt to guide church members to get past the traditional definition of a church as a place of worship and redefine it as a place of community. They could then enjoy all the benefits church provides without having to accept or promote supernatural beliefs. Giordano believes joining a secular church is especially important if you have children. Children could here learn moral values and they would get to see that their family is not the only secular family. This already is true of quite a few non-theist Jewish congregations led by rabbis. Judaism has always been both a culture and a religion, so some Jews practice what they call Humanistic Judaism. They celebrate the culture while letting go of the supernatural.

Could this be done? Could preaching be done by clergy without faith? Could secular communities like current faith communities be built without belief in God as uniting factor? These and similar questions are not yet answered. What remains fact, is that God only exists in (ancient) texts and the minds of believers, as – amongst many others – Gericke shows. He convincingly discusses arguments against the existence of God and emphasizes: "... today "God" is nothing more than an ideal idol, created in the image of the latest technological metaphors projected onto the cosmos." We today know the origins and evolution of the idea of God. We know the neurobiology and -psychology of believing and faith. We know much about consciousness and how people change. The question non-believing clergy who preach must answer is: how am I honest in what I'm doing?

When I discontinued my legal studies to become a full time Christian minister I did not believe in (a) hell or Satan. I believed that if there was an afterlife, all people who ever lived – and even those who never lived – would be there. This was a problem for some of my fellow students, but none of the professors or lecturers ever confronted me on these convictions. During the six years full time studies I developed more strains of thought that didn't correspond with the mainstream dogma of my church. On top of prescribed material, I read everything I could and devoured especially German literature. I decided to continue formal studies after completing the two degrees needed to be accepted as Verbi Dei Minister (Servant of God's Word) and I did.

In 2007 I became interested in neurobiology, -psychology and neuro-psychotherapy. I started reading anything on neuroscience(s) I could attain and reached out to professionals in these fields for discussions and mentoring. This led to me understanding how the human brain functions, why we do what we do, why we believe, how we change, why (some) people believe in God(s), etcetera. The information I obtained via academic proficient thinkers like Yuval Noah Harari, Rutger Bregman, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Jordan Peterson, Robert Sapolsky and others excited me. However, it also brought me face-to-face with my looming decision regarding my relationship with Christianity and the church.

Academically local theologians and biblical scholars like Sakkie Spangenberg, Pieter Craffert, and Julian Müller stimulated my thinking. So did Hansie Wolmarans, an exemplary secular preacher. Via the cultural-anthropological based work of Bruce Malina, JJ Pilch, Richard Rohrbaugh and others I became fond of Jesus' social gospel and a social sciences approach to texts. Michael D. Goulder's findings convinced me that biblical literature was created to function within the ancient faith communities. I became convinced that religion was man made and "Everything in heaven was created on earth".

While being a congregational minister the questions I had about our church's dogmas and practices increased. As I discussed some of these with peers I was often rebuked and discouraged to ask these questions, read the books I read and keep the friends I did. Animosity towards me increased and I became an enemy of God, Jesus, Christianity, and the church. Fundamentalists cast suspicion on me as a person and urged people to leave my congregation and not to be associated with me, despite the fact that I could always provide rational arguments for my views.

This didn't discourage me, but affected my health, relationships, and public image. I was never formally accused or tried but was retrenched by the church in September 2014. My opponents were more concerned that I did not believe that Jesus was born of a virgin than where I would earn money to provide for my family. I was unable to find other work or generate a sustainable income with my theology degrees and was consequently declared bankrupt and sequestered end of 2019. We lost our home, vehicle and all our savings. I don't need mentioning the effect this had on my marriage and kids.



[Image credit: dreamstime]

In June 2021 I tested positive for Covid-19, lost consciousness and – unknowingly – was admitted to hospital. I was put in an artificially induced coma, intubated and thankfully my system responded positively. The time I spent in ICU

was traumatic, but at least I survived. One of my best friends, Abel Pienaar, passed away from Covid-19 during this time, as well as 26 other people I knew well, most of them healthier than me. New questions arose: Why didn't I die? How did I survive having all the mortality markers except diabetes? These were really pressing questions for me. I couldn't sit, stand, walk, or use my hands after the coma, I lost lung capacity and suffered heart failure. But I was alive and determined to live life to the full. Eighteen months later I function, but I'm still not fully recovered.

Reflecting on this experience and life thus far helped me realize that I did not believe in God anymore. I acknowledged that talking about panentheism, and other metaphors were all only brain gymnastics. The rational and emotional aspects of my journey converged. I was still faced with the same dilemma, earning a living with theology degrees and no other relevant skills or experience. My main income was through part-time preaching once or twice per month and irregular consulting, coaching, or training.

Initially preaching without faith was difficult, but it became more and more problematic. I preached on everyday life, social issues, and ethics, steering away from God and theological concepts. Praying without addressing God and being present while the congregation sang became intolerable. Conversations after services could only ever be artificial and dishonest. Not being honest drags one down and beats one like a seasoned streetfighter would.

While writing this article I finally made the choice for integrity and honesty. This is where I draw the line in the sand, get out of the secular closet and end my preaching without faith. Emotionally it finally set me free.

While writing this article I finally made the choice for integrity and honesty. This is where I draw the line in the sand, get out of the secular closet and end my preaching without faith. Emotionally it finally set me free. What the future holds and how I'll generate an income, in a very conservative and religious community, time will tell. Fortunately, I – like you – have the life force of 4.5 billion years plus evolution in me, gained some skills and experience on the way here. I'm again starting over and looking forward to the journey.



[Image credit: dreamstime]

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