

After living without God for a year, former pastor Ryan Bell no longer believes

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(RNS) Ryan Bell—the former Seventh-day Adventist pastor who spent 2014 living as an atheist—is ready for his big reveal.

After chronicling the last 12 months on his blog Year Without God, Bell—who now works as director of community engagement at People Assisting the Homeless in Southern California—announced in an interview with NPR that he no longer believes in God.

Bell talked with Religion News Service about his decision and what it will mean to him and his loved ones. Some answers have been edited for length and clarity.

Q: This weekend you told NPR: “I don’t think that God exists.” Can you elaborate?

A: I think the best way I can explain the conclusion I’ve come to—and conclusion is too strong a word for the provisional place I now stand and work from—is that the intellectual and emotional energy it takes to figure out how God fits into everything is far greater than dealing with reality as it presents itself to us.

That probably sounds very nonrational, and I want people to know that I have read several dozen books and understand a good many of the arguments. I’d just say that the existence of God seems like an extra layer of complexity that isn’t necessary. The world makes more sense to me as it is, without postulating a divine being who is somehow in charge of things.

Q: You also said that you’re “still the same person deep down that I was before.” What was valuable about the past year? Would you do it again?

A: I would definitely do it again! And I'll go a step further: I think others should do it, too. Anytime you can step outside your comfort zone, you will learn important things about yourself and the world. I've learned that atheists are not the miserable nihilists that many Christians think they are.

I've also had a few remarkable moments of irony. Once I was in a gathering of atheists and the speaker referred to "seeing the light" and "finding freedom at last." It struck me then that most people really are searching for the same thing.

Q: Do you still plan to write about, speak and work in the atheist community?

A: I do, in some capacity. I don't think I'll be joining a crusade to destroy all religion anytime soon, though some days I'm tempted. I just know too many good people of faith to see religion as any kind of universal evil. But I do think that there is much work to be done with and among atheists.

I have a special interest in post-theists—people who are in the in-between phase that I've been inhabiting for the past year. There are thousands and thousands of people who are betwixt and between, and there is next to nothing for them in the world of religion. I'd like to be a part of that conversation.

Q: After a year, what do you think about the priorities and actions of the atheist movement in the U.S.?

A: On the whole, I love the no-holds-barred search for truth. I love the honesty and clarity of speech that is so often lacking in religious circles, where everything is couched in metaphor and innuendo.

On the other hand, I recoil from a one-track-minded scientism that I sometimes encounter—as though science has all the answers for every question that a person has ever asked. There is also a kind of smug condescension that is hard for me. I still have scores of Christian friends who are not dumb. Their faith is not like believing in Santa Claus. The more the atheist movement behaves like the traveling evangelists I encountered as a conservative Christian, the more I cringe—and for the same reasons.

Q: Your significant other is a Christian. How are you navigating that?

A: It's challenging sometimes, but she is an open-minded, thoughtful person. I'd call her a Christian Humanist, or a Humanist in the way of Jesus, if that makes any sense. I still share a love for the stories of the radical Jesus preferring the poor and downtrodden, so we're not as different as it may seem on the surface. Besides, our relationship is about more than debates about God's existence.

Q: What would you like to say to people who question your motives or sincerity?

A: There's not much I can say. I don't feel like I need to defend myself. I've only lost money and earning potential this year, but I wouldn't change a thing. I guess I can't prove I'm not being dishonest any more than I can prove that God doesn't exist. People will just have to evaluate the evidence and decide for themselves.

Q: You've lived as a Christian and an atheist. What's one thing you wish more Christians knew about atheists? One thing you wish more atheists knew about Christians?

A: I wish more Christians knew that atheists are not nihilists who have no meaning to their lives or people with no moral compass. They're not stubbornly rejecting God. All the atheists I have met have seriously hit a brick wall while trying to know God.

I wish more atheists knew that Christians care very deeply about knowledge and truth. They are not stupid. In every group there is a percentage that are ignorant—but if you take a wider view, Christian intellectuals have contributed a great deal to the body of human knowledge through history.