

Seeing the light

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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Based on my own entirely unscientific observations, it seems that there is a burgeoning market for “recovering pastor who saw the godless light” stories these days. The genre is familiar enough by now, right? Fundamentalist pastor grows up in the church, uncritically swallows the whole religious package, devotes xnumber of years to serving as pastor in [insert small Bible belt American town here], gradually begins to have doubts, finally has the courage to leave his (it’s almost always a “he” so far) faith behind, is persecuted, scorned and rejected by his townsfolk and former parishioners still imprisoned by the shackles of fantasy and indoctrination he has so recently (and heroically) shed, and eventually staggers into the warm and compassionate embrace of this or that atheist group devoted to helping recovering clergy. And then, for the triumphant finale, our hero embarks on a life of spreading the good news of atheist liberation on [insert motivational speaking tour here] amassing inspiring (de)conversion narratives of other clergy that he has “helped” along the way. It’s not a bad gig if you can get it.

I listened to the latest version of this narrative recently on [an episode of Q with Jian Gimeshi](#). The recovering pastor in question was Jerry DeWitt, a former Pentecostal preacher from Deridder, LA whose story pretty much exactly matched the one above. The interview itself was predictably anticlimactic. I was expecting (or at least hoping) to hear some compelling evidence or dramatic story or event that finally tipped DeWitt over the edge. Was it the problem of evil that finally did it? Was it a tortured struggle between science and faith? Was it unanswered prayer? But the reasons never came up—at least in this interview. Gimeshi focused more on DeWitt’s experience *since* leaving the faith than on *why* he left in the first place. Perhaps it was just assumed that the trajectory away from faith was and is inevitable (it *is* the twenty-first century, after all, as DeWitt reminded us at one point). Eventually *all* smart people leave religion behind, I suppose. Eventually *everyone* who isn’t blinded by religious indoctrination and committed to willful ignorance sees the obvious truth—the “brutal fact,” as DeWitt mentioned in an offhand comment—that there is no God, that the Christian narrative is false, that we are on

our own, etc. Well, ok, then.

What is fascinating to observe is the way in which DeWitt (and others) speak of those who are still “trapped” in religion and how the language employed often mirrors the language many religious folks use to talk about atheists. Perhaps this is to be expected from former clergy, I don’t know. But we hear about having patience for those still “trapped” and about how “we have to just be patient with them,” about only gradually seeing the light. We hear statements like, “you know, it took me a long time to have the courage, too” and “I wouldn’t judge someone who just couldn’t accept the [obvious] truth until later in life.” The language could quite seamlessly be mapped on to a religious conversation about someone still trapped in the “darkness” of unbelief. Come to think of it, I actually *felt* like I was listening to an eager Christian talking about their unbelieving neighbour. We all have our good news to share, our gospels to proclaim, it seems, and we are all quick to understand and describe those who don’t agree with us in condescendingly arrogant and pejorative terms.

At one point, Gomeshi asked DeWitt why he stayed in as long as he did. DeWitt responded by saying that he was addicted to the performance aspect of religion. He loved to be the “shaman,” the purveyor of spiritual experiences. He loved the “high” that came with preaching, loved being with people and the sense of community these collective experiences fostered, loved the “illusion” that he was doing some good, that he was “helping people.” “The problem,” he said, “was that for the longest time I thought religion was the only game in town for these kinds of things.” Luckily we have the recovering pastors motivational tour now, I suppose. All the delights of flattery and smug self-importance (and power!), and all the outlets for our many and varied altruistic urges without all of that odious God business to get in the way.

Are there pressures on pastors in the postmodern world where religion is *far* from the only game in town? Sure. Maybe even unique ones. I don’t begrudge DeWitt his story, nor do I doubt that his road has been a difficult one at times. These are certainly interesting times to be affirming and proclaiming a particular faith. But just once I would like to hear one of these interviews *not* slide into the well-worn grooves of darkness vs light, ignorant superstition vs enlightened rationality, dogmatic rigidity vs open tolerance, etc. Just once I would like to hear someone, whether a recovering pastor or a recovering atheist or a recovering *anything*, say something like this:

You know, I've just changed my mind. But I know that the evidence does not interpret itself and that there are well-informed, thoughtful, committed, decent people who understand and interpret the world differently. I don't claim that everyone who thinks differently than me is "indoctrinated" or stupid. I know that a compelling case could be made for a number of options when we are talking about meta-explanations for this crazy world we live in. Every worldview has explanatory gaps. But life is about more than explanation, it is about choice; and this is the choice that I have made. This is what I have chosen to devote my life to.

Or something like that. But I guess that would be a pretty boring radio interview. And not a very inspiring or motivational (or profitable!) tour.

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