

Losing whose religion?

By [Tammerie Day](#)

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Surf's up on religious doubt. We've heard about millenials leaving the church in droves (although—trust me—young folk are not alone in disenchantment with organized religion), the spiritual-but-not-religious, the backlash against SBNRs, and atheists holding Sunday go-to meetings. Now we are turning to the Janus of doubt/faith. But rather than Doubt and Faith facing away from each other, it seems Doubt is taking a hard look at Faith, and Faith is taking a hard look right back.

Of late, pastor-turned-agnostic Ryan Bell is blogging his journey and its surprises at [Year Without God](#). He spoke with Becky Garrison at *Religion Dispatches* about his experience:

To be honest, it feels a bit surreal. Having lost my career after being a pastor for 20 years, I'm really questioning the virtue of religion. Yes, I know people tell me religion and God are different, but everything we know about God comes to us through religion.

So to lose one's religion in such a dramatic fashion as I did, it made sense for me to just walk away and examine the basic tenets of my faith, especially now that I'm not responsible for a church full of people.

It's early in Bell's quest, and he is still searching for language to express his questions. Perhaps he will discover, as I have, that we do *not* have religion to thank for "everything we know about God." Framing the God question in terms of "knowing" makes it an epistemological concern. But for many people, God is more mystery than epistemological challenge: their God is beyond knowing, a God of sense and experience. I am in that camp; my experience of God is direct and of a mystical bent. I have never felt excited, convinced or reassured by arguments for God's existence. Can I then doubt? If my experience of God is not based in "knowing," what *is* the nature of my faith?

Bell seems to have lost his religion (or was it just some of his privilege?) when he crossed the line in solidarity with LGBT folk. As an activist for LGBT rights in the conservative Seventh Day Adventist church, Bell gained enough notoriety that his church asked him to resign. When he embraced the questions to the point of evaluating life without God, he lost his adjunct teaching positions, too. He acknowledges that he has often felt like the odd man out, and so this is nothing new (albeit more costly).

Welcome to my world, Brother Ryan. I am too queer for most churches, too Jesus-y for others, too much a pastor to work in the academy or sit comfortably in a pew. My friends appreciate my spirituality but feel constrained by my Christianity. My mystic's heart is left cold by most worship services. I don't fit in available religious settings.

I doubt, all right. I doubt I fit anywhere.

I have found encouragement, though, in the writings of poet Christian Wiman. He has written compellingly about doubt's enlivenment of faith in his book *The Bright Abyss*, and he had this to say in his interview with Krista Tippett for [On Being](#):

Doubt is so woven in with what I think of as faith that it can't be separated. I am convinced that the same God that might call me to sing of God at one time might all me at another to sing of godlessness. Sometimes when I think of all of this energy that's going on, all of this what we've talked about, these different people trying to find some way of naming and sharing their belief, I think it may be the case that God calls some people to unbelief in order that faith can take new forms.

That this is me, I am both frightened and convinced: called by God to disbelieve what doesn't need to be believed, so that faith can take new forms. I respect the atheists I know, at the same time as I wonder how many SBNRs and agnostics are spirit-embued persons for whom traditional religious forms do not work. Can I get an amen?

David Brooks apparently thinks so. In column for the *New York Times*, ["Alone, But Not Alone,"](#) Brooks peers into the "yawning gap between the way many believers experience faith and the way that faith is presented to the world." He claims there is a "silent majority who experience a faith that is attractively marked by combinations

of fervor and doubt, clarity and confusion, empathy and moral demand.”

I don't know about "silent majority" (they usually don't like my kind) or "attractively marked" (sounds like a designer zoo animal), but the rest of this is dead on.

Fervor and doubt: in my heart, they go hand in hand. Perhaps that's why some freethinking friends have invited me to contribute to [The Gospel of Doubt](#), a book project exploring what happens when Doubt casts a gimlet eye at Faith, and Faith gives as good as it gets... particularly empathy and moral demand. Because neither doubt nor faith should distract from feeding hungry people, waging peace, welcoming immigrants, and achieving living wages. Getting to those realities; that's the question I'm living into. How about you?

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