

CLERGY WHO QUIT

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American Atheist magazine, Sept-Oct, 2009

Reprinted in Fading Faith: The Rise of the Secular Age

Gustav Broukal Press, 2010

One indicator of religious decline in America is the significant number of clergy who cease believing the supernatural tenets of their churches. Deep, deep inside, some preachers gradually sense that their lives are devoted to fantasy. They come to suspect that creeds, dogmas and scriptures about deities and devils, heavens and hells, miracles and messiahs, are fiction. But they don't dare reveal such qualms, lest they wreck their careers, their status, and their pensions. So they hedge in the pulpit, speaking in metaphors, living a pose.

However, a few have integrity enough to chuck it all - to throw away everything they worked hard to attain, and publicly disavow their past beliefs. Such traumatic reversals require courage and honesty.

A couple of my friends, Richard and Dotty Kendig, grew up in fundamentalist families, were married in Bible college, were ordained, and became missionaries to Peru. They were deeply compassionate and truly desired to help primitive Amazon villagers. But they were repelled as they watched fellow missionaries abuse the natives, treat them with contempt, and count them only as "souls" to be added to the convert list. Some missionaries forced native women to cover their bodies, and stormed into huts to smash yucca beer pots. After 15 years, the Kendigs quit, leaving with humanist values.

"We went there to convert the Indians, and they converted us," Dick sometimes told me. He and Dotty subsequently tried preaching in Pennsylvania churches, but felt awash in hypocrisy. They quit Christianity, became freethinking Unitarians, and moved to a remote West Virginia farm, where Dick was killed by an overturning tractor. His widow is now a schoolteacher.

How many other ministers undergo this type of pilgrim's progress, slowly abandoning supernatural faith? Here are some famous cases:

CHARLES TEMPLETON

Growing up in Toronto, Templeton was afire with intelligence and creativity. He became a teen-age sports cartoonist for the Globe and Mail newspaper. Later he experienced an emotional conversion, started his own church, and rose rapidly to be Canada's top evangelist in the 1940s. He became a major broadcast preacher. He teamed up with Billy Graham for huge revivals in arenas across America and Europe, "saving" thousands. Together, they spread Youth For Christ International.

But Templeton began having intellectual problems with fundamentalism. Trying to make his religion rational, he earned a degree from Princeton Theological Seminary, then became a special preacher for the National Council of Churches, then became head of evangelism for the Presbyterian Church USA.

The changes didn't save his church career. His doubts wiped out his faith. In 1957, he announced that he was an agnostic and renounced Christianity - stunning the evangelical world in which he had been a superstar.

Templeton's drive swiftly took him to new achievements. He became a Canadian television commentator -- then managing editor of the Toronto Star -- then a leader of the Ontario Liberal Party - then an advertising executive - then editor of Maclean's Magazine - then host of a long-running daily radio show. By the 1980s, he had retired mostly into writing, turning out novels and nonfiction books.

In the 1990s, just before Alzheimer's beset him, Templeton summed up his religious transformation in *Farewell to God: My Reasons for Rejecting the Christian Faith*. It was another slam to the church community that once adored him.

His book says Christianity rests on "fables" that no scientific-thinking person can swallow. The church teaches "beliefs that are outdated, demonstrably untrue, and often, in their various manifestations, deleterious to individuals and to society," the former evangelist wrote.

Page after page, he lists Bible miracles that are absurd to modern minds. Then he asks how an all-merciful father-creator could have made such a cruel universe:

"All life is predicated on death. Every carnivorous creature must kill and devour another creature. It has no option.... Why does God's grand design require creatures with teeth designed to crush spines or rend flesh, claws fashioned to seize and tear, venom to paralyze, mouths to suck blood, coils to constrict and smother - even expandable jaws so that prey may be swallowed whole and alive?... Nature is, in Tennyson's vivid phrase, 'red in tooth and claw,' and life is a carnival of blood.... How could a loving and omnipotent God create such horrors?"

His book concludes: "I believe that there is no supreme being with human attributes - no God in the biblical sense - but that all life is the result of timeless evolutionary forces.... I believe that, in common with all living creatures, we die and cease to exist."

Templeton died and ceased to exist in 2001.

MARJOE GORTNER

Instead of writing a book about his apostasy, Gortner made a movie.

He was a remarkable denizen of the underbelly of religion. His parents were California evangelists leading revivals that were money-making hokum. Onstage, they exchanged secret signals while manipulating worshippers to emotional peaks and extracting large offerings from them. They sold "holy" gimmicks guaranteed to heal the sick.

They named their son Marjoe for Mary and Joseph, and trained him as a squeaky child preacher, a religious sensation. They drilled him in sermons and stage antics, sometimes holding his head underwater to force him to memorize his lines, Marjoe later recounted.

At age three, he was ordained by the Church of the Old-Time Faith. At four, he performed a wedding, triggering an uproar that caused California legislators to forbid marriages by preachers under 21.

For ten years, Marjoe the boy wonder performed across the South and Midwest Bible Belt. He estimated that his parents raked in \$3 million. Then Marjoe ran off at 14 and lived with an older woman who served as both lover and surrogate mother. Eventually he returned to the revival circuit, strutting and prancing onstage as his parents had taught him. Money rolled in again.

Gortner knew that his religious act was a sham. Yet, strangely, he had an honest streak and decided to expose his own fraud. He engaged a film crew to make a documentary about his ministry. After revival shows, the cameras followed the preacher to hotel rooms where he tossed armfuls of money, crowing "Thank you, Jesus!"

The film, *Marjoe*, jolted the fundamentalist world when it was released in 1972. As an ex-preacher, Gortner became a minor movie star and recording artist. He went bankrupt while attempting to produce a movie about a crooked evangelist. In 1995, he appropriately played a preacher in *Wild Bill*.

During Gortner's heyday on the revival stage, another star was faith-healer A.A. Allen, who toured with jars containing bodies he said were demons he had cast out of the sick. (Doubters said they were frogs.) Allen disappeared after a show at Wheeling, West Virginia - and was found dead of alcoholism in a San Francisco hotel room, his pockets crammed with wads of cash.

Gortner said Allen once taught him how to tell when a revival is finished and it's time to travel to the next city: "When you can turn people on their head and shake them and no money falls out, you know God's saying, 'Move on, son.'"

JAMES BALDWIN

Some bookish Americans may not know that Baldwin, the great black author, formerly was a boy evangelist like Gortner.

Baldwin grew up in Harlem, where his tyrannical stepfather was pastor of Fireside Pentecostal Assembly. In a *New Yorker* essay titled "Down at the Cross," later published in his civil rights book, *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin recounted the

bitter hopelessness of the ghetto, where jobless men fought and drank themselves into the gutter.

The surrounding misery "helped to hurl me into the church," he wrote. As a child, at a prayer meeting, "everything came roaring, screaming, crying out, and I fell to the ground before the altar. It was the strangest sensation I have ever had in my life." Newly "saved," he became a 14-year-old junior preacher at the family church and soon was "a much bigger drawing card than my father."

"That was the most frightening time of my life, and quite the most dishonest, and the resulting hysteria lent great passion to my sermons - for a while," Baldwin wrote. Since crime and vice filled surrounding streets, he said, "it was my good luck - perhaps - that I found myself in the church racket instead of some other, and surrendered to a spiritual seduction long before I came to any carnal knowledge."

While he tingled to the "fire and excitement" of Pentecostalism, he nonetheless experienced "the slow crumbling of my faith." It occurred "when I began to read again.... I began, fatally, with Dostoevski." He continued handing out gospel tracts, but knew privately that they were "impossible to believe."

"I was forced, reluctantly, to realize that the Bible itself had been written by men." He dismissed the claim that the Bible writers were divinely inspired, saying he "knew by now, alas, far more about divine inspiration than I dared admit, for I knew how I worked myself up into my own visions."

The ex-minister wrote that he might have stayed in the church if "there was any loving-kindness to be found" in it - but "there was no love in the church. It was a mask for hatred and self-hatred and despair."

At 17, Baldwin left religion behind forever. He later called himself a "nothing" theologically. Eventually, his switch to writing enriched the world of literature immensely. In "Down at the Cross," he summed up:

"Life is tragic simply because the Earth turns and the sun inexorably rises and sets, and one day, for each of us, the sun will go down for the last, last time. Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have."

For Baldwin, the sun went down a last, last time in 1987.

DAN BARKER

How do supernatural beliefs die? Very slowly, year after year, in a thousand small expansions of the mind - according to Barker, who evolved from teen-age evangelist to co-president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

"It was a gradual process, a growth," he told an Iowa newspaper. "It would be like asking you, 'When did you grow up?' You probably could not answer that question with one defining moment."

At 15, Barker experienced a typical hysterical conversion at a California revival, then flung himself fervently into adolescent religiosity. He carried a Bible daily, joined fundamentalist youth groups, and preached to everyone in sight.

Keenly intelligent and a gifted musician, he rose rapidly in the teeming evangelical culture. His preaching and music-arranging blossomed for several years. He pastored small churches, married a gospel singer and they toured the revival circuit for eight years, rising toward success.

But doubts insidiously crept into Barker's innermost thoughts. Later, in his book, *Losing Faith in Faith: From Preacher to Atheist*, he explained:

"It was some time in 1979, turning 30, when I started to have some early questions about Christianity.... I just got to the point where my mind was restless to move beyond the simplicities of fundamentalism.... So, not with any real purpose in mind, I began to satisfy this irksome intellectual hunger. I began to read some science magazines, some philosophy, psychology, daily newspapers (!), and began to catch up on the liberal arts education I should have had years before. This triggered a ravenous appetite to learn, and produced a slow but steady migration across the theological spectrum that took about four or five years. I had no sudden, eye-opening experience. When you are raised as I was, you don't just snap your fingers and say, 'Oh, silly me! There's no God.'"

Painfully, during his backslide, he suffered shame as he continued leading church services. "I felt hypocritical, often hearing myself mouth words about which I was no longer sure, but words that the audience wanted to hear.... I became more and more embarrassed at what I used to believe, and more attracted to rational thinkers.... I no longer believed what I was preaching."

Barker frantically sought an escape from his dilemma. He began a side job in computer programming. His transformation wrecked his marriage. Finally, scrupulously conscientious, he wrote a mass letter to former church and gospel music colleagues, telling them: "I can no longer honestly call myself a Christian. You can probably imagine that it has been an agonizing process for me."

Today, Barker is married to Annie Laurie Gaylor, co-president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation - and is just as exuberant for intellectual honesty as he once was for fundamentalism.

HECTOR AVALOS

Born in Mexico in 1958 into a Pentecostal family, young Hector was a gifted child and became a fiery boy preacher. After he moved across the border with his grandmother, churches featured him as a small denouncer of the sex-drugs-and-rock-n-roll liberation of the 1960s. At age 9, he addressed hundreds of worshipers at a convention in Glendale, Arizona.

But in high school, he plunged avidly into science and philosophy - and by his first year of college, he no longer believed in supernatural deities. "Miracles went down the drain," he recounted. After his childhood faith evaporated, he switched his intellectual brilliance to scientific rationality. He earned a doctorate from Harvard and became a professor at Iowa State University.

"How Bible Study Made an Unbeliever Out of Me" was the title of his testimonial in *Freethought Today* (August 1991). He wrote skeptic books such as *Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence* and *Se Puede Saber si Dios Existe? [Can One Know if God Exists?]* He became director of the Committee for the Scientific Examination of Religion, and addressed a World Humanist Congress in Mexico City in 1996.

Dr. Avalos attacked "intelligent design" advocates who attempted to sneak biblical Creationism into school courses in the guise of science. He drafted a statement against ID that was signed by hundreds of Iowa professors. He was featured in a 2008 documentary movie, "Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed."

JOHN W. LOFTUS

Evangelical congregations can be petty, vindictive, unforgiving - and this lack of compassion can help propel a minister into doubts and loss of faith. That's what happened to Loftus, formerly an intense Church of Christ pastor.

Why I Became an Atheist, an earnest autobiography, recounts how Loftus grew up in a Catholic home in Fort Wayne, Indiana, attending parochial school without much religious commitment. In adolescence, he was a problem teen, kicked out of high school, sent to a juvenile home for repeated minor police troubles. Then he underwent an emotional conversion and became "on fire for God. I burned with passion for the Lord. And for good reason: I believed God turned my life around."

Loftus entered the rebellious "Jesus Freak" subculture and "witnessed" on street corners. Then he attended a Church of Christ seminary and became a pastor. But several congregational conflicts soured him on church life. A church board fired him because some leading parishioners thought (mistakenly) that his removal would win back a prominent couple who had moved to a different church. Then Loftus became active in another church, of which his cousin was pastor - but the cousin angrily suspected that Loftus was trying to grab his pulpit. Worst of all, a homeless shelter director, a former stripper, falsely accused Loftus of rape, and fellow Church of Christ leaders wouldn't defend him.

These and other squabbles caused the young minister to think deeply about religion - and the more he thought, the more it seemed a fantasy. He finally shifted to complete atheism, and found it liberating. While he was an evangelical, he suffered constant guilt and shame for his human frailties. But now he has no need to apologize. "Today, I am guilt-free."

ROBERT M. PRICE

A supreme nonconformist, Price went from born-again evangelist to atheist.

He holds two doctorates and has written 40 books. He now contends that Jesus never existed as the Bible depicts him, but was a fabrication from many risen-savior magical legends of the Middle East. Yet Price attends a Christian church and calls himself a "Christian atheist." What a tangle!

Raised in a fundamentalist Baptist church, he led an Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship in college and attended an evangelical seminary, where Billy Graham

was his commencement speaker. Then he became pastor of a New Jersey Baptist church.

But he was ravenous to read and learn. Over two decades, he earned two theological doctorates from Drew University. His intense study wiped out his supernatural faith, and he left the pulpit in 1994. He dabbled with ultra-liberal Unitarian Universalism, but became disenchanted with that, as well.

He joined the Jesus Seminar, which tries to separate fables from historically accurate verses in the Bible. And he became a prolific author, pouring out volumes such as *Jesus is Dead*, *The Incredible Shrinking Son of Man*, *Deconstructing Jesus*, *The Reason-Driven Life*, etc.

His biography says he now "attends the Episcopal Church and keeps his mouth shut."

Other backsliding clergy handle their loss of faith in diverse ways. The legendary Mother Teresa was plagued for decades by secret inner doubts that either God or Jesus is real, and she often confided that she was unable to pray - yet she lavished adoration on the deities in public appearances, and prayed before television cameras.

In contrast, the great mentor Will Durant almost was ordained a Catholic priest, but he ceased supernatural beliefs and withdrew from orders. Later, he gave a talk about phallus-worship in religion - and his bishop excommunicated him swiftly, announcing the action to newspapers. Durant's devout mother collapsed in shock and his father ordered him to leave their home.

Even seminary professors can slip from certainty. In *Walking Away From Faith*, Dr. Ruth A. Tucker of Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan, wrote: "There are moments when I doubt all. It is then that I sometimes ask myself as I'm looking out my office window, 'What on earth am I doing here? They'd fire me if they only knew.'" She left the seminary in a bitter conflict, but remained religious, despite her doubts.

Similarly, Dr. Bart Ehrman, chairman of religious studies at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, described in *Misquoting Jesus* how he journeyed from born-again Christian to agnostic.

In addition to clergy, multitudes of lay churchmen likewise cease believing. One was university librarian Edward Babinski, who told his own story and related several others in *Leaving the Fold*. Similarly, former Los Angeles Times religion reporter William Lobdell wrote *Losing My Religion: How I Lost My Faith Reporting on Religion in America*. Once a born-again evangelical, he slowly realized that intelligent people cannot swallow magical tales.

The process of secularization - erosion of supernatural beliefs in Western society - encompasses many who once were devout, but came to see church claims as fairy tales.

In addition to the few ministers who make dramatic public breaks, how many more remain in the pulpit, reciting dogmas and creeds they no longer believe, afraid to face their real selves? Perhaps, like Tolstoy's Ivan Ilytch, in the final hour before death, they will see that their lives were meaningless.