

The Unbelievable Truth: Why America has become a nation of religious know-nothings

BY [Daniel Dennett](#)

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The new study by the [Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life](#), released this week, shocked many with the revelation that atheists and agnostics tend to know more about the world's religions than believers do.

Pew researchers asked more than 3,000 Americans 32 central questions about the Bible, Christianity and other world religions. On average, people who took the survey got half the answers wrong - and many even tripped on basic questions about their own faith.

Fully 54% of Protestants could not identify [Martin Luther](#) as the person who started the Protestant Reformation. Forty-five percent of Catholics did not know that their church teaches that the consecrated bread and wine in holy communion are not merely symbols, but actually become the body and blood of [Jesus Christ](#).

But we shouldn't be that surprised by the fact that supposedly faithful people had major gaps in knowledge about the religions in which they claim to believe. The explanation - or at least most of it - is not hard to see in the recent history of religion.

There was a time when the creeds of most religions could be accepted as unvarnished truth - "taken on faith" - by most of the flock without much cognitive dissonance, simply because humankind didn't yet have a wealth of well-evidenced alternatives to the traditional answers.

However, since the birth of modern science in the 17th century, it has been downhill for literalism.

After [Copernicus](#) and the collapse of the idea that the Sun goes around the Earth, the idea that Heaven was Up There and Hell was Down Below had to be turned into metaphor. It is still potent imagery after several centuries, but it is treated as literally true by, well, hardly anybody.

The age of the Earth, the existence of billions of galaxies, the detailed confirmation of evolutionary biology, including our demonstrated close kinship to chimpanzees and indeed all other mammals - all these discoveries and many more have taken their toll on any literal understanding of the holy texts. Scholarship about the history of those texts

has also made it more and more obvious that they are imperfect human artifacts with a long history of revision and adjustment, not eternal and unchanging gifts from God.

So what's a religion to do? There are two main tactics.

Plan A: Treat the long, steady retreat into metaphor and mystery as a process of increasing wisdom, and try to educate the congregation to the new sophisticated understandings.

Plan B: Cloak all the doctrines in a convenient fog and then not just excuse the faithful from trying to penetrate the fog, but celebrate the policy of not looking too closely at anyone's creed - not even your own.

Read more: http://www.nydailynews.com/opinions/2010/10/03/2010-10-03_the_unbelievable_truth_why_america_has_become_a_nation_of_religious_knownothing.html#ixzz125KRCTiR

Plan B has been the choice of most religions and denominations, and the result, not surprisingly, is that most religiously affiliated people have no firm knowledge or even opinions about the finer points of any religion, including their own.

How, then, to explain the apparently contradictory fact that, according to Pew, atheists they surveyed knew the most about religion?

Atheists tend to be those curious and truth-loving folks who do take a good hard look at religious professions of faith, and hence they tend to know what they are walking away from. There have always been atheists, though not always very visible to the public. In fact, the perennial nagging doubts of the few atheists in the crowd have probably been the main force sustaining theology!

Most people are afraid of what they might discover if they read the fine print too carefully, so they sign on the dotted line without a glance, and then often feel the need to defend their lack of curiosity as an example of their holy trust in their own faith. But every generation has its restless doubters who are just not comfortable with the traditional formulas they are invited to profess by their religious leaders. They cast about, with great intelligence and ingenuity, for alternative formulations that they can assert with a clear conscience.

Those that find them are the theologians; those that don't are the atheists, whether or not they leave their churches or just hunker down in silence.

In fact, some theologians are well-nigh indistinguishable from atheists. For example, [Bishop John Shelby Spong](#), the liberal Episcopal author of "Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers In Exile" (1999) and many other books,

and his British counterpart, the Anglican priest Don Cupitt, author of "Is Nothing Sacred?: The Non-Realist Philosophy of Religion" (2003) and many other books, are both regarded by fundamentalists and born-again Christians as atheists, plain and simple, and one can see why.

So the Pew results are no doubt actually somewhat stronger than they first appear: The more you know about religions, the less likely you are to believe religious creeds and myths and thus the more likely you are to be an atheist or agnostic, whether or not you are affiliated with, or even clergy in, a church.

Many of those who have thought long and hard about religions - and hence know the answers - don't actually believe the doctrines that they rightly identify as belonging to the church they are affiliated with.

They know, for instance, what a good Catholic is "required to profess" as [Pope Benedict](#) (when he was Cardinal Ratzinger) often said, and so, if they are Catholics, they profess it. But they find that they cannot actually believe it. Many people maintain their loyalty as vigorous members of their denominations while quietly setting aside the dogmas, either utterly ignored as irrelevant or wreathed in protective layers of metaphor.

The Pew study also reveals why atheist critiques of religious doctrines are largely a waste of effort: Few people believe them in any case; they just say they do.

The more interesting question is, why do they feel the need to say these things? And what consequences flow from this?

One effect is widespread and most unfortunate. We increasingly see pastors who no longer hold the beliefs they are professionally obliged to preach, but go on executing their duties for various reasons, some good, some not so good. These folks are caught in a web of what might be called designed miscommunication, and it takes an unmeasured toll on their consciences.

My colleague [Linda LaScola](#) and I are currently studying this phenomenon, and when discussing our first pilot study of closeted non-believing (or other-believing) clergy, we often heard two jokes about the seminary experience that was part of the training of most clergy: "If you emerge from seminary still believing in God, you haven't been paying attention," and "Seminary is where God goes to die."

We are now looking for more volunteer clergy who want to tell us, in strict confidence, about how they deal with their own loss of faith in the doctrines of their own churches.

Dennett, a philosopher and cognitive scientist at [Tufts University](#), is the author of "Darwin's Dangerous Idea" and "Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon."