

BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Caught in the Pulpit: Leaving Belief Behind*

Caught in the Pulpit: Leaving Belief Behind, Daniel C. Dennett and Linda LaScola, Congruity, 2013, ISBN: 9780615927909

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Caught in the Pulpit: Leaving Belief Behind expands on a pilot study of non-believing Protestant ministers that Daniel C. Dennett and Linda LaScola published in *Evolutionary Psychology* in 2010. As a continuation of the study, this slight but engaging book similarly concerns those who entered the clergy but were unable to move beyond their doubts. LaScola did the empirical heavy-lifting, conducting in-depth interviews with thirty-five participants across the pilot study in this more substantive work, while Dennett provides an evolutionary interpretation of this data. LaScola's informants include clergy, students, and seminary professors, among whom many are members of the Clergy Project, an online safe space for active and former religious leaders who "have actively rejected a belief in a supernatural worldview". The authors rely heavily on the Clergy Project, but do not have direct access to or influence on the confidential community and its prospective members.

The book is organized into seven sections with a forward by Richard Dawkins. Although each section is important, it is the second section—"Five Sketches"—that earns the book its title. LaScola develops five portraits of former and current clergy, including a Presbyterian pastor, a Lutheran pastor, a Lutheran seminary dropout, a Roman Catholic priest, and a Mormon Bishop. LaScola allows the participants to speak for themselves, often in lengthy block quotes, limiting her input to clarification and the occasional aside. A common theme throughout participants' responses is the impact of seminary. It is therefore appropriate that LaScola also interviews seminary professors of Old and New Testament Studies. She found that learning textual criticism had a profound effect on many former or current clergy, and that the professors struggled to overcome their students' sudden and painful disillusionment.

Dennett's main contributions are two sections entitled "Breaking the Shell: Transparency and the Survival of Religions" and "The Inner Shell—Isolating Pastors from their Parishioners and from Themselves". Together, they offer a rather timid look at the struggles of pastors through the lens of evolutionary theory. According

to Dennett, religions, like cells, have developed "Good Tricks" for maintaining their membranes. Although some cultural phenomena may bear resemblances to biological cells, Dennett's analogy has limited explanatory value. Also, the transition from autobiographical statements to cute analogy is jarring, especially since Dennett concludes with the trivial observation that churches need to adapt in order to survive. The "Inner Shell" is the better of the two sections, largely because Dennett more plainly addresses the struggles facing clergy as they try to come to terms with the new transparency of the information age. Self-deception, he argues, is not only inevitable for doubting clergy, but also a luxury that they may not have for long.

One of the book's main drawbacks is the lack of clarity about its intended aim and audience. If the authors' main objective is to explore the "disconnect between what closeted non-believing clergy believe and what they preach", then the five sketches introduced early in the book are sufficient, without the Darwinian gloss. If, however, the authors' Darwinian interpretation is meant to take centre stage, then the lack of rigour with which this is performed is surprising. Dennett's use of analogy resembles a rhetorical trick more than a scientific hypothesis. Nevertheless, *Caught in the Pulpit* may serve as a therapeutic work for nonbelieving clergy who struggle with doubt and deception. From a scholarly perspective, however, the project would have been better served if the authors had teased out the links between questioning clergy and their exposure to non-belief through "New Atheist" publications or other media.

Although, in the chapter "Emerging Themes", LaScola does reflect on the struggles of liberal clergy who often appear to be atheists in all but name, there is insufficient exploration of the parallels and contrasts between those who might think of religion in mythical, metaphorical, or apophatic terms, and those who simply identify as atheist or agnostic. For example, one of the respondents discusses revisiting his unanswered questions in the work of liberal Christian writers. The fact that he finds value in story and tradition rather than the literal supernatural cries out for exploration, but the reader is left waiting until much later in the book when LaScola discusses how liberal clergy often equivocate on matters related to doctrine. Attempting to find truth in myth, however, is

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central to understanding how clergy move from belief to non-belief, and worthy of more prominent treatment.

The whiff of missed opportunities hangs over *Caught in the Pulpit*. As Dawkins observes, kindness shines from every page of the book, but empathy, as an overarching objective, is sometimes at odds with other equally noble

goals. Scholars of secularism and non-religion will find little surprising here, and that which does surprise lacks the requisite analysis that one might desire from a treatment of such an understudied issue. Nevertheless, I recommend the book for starting a conversation, and for giving a voice to a poorly understood minority.

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