

Blind about faith

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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Over the last few months, I've been following a blog by former Seventh-day Adventist pastor Ryan Bell. The blog is called [Year Without God](#), and chronicles Bell's decision to take a break from God, walk away from the church, and try living like an atheist for a year. I have [more than a few reservations](#) about the project itself, but it has been very interesting to ride along with Bell in the post-church, post-God landscape.

In his recent post "[No more blind faith](#)," Bell talks about a recent conference he attended where he had the opportunity for dialogue with a handful of conservative "Christian apologists." These Christians were trying to persuade Bell (and others) that faith wasn't "blind," that Christianity was public truth based on reason, not just private persuasion or personal fancy. Bell speaks admiringly of the sentiment, but goes on to dismiss it as, ultimately, untenable:

I'm not sure how you can say "no more" to blind faith and still be a Christian. I know the slogan is meant to say, faith must be based on evidence. But still the actual step of faith is a step into the dark—a leap—or else it's not faith. It's sight. And the Bible says, "We walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7). What is "seeing faith?" Especially when the author of Hebrews defines faith as "evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). You either present evidence for your beliefs, which qualifies them as public truth, or you claim that faith is the evidence. Say no to blind faith long enough and you will likely say no to faith altogether.

From my reading of his blog, Ryan Bell strikes me as a very intelligent person who speaks in refreshingly measured and irenic tones (a nice contrast with some in the burgeoning genre of "former pastors who saw the atheist light"). But as I read this paragraph, I wondered how it was that he managed to emerge from years of higher education and two decades of pastoral ministry with this simplistic an understanding of the nature of faith. The stark, binary way he presents the options seems

remarkably naïve to me. Blind faith or no faith? Faith or sight? A leap into the dark or views based on evidence? These are our *only* options? Surely Bell must realize that faith comes in grayer shades than this?

It's not as though, after all, the human predicament is to stand bewildered and clueless before the smorgasbord of religious and irreligious options on offer, and just randomly decide. "Well, I guess I gotta pick something, so I pick . . . that one!" Each of us (whether we believe in God or not) has negotiated and will continue to negotiate the complex *mélange* of the traditions we were socialized into, our own personal experiences, the things that we place value upon, the testimony of others (past and present), the things that we long and hope for, the things that we admire and cherish, the ideals we are convinced extend beyond the contours of our own peculiar psychologies, the wounds we carry and the resources we believe are available for healing, and, yes, even the whispers (or loud shouts!) from beyond the boundaries of the empirical. And we must wrestle with the often-indiscernible ways in which all of these things interpenetrate and exert influence upon one another.

All of these things (and many others, no doubt) factor into where and how one leaps. I can't think of a *single* Christian—even those with whom I strongly disagree—for whom something like the cumulative package above doesn't form the scaffolding from which the "leap" of faith is made.

And speaking of the scaffolding from which we leap, where, incidentally, is the acknowledgment that atheism and agnosticism also rely heavily on things that cannot be observed in the empirical world and cannot be proved? Truth and morality matter a great deal to Ryan Bell and many who walk away from Christian faith. But what observable evidence do we have that human beings should order their lives always and only according to true propositions? Why should truth trump usefulness in a world devoid of any objective meaning or *telos*? How would we prove that it should? And when was the last time you encountered empirical evidence for an objective moral imperative (not that human beings seem to believe in such imperatives, but that they should)? The list could go on. So many of the values and assumptions that sometimes drive people away from God are just as remote from the realm of observable, testable, empirical evidence as the existence of God. All worldviews rely on things that can't be proved.

Is faith in Jesus Christ a leap? Of course it is. But it's not blind. It's pretty rare indeed that we choose anything *blindly*. It might even be impossible to do. And this is especially true when it comes to worldviews. We all leap, every day, in various directions and for a wide variety of reasons. Some of these reasons are good and admirable; some of them are silly and barely comprehensible. But they are still reasons. To be human is to be a leaper, for we all must choose to whom or what we will give our allegiance, based on less evidence than we would prefer.

Nobody has blind faith, and Ryan Bell should know better than to suggest that this is so. Our public conversations about God and religion are toxic and poorly informed enough as it is, without adding more confusion to the pile.

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