

ABSTRACT FLIRTING WITH GOD

Introduction

Is it possible to have religious experiences without believing, in the sense of regarding them as the truth? This question has been asked every now and then since about a century and a half, making it relatively new and it has not yet been considered systematically. In the past few years, however, we see an increase of religious behaviour in people who say that they do not believe. Research on this phenomenon is urgently required but complicated because it has not yet crystallised, which makes it not clearly visible, and because it is difficult to depict conceptually, as many definitions of religion depart from believing. Therefore it is necessary to develop a new notion of religion, which includes traditional forms as well as new forms without believing. In order to depict these forms of religiosity, which I characterise as 'a-believing', I use unorthodox means: journalism and experiment.

Impossible religiosity

1. Religiosity without belief has been rising against the background of the problem of belief many in our culture have these days because all presentations of religion are placed in perspective. For those concerned it has become impossible to believe in metaphysically loaded religious images.

Apart from this intellectual process, there is also a secularisation of consciousness, which has its own dynamics. Those who experience this, often emphasise their passivity in this process with conclusions like 'I lost my belief' or 'I fell from my belief'.

The existing collective structures of plausibility in our society have disappeared. It has become normative to place beliefs in perspective, even among those who believe.

As a result, religious practices as well as questions concerning the meaning of life for many have become increasingly remote. Some even speak of religious and philosophical illiteracy.

The current widespread inappeasable attitude that puts everything in perspective and to the question, regards change and improvement as of high importance. This I call 'reflexive doubt'. Reflexive doubt not only rendered religious belief impossible for many but also made people want to look ahead, to make progress. Reflexive doubt creates a desire for more. The horizon has become alluring. What lies beyond? Might this attitude possibly contribute to a renewed preoccupation with the meaning of life (with ones world view, or, as I call it here, philosophy) and religiosity?

2. Does this also mean, as some social scientists and theologians maintain, that religion is returning? I think that this is a case of wishful thinking. It may be plausible that people nowadays are more open to religiosity than a few decades ago and, indeed, in our culture we do find a certain religious desire that may be increasing. However, for religiosity to be proven to be on the increase, the problem of belief needs to be solved.

The question of the purpose of life continues to occupy people, even though there is a great extent of realisation that there are no credible answers. The desire for purpose grows. How can they deal with this?

In particular the question of the existence of a personal, authentic self is currently focused upon. Society asks us to be authentic at a time when all answers about a 'true self' have become incredible.

We do have the spirituality of New Age with its focus on finding the true self but it is only marginal, as you would have to believe the presented metaphysical images of a true self.

For many people the question of belief is too huge to accept such images. For them, the question of who-am-I is a lot to take on. A true self is desirable but without belief it seems to be unattainable.

The reflexively doubting individual looks at himself critically: am I really authentic when I want to buy that new gadget just like everybody else?

The desire for a true self and other religious desires are blocked for many. They do not succeed in fulfilling it without belief, while at the same time they cannot believe. What other ways exist to approach this problem?

Strategies

3. The most important strategy to approach the problem of belief is that of 'minimalism'. This strategy tried to keep the credible belief by getting rid of the incredible belief and thereby save religious life. Robinson's best seller *Honest to God* (1963) was a well-known example of this. He maintained that a great clearance was the only remedy to save the Christian belief.

In the Netherlands the strategy of minimalism was given shape by 'gereformeerde' (a type of Protestant) theologians like Kuitert, Wiersinga and Manenschijn. It also can be found in other churches, like the 'Liberal Protestants' (Goud, Adriaanse), the Catholics (Schillebeeckx, Borgman), and among non-scientists outside of churches (Oegema, Groot, Apostel).

Many minimalists are very stern about what not to believe. They often denounce untenable beliefs out of hand. Their stern disbelief in metaphysical images by itself makes them believers, which makes them look very much like equally stern atheists. Agnosticism, which does not want to believe in the existence or the non-existence of a God, is their combined target of criticism.

The minimalist strategy is the most important of the various strategies because it takes the problem of belief seriously. Apart from this, it has a considerable social distribution. Minimalism has been deeply embedded in many churchgoers and others.

According to the Kelley thesis, churches where creeds are carved in oak lose far less members than churches where relativism and tolerance are rampant. This thesis is not plausible. It fails to take minimalism for its worth. These minimalist churches did not languish due to their tolerance but because too little was left to attract people with religious desires. The minimalist cleansing process was an iconoclasm, in which for the sake of intellectual honesty so much was sacrificed that an empty, vague and hardly metaphysical belief remained. Many rituals also lost their meaning. Why pray to God if you believe that he does not hear you anyway? This led to experiential poverty.

Popular more general varieties of minimalism are visible in 'ietsisme' (it-ism; the belief that there is something) and agnosticism. The former is a vague and empty belief, the latter advocates a-belief. Both are philosophical and both are often accompanied by a particular religious desire which has no ways of being fulfilled.

4. Religious belief nowadays is not popular any more and therefore many theologians go to great lengths in order to make their belief void of belief. They discuss belief critically and pretend not to believe. Not only Christians are guilty of this. For example the Buddhist author Hagen proposes that Buddhism is knowledge, not a belief. According to this theory, scientists believe.

Implicit believers take one step further. They simply do not thematise their own belief. They focus on the correct attitude of trust and devotion, without asking questions that could lead them astray. Who knows that he believes in fact already has a hint of doubt. According to Durkheim, Luckmann and Gauchet, belief was originally implicit and to gain the insight that one believed was the beginning of the end. Precisely non-reflexive strategies are, however, presently experiencing difficulties.

Yet another strategy for dealing with the question of belief is that of 'pseudoscience', a term I regard as appropriate for types of religion that do not recognise that they are religious but they maintain that they are scientific although are in reality far from it. There also exists a 'New Age scientific strategy' that is indeed trying to have a debate with the scientific community, which is an important criterion for being scientific. Ultimately, however, the pseudoscientific strategy can only be maintained in as non-reflexive a manner as possible. Those who also critically examine the facts cannot persevere in this strategy.

Finally, there is the strategy of 'first believe and then see'. The question of truth is temporarily placed between brackets in order to investigate the working of the belief experimentally. Practitioners trust that in this manner they can uncover that their belief is true.

5. Every strategy demands its sacrifice. Intellectually, minimalism is the most pure of the strategies discussed but it allows only limited religious experience – it is not even desirable from a minimalist point of view. Minimalism asks for a sacrifice of feelings. Implicit and pseudoscientific strategies are intellectually unsatisfactory for those with a slightly higher education. In their boisterous worlds of imagination, intense contact can be experienced. This may be emotionally satisfying but reason has to be sacrificed.

Is it possible to be religious without sacrificing either your feelings or your reason? The answer hinges on the question of whether it is possible to experience something religious without belief. Most definitions of religion do not allow for this. To Durkheim, Luckmann, Weber, McGuire, Yinger, Taylor, Geertz, Van Baal, Ten Borg and Stoffels all alike religion is something in which belief is a necessity.

It may seem logical that when one does not believe one will experience nothing but it is not. Religious behaviour and images can also be cultivated for their beauty, usability or because they are felt to be good, and thereby may invoke religious experience. Instead of judging whether they are true – or untrue, they can also be approached as questions of taste, which does not necessarily mean that they lose their use. This may be complicated from a believing or disbelieving perspective but from an a-believing perspective this is a way of approaching religious images in order to facilitate their invocation of a religious experience.

What is religiosity?

6. The question here is of course what we understand under religiosity. As most social scientist depart from belief, it is necessary to develop an alternative understanding of religion. This understanding must remain close to traditional views of religion – this in order not to steep into the wilfully labelling of things like soccer or fascism only because they for instance have an integrating function and this function is religious in the eyes of those who like to label them thus. The understanding of religion I develop here has two pillars: transcendence and intentionality.

Presently, the awareness that there is transcendence (hereafter, awareness of transcendence) is strong. According to Jan van Baal, in the past religions tried to fill this 'gap in our thinking' with belief but nowadays the consciousness that something is slipping away from our attention, that our understanding is limited, that there are many things we do not know and may never know is widely appreciated, thematised and sought for.

Transcendence itself cannot be known or named. The only thing we can do is to create images of it. We can discriminate two types of images of transcendence: images that are used to try to indicate a border behind which things cannot be known – the horizon, a corps, etc. – and images that try to depict something that is behind this border. Such images are metaphysically loaded. Traditionally people believed in them, but at present they can also be cultivated on an a-believing basis. In the case of believers the feeling of transcendence can be present but among a-believers the feeling of transcendence is necessary to experience something that can be called religious.

Duintjer and Bor maintain that they experienced transcendence when they met with the 'non-interpreted reality', which bridged the boundary between subject and object, and that they were lifted 'above space and time'. With this, they make a statement of belief. At most we can say that they had an experience by using images of transcendence.

Especially images of transcendence related to emptiness are at present sought for. Artists have made art in order to evoke existential experiences of emptiness. This is illustrated by the paradoxical dungeons of avant-garde artist Piranesi and the gasometer of Viola. These works of art deliver 'philosophical experiences' as they are sought at present in manifold ways – these images of transcendence invoke the awareness of transcendence.

Here I call reflection upon this ‘philosophising’. There exists a broad range of practices in which people attest to philosophical experience – such as a confrontation with death when touring graveyards or bungee jumping; or the notion of infinity when looking at the stars or listening to music.

Asking final questions of meaning is presently also an important way to invoke the realisation that transcendence exists. Philosophical experiences can obtain a religious nature when an experience of intentionality slips in and this becomes more explicit.

7. I borrow the notion of intentionality – or the sensation of being addressed – from Van Baal. This is an entirely different meaning than the notion of intentionality of Husserl. According to Van Baal, people are ‘in dialogue with the universe’. On the one hand he is a lonely subject thrown back onto himself, on the other he wishes to experience to be a meaningful participant in his universe. In traditional religions gods and ghosts were the natural partners in this dialogue. People used them to fight their existential uncertainties.

Here Van Baal shows his functionalist side, while examples can be given of subjective experiences of intentionality that, strikingly, lead to strong emotions of insecurity. Van Baal sees the aspiration of people to be part of the universe also in art and play. Religion, however, was the most valuable for this purpose. Intentionality, according to Van Baal, existed also outside of religion. He reserved the notion for experiences being addressed by ‘too coincidental coincidences’. When people believed in it, this was religion. Here I shall use the term intentionality in a broader sense to include all experiences of feeling addressed by something that is presented by images of transcendence. This can happen with belief and without belief, but only with the feeling of transcendence.

Later on, Van Baal developed appreciation for the gap in our thinking, which he then called Mystery. According to Van Baal this Mystery is mainly appreciated for its value by westerners with a higher level of knowledge. The Mystery has a notion of transcendence as well as a sense of intentionality. He claimed that there was an objective existence of the Mystery, which could also be called God, leading to some of his colleagues to criticise him for stepping outside the boundaries of scholarship.

The taste of more

8. For Van Baal, the intentionality of coincidence that is too coincidental was no longer credible, although he noticed the experience of it in himself, just like James and Bergson experienced it in themselves, together with tens of percents of Dutch people. It is a deeply embedded experience, independent of intelligence and education. It can be accompanied by the awareness of transcendence. It is not plausible that this is a survival that will peter out eventually or that for instance top athletes, who appear to be highly susceptible, use it to create a ‘control-illusion’. It has never been investigated whether supposedly superstitious athletes actually believe in it or whether they possibly combine a awareness of transcendence with the desire to address or be addressed. On top of this, in advertising and fiction it appears that people can also feel addressed by coincidence when there is no desire for control whatsoever. If this is the case, why should it not be possible in everyday life? Goud points out that we live in a time in which everything has become coincidental. The fact that people regard precisely coincidence as intentional agrees with their worldview, which may explain its popularity. The degree of religiosity, which in this area is often experienced in a believing manner, depends on the strength of this experience and the accompanying feeling of transcendence.

Is it, as critics say, stupid to feel addressed by coincidence that is too coincidental? Perhaps it is stupid to count too much on the feeling that your coincidental lottery ticket will be winning. However, it is not only an issue of ‘making illogical connections’ as critics say. It also concerns the experience, namely that of intentionality, and this could be much more important to many people than the actual question of winning. For them it is not so much a question of true or untrue but of taste. Playing the lottery is an art that can also be elaborated in a philosophical manner, for instance

when you actually turn out to have a winning ticket. The fascination for coincidence lies in the combination of the awareness of transcendence and the sense of intentionality. It is an example of how people can nowadays be religious in a-believing manner, whether to a larger or smaller degree. The question of its quality is subject to debate.

People can work out a religious method that elaborates coincidence as an image of transcendence in a-believing manner. Various oracles are used in this way – such as ad hoc personal creations, drawing oracle cards for entrepreneurs and astrology.

9. In manifold ways people try to deal with ‘metaphysical seduction’ in an a-believing manner, in various degrees of religiosity. This is not without problems, given the current philosophical context in which religiosity for many people leads a withering existence, which is also due to the inability to give it shape caused by the problem of belief. This problem manifests itself for instance in bowing and kneeling. In themselves they are very strong gestures referring to the human condition – we are small, life and the world are big. However, presently they have numerous negative connotations. Fortunately, society has changed and we do not need to bow and kneel anymore, says Vuijsje. On the contrary, Borgman says that we should pick up doing it again, for the sake of society. I believe that both fail to take bowing for what it is worth. Bows are potentially powerful images of transcendence that can provide strong experiences of intentionality. Indeed, who bows or kneels, addresses and who addresses will feel more easily addressed.

The awareness of transcendence and the experience of intentionality can also be found among minimalist theologians (Kuitert, De Lange, Holtrop) and others (Lyotard, Groot, Apostel). It is a shy form of religiosity. Intentionality is felt only subtly. The minimalist, barren belief and the limited ritual prevent it. At times a certain a-belief seems to be involved. One can also wonder whether the works of various Dutch novelists show something similar; religion departing from almost no or no belief (Reve, Kellendonk, Möring).

Various performance artists know how to overcome this shyness using artistic flair. They engage in a ‘pleasant conversation with tradition’, take of it what they like and use it to evoke the awareness of transcendence and the feeling of intentionality. The British composer Tavener organised a multi-religious spectacle in the Old Church in Amsterdam and Dutch artists the religiously flavoured Festival Stonehenge Rotterdam.

In principle everything can become an image of transcendence, which strongly depends on the culture. In our culture today the ‘true self’, which for instance ‘only wants the best for you’, addresses many people, both figuratively and literally, as an experience of intentionality. This occurs in a variety of ways, including music, spells, dance, sports, nature, and philosophical and religious texts like those by Tolle and channelled ones like those by Roberts, in which the self is important. People can also have spontaneously occurring experiences of a true self.

Another type of – superficial or deep – a-believing religiosity is increasing among people who have an illness. They take refuge in for instance homeopathy, reincarnation therapy, shamanism, pragmatic, or use the image of chakras or auras. In an a-believing manner they cultivate the image of transcendence that health has a divine aspect, or at least has a transcendent aspect, that can be contacted. This in the hope of getting better – the ultimate pursuit of the experience of intentionality.

Users of psychedelic drugs form an interesting category. When used with an appropriate frame of mind, these drugs offer the possibility to simulate religious experiences, which, according to reports of users, can be in a-believing form.

In the area of play with explicit fiction, religious experience is also pursued; by magicians, in fiction writing (Tolkien, Potter), gaming, science fiction like Star Trek and re-enactment like around the statue of Nehalennia and the Elf Fantasy Festival. This happens often in a-believing manner, although interestingly enough a development towards belief may also be possible – Scientology, faith healers like the Dutch Jomanda.

10. It is important to note that a metaperspective is often visible in the use of various images of transcendence. People may empathise with other, often religious, people such as pilgrims or monks the present or a long gone past. By looking through their eyes, they try to experience something, like an historic sensation, a sense of meaning and perhaps religiosity. Of course subjectivity and fantasy play their role here but this does not need to be a problem; fantasy has always been an ally of religious experience.

Asking questions of meaning from an a-believing point of view is typically an activity in which a metaperspective plays a role. Instead of looking for an answer, it analyses humans as beings asking questions about the meaning of life. This is the fruit of reflexive doubt. It places one's own philosophical situation in a very broad perspective – if I had been born in India, I would have been a Hindu. Through books and films people empathise with exotic and religious worlds. In this way they can become part of them for a moment, while staying at a distance at the same time. In practice, many have acquired the scientific attitude of methodological agnosticism. This is a passive attitude. A more active one is problematic for many because the problem of belief will inevitably show up. I discuss whether the methodological ludistic attitude Droogers propagates offers a solution. Finally I give some examples of more extensive religious activity based on an a-believing metaperspective.

From a metaperspective it is clear that people create meaning and found religions. This creation game can be played with much gusto. Theologians nowadays use the metaphor of play for religious activity, whether suitable or not, mainly in an effort to provide a somewhat juicier effluence. However, religiosity can only really become play if it does not work on the basis of belief. The Matthew Passion is sung by singers and appreciated by an audience that is for a large part a-believing and also turns out to have the capacity to arouse religious experience – here may lie the explanation of its popularity.

In play it is possible for people to abandon themselves thanks to the fact that every game has its end. This pretence can turn the sobering effect of reflexive doubt into one that provides a religious experience. In play, this concerns the truth of the feelings, not that of the images that come alive. This consciousness stays alive even in the most fanatic actor or soccer fan. At the same time something happens in moments of seemingly total abandon. The actor gets the feeling of being out of control and may experience a sense of intentionality as something coming from outside. This experience gives the a-believer a feeling of transcendence.

The question of the status of the metaphysically loaded images of transcendence remains ambiguous for the a-believer. The question remains whether 'something was there or not?' Both the believing religious and the atheist scenarios are, all things considered, absurd. The various scenarios are brought to life with for instance music. A-believers switch between the religious and atheist possibilities and surf their way through the broad supply of religious phenomena, serving various aspects of a person. These days there is much appreciation for the 'flexible identity', which includes appreciation for experimenting with religious experience. This flexibility also sheds new light on pluralism. It is not necessarily hostile to religion but can on the contrary also be a stimulant for religiosity. In order to get a clear view of this type of religiosity we need to abandon the idea of religion as a system of credible images. Scholars who stress this flexibility, such as Kalsky, remain captivated by the inflexible belief that religion is a matter of regarding something as true. Hermans' theory of the 'dialogical self' offers possibilities to understand flexible a-believing switchers and surfers.

Pragmatheism

11. The days when pragmatism and religiosity were opposites have been counted, at least in practice. Pragmatism is of much larger interest – idealism also is practically motivated.

Nowadays, religion is also approached from a practical point of view; how does it work? How can religiosity be harnessed to promote one's wellbeing? Even more important: How can religious experience be created? These questions present themselves in New Age spirituality, in churches and in health care. Instead of the truth, the focus is on the utility.

I call engaging in religion without belief for its functioning 'pragmatheism'. It is new-style agnosticism: active rather than passive. Pragmatheism can be regarded as an a-believing, radical elaboration of the pragmatism of James in the field of religion. He was a great supporter of religious belief because he thought that it is beneficial to people. However, for those who have no credible 'living options' left, James' pragmatism offers no possibilities to experience religiosity. Pragmatheism does.

Pragmatic ways of dealing with religion are nowadays widespread but a-believing ways are still quite limited. Altogether it is my rough but conservative estimate that more than ten per cent of Dutch people are pragmatheists, who have no belief in metaphysically loaded images of transcendence but experience feelings of transcendence and intentionality by cultivating them.

12. Traditional religious circles offer much resistance to this utilitarian attitude. Those who experiment with pragmatheism in traditional religious settings get themselves easily in trouble.

Sociologists also offer criticism. According to Schulze, experience is obligatory in the 'experience society'. Bauman accords by depicting the contemporary person as a rootless rambler. He wanders about without direction, like a victim of 'experiential inflation', forever looking for an even stronger kick. However, this argument by Schulze, Bauman and others is no more than a plea against 'experiential production' that is not neatly organised. Experience is an art.

Experiential directedness fits in the 'subjectification thesis'. Heelas and Woodhead propose that the status question is nowadays being re-evaluated from the viewpoint of experience. They regard this as a 'spiritual revolution'. In my opinion, truly revolutionary is only the radical subjectification that does not take one's own experience as its (supposedly objective) criterion of truth and untruth, but is able to place this in perspective as something that is subjective.

There seems to be a struggle about the right to use religion. The explicit use of religion is increasing but there are protests from a broad range of religious leaders, such as the Buddhist Samy and the Christian Kuitert, and scholars like Safranski, Durkheim, Luckmann and Bruce, who believe that conscious use causes disbelief, leading to the disappearance of religion. Others, like Allport and Maslov, place users opposite true believers and maintain that the former cannot actually experience anything religious. In a parallel manner, Goud places imagination opposite fantasy.

Nowadays, New Age spirituality offers a large range of examples to give opponents ammunition to illustrate negative aspects of the use religion. Heelas also discriminates between good and bad spirituality, in which the latter is not only capitalist but also characterised by less belief than the former. However, he does not deny that it can also evoke religious experience.

Levinas is searching for a middle path by discerning two types of use, a selfish and a non-selfish one, and proposing that there are no objections against non-selfish use. His minimalism makes this, however, likely to appeal only to a highly-educated minority. From an a-believing point of view there is nothing against the use of images of transcendence that are strongly metaphysical. It would be wrong to proscribe them. 'Religious realism' demands that we do not reject forms of use while at the same time keeping our eyes open to the possibility of excesses. If religion is a matter of taste, taste needs to be cultivated in order to add quality to a-believing religious life. This is the art of 'flirting with God'.

Epilogue I think that religiosity without belief will become a trend, which is most welcome. A society with only marginal, languishing religiosity is poor, as it would be when art was languishing. Such religiosity does not come about just like that. Heaven must be conquered.