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Does Your Pastor Believe in God?

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A news report from the Netherlands points to a form of theological insanity that is spreading far beyond the Dutch. [Ecumenical News International](#) reports that church authorities in the Netherlands have decided not to take action against a Dutch pastor who openly declares himself to be an atheist.

The pastor, Klaas Hendrikse, serves a congregation of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands. In 2007 he published a book described as a “manifesto of an atheist pastor.” In the book Hendrikse argues for the non-existence of God, but he insists that he does believe in God as a concept.



As [Ecumenical News International](#) reports:

In his book, Hendrikse recounts how his conviction that God does not exist has become stronger over the years.

“The non-existence of God is for me not an obstacle but a precondition to believing in God. I am an atheist believer,” Hendrikse writes in the book. “God is for me not a being but a word for what can happen between people. Someone says to you, for example, ‘I will not abandon you’, and then makes those words come true. It would be perfectly alright to call that [relationship] God.”

While this kind of theological language may be shocking, it is not all that uncommon. For years, many theologians have been moving away from realist conceptions of theology to various forms of non-realism. In classical terms, anti-realist theologians can actually be atheists, for they do not believe that God actually or necessarily exists. They do, however, find “God” to be a useful concept.

Janet Martin Soskice defines theological realists as “those who, while aware of the inability of any theological formulation to catch the divine realities, none the less accept that there are divine realities that theologians, however ham-fistedly, are trying to catch.”

That definition is incredibly helpful, for it serves to remind us that there are, on the other hand, some theologians who believe that there is no divine reality at all. Evidently, there are some pastors who also believe that there is no God, but there is a concept of God that we can use.

Most Christians would be shocked and scandalized to know that a pastor would be an atheist — and intend to remain as pastor. But in the doctrinally disarmed world of many denominations, the service of an atheist as pastor is not only conceivable but actual. In one sense, Klaas Hendrikse is merely more open about his atheism than many others. Indeed, many liberal Protestants believe that God is, in the end, an intellectual concept that may add meaning to life — not a living self-existent deity who rules over all.

In Klaas Hendrikse’s case, his congregation belongs to two denominational groups. Neither denominational body was willing to bring Pastor Hendrikse to a church trial or disciplinary process.

In announcing the decision not to discipline Hendrikse, the church told the congregation by letter that a disciplinary process would amount to “a protracted discussion about the meanings of words that in the end will produce little clarity.”

Such is the world of liberal Protestantism. The service of a preacher who does not even believe in God is preferable to “a protracted discussion about the meanings of words that in the end will produce little clarity.” Of course, the lack of clarity is the church’s own fault. It is not as if the issues are not sufficiently clear. A denomination that will not require its pastors to believe that God exists is a denomination that has reached the very bottom of the well in terms of theological insanity. According to the news report, the Protestant Church in the Netherlands claims that its own laws prevent the denomination from taking any action against a serving pastor.

The theological self-destruction of the church never starts with a pastor who doesn’t even believe in the existence of God. It begins with denials of one doctrine here, another there. Before long, the unwillingness of the church to call its churches and ministers to account leads to further theological concessions. The cowardice of church bureaucrats opens the door to any and all theological aberrations. The next thing you know, there is an atheist in the pulpit.

A church afraid of “a protracted discussion about the meanings of words that in the end will produce little clarity” is itself the guilty party in that lack of clarity. The church bears the responsibility to make the issues clear and to defend the faith — otherwise it isn’t a church at all.

The Dutch have become famous worldwide for their liberal approach to assisted suicide and euthanasia. In this case we see something new — the suicide of a church.

