Yawning in the face of God: Religious boredom as a form of activism

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Abstract
Although the potential of boredom has been part of the Christian tradition from its very beginning, the experience of boredom among adult believers has often been stigmatized or silenced. In this paper I explore the ‘politics of boredom’, suggesting that the experience of boredom within faith communities may be a form of minority stress, indicating that sub-groups do not find themselves represented in the shared narrative and practice. I argue that while many disciplines, including psychology and theology, have a tendency to problematise those who are bored, it may be more fruitful to change this scope and investigate the boring. As an example I explore a feeling I call ‘Jesus fatigue’; the sense of being tired with the repetitive narrative investment in Jesus as a figure of inclusion, while actual inclusion is continuously postponed. I then discuss the subversive potential of ‘the yawn’, the open display of boredom, as a possible theological intervention that confronts tradition with its implicit exclusionary tendencies.

Keywords
Boredom, Jesus fatigue, theology, marginalisation

Introduction
It seems only appropriate that I start these reflections on boredom by sharing with you a small passage from the Bible that centres on falling asleep. I will read a few verses from the New Testament, from the book of Acts, to be precise: the book that follows the four Gospels and relates the travels and adventures of the apostles who spread the message of Jesus after his ascension to heaven. I read from chapter 20, the verses 7–12:

7 On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight. 8 There were many lamps in the upstairs room where we were meeting. 9 Seated in a window was a young man named Eutychus, who was sinking...
into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story and was picked up dead. 10 Paul went down, threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him. ‘Don’t be alarmed’, he said. ‘He’s alive!’ 11 Then he went upstairs again and broke bread and ate. After talking until daylight, he left. 12 The people took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted.1

I, too, am comforted by this story. It is only since very recently that I have started to come out as a bored believer, a coming-out which is perhaps just as scary as the one I had when I was 15 and disclosed to the world that I liked girls. As a bored believer, I find in Eutychus a sleepy ancestor that I can relate to. I recognize his eyelids that are becoming heavy as the discourse of the church just drags on, while the figures of authority stick to the form of the monologue.

Eutychus is only the first in a long line of bored Christians who has trouble staying awake, and when we follow this line, we see that boredom has always haunted Christianity like a shadow. We can for instance find studies on *acedia*, the state of indifference among early Christian monks, who were fighting the ‘noon-time devil’, as they described the after-lunch dip that troubled their concentration as they committed to their prayers (Crislip, 2005). An interesting study from Daniel Jütte (2020) brings to life disputes that took place during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation between ministers who complain about believers falling asleep in church, and believers complaining about ministers preaching too long or too wordy. This study shows that there have even been times when sleepiness during the sermon was such a big problem that congregations would appoint someone carrying a stick who would whack people who fell asleep (p. 1164).

Why are people falling asleep? Is religion boring? According to ritual studies scholar Harvey Whitehouse, it might very well be. According to Whitehouse, who studied Melanesian traditions, religious ritual needs to balance a fine line between frequency and emotional arousal. He coined the notion of the *tedium effect* to denote this tension: the repetition of rituals creates group coherence and engrains the tradition in people’s mindsets and habits, but has the risk of becoming dull. Innovation in rituals is more emotionally satisfying, but cannot be repeated as often and can also estrange people from the tradition (Whitehouse, 2000).

Other studies show how religion can be boring for youths who struggle with its long and complicated texts (Rackley & Kwok, 2016), the learning by heart of verses from the Quran (Rizki, 2023), or monotonously reciting prayers in shul (Coleman, 2018).

Religious boredom thus exists, across traditions. Is that a problem? What, in fact, is (religious) boredom? These questions, and many more, have I tried to answer over the past two years or so, ever since I finally admitted to myself that I, personally, do find my tradition, Calvinist Protestantism, increasingly boring. I realized that when you are bored enough, in the end there is only one thing left to do, which is to analyse your boredom. I have therefore been keeping a boredom-diary: a notebook on my phone, writing down any thoughts that seemed relevant. I have been collecting academic literature and took an interest in the representation of boredom in art and popular culture. I have now arrived at a paradox: I don’t know of any phenomenon that is so fascinating as boredom. I therefore want to thank the organizers of the International Association for the Psychology of Religion conference for the honour and opportunity to explore this together with you.

In this lecture, I hope to argue convincingly that religion indeed has a problem of boringness, and that we as scholars of religion should take this seriously, because if we don’t, we risk perpetuating conceptualizations of religion that uncritically adopt its self-definitions as interesting, and thereby support, or at least do not challenge, some of the darker sides of organized religion.

The lecture consists of three parts. In the first part, I discuss the ways in which boredom has been conceptualized in psychology and philosophy. I will suggest a perspective on boredom that takes not so much academic discipline, but questions of power, as its point of departure. In the
second part, I will then test this approach on a concrete form of religious boredom that I myself experience, namely, that of Jesus fatigue. Finally, in the third part, I hope to show how boredom can be made fruitful as a form of resistance or ‘talking back’ to religions’ oppressive mechanisms. This third part draws on an example taken from a contemporary novel. In other words, we move from the conceptual to theology and then to literature.

**Defining (religious) boredom**

So: what is boredom? One of the most quoted and concise definitions of boredom is that it is ‘the aversive experience of wanting, but being unable, to engage in satisfying activity’ (Eastwood et al., 2012, p. 482). Often, a further distinction is made between *state boredom* and *trait boredom*. *State boredom* is situational, caused by external circumstances such as a very unstimulating environment (Bench & Lench, 2013). It is the long sermon, the lamps that suck up all the oxygen, the continued delay of the meal that caused Eutychus to fall and die.

*Trait boredom* is part of the individual’s personality and is not necessarily related to circumstance, although it can be (Fahlman et al., 2013). It was something in Eutychus himself that was the problem. Even if he had eaten, if it were morning, if the sermon were short and delivered by a candy-coloured clown with a fancy PowerPoint and contained interactive elements, Eutychus would have fallen.

It is mostly this latter form, the boredom that comes from the inside so to speak, that has been researched in the field of psychology. Here, boredom is seen as a negative emotion that can even become a pathology that causes problematic or harmful behaviours. Boredom proneness, a person’s heightened propensity to become bored, can for instance lead to depression, anxiety and stress (Lee & Zelman, 2019), substance use (Ertüzün & Lapa, 2020; LePera, 2011), Internet addiction (Lin et al., 2009), reckless driving (Dahlen et al., 2005), binge-eating (Stickney & Miltenberger, 1999) and problem-gambling (Mercer & Eastwood, 2010), to name but a few negative outcomes. Scales have been developed to measure boredom proneness (Farmer & Sundberg, 1986; Vodanovich et al., 2005), and suggestions have been made on how to support individuals suffering from pathological boredom (Ghamkhafard et al., 2019; Jaradat & Ababneh, 2021).

A minority voice in the field of psychology has questioned the focus on negative effects of boredom and has pointed to the possibility of positive effects. Gasper and Middlewood (2014), for instance, argue that boredom can be a source of positive thought and innovation, as the catalyst of ‘the quest for meaning and exploration’ (pp. 53–55, see also Hunter et al., 2016).

This minority perspective sits well with the assumption, found in philosophy, that boredom should be taken seriously, because it is a clue to important existential questions. Søren Kierkegaard (1848/1984), for instance, argued that people should muster up the courage to face their boredom, so that they could stop escaping in entertainment, open themselves up for the transcendent, and grow into becoming more attuned to their surroundings and thereby more ethical. Likewise, for Martin Heidegger, boredom is a mood that can form a starting point to make inquiries about Dasein, or being-in-the-world (McDonald, 2019). Walter Benjamin saw boredom as a promise: the fact that people are bored with their circumstances, must mean that other worlds are possible, and they can start imagining those worlds beyond the superficial repetitions of what is presented to them in daily life (Moran, 2003).

**The politics of boredom**

While I find these approaches helpful, and while acknowledging the limits of this overview, I do find that many approaches tend to lean towards one of two extremes, namely that of problematizing
and romanticizing boredom. Both have their pros and cons. In the first instance, often found in psychology, boredom is seen as necessarily problematic and something to be fixed, without much room for its potential, but it does become evident that there are real, material consequences to the state of boredom, affecting real people in the actual world. In the second instance, found in philosophy, the existential and spiritual dimensions of boredom are recognized, yet these are then explored in abstract terms, by people who are clearly in a position to do so, and the material conditions under which people become bored disappear from view. In both instances, the cause for boredom is mostly located in human beings themselves, more concretely, in the individual. It is the individual who needs to be tested for boredom proneness, or who has to do some soul-searching to find the cause of her existential emptiness.

What we need, I propose, is an approach to boredom that combines the material, the existential and the spiritual dimensions, and that takes more seriously the question of circumstance. An approach is needed that asks questions about what it is that causes boredom. Many scholars have steered clear from that question, assuming boringness to be too subjective. After all, what is boring to the one is interesting to the other, so apart from perhaps art and literature critics, to many it seems a futile exercise to come up with criteria for boringness. But this lets boringness and those who are boring, off the hook.

I would therefore like to approach boredom from the perspective of power, asking how power difference is involved in the answering the question of who is bored and who gets to be boring. We need, in other words, also to include the politics of boredom. Boredom does not exist in a vacuum. Boredom is related to privilege and exclusion in a variety of ways, of which I will give some examples.

Boredom has an age. It is generally studied among adolescents (Hunter & Csíkszentmihályi, 2003) and the retired (Weinstein et al., 1995). This risks stigmatizing both groups as being especially boredom-prone. The Dutch language knows the words hangjongeren (‘youth-that-are-hanging-around’) and hangouderen (‘elderly-that-are-hanging-around’), but not, for instance, hangveertigers (‘forty-year-olds-that-are-hanging-around’). The effect of this stigma is that it deprives those between the ages of, say, 25 and 65, of admitting to boredom, as they are supposed to be resourceful enough to be able to solve their being bored. If they are bored, it is apparently their own fault.

Boredom has a class. This works in two directions. On the one hand, it is the elite that suffer from l’ennui, the boredom that comes with having all you need and not having to make an effort (Majumdar, 2016). On the other hand, Marxist literature on boredom strongly connects it to the working class’s situatedness in capitalism, to alienated labour and consumer society (Quesada, 2020). This is the boredom of the factory worker.

Boredom has a gender. Feminist theory on boredom has uncovered how both in cultural productions (such as Madame Bovary) and in real life, women in particular were prone to the boredom of being confined to the house and care obligations (Spacks, 1989).

And boredom has a colonial history and post-colonial present. Ugandan scholar LK Kezabu (2016) describes their becoming bored with an education system that has been introduced and produced by the former colonizer and that neglects knowledge that was produced locally. This is what novelist and critic Saikat Majumdar (2017) refers to as the banality of power: power often manifests itself not in the dramatic, and the lived reality of oppression is often not that of glorious resistance, but of being subjected to the boring: to oppressive administrations and bureaucracy, for instance. For many people living in post-colonial conditions, life includes living with the dysfunctional remnants of colonial administrations that were never designed to fit with their contexts in the first place. Using the work of political scientist Thomas Dumm, Majumdar argues that the experience of boredom is often a marginal experience, of lacking resources. It is the experience of being
left out and of not being able to influence what is going on: boredom is ‘an expression of discomfort at not wanting to be a part of a larger narrative while being acutely aware that one is’ (Dumm, 1999, pp. 2–3, cited in Majumdar, 2017).

Boredom can thus be understood as the canary in the coalmine. It can be a strong indicator that someone or a group is (partly) deprived of meaningful existence, that there are repetitions in play creating a narrative that serves the interests, questions and concerns of some, but not of others. Boringness can be a form of violence.

We therefore need to be very careful in blaming the bored, since they are often already in a marginal or vulnerable position, and instead shift the focus to what or who is boring. In the words of Madison Moore, author of the book Fabulous (2018), ‘Boringness is a privilege’. Some people can afford to be boring, others need to be fabulous in order to be noticed. Perhaps we should develop scales to measure boringness in people, rather than boredom proneness. And perhaps we should use the experience of boredom to reflect not so much on the meaning of life, but on the means of oppression in a given situation. This, I feel, is already a bit closer to my own training and research, as it would require, following Frumm, investigating the dominant, boring narrative.

**Jesus fatigue**

This is what I hope to do in the second part, where I reflect on the question of why I find my religious tradition, in particular its central figure of Jesus Christ, so boring.

I use the term *Jesus fatigue*, being tired of Jesus, to capture my experience of the Jesus story and how it is presented in my own church denomination, but often also when I make an excursion to other denominations, read the newspaper or social media, or read theological literature. It is, on the one hand, a form of *state boredom*. It is being exposed to repetition of the same, which is unavoidable for a religion that bases itself on a central figure or plot, in Protestantism, the plot of salvation. It is also possible that it is a form of *trait boredom*, that it is something in me that finds Jesus boring in a deep and existential way. Maybe it is even just snobbism: the academic who gets bored in church.

But there is, I think, also a deeper layer to it, which is related to the politics of boredom. Jesus fatigue to me involves a sense of continuous disappointment, resulting in existential detachment, caused by the continuous coexistence of the Jesus narrative, on the one hand, and exclusionary practices, on the other hand. As a sexual and gender minority in the church, I can attest to how the slowness of change, and therefore the dragging of time, puts pressure on the Jesus narrative. And I know there are others inside and outside my tradition who have much more reason than I do to feel that pressure.

The effects of Jesus fatigue are disturbing. It makes a person feel isolated, alienated. I am surrounded by people who do see the point. Even those who left the church or who never even were a part of it argue that Jesus was a ‘wise teacher and an exemplary figure’. Or perhaps I am wrong. Maybe they don’t mean it. Because sometimes I think there is a Truman-Show-like conspiracy going on, that *everybody* is secretly bored with Jesus, they just decided not to tell me to see how long I will keep going.³

Perhaps to my own surprise, though, it is not the experience of exclusion that is boring, but the narrative of inclusion. I would like to explain this by unpacking the paradox of inclusive Jesus.

**The paradox of Inclusive Jesus**

Inclusive Jesus, a term I take from Markus Bockmuehl (2011), refers to the phenomenon that over the past few decades, for many mainstream Christians in western countries, one of the central
features of the figure of Jesus is that he supports the notion of social inclusion. What has become leading in many churches and public theology is a version of the Jesus narrative that incorporates a number of recent social critiques such as feminism, LGBTIQ+ perspectives, decolonial and post-colonial perspectives, and antiracist views. Inclusive Jesus is a Jesus who withstands the test of all these critiques. It is for instance argued that Jesus has always been there for the marginalized, the oppressed and the underprivileged.

That institutionalized Christianity has not always lived up to this example, to put it euphemistically, is then the result of an inaccurate understanding of Jesus’ life and mission: if people would have a correct understanding of Jesus, they would know that he would also love queer people, poor people and people of colour. Moreover, Jesus has always been this way; it is just that we only now discover his full potential as in fact very compatible with social critiques. Inclusive Jesus thus leads to a convenient collective amnesia about the violence that other Jesuses have caused in history and present.4

What is so paradoxical about it: Jesus is so strongly centralized as an emancipatory figure, that the effects for actual people living in relation to this story are, in fact, counter-emancipatory. Jesus is brought into the conversation as the ultimate expression of God’s preference for the margin. Yet the effect is that the margin itself seldom gets to speak and is once again pushed away. What happens instead is that the margin is evoked as a rhetorical tool to serve the Jesus story and to firmly keep Jesus in place as a hegemonic religious figure, as the trustworthy and valuable core of Christian teaching and practice. Jesus is posed as the central figure of inclusion – but that he is central, is beyond critique. In order to reach his full emancipatory potential, Jesus continuously depends on those who need emancipation, or liberation. He then comes to function as a sort of black hole: he is the void into which all else disappears, a narrative suction or vortex, a character that feeds on other characters in order to stay alive.

There are many elements about Inclusive Jesus that may evoke boredom, I will briefly mention three.

First, any reference to Inclusive Jesus is often also immediately the end of the conversation. Once we have established that Jesus came to serve the underprivileged and excluded, no further action is needed. We do not need to gather any actual information about the excluded, because they are already safely incorporated in the Jesus story. We are relieved from the obligation to work on detailed analyses of how oppression and exclusion actually work.

Second, thinking back of Whitehouse’s study on ritual, we might even say that Inclusive Jesus himself has become a ritual, not in the sense of the eucharist, but via ritualized expressions about him. He has become a set of automatic statements, or clichés, in both Christian and secular contexts. I do not question the intentions of people who evoke Inclusive Jesus, but I do critique the effects of this repetition.

Third, Inclusive Jesus can do no wrong; he is a modern manifestation of the doctrine of the sinless Christ. This doctrine is not challenged by Inclusive Jesus theologies; the only thing that has been changed is the dominant perspective on what is regarded as sinful. And it is the survival of this doctrine that is one of the aspects that make Inclusive Jesus so boring, because sinlessness is boring. It suggests a static, infallible Jesus, instead of, what would be interesting, a Jesus who changes, learns, fails, reflects on his actions, and does a little bit better. Or perhaps even better: a Jesus who knows that he may need to take up a bit less space. A Jesus who now and again disappears, retreats from the scene.

In short, Inclusive Jesus is a well-meaning, but also a potentially superficial and boring answer to centuries of patriarchal, straight, cisnormative and white Eurocentric church building.
Boredom as a form of resistance and activism

Ever since I have been spending more time with my boredom, I have started to wonder whether the answer to the paradox of Inclusive Jesus might be yet another paradox, namely that of boredom as a form of activism. It sounds paradoxical because boredom sounds very passive, the void that is created by the absence of the interesting (cf. Kierkegaard, 1848/1984), a form of non-doing or non-feeling. But I have come to doubt whether that is really the case.

There is, I think, something very subversive in the conscious display of boredom. Visible boredom forms a threat to established beliefs and practices, because it confronts people with the potential meaninglessness of those beliefs and practices. Eutychus sits in the windowsill and falls asleep during a speech of the great apostle Paul, and in that way embodies a critique of the apostle so profound that many feminist theologians will be envious.

There is a power in boredom that I am only beginning to understand.

I would like to introduce one example to you from a novel I read over the summer that explains it so much better than I can do. Here, we thus change the register from theology to literature. It is from the novel The Shadow King, by Maaza Mengiste. This novel is set in Ethiopia, in the 1930s, when Italian troops attack the country and Emperor Haile Selassi flees to England. It tells the story of Hirut, a young serving girl who joins the Ethiopian resistance – via Hirut, the novel in fact tells the story of many women who were part of the armed resistance, but received little recognition for their bravery. The leader of the rebels is called Kidane, who becomes attracted to Hirut and tries to violently force himself on her. This is the scene that I would like to read with you, with a trigger warning that it contains the elements of harassment and violence:

He pauses and says, Say my name, tell me my name, say it.

Instead, Hirut, empty of words, tries to drown herself in a wave of indifference. She does this because he leaves her no choice and no chance and no hope and no escape, and because she will never have the right words to make a path out of this moment. And because there is really nothing, nothing left to say, Hirut opens her mouth. At first it is a mockery of herself, of her emptiness, but then her mouth opens wider of its own accord, a bubble rises up from the back of her throat into her head. And then, she yawns. It is both absurd and luxurious. A shock and a relief. It is a fist uncoiling and expanding inside her body, a long, extended breath singed and shaped by hate.

He gasps as if stumbling. As if he has just broken and is now buckling in half. As if that open mouth and that bubble of air have begun to undo him. Hirut sees his surprise, sees the way it traces a path across his eyes. He is so startled that his mouth sags open and his breathing stops until all he can do is gasp again. Hirut blinks and squints, baffled. She purses her mouth, readies it, and then slowly opens it and watches him flinch as if repulsed. She shuts her mouth and opens it again: it is a loaded gun that she waves in front of him.

Stop that, he says, confusion rippling across his face. He closes his eyes but it is too late. He is growing limp. (Mengiste, 2019)

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Perhaps boredom is not so passive after all. Hirut ‘tries to drown herself in a wave of indifference’. In all its desperate tragedy, it is an act, she wills herself into not caring. As though she were speaking in tongues, she opens her mouth and lets something else take over, her anger, her hate, as she participates in a speechless act that unarms the enemy. And then, when she witnesses the effect of
her yawn, she starts to master it, to use it consciously. It suggests that boredom can be cultivated, a carefully selected and perfected strategy.

Is it possible to overestimate the power of the yawn? Hirut’s one single yawn makes impotent the patriarchy, paralyzes the phallus. Her yawn is a loaded gun.

Perhaps we need to rehabilitate boredom from its negative reputation. It is not just a pathology, nor a starting point for abstract philosophical reflection, but a starting point for developing a critical attitude. Perhaps it can be a protection mechanism for those in the margins, a form of healthy emotion management on the part of those who risk being a target of the boring. Instead of investing in useful but also costly emotions such as frustration and anger, one decides to cultivate indifference. Being a bored believer is this not the same as leaving religion. It is being present in a confrontational, subversive way. We yawn in the face of God until he, she, becomes as fabulous as we know they can be.

**Conclusion**

I would like to conclude with some remarks about how the study of boredom might be relevant for the fields of religious studies and theology.

I may be wrong, but I think religious studies may have a bit of a bias towards defining religion as a set of meaning-giving practices, in a positive sense of the word. Religion is something people engage with because they can relate to it in a positive way: it gives them an identity, a sense of meaning and belonging, a ritual reality and so on. But how do you study religious boredom? Is the Christian who is bored with Christ still a Christian? Since admitting to boredom can make a believer vulnerable, how do you detect the bored, for instance during fieldwork?

Regarding theology, perhaps boredom could be the starting point of formulating a pubescent theology in which we are encouraged to slouch, yawn and doze off until things change, while the responsibility for the hard work of that change lies primarily with those who are boring.

In the meantime, out of sight, we start to play. Walter Benjamin has suggested that it is not the dominant narrative, but the scraps of that narrative that are interesting (Moran, 2003, p. 175). A focus on scraps creates a space to breathe for those who are bored with the repetition of the already known. Elsewhere I have argued that theology, when it takes seriously experiences of the margins, should be a form of cabin-building (Van den Berg, 2022). It builds unstable and temporary shelters with the left-overs of tradition: the characters, plots and stories that did not fit neatly in the dominant structures of systematic theology. In other words, a theology from the margin may speak back to the dominant narrative not only by yawning (deconstructing), but also by building (constructing), albeit on its own terms. Shelter building stands for a form of theology that cherishes democratic play: there are no boring bullies allowed in the shelter.

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Notes
1. Taken from the New International Version.
3. I here refer to the movie *The Truman Show* (Weir, 1998), in which main character Truman Burbank, played by Jim Carrey, unbeknownst to himself, is part of a television show. While all the other inhabitants of his fake hometown, Seahaven, are actors, Truman is under the impression that this is really his life.
4. Bockmuehl’s critique of Inclusive Jesus, as I understand it, is mostly that Inclusive Jesus has universalizing tendencies, and that in order for him to appear as inclusive, he needs a supposedly exclusive other (for instance: Jews and Gentiles). I support his argument for a reading of the gospels that allow for Jesus’ exclusivist beliefs and practices come to the fore (see also Avalos, 2015). From here on, my own argument develops more into the direction of the effects of Inclusive Jesus on those whom the narrative presumable includes.

References


