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Is Belief In God Irrational? | Meghan Sullivan

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The Veritas Forum

Meghan Sullivan is Professor of Philosophy and the Rev. John A O'Brien Collegiate Chair at the University of Notre Dame. In this lecture she discusses the rationality of the Christian faith from the stage at Montana Tech. ••• Please like, share, subscribe to, and review this podcast. Thank you!

Transcript

Welcome to the Veritas Forum. This is the Veritas Forum Podcast. A place where ideas and beliefs converge.

What I'm really going to be watching is which one has the resources in their worldview to be tolerant, respectful, and humble toward the people they disagree with. How do we know whether the lives that we're living are meaningful? If energy, light, gravity, and consciousness are a mystery, don't be surprised if you're going to get an element of this involved. Today we hear from Notre Dame philosopher Megan Sullivan as she discusses the rationality of the Christian faith.

In a talk titled *Is Belief In God Irrational?* From the stage at Montana Tech. I should tell you a little bit more of maybe about why I'm up here tonight and what got me to this point. In particular, caring about rationality on the one hand and caring about the Christian faith on the other, I mean you give you a little bit of unsolicited biography of me.

But then I want to talk about three big philosophical challenges I think people face, certainly Christians face when they try to decide if their faith is rational. These are challenges that at various times in my life I've taken to be really decisive, bad challenges to the rationality of my faith. But now at this phase, this season in my life, I think they do have potential answers.

So I want to sketch what I think those potential answers might be. But then open it up so that we can have a big conversation. And then if you guys are anything like my students

at Notre Dame, you're not going to be having any of my arguments and so you're going to have lots of objections and ideas.

And I'm going to hopefully leave you with the message tonight that that is a crucial part of living irrational faith, is having these questions and being willing to engage in debates. So I guess a little bit about me. I specialize in philosophy of time.

You can all be very grateful. I'm not going to give you a boring lecture about philosophy of time tonight. But I'm very interested in rationality.

And I haven't since I was a little kid. I actually just finished my first book about rationality, which you can all buy for Christmas next year. Somebody said it's a pretty boring one.

But you know, I was one of these kids. I grew up in North Carolina in a family that was somewhat economically unstable, irreligious, but not atheist. Not like Richard Dawkins' Andy's.

He's not even said at the dinner table and talking about all the evidence there was if there wasn't a god, how foolish people were to believe in god. Religion just kind of wasn't a thing in my family. We would occasionally make jokes about the really holy roller families that lived down the street to my Bible Belt town in North Carolina.

But otherwise it just was not an issue for us. And when I was getting ready to leave home, when I was graduating my school, I was pretty confident of who I was. I thought for sure that I was going to be an intern.

I really wanted to be a lawyer. I wanted to have a profession that was really stable where I'd make a lot of money and I'd be able to provide with my family. I'd see bad guys and I'd travel a lot.

That was kind of my vision of my career. And if you asked me if religion was going to be a component, I would have laughed and he said like I don't know if I'm very similar to religious, maybe I'll be kind of interested in it. But in general it was nothing that was on my radar.

And like happens to everybody, I mean adults in this room will definitely know, there's people who've been out of college list for a little while. You have your plans when you're 17 or 18 years old and you could be the best planner, most rational person in the world. They get screwed up.

Things change. When you change is a person who is dramatically not part of your life. And that's definitely what happened to me.

So how did I get interested in philosophy? I got to UVA. It was the fall of 2001. I thought

I'm going to sign up for all these politics and economics courses which are what you need to be a lawyer later.

And UVA said, "Ha, you're going to take the classes that we tell you to take." And they start being a philosophy course. And at first I thought like you know this class is kind of goofy. It was issues of life and death.

So a really big 150 person ethics course. But I loved it. I loved it from like the second week onward.

My other class is my politics classes. We were reading a meal Durkheim and talking about how bureaucracies are powerful or not powerful. And I just was not interested in that when I was 18.

I'm kind of interested in it now. But I was not interested in that. And Econ was fun but that was a big class and you just had to memorize the problem sets and you got your grades.

And the philosophy class was the first one where one, the teacher actually cared what I thought about the questions. So is it permissible to commit suicide? This abortion morally permissible. She's asked some questions that matter.

And I'm going to get a bad grade if I don't answer it sincerely and accurately. And two, we're learning how to argue. And I really love just ripping apart people's arguments.

And then I have this vicious tendency when I was 17, 18 years old. And the idea that there was a class where I could just do that to other students and get rewarded for it was an amazing discovery for me. So I started, I loved philosophy and I started thinking I should be more than I got more interested in thinking classes and more abstract reports, parts of philosophy.

The kind of philosophy I think now is definitely more abstract than the spectrum. But realized like the stuff I liked about it, you can just keep going deeper and further. Started getting really interested in it.

Carried a lot about being rational. I was the person that was like a real jerk in the lunchroom at college. Like we'd sit down and started conversation and you would say something innocuous.

Like I think France is a lovely country and then I would just go to town on you about all of the different objections I had to your claim. That was going to be in college. But another thing happened, my first year of college that was really important to getting me here now with you guys tonight.

And that was the September 11th attacks happened. And some people say like you know

those attacks were like they're wake up call. They realized we lived in a completely different world than they thought we lived in.

It wasn't like that for me. I mean I didn't know anybody who lived in New York or Washington DC. For me when the attacks happened in 2001 it was like an event happening in another country.

And I didn't really register immediately how important it was. But people at college were talking about it. It was coming up in my politics classes.

And it was kind of this constant hum of that like what is what's going on with the world? What are our lives mean? And I was away from home for the first time and I was starting to become an adult. And the inside story you know the Holy Spirit was starting to talk to me for those of you guys who are Christians in the room. He's got various faces.

People who convert to Christianity starting to hear these like whispers and polls. But one question that I got really stuck on which you know now strikes me as a very much first year philosophy major question. But at the time it seemed really profound to me.

It's like what is my life mean? And the way I thought about that question the way I really got stuck on it was like you got all these people who work in the World Trade Center. And they have the job that I wanted more than anything in the universe. You know they were high paid attorneys working for these really different corporations really important jobs.

And then one day they just died because some crazy people on an airplane flew it into their office building. And I started you know that idea started occurring me I'm strapped but then it started getting more serious. And I started thinking like what does my life mean? Someday I'm just going to die.

They're the lives of the people I love. And I'm really close with my family. What does it mean that someday they're not going to be here? And philosophy had some answers to that question.

Philosophers love to write like 600 page books about this question. What does it mean? And I read the books. And I was enjoying those but that wasn't like what I was looking for.

I started feeling like I really want a question about like why is life valuable? What is good? And it wasn't fun to get there. First anniversary is September 11th. So fast forward to 2002.

I'm still having these questions and then there's this big historic anniversary coming up. And I'm thinking like I want answers. Like I deserve answers.

People should be helping me make sense of this. It's not happening in philosophy.

Philosophy did do a big event about the meaning of life on the first anniversary of the September 11th attacks.

I had a lot of people who cared about me in my college community but nobody was really helping talk about these questions. And I remember reading this newspaper article The New York Times did about children whose parents had died in the World Trade Center and thinking like today's the day I have to like talk to somebody about what I'm thinking about. So I called my parents and you know this is the phase in my life where I talked to my parents for 30 prescribed minutes on Sunday.

And we just repeated the same conversation over and over again every Sunday. That was our relationship at that point. So I called my mom to work on a Wednesday and I'm like mom I just wanted to talk to you about like how much I love you and how we're all going to die.

But I put that's okay because like I think our love is enough. And talking to my mom and she's like one I do not have time for this. Like I'm in my coffee break.

Do like are you high? What is what are they doing up there? And she's like you know I think like you know this is heavy stuff and I really love you too and I really want to talk more about this with you maybe on Sunday. And you know we kind of hung up and I was thinking well you know I do really love my mom and she really cares about me but like that's not also what I was looking for. So I thought you know who talks about where I found some what sad things on days that memorialize them.

Christians. This is like a Christian thing. So I'll go to a church service and they'll be a speech there and I'll have a chance like intellectually engaged with somebody who cares about this the same way I do.

And by now it's like four in the afternoon and the only church services going on near my house or at the Catholic parish that's near where I live. So I'm like I'm just going to go like crash their talk. And I have no idea what goes on in a daily mess.

But I go there and it's me and like a few old ladies and the priest and it's a very typical weekday mess. The readings were set long before September 11th happened. And then we're digging the reams and there's lots of standing and sitting and people are saying things that I don't I've never heard.

I've got a church services when I was younger but I didn't really know I didn't understand the energy at that point. And there was a homily that was very brief and had absolutely nothing to do with the meaning of life or these big philosophical 18-year-old questions that I had. But I remember being there and thinking like and this is where you know you have the internal part of the story.

The Holy Spirit's working with you and thinking like okay this is where I need to be

looking. I've been looking at other places and wasn't finding any kind of relief. I wasn't finding the real sustenance that I needed to hear.

It is weird as hell and I don't really understand what's going on but there's something that these people have that I really want and need and I've been looking for but I don't understand. So I started going back too super secretly and went back first to like Wednesday masses for a while. I go you know had that great experience of God at that one Wednesday mass.

So I was like I'm a Wednesday mass person. I start going on Wednesdays and then after a couple months one of the parishioners or any boy that kind of clues me in that the main event is on Sunday. Like you just created the first day or two people.

You all like the real experience. You should start coming on Sunday. Maybe you should like talk with us a little bit more and get to know us and so I started getting to that and started attending church services on Sunday and I brought a lot of questions.

I mean I was still very much that kind of annoying underground philosophy major but I didn't have all the answers. You'll see tonight. I don't have a lot of great answers for you guys but they took my questions seriously.

They just talked to me a lot about Jesus and talked to me a lot about prayer and engaged me in prayer. Plus how many of my third year of college I decided I wanted to be a comic person in particular joined this Catholic church. Now all this is happening like behind my parents back the philosophy major and the Catholicism and Zostov were not talking about it anymore and it got really came to a head like my third year of college.

So you know I can remember the phone call or I told my parents like you know I'm getting like confirmed in the Catholic church and two months you guys want to come. They're like okay that's like super weird but you know also I guess what I'm not going to be a lawyer I'm going to be a professional metaphysician and they were like what is going on? It seemed like a sudden change and I think one of the things that surprised my close friends and family I didn't talk to a lot of my extended friends or family about this because I was very nervous for reasons why I was going in a minute but with my close friends and family I think one of the things that really struck them was it wasn't just that I went from not really caring about whether there was a God to really believe in God but I also believed all kinds of like really specific things like when they started talking to me about it it still I increased out to people of my family but I believe there's a God I believe these three persons in one substance and became man and dwelt among us and did all these things in Israel and it could be historically verified and that we eat his body and we drink his blood and there's this possibility of salvation yet after life looks a certain way as I go on and on with my parents about this they're like blood is going on but I've felt what I call now I think that there's a thick faith so a faith in God that also has a lot of particular components to it and one of the problems with having a faith like that is if you've got a

lot of beliefs rather than just one single like I believe in God and not answering questions you've got a lot of components then there's a lot that can be like attacked about it there's a lot of ways a really thick complicated belief system could go wrong and a lot to worry about and that really worried me as a philosophy major like I love pointing out inconsistencies and other people's beliefs and really I realized at this point when I knew I wanted to become a professional philosopher that I was in big trouble I definitely didn't feel like I had the confidence to defend the complete consistency of the Orthodox Christian canon at that phase in my life but I didn't really want to take any questions about it. I also feel like this is something that was really precious to me like it was something that I developed with God's help but otherwise kind of on my own with these small communities it was starting to really permeate how I lived my life like when I prayed and what questions I took to be really important and I didn't want any of the jerk philosophy majors like me to start attacking that like I wanted to keep that precious and so for a while honestly through the first two years of graduate school I just thought you got to keep these parts of your life separate.

You got the thing which is the thing I do on Sundays and occasionally on Wednesdays and the thing I do when I'm going to bed at night and when I wake up in the middle of the night and early in the morning and then there's the other philosophical part of my life where I just never bring up the fact that a Christian don't talk about it with my colleagues don't write about it you definitely don't engage in any control about it and it's just better if there's kind of this bicameral setup keep each separate. I think now that that was a mistake but I'll tell you a little bit about the kinds of objections I was particularly worried about and then how I started to think that maybe these aren't that significant is philosophical objections to having a faith that having a rational faith. So I'm just going to go through three you guys are going to think of a million more and that's going to be why this conversation was fun tonight but I'll give you three that I was really worried about and have been up until this point.

First objection I got from a lot of people when I started being a little bit more open about my faith life is that you only believe that because objection maybe some of you guys have gotten this but they say like look if Catholic Church hadn't been near your dorm or there hadn't been any Christian community in Charlottesville, Virginia or if you've been born enough to understand you wouldn't believe all of these complicated things about Christianity that you believe. Once you realize that it's so chancy so lucky that you form these beliefs that you were exposed to all this information when you were you should really doubt whether it's right whether you're rational and keep believing how many guys this quick show of ends it like heard that objection and think like yeah it sounds like pretty good things hadn't gone exactly right if I hadn't had the parents that I had if I hadn't been living next door to this kind of church if I'd been born in a really different culture I would have ended up in a really different position so that means I shouldn't be so confident that I ended up in the right position. I was really bothered by that for a while

but now I less so partially because I think a lot of our beliefs are chancy there's a temptation to want to make our religious beliefs so special I had that temptation for a long time the bigger religious beliefs so special they're so unlike any of our other beliefs that they really just play by a whole different set of rules but I don't know if that's exactly right so I'm a huge Star Wars fan that's one of my favorite topics to talk about and this is a spoiler but I don't feel really back this has been out for like 30 years you know Pat and I could have a disagreement about whether dark is Luke's father that's the spoiler we could have been with this agreement where I say Darth Vader is definitely Luke's father and Pat says Darth Vader is no way Luke's father and then I find out that Pat has only seen a new hope but I've seen all of the films I've seen all the films like Yearly for 20 years and so I'm not surprised that we disagree about this because I'm just lucky to have been in a position where I got the information with the crucial plot twist but Pat hasn't gotten yet because he hasn't seen the film so just a matter of fact that we disagree it seems lucky that I've had a chance to see the film and unlike you that Pat hasn't that's no reason by itself to think that my beliefs that Vader is Luke's father is irrational what you need is some claim that like my feeling that I've gotten revelations from God or from the right kind of church community or the right sources that in and of itself is suspicious that's a suspicious way of gaining information about God the same way you think like watching a film is not suspicious way of getting information about its father but then you think like what's so fishy about the origins of our religious beliefs so some of my beliefs especially the big ones like that God loves us and God exists I feel like I can somehow but it's just individually me and God in prayer other sources of belief I trust things that I read I trust people that seem authoritative and have done a lot of research I trust the church but I trust lots of people in my ordinary life too I believe in climate change I don't know anything about climate science I've never seen an Arctic ice core I just trust that people who are in a position to know a lot about this are telling me the truth until I've been with it otherwise same thing seems to be going on in my religious life in fact like all the ways I search for evidence in my religious life I think you're going roughly the same way I search for evidence in that rather part of my complicated western 21st century belief structure so I stopped being so worried about the you know you only believe that because kind of objection now another more direct objection is that religious faith is just by definition irrational and this is an objection you hear sometimes from people in different Christian communities this people will say like the whole point of having faith is you believe things without any evidence whatsoever and being rational means you look for evidence you hear this from major atheist philosophers like Richard Dawkins or there's a there's a philosopher at University of Chicago Brian Leiter who just wrote this really interesting very wonderful book called why tolerate religion which I recommend to you guys but he says he agrees with this point to think this by definition irrational here's what he says in his book this came out a couple years ago he says for all religions not just Christianity there are at least some believe central to the religion that first issue in categorical demands on action demands that have to be satisfied no matter what your previous desires are and no matter what incentives or distance settings the world offers

up so religion tells you live this way no matter what the consequences are and two letter says religion is also required to have beliefs that do not answer ultimately to evidence or reasons as these are understood and other domains that are concerned with knowledge in the world religious beliefs and virtue of being based on faith have to be insulated from ordinary standards of evidence and rational justification the kinds of evidence that we look for in common sense and in science so if you agree to that definition that's like what it is to have religious faith certainly Christian faith then it just follows like a really quick easy trivial philosophical argument that religious faith is irrational because the whole definition of real rationalities you're looking for evidence in responsive evidence but I don't think that's a definition of faith that we have to accept and that's definitely not my conception of what my faith is or what the Christian faith calls people to I think that we are made in the image of God and part of that image is image of a rational being something that's a thinking caring thing something with free will that's also not only able to free the act but freely and I think there's lots of evidence in the gospels of disciples learning more about God and changing their minds and updating their beliefs so one of my favorite examples that I like to meditate on is from Acts where Jesus has just ascended into heaven and he's been telling the disciples are coming back and the disciples are really excited about this this has been a profound experience for them so Jesus ascended to heaven and the disciples are standing there and they're just like looking over the sky you know he said he was coming back but any guys watched the space I watched two weeks ago this was so cool they launched a rocket into space and then immediately came back and just landed on this ship and the disciples thought Jesus was going to do that he's going up to heaven but then he says he's coming right back well they're standing out there and eventually like God has just sent a message to the disciples being like not immediately like be a delay you know you didn't you you guys assumed very quickly that the return of God was going to be imminent but that was that was something that you know misused of your reason but not and misunderstand like a misunderstanding of what was promised but not any defect in what God promised I think there's lots of examples where we're trying to understand God and we're doing it from a full heart and we're doing it in a way that's guided by God but we messed things up a little bit and we have to be part of it and God sometimes engages with us and helps us do that thinking sometimes we engage as a church in the community and help each other figure things out but that's part of having a life of faith you know said well certainly didn't lack any faith for a meeting to kind of wake up calls from God that he wasn't going back immediately I think that's a really good model for our faith and one that requires you like oh he's turning your mind on and not necessarily thinking that when you're engaged in your life of faith you just completely insulated in evidence that's a definition of faith that our at these counterparts want to voice on us because it makes it that much harder for us to defend the rationality of all the way now of course there are big independent challenges to the rationality in particular religious beliefs I think the biggest one's probably the problem involved so this idea that it's inconsistent to believe that God is morally perfect that God is omnipotent and then we live in the kind of world that we

don't live in where there's a lot of season before we're suffering I think that's a really serious problem actually gave an hour-long lecture rant at the central view Catholic high school today about the problem of people and very happy to talk with you guys a little bit about how I think about that as a philosopher but let's say like the living this life of evidence directed or evidence interested faith is easy because it definitely isn't there are all kinds of really interesting challenges but I think it can be overcome and in fact meditating on something like the problem people or how God can have foreknowledge but we could have genuine freedom a white guy would want to create it all as God's birthday these big philosophical questions thinking about them deepen our lives as faith I think if you say the part of your faith is loving God but you're not interested in trying to understand that what you love then it's a really weird and maybe perverse kind of love and not the kind of love that necessarily is the one we were promised in the faith so that's why I also don't think we have to accept the second objection which is like faith is by definition irrational now the third kind of objection and this is another one my students press me on quite a bit it's that having this kind of confidence in a really thick complicated religion like Christianity is somehow offensive given that we live in a really pluralist globalized society where we realize there are a lot of people very different religious beliefs or no religious beliefs at all and disagree with us on all of these really particular claims that we want to make about that so you might think like there's something offensive about me standing up here trying to say that I'm really confident in the truth of Christianity what I know that my next door neighbor is Muslim and that he has lived his life with similar intellectual virtue to me and his brother Bible and his red uh read the karen and his thought through these issues and he has become very convinced of the truth of Islam so isn't that a sign that both of us should just not be confident or beliefs at all anymore there's this kind of disagreement and in some cases when there is disagreement you should lose confidence that you've gotten it right so I will pick on Father Bretta my father Bretta and I go out for this big fancy dinner I'm glad to believe he likes fancy dinners and the check comes and we agree to split it which probably if I were a better parishioner I just pay for it but we're here to split it and we need to pay the tip and so we both do our quiet calculations and we come up with really different numbers about when we over tip both have a greater time taking 15% of 72.

If we find out we disagree and we both try to do the calculation then we should both like chill out and do the calculation again we should shouldn't be super confident that I got the right answer in that scenario and in some cases when we find out people disagree with us that's exactly the irrationally appropriate reaction to take but that's not always the case it's like my Star Wars example from earlier comes out if you think we weren't in exactly the same situation to begin with some visa V maybe our relationship or knowledge about God I don't think me and my neighbor Drusa have been in exactly the same situation vis-a-vis information in government.gov he wouldn't say the same thing about me either we're in really different situations that's one reason to maybe avoid losing confidence so quickly another reason is it's easy for us to recalculate the tip but

the information that we get about something really complicated and difficult philosophical challenge like rational religious faith it might not be so easy for us to sit down and like reanalyze all the evidence that's gotten us to this point like I can't really go back and revisit those moments of prayer that increased my confidence or these particular aspects where I thought God was involved in my life or that all these bits of complicated information they got to me to this point it's not the kind of thing that I could do a quick recalculation of so maybe that's also some reason at least morally justifies me in sticking to my guns. Now there's a way of being confident in your religious beliefs but also not being a jerk about it and I think that a lot of my students think that just disagreeing with somebody about a complicated question in my religion or morality is in and of itself kind of offensive and so the best thing we can do is try to just take people we disagree with and make sure make our views as similar as possible try to bring their views together so that we can all agree that we don't find ourselves in this complicated situation of disagreement before and disagreement can be tough but it doesn't have to be that way and in fact I think it shows a lot of respect to our counterparts and other religions when we take it seriously that their religions make these big literal claims about the world and its history that they do have big things that we can debate about and that they think they have evidence for rather than just trying to like appropriate them to argue and boil down our views in the process. I think it's the kind of thing where a diversity of religious faith is actually an invitation for us to talk about the thickness of complexity and importance of faith in our lives and it doesn't have to be offensive in any way as long as you're willing to handle the spirit of charity.

So I'm no longer convinced by that objection though of course you find yourself in disagreements with people that matters in religion and they can give very needed and they can get uncomfortable and they can lead us to sometimes not live up to our moral ideals and in those cases probably we should stop having the disagreements but that doesn't have to be a threat to our belief like in the first instance. So those are three things I used to worry about quite a bit but now I think I've got you know good philosophical faces for thinking I'm all right with my faith. I want to leave with maybe more positive claim about why being Christian has actually been really good for me as a philosopher.

I'm a huge fan of Aristotle. How many guys have read Aristotle? Oh that warms my heart. Usually I get people being like I thought this wasn't going to be a philosophy talk.

I love Aristotle and Nico McCain ethics is his big book where it's basically his lecture notes to his students and ancient Greece about how to live their lives and his big advice in book two of the ethics is don't read theories. I mean it's good for you to have theories about what it is to have a good life. It's good for you to read books saying what your life means and why death would be bad.

That's I really desperately wanted theories when I was in the beginning of college but

theories only take you so far. If you really want to learn to live well you want a good life you need to find examples. You need to find people who have led good lives and you need to put yourself under their study.

You need to learn the habits that have gotten to them to where they're going and you need to learn how to judge what's good about in your particular circumstances. And I've really been convinced of that as a moral theory but also as a Christian one of the things I think is really wonderful about the Christian faith is you have the person of Jesus Christ whose life you get to participate in really actively as a Christian you need to learn a lot about. You have the saints and pulling men and women who participated throughout history and the similar kind of like learning to be a good person by developing the right habits you know a church that comes alongside you and tries to help you develop those habits.

It doesn't always get everything right but it gets you a lot closer than any book that you could purchase as far as a noble or at the very yoga or Montana type bookstore. I think we are. I think it's a path that like walking on you're more likely to get the answer right.

One of the other things I love about Aristotle is he tells his students the whole reason we study philosophy in the first place is not so that we can find ourselves in a situation where we can know what virtue is but so that we can live well otherwise there's no benefit of it. There's no point in being a philosopher. And that's another thing I've really become convinced of like I love being clever and smart and winning arguments and knowing the definitions and very complicated logical terms when I was younger but now from myself in the scenario like I like doing philosophy because it's habit that goes alongside my religious faith but answers this question that I know I'm searching after which is how to live well and it's a question that's not unique.

It's across the human experience. It's a question that actually freaks thought you have to take a whole course on but it's one that you know maybe I find a group that starts to have the answer. So that's where I'm at but I'm hoping we can have like a big debate.

If you guys can think of really great arguments for the irrational and Christianity I know a bunch. So we'll have a good argument but thank you so much. There's two questions that I have take a little bit of context with them but the first question actually is based on the discernment process that I have and I was born and raised here in Duke Catholic magma conception in youth central and raised Catholic my whole life but my true discernment in my religion didn't come about until my freshman year in college and and don't hold against me that I went to MSU.

I have three children that graduated from Montana Tech so I get a I get an indulgence. But when I was at MSU the very first weekend that I was there I of course being born and raised Catholic I went to Mass at Resurrection parish and the priest there was Father Conjo-Kelwood and Father Conjo was a good friend of our families and I knew him when I

was growing up. I walked into and it wasn't a church thing it was the ag auditorium we didn't have a church yet.

So I walked into Mass and Father Conjo said to me why are you here? I thought oh my god theology test here on a Sunday night and I said you know the standard answer was it's Sunday Father and he looked at me again and he very sternly said no why are you here? Many saw that dear and headlight look that I had and I really was stumbling for what he was trying to say or ask and my discernment came out of not a crisis as 9/11 but it came out of fear. I'm sorry Father but it was fear of a parish priest. It was all good Catholic kids born and raised.

I was definitely afraid of pastor and he said another thing to me that left a great impression on me and he said don't let the ritual become the religion. I really had to think about that for a second and he smiled at me and he said and he really encouraged me to Saint Thomas Aquinas and said you might want to read a little bit now. Well this was before Google and so I was stuck with going to the library and looking up if they had anything on Saint Thomas Aquinas and they did.

One book that I found was Summa Theologies and I got to admit that made my head hurt and as I read it I knew out of fear that that flowing Sunday Father would be asking me some questions. So I checked out the book took it back to my dorm and you should have seen the looks I got. First week of school and I bring it back a book by Saint Thomas Aquinas.

But some certain things stuck with me from that book and they still do. But what came rushing in was in my many years of my Catholic upbringing and there was very little from that and I was an algebraic where Latin was mass. There's very few things that I remember.

I remember in the moment in God created an alias here to salt his own end. The rest of the mass I didn't know really what it meant. Also in Latin I can still sing jingle bells in Latin.

That was from Good Central. But I really didn't have an understanding of my faith or my religion. But when I read Saint Thomas Aquinas two things stuck with me and they still do.

But in that he said there's a twofold manner for which we come to know God, reason and sacred teachings. In that book he talks about the five demonstrations of God's existence, the five ways that he talks about. And I began to get very fascinated with that and if you ever want to read in that it is fascinating.

He also said that faith is an intellectual habit. You really have to think about your faith. You have to think about your religion.

In essence a good deal of experience, inquiring ability to avoid intellectual distraction is needed to apprehend the important principle. And that brings me to my question, my first question. Dr. Sullivan in your opinion and drawing from your experiences, do you believe we as a society are giving ourselves a just chance to answer the question of whether faith is rational or not? Given the fact that the very nature of our society is one of distraction, can we cultivate serenity to the point that we can truly participate in any form of meaningful reflection or dialogue upon the constructs of that issue? That's a great question and the role of contemplation in religious faith is one that I have not actually thought too much about it until about a year ago.

So I started teaching this class of Notre Dame called God in the Good Life. And one of the readings, I wanted to add some readings about different Christian teachings about heaven. So I have an acquaintance who very famously says that we're only active in making choices and doing things in this way.

But it takes this idea from Aristotle and just runs with it. In the next life it's going to be almost wholeheartedly devoted to contemplating God. And I read this and I don't know about you guys but I'm terrified of that prospect.

But like imagine what kind of it was something like the quietest part of your church service when you're just silently praying. And now imagine that's you for eternity. There's no Netflix, there's no family.

There's this clip from the Simpsons where our home or our German birthright Catholicism, I don't know if you guys have seen this episode, but Marge is like freaking out because she's talking about Protestant pastor. Protestant pastor tells her they're going to go to a different heaven. That's not true but that's what he tells her.

And so she imagined she goes to Boston and that everybody's playing croquet. It's kind of like a really nice country club atmosphere. Babbard and Homer and Catholic heaven where they're like one doing Irish dancing and they're jumping on trampolines and they're having these big parties.

And she freaks out because they're not going to be together. But one thing that's nice about that image is like both images of heaven are people doing things and like socializing. It's just kind of like everything good about our day-to-day bourgeois lives here just extended into eternity.

And that is basically my default view of heaven. But that's not necessarily the view that we get in the tradition. And one thing the tradition convicts us really a lot on, I think, is we have to take seriously the idea that the life that we're really aiming at is going to be dramatically different than the life that we structure here.

And one of the ways it can be very different is the sense of like contemplation of God is

going to take precedence over everything. But we suck at that. Like, you know, do it for a brief amount of time when we're in church and maybe when we're praying before bed at night or before meals for a very brief period of time.

And if we're lucky, we're not thinking about anything else but I don't know about you guys. On Sunday mornings I'm thinking about where we're going to go to brunch. And then I'm thinking about whether I can sound very eloquent while I'm praying.

It's not going to be like that at all. It's going to be total quiet. And just like us and God, these experiences are very hard to have in this life.

So I think the way that we live our lives now makes it very hard for us to understand what God has promised us. So that's something I've been thinking quite a bit of talking with Christians and various denominations and oncons, but that is whether or not the things that I'm quoting myself into right now take a lot of pleasure from actually distracting me from what I should be thinking about when I say that I'm looking forward to this promise that God has made. So I think it is something we have to be really intentional about.

David Foster Wallace has this really great article called This Is Water. He's not talking about religious faith at all, but I read it through Christian lives. He talks about how we just need to give him the practice of disrupting our day-to-day lives and trying to think more deeply about what things mean.

So he's like, you know, you're in line, you're in a long line at the cashier to check out at the big box store and you're just kind of angry, just miscellaneously angry at everyone around you. The line is slow and you're tired and you want to get home. He's like, those are the times when you should interrupt what you're doing and just think about what this all means or how amazing it is to be a lot.

He's, it takes a very secular view forward. But I think those are times when we should be practicing quite prayer, times when we need to interrupt and remind ourselves, like, this could be another way of like where we're entering the way that we see this world and would like give our faith some, the hope that we allegedly have will make that hope seem much more real-class. But it's not easy.

I'm not getting off Facebook. Father Brad is like, he never got on. It's too late for me.

Thank you. Second question. Initially, this may appear as though I'm anti-technology.

This question, I have not. As father introduced me, my life is immersed in technology. My job is.

But what I'm seeing in my, as I teach up here, I've taught up here for seven years with my students, what I'm seeing is giving me pause of what I see and the impact of

technology is having upon our society. It is giving me pause. But the privilege to this, and I, and I didn't go back to my college days, but one of the assignments I had to read back in college was understanding media by Marshall McLure.

There's a famous quote out of that book, but it says, the medium is the message. Well, Marshall McLure was actually doing was, he was prophesying the dissolution of earth in your minds. Perhaps that is very, is gaining more impact now, much more than when I read it back then.

But with technology, we are distracted. It makes it difficult. And with a linear mind, technology today, especially the internet, the average time that an individual spends looking at an internet page is 10 seconds, 10 seconds, and then they're on to the next thing.

So my question, relative to that, is do you believe, and I should, another preference is, the students that talk with me after class many times, I don't see they have a great problem with defining faith. Most all will have a strong belief in a Supreme Being. What it might be that may differ, but they have a strong belief in a Supreme Being.

But they really question me about, and ask me about, is religion. Not so much the faith, but the religion. The question, do you believe that the difficulty in choosing what religion, if you need to follow for today's youth, is grounded more in the nature of thinking, shallow versus deep, or in their perception of relevancy? This is a great question.

And there are a couple things to say. One, when students come to me with this question, I get this question a lot from undergraduates in the internet, and they're like, I love God, but I don't want to be Catholic. I don't want to put myself under the authority of the church.

And Boston students might say the same thing about the church that they grew up in. They don't want the institutional aspect of it. They just want the feeling and the hope that it gives them personally.

And I think at one hand, you've got to follow your conscience. So those tell my students, well, if you've been praying about this and thinking about it, you should follow your best judgment about where to look. But don't give up too easily.

I can't, and this maybe sounds super Catholic, but I know other Christians and different groups who feel the same way, I can't imagine being a Christian outside of the church for a couple of big reasons. One, it's very hard to get this evidence that makes your faith rational. Like, I feel like that gives me some support and information individually.

He reveals to me sometimes in prayer that he's there, that he loves me, that he's got a plan. But otherwise, he's pretty not communicative with him. He doesn't share a lot of important information about who he is or how I should live.

Those happens I'm talking about that I think are really important when we're sitting in good life. I don't get a lot of that directly for me to God connections, but I get a lot of it from learning about the tradition and the faith. And that depends on trusting other people.

And it also depends on the kind of division of labor, realizing some people have different colleagues. Like, I'm called to doing some of the logic about these questions. Some people are called to heal and to provide that kind of support.

Other people are called to do other things that God wants to happen in my life. And if I take myself out of a community with them, I'm not going to get all of this access to God that is what I really want. I just can't do it on my own practically, there's no way of doing that.

And I do really believe that God wants there to be a metaphysical church, like a big Christian church. It's important. And Augustine has this really great line in non-Christian teaching.

So he writes this book trying to teach people how to teach Christianity. And he's like, you guys have to be really careful with the interpretations of the Bible that you're using and take these interpretive questions seriously, because the interpretation is how we get a lot of information about God. And then he goes on to say something I think very beautiful.

It's like, God could have made it easy on us. This is paraphrasing Augustine. He could have just let all of us have that information individually.

But he wanted to make it hard because he wanted us to have to get together and love each other enough and depend upon each other enough to get the whole picture together. He wanted there to be a church. And if he was just giving us individually everything that we needed, that there'd be no impetus for us to do anything together as a community.

So instead, in his infinite wisdom, he said things up so we'd have to depend upon each other. So when students come to me and they say, like, they don't want any part of religion, you know, there's a charitable way of interpreting that where they're just saying, like, you know, a lot of the stuff that this religious tradition I grew up in is saying things that I'm now starting to question. Well, that's awesome.

I mean, that's just a sign you're getting smart and you're raising questions. We're taking this seriously. But if you say you just don't want to be with other people, you don't want to go to low, that sounds to me like, you know, saying, I'm going to synthesize my own antibiotics this year, because I just don't like trust other people to do it for me anymore.

I don't like medical community. It's like, okay, you're making your life much harder than

it needs to be. And you're probably missing out on a lot of goods that like a certain amount of trust in community would afford.

But I also, I understand the like frustration and certainly in this like hyper-political comment in the United States where religions often mixed up with other institutions that I think we really are in questioning, you know, there's some brain truth to that movement that needs to be honored. My question is, do you believe that church is necessary, like, an actual gathering of other minds as a collective to come together in order for you to have an actually strong spiritual connection in one way or another? I think so. I think there are ways of worshiping God individually, ways that we're called to worship God individually.

But for most of us, and I don't know, you might have a very special call into like individual cloister in life. But I think very few of us have that special ability to worship God on our own. It's a great gift if you have it.

But for most of us, we need other people on fellowship to do it right. So I think like your default standpoint should be to want to do it in a community and to take that community point in your obligations to it quite seriously. But you know, there are some, I believe that there are some individuals throughout history and maybe even today who are called to a certain kind of religious life that's very isolated.

But that's very rare and definitely not the kind of like the most push you think that we've got. I have two quick questions. One of the things when I was taking some philosophy courses was the one big thing at least on a logical basis, or it seemed to be, was Pascal's wager.

And I would like to know your comment about that. My second question is how has this evolved with the intellectual thought about philosophy that has become as much feeling as it has been to watch. So Pascal's wager, how many of you guys are familiar with Pascal's wager? There are lots of different variations of it.

There's actually this really awesome long article in our main journal philosophical review from a few years ago that tries to classify every different existing version of Pascal's wager. Just to say it's still taking quite seriously philosophy circles. But the basis just to Pascal's wager is like you have a choice you can either believe in God or not, like do the things of believing in God when required or don't do them.

And you could either be right or wrong and then you draw this little diagram of believing God in your right, you get eternal happiness in heaven, believe in God in your wrong, you know, you miss out on sleeping in on some Sundays. Don't believe in God in your wrong, the eternal damnation or at the very least like something like that. Don't believe in God in your right, then you save yourself some Sundays.

And the idea is the dominant thing to do is to believe in God because the potential cost of benefits, if there's even a slight probability that God exists, make it the thing that you should wager for, just make the rational thing to go for. And I love William James' response. William James loves the idea of Pascal's wager.

The multiple he talks about how he's fascinated by the argument, but come on, like nobody gets up on Sunday mornings and goes and prays and gives alms and does all the things that you're called to in a serious Christian or Jewish or Muslim life because they're performing that little calculation every morning. That's just not like the basis of a real thing. And that's not, that might get you one piece of the belief like God or not God, but it's not going to get you all of the other things that go into having a rich faith.

So James is really critical, I think rightly of Pascal's wager, but then James goes on to make a really interesting insight, which is, Pascal wasn't wrong in the sense that sometimes we don't have a lot of evidence either way about what we should believe. But we think like it's so valuable to me that this might be true, that this could be an important part of my life, that I'm going to go ahead and risk holding the belief until I've got good reason to think I made a mistake. So there are two ways of thinking about your belief life.

This is how James points it out. One is you're the kind of person that never likes to be wrong. So you always hold back on believing until a ton of evidence is commented.

This is how the skeptics live. And James says like that's how some people want to live, and that is a way of living your life. But that's not the only reasonable way of living your life.

Another way is to go ahead and believe until you've been freaking wrong. And sometimes you have to think you're really expect. But it involves trusting.

And James says like we do this in lots of other components of our life. Like I'm in a relationship with somebody. And I want to believe that they really love me and that they're being faithful to me.

I can either demand a ton of evidence that can become like that person in the relationship. It's constantly like prove you love me. Let me see all your text messages.

So I want lots of information. Or I can just go and say like I'm going to go ahead and like believe that you love me until I've got some decisive reason otherwise. Because like that's like having a thinking elite with faith on you.

It's hard just having a good life or having this relationship. And James is like Pascal wasn't wrong in the sense that sometimes we go ahead and like do things for pragmatic reasons because they're going to be good for us even if the evidence still hasn't come in. And I think that part of the way is really good.

In philosophy, I'm not a professional theologian. In philosophy there's kind of a big division between different camps. Some of it's artificial but some of it's real.

No one can be up with analytic philosophers who are really into formal logic and rigorous law of law. And then you've got continental philosophers who are more interested in phenomenology and might be more in the feeling of camp that you're talking about. My training is more on the analytic side.

And my experience there is that there are some philosophers of religion who work on like giving really detailed arguments in the whole philosophy. But for the most part it's pretty hostile place to religious beliefs. Certainly people have any kind of like think religious faith.

That's for kind of artificial and historical and sociological reasons. Not because there's any problem and principle with being interested in this kind of philosophy of believing in God. But that's you know hard to square.

Like I'm really lucky. I'm at a department in a university that's unabashed of being Christian and is very happy to what they be as like freaky as I want to be about my religious beliefs. But in many departments where I can talk or where I'll visit people that are a lot more suspicious and weirded out when we talk about religious issues.

So we'll then we'll see this video and be weirded out by it. That I think is a real problem for philosophy departments because there's absolutely no reason if I convince you of anything like in principle to think that we can't think about the existence of something like God. The same way we'll have knockdown drag out arguments about whether numbers exist.

These questions can be pursued at the highest standards of academic philosophy. For some reason certain questions are off limits. And as a result a lot of professional philosophers I think they're not working on the kinds of questions that would draw a couple hundred people on a Thursday night away from Netflix to do philosophy.

Like I don't know how many of you guys would come out to have this big debate about what a number of people exist. But it's like a deep acting professional philosophy. I think that they don't they don't honor these questions seriously as maybe they would have long years ago.

And it's just for so historical. Is it maybe maybe it will change. In your life of faith have you ever been influenced or have you ever personally ever experienced miracles? Number one and then do you have an answer based on your experience it could be with miracles or otherwise? What can solve modern day deals that you feel by the most pressing? Thank you.

Solve all the world's problems. The miracle's question is really interesting because that's

a point where it depends on really what you mean by miracles. You might think of miracle as like a clear violation of the law of nature.

And I guess in principle I'm hoping to do those miracles happening but I've never witnessed something like that. That is probably depending on you can give me a big debate and metaphysics about what a law of nature even is and that makes the question either harder or not hard. We can talk about that with a reception especially if I have like a piece of paper like a drawing but I won't do that.

We'll see that there's another conception of miracle that I absolutely believe in which is just this idea that there are ways that God intervenes in the world. And I think he does it through sacraments. I think I witnessed something miraculous on Sunday when I participated in communion with my church or when God was there with us in a way that changed over the course of the mad hour.

That's what you mean by miracles and I think we're very like we're blessed to have lots of ways that God has made possible for us to to see him and interact with him and really like not abstract get out of your head kind of ways. This goes maybe a bent to one ear point chat. It's a big part of my faith life is getting out of my philosophy head and not just like reading philosophy of religion but going and praying and being there in the moment and being with God.

And those kinds of encounters I think God does make available to us. We have to be open to them but they're definitely there. And those I don't think pose any believing in that doesn't pose any irreconcilable challenge to like science or having scientific worldview.

And I also don't think nothing in our faith requires us to turn ourselves off to true science. They should be perfectly compatible. In that sense whatever kind of miracles that God provides for us have to be compatible with what we're going to start to make the future of the world.

How do we cure the world's illness? That I don't know. Great. Great, harder.

Be kind to people. So you know realize that we're one of the ways that God shows himself in the world. Four thousand.

I'm pretty confident that there's a lot we can do just as individuals with each other to help make a big difference in the world. I'm pretty optimistic that there are charitable donations through how we spend our time through welcoming the stranger. The other advice and picture of the good life we get from the attitudes always that God thinks the world is going to be said right.

And you know there's no promise that it's going to happen in our lifetimes only to see it but I think part of that is also thinking like eventually this the good life that's going to be

made available at all. It's all you see good. So that's my best advice.

I can give you more particular politically motivated advice also at the cocktail party after all of this. So I'm a student and the question I want to ask is why and something that's physically challenging to me but it doesn't really mean that I'm doing my thing. So I've always struggled about the concept of going down in eternal.

I started finding knowing exactly what's going to happen and me see having a choice to do whatever you have to do. So basically to me it means even before the world was me God knows every single thing that's been happening and I know he knows. I just didn't understand how.

And I was actually thinking about that and I just got to talk about it but maybe it's just God. I don't know what to think about that. That's a fantastic question and an incredibly hard philosophical question in philosophy and time which I think I'd have an amazing answer to.

But I will tell you that's what I think about constantly. This is one that I think about in like the morning when I'm awake thinking about God. I don't have an knockdown answer that I'm satisfied with but I can talk about the options.

I once gave a address of like my church when I was in New Jersey asking me to give a philosophy talk to them like this and I decided to do your problem. So here's the problem. God knows absolutely everything.

He's completely omniscient which means he knows every fact that could be known including facts about the future. Who will win the Super Bowl next year. Who the 46th President of the United States is going to be and what it's going to end.

Every possible choice that we're going to make from here going forward. But it's also really important that we have really strong free will because otherwise if God set us up to be just kind of like robots knowing exactly what we would do and every choice that we're ever presented with in our lives then God would be responsible and it seems for all the horrible things that we do but God's morally perfect so we can't be. So we have to have some really extreme we call libertarian free will.

It has to be the case that we are the ones that decided and you give a moment what we're going to do. Anytime I'm opposed to the choice. So I you know somebody after this talk offers me a bribe to do something.

I don't know what anybody would bribe me for. This is the example they always use in the philosophical literature. They offer me a bribe.

God knows whether or not I'm going to take it. He knows right now before the bribe is even offered whether I take it but presumably it's up to me whether I take it and I

haven't decided. So contradiction.

What do you do? Give up on God's omniscience or give up on the strong free will that's important in his moral protection. And you have a couple options. One is like rethink omniscience.

So some people do that but that's oftentimes in odds with with orthodox Christian traditions because in God has a lot of power and he thought he has. If God's all perfectly all powerful and in control and has provenance he's able to direct everything in the history of the world to his ends and you can't do that as you don't know what's going to happen next if you're able to claim that. So that's a problem with that response.

You might think we don't have this genuine kind of free will. If you say that then the problem with evil which is the worst rational problem facing religious believers becomes even that much harder to solve. You can say that maybe God is outside of time and that makes things a little bit easier.

So God doesn't see the passage of time or time doesn't pass for him the same way it passes for us. That's a common move in the tradition but then it's a little bit weird because you might think it raises questions like I know right now that it's 8.22 p.m. and in a minute it will become 8.23 p.m. Maybe you guys are watching the watches too. But like God if he's outside of time couldn't know that it's not 8.22 p.m. forgot so he couldn't know what time it is.

So there's something I know that God doesn't know. That's like what? So this is a you can see at like 3 a.m. you run down the rabbit hole and like starting to run out of options and I don't think any of those are satisfactory. This is one of these questions that I think like like you brought up it doesn't like make me not want to go to church or make me believe that God doesn't exist and love me.

But it makes me think wow there is a huge philosophical attention in my worldview. Now I think like how bad is that? Well it's pretty bad especially if you want to know everything like I do. But you know there are lots of tensions.

There are lots of philosophical paradoxes like this. The liar paradox so this sentence is false. Is that sentence itself true or false? That's another one you can think about at 3 a.m. and every possible option is really bad.

But that's not a reason but to also like you know give up major important structure in parts of your life. It's just a reason to like think that you know these philosophical questions are really tricky. You don't really understand time as well as we should.

We should pay more people to study the philosophy of time. But I mean you write that that's a really big puzzle. I guess if you had to put my money anywhere it would be on God being outside of time.

But like I said I don't think that obviously solves the problem it's meant to solve. But I gave this talk at my church. That's how I ended.

Like moving through all the different possible solutions and all of them were completely inappropriate. And then they were like okay so what does the Catholic Church say on this? And then I was like oh the Catholic Church says some stuff that seems kind of inconsistent. And then they didn't invite me to ever give a talk.

So yeah the metaphysics lecture series in St. Peter's. So I know that when you come to college or when you're leaving home for the first time that's sort of the time you get to make some breaks of faith. So for like college students or people who are struggling with their faith what do you think is the biggest component that either keeps or makes problems with faith or has some struggle with it.

So in terms of my faith life where I've struggled in there and it's not been like roses ever since I decided to believe. Like I get through periods and pretty tensed out. Something that helps me a lot is how you have like you know your church community you go to but you've also got your close friends.

This goes back to Aristotle. Book eight of Aristotle's ethics. He says you've got three kinds of friends you possibly have.

It's important to have all of them but one category is most important. So the least important category is he calls friends of utility. So people that you hang out with because they'll be get something that you want.

So you can't play tennis unless you have another friend that's wanting to show up with the court or people that are friends because they'll give you a ride somewhere you want to go. These are friends you pretty quickly discard and you only care about them because they're means to smother act. So it's okay to have some of those.

You also have friends of pleasure. So this is what we normally think of with friendship and like people. You spend a lot of time with because they just give you feelings of happiness.

You like the same jokes. You like to do the same activities. You just like them they make you happy.

Aristotle says that's an important kind of friendship too but that's not the most important one. The most important ones he calls friendships and birds you. But these are basically people in your lives who actually might not mean to have them all the time but you care a lot about your soul and your development and your your goodness.

You're a eudaimonia and how close you are to getting that kind of goodness and they're willing to talk with you pretty frankly about when you're messing it up. But they're also

willing to like take you seriously and listen to you. And I think in my life, Christian life, various phases, having those kinds of friendships where people like you can talk about your questions and they take your questions seriously and they care about your good.

They want you to have a good life and you hopefully want the same for that. And you have meals together and when you start to have these doubts you don't just bottle it up and think you're going to get the solution on your own but you share them and that Aristotle thinks that these people are like nearest us. They help us see things that we're just thinking of seeing ourselves.

I think that's a huge part of the Christian life is like finding those kinds of people and hopefully you find yourself in an environment where they're around but they're not always easy friendships to maintain. But finding those people and then letting yourself be vulnerable enough for them to help you through those times. It's a great, it's a real gift if there are people like that in your life and sometimes you go through phases where there's not, you're really in the dark back where you've got to be yourself.

But I think certainly for people in school or the way from their families this is the biggest challenge is finding those kinds of people. And then it's a matter of habit. Like you have to have meals with them.

You have to like encounter them enough so that they can't actually know what's going on with you. It can't be the kind of person who just check in with once a year of Christmas vacation. But the people that are really like walking with you.

I think that's a big part of maintaining it. I don't know what causes people to lose their faith. I think maybe sometimes mismanaged doubt is part of maybe really legitimate doubts.

I wouldn't be surprised if part of like God's blade for some people is just to develop their intellects in such a way that they go through and get into their faith out. And that's just part of them becoming who they're meant to be. So if that's happening the best you can do is follow your passions.

But I would say make sure that make sure you're not deluding yourself. One thing good friends help you do, these kind of virtuous friends help you do is realize like you know when you're lying to yourself for that people are. And when you're not taking yourself seriously.

And we can always do that on high. It seems that today the main perception would be that belief in God is irrational. At least maybe most people would think that or that would be the prevailing perception.

Do you think that is a failing of the church to perhaps not be rational enough? Or is there some other reason that that is the dominant perception? I don't think the institutional

like our facing part of various Christian denominations including the policies that are done enough to kind of administer people's minds. I think they make good efforts but there's always more that we can be doing. So I definitely think that the institution and the network that is in the church there is some responsibility.

I think there are also really hard cultural forces that we're up against. Like you know we are the church produces texts and we've got all these great theologians and philosophers and scientists who are part of the community. But you know for various reasons having to do with modernity and have quickly we want information and how much we don't like to think deeply about questions and how much we don't like to spend time developing these kinds of relationships with each other.

And now the church you know is the difficult time getting the message received even though it's out there. God is a difficult time getting messages received. And that we bear responsibility for you.

In the same way I think we're responsible for some of the dubious places we get our news from these days. We're also responsible for some of the kind of shallow places that we look for answers to the really important questions of our lives. And we get a lot of there's a lot of you know there's like clickbait web pages of like eight ways to make your partner love you more this month.

And you think we've read one of those web pages and we've learned a little bit about love but really like you know we need to slow down and think more deeply about these questions. And that were responsible for where we're getting our information from especially the knowledgeable moments of our faith. So it's a two way street but the church could try harder.

Similar with cognitive dissonance I do think at least when they come to the Christian faith people get information about God at various points in their life and some part of the call has got to be personal. So I thought when I was in high school that people who would go to these church services and pray and do all the standing and kneeling and repeating were just deluded. They were part of some mass hysterical movement.

And that was the rational hypothesis to operate under a given my like complete inexperience of God at all personally and the way that incidents have got to end my life. So I'm sympathetic with people who say like come in from that side and see these like Christian groups or other emotions and things like I don't know what wavelength you guys are operating on but it's completely bizarre I don't understand it. Because you don't you know the toward my hypothesis that people inside of them might just have evidence and experiences that you haven't had yet and you're totally right to just be operating on evidence that you have at the moment and you just don't have it yet.

Does the fact that you know there's there's this question that there's lots of

disagreement between Christians and atheists or Christians Jews and Muslims but there's also a significant difference between the SN8 based on this question. Part of it I think can be explained by the difference in religious experience but that just raises this question of why will it all powerful loving God not make these experiences easier for us to have more is why wouldn't he provide the seven days to you that we think this isn't insane. And I think that's a serious problem this is sometimes a philosophy called the problem of divine hiddenness but like what possible explanation can we have for why God would make himself available to only some people in certain times in certain ways and making so much harder for other people to understand what's going on especially if this is a legibly really important part of life.

I think that's a serious problem. I think the answers to it are a bit complicated I could point you to some things to read if you want to understand like within the tradition why people tend to have any answers to the problem of hiddenness but I think part of it is that we like to assume we like the anthropomorphized God especially philosophers love to make God into just like a really great image of ourselves. This idea that like a really perfect God would want everybody to know everything about it if you have a super extrovert God and one of my colleagues points out that like I don't know where we got that assumption that the way God would want to interact with us is a really easy going way where God is constantly providing information of and something that we have to like really seek after and you have to be trained and you have to learn to perceive in a certain way and he kind of comes and moves in his relationship with us.

I think there's things that theist can say that that why God seems to be operating these ways that from the outside seem really strange but I also think it's too easy to say that that should make atheists or people on the outside feel comfortable because it shouldn't like if you know it's not a good argument to say I have some special evidence I can't show you but if you had it you would believe all the things I believe that shouldn't convince you of anything unless you like really already trust me instead you should stay skeptical until you get the evidence and I don't think a loving God would also be grudge any of us for following our consciousness when it comes to our intellectual life so I mean we also should have wouldn't be incredibly judgmental with people who just still feel like they haven't gotten that information yet or they haven't learned to see God in that way. There's a lot of illness in society and if we are no perfect like if since I was born with cancer I would die alone born with cancer if we are the one. That's a version of the problem of people which I you know this is this is the big problem for rational or just believe.

I think just meeting you I one don't know that much about how you suffer from your illness and so I don't want to like presuppose a lot about your story because that's the way that really disrespecting you is a person. And I think sometimes we like to talk about the problem evil and suffering in this like really abstract way like list off these cases in real suffering that we read about or thought of and do it in the kind of casual way that

doesn't take the suffering very seriously and that just bothers me as a human. Especially when we talk about real cases like yours but then I think there I don't think there's any single silver bullet answer to the argument for me.

So some philosophers throughout history have thought we have one catch all explanation for why God allows children to be born with cancer, tsunami's to happen in Japan for why God even allows just like little but seemingly pointless suffering like mosquito bites as an example I really like to occur in the world because he can prevent them so why does any of these a good guy. I think that the answer has to be a lot more complicated and there are a bunch of pieces of it. Some pieces involve he cares a lot about us having this real serious human freedom and we abuse it.

It's aware responsible for some of the evils in the world. Our freedom is so much more important than those evils. Some of it has to be that God sees goods that come out of suffering that we don't perceive given our limited perspective.

Some of it has to be theological and this is the part where again these philosophical debates between these and atheists can get really unsatisfying because you say like look suffering is no surprise to Christianity like the faith the Old Testament and the New Testament talk constantly about people suffering in various realistic identifiable ways and they say that somehow God becoming man living among us dying and being resurrected is the cure for that suffering is part of that suffering being transformed and then you say I don't I don't see it. I don't understand how that all worked out and that's an invitation to like more theology and to get deeper into the tradition and some people respond to suffering in exactly that way just like oh I want to know more about Jesus, I want to pray more, I want to let go deeper in and some people suffering pushes them out of the tradition. I think some of that is depending on how God's interacting with us and it's complicating questions about how we respond to really sophisticated evidence but the short answer is that's really unsatisfying this philosophy.

We like our philosophical arguments to be very tidy so somebody makes an argument and you say premise two is false for these reasons and then they often reply and then after 45 minutes we go home and we go to beer and consider the argument included. This one the problem evil just the epicycles get increasingly complicated and draw more and more and more on this really complicated theology and involves not just knowing things but praying and believing and joining a church and being in a community and just gets like really messy really quickly. So the short answer I'd have for someone like in your scenario is one I don't want to pre-suppose to know your suffering.

It's why I really understand that part of being a serious Christian is wanting to understand political suffering not just treat it like a datapoint in a philosophy argument. But then the second part is like sometimes there are really brilliant philosophical arguments like the argument from evil that just have incredibly messy responses on the

other side and all the people is not the only one there are other ones in the philosophical tradition that have nothing to do with God where just one side is a way easier dialectical spot in the debate than the other side but that doesn't mean that the other side is not trying to get at the truth it doesn't care about the truth or being irrational it just means they're stuck like sometimes the truth isn't easy yet and I think that's got to be part of the response to the moment you want to. My question begins with Galileo's heliocentric model and humans realizing that the universe is bigger than previously thought and that we're not at the center and now in today's age we say that it may happen and if that is in some leading scientists say that it may truly be infinite and if you're familiar with the many worlds theory and my question is if it was proven true that there is multiple universes how would this affect society if we can make a choice but ultimately every possibility that can happen does happen and so those were like stuck on the highway where we can choose to change lanes but ultimately the destination is the same.

Yeah there is so interesting work in philosophy of religion right now that I could point you to our turn to understand whether like the many worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics I mean things get really nitpicky in philosophy but whether some of these interpretations are consistent or inconsistent with certain orthodox Christian teachings there's a little college industry for that that I'm not an expert in but I can just say like some people spend a lot more time thinking about precisely your points than I do I just say it kind of openly because like I am not very confident in any of these many worlds interpretations I do think they would be if it turns out that like every possible way of things keep you up so there's a possible world where I came here tonight and spoke to you all but there's also a real concrete world where my doppelganger is a serial killer and another real concrete world that's empty except for one little particle that's gradually spinning and then he raises a question like did Jesus come to all of those worlds why would God create the serial killer world am I responsible like my very existence guarantees and somebody else is getting killed in another world like those are heavy questions which lead me to think like this whole worldview is going to be very unlikely to convince me but I'm still open to it and curious about it and there are philosophers that take it like the antecedents more more seriously than I do as far as the cosmology question I think this is a fascinating question as a person of faith how much do you think we can learn from a very fast cutting edge cosmologists about the beginning and our universe given that it's something that they can study empirically and very rigorous mathematical models and I think in all cases we should be open to truth wherever we find it so I think I very much think we find ourselves in a situation of thoroughly decidels of like that was incomplete picture of the world and this hope that's behind it and we're getting some new information from observations of the world for our hopeful growth as a civilization it's helping us refine that and some things we might you know really misunderstand it how long it took to create the world how exactly the humans came on the scene these are all questions that we can learn from scientists and you should absolutely take anyone pursuing the truth virtuously we should take their results

seriously and part of having the faith is the faith that eventually all of these complicated beliefs are going to fit together into a true accurate picture and see there's no there's absolutely no reason for a person of faith to insulate for themselves for the best side but that makes it seem like it's all super easy like you subscribe to national geographic and you subscribe to link first things and you're good as long as you're not up to speed on anything you're not they pose challenges the theory of evolution poses a serious problem for our understanding of human freedom and salvation to kind of think it requires some really difficult rich theology to try to understand how that picture could fit together the view of the beginning of the universe the different cosmology of its potential end you know raises some interesting questions for what the faith teaches us about how the world began and why the world exists in the first place in how to create and these are things that are like incredibly difficult questions that require a huge amount of rationality and a lot of evidence and knowledge will reverse you accurately and so like you know this hope that everything is going to fit together but frankly won't do it unless really intelligent people are willing to get into the details of these theories and that's something that's if you've ever been to one of these philosophy of physics means philosophy and religion talks you realize it gets very difficult very quickly and I have much admiration for people trying to work out that part of their systems I don't think it's necessarily if you like this and you want to hear more like share review and subscribe to this podcast and from all of us here at the Veritas Forum thank you

(gentle music)