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Is Belief in God irrational? | Meghan Sullivan

November 3, 2018



The Veritas Forum

At a Veritas Forum from Middlebury College, Notre Dame philosopher Meghan Sullivan explores the questions that defined her journey to the Christian faith.

Transcript

No religious faith, no Christian faith worth having, is one that asks you to believe things based on no evidence at all. In fact, the very best thinkers in the Christian tradition from the Gospels' Army have all been trying to give you reasons for the things unseen, the things that they want you to believe in. Is Belief in God irrational? This is a question on which Notre Dame philosophy professor Meghan Sullivan has changed her mind.

A Rhodes scholar and rising star in academic philosophy, Meghan has published in leading philosophical journals, including news, ethics and philosophical studies. But unlike many philosophers, she has a gift for communicating to general audiences. Meghan has written for the Huffington Post, Common Wheel and First Things, and is a frequent and popular Veritas presenter.

In this recording from her first Veritas Forum at Middlebury College, Meghan shares her story of transitioning from atheism to Christianity, and explores the philosophical questions she wrestled with in that process. This is my very first Veritas Forum, and also my first trip at Middlebury College. So I'm doubly excited to spend time with you guys this afternoon.

I think we can have a really profitable and useful exchange about this afternoon. That's this question about what the connection is between religious faith and particular Christian faith and rationality. The way I was thinking structure remarks today is you guys just met me and you heard a bunch about my CV, but you don't really know much about me or my background yet or why I'm interested in this topic.

So maybe I'll just spend a few minutes telling you about how I got interested in these issues of faith and rationality and a little bit about how I found myself really worried

about these questions. And then I'll raise three big objections or arguments that I hear quite a bit from my students, from colleagues, from people in the general public that claim that there's some irresolvable tension between faith and rationality. I'll raise those objections and I'll talk about the stronger and weaker forms of making those objections.

I'll tell you why at the end of the day, they don't convince me to abandon my faith, but maybe you can find stronger ways of objecting. We were joking with Matt Matei earlier. I always update in response to new reasons.

So we can have a great debate today and maybe one of you guys will pick up the mantle of these objections and we can get somewhere with it. So does that all sound good? I'll maybe talk for about 30 minutes, then we'll have a little bit of moderated Q&A, and then we'll have just a free-for-all. And this would be a great time for you to ask any kinds of questions about philosophy of time or philosophy of religion, or, and this is what I hope it'll focus on, the issues that I bring up in mind remarks.

Does that all sound pretty good? All right, great. So, as Dr. Kimball said, I'm primarily a philosopher of time. I'm actually writing a book right now on time and rational planning.

That's been my current obsession of the last two years. And always, as long as I can remember, I've been really interested in rationality and a hyper planner. How many of you guys in the audience consider yourself one of these people that's always overplanning your days? Anybody? Any things like I'm the opposite of that, I resisted all attempts to charge structure in my life? I've always been a hyper planner.

I have this app called Todoist on my phone, which basically enables you to make these really complicated to-do lists, and I looked it up just before I came here. I have 11,220 some odd to-do items that I've checked out since this summer on my app. So that gives you a sense of how fine-grained my planning is for my life.

And when I was getting ready to go to college at the University of Virginia, I was still very much like this, and I had a really clear path set out of what I thought the rest of my adult life would look like. I'd done debate in high school, so I was really interested in debate and thought the natural move for an avid debater is to become an attorney. I'd worked for the government.

I'd been involved in international law. I didn't quite have any sense of what that meant. We'd be traveling the world and suing people and giving some of it away because I was still going to be a good person.

I grew up in a family that was irreligious, not like Richard Dawkins style aece, just telling my parents that down, and we had conversations at the dinner table about why God didn't exist. But we just would have conversations about how those Christian people that lived down a street are kind of weird, and we don't really do the same things that they

do, and like, let's just not talk about it, religion is weird. And if you'd asked me around the time I was finishing high school, I'd be like, "I definitely don't see any place for any particular organized religion in my future.

Why would you even ask that?" And certainly didn't have a lot of esteem for people who were deeply religious. So the fast forward, I get to college, it's September 2001, and a couple weeks after I arrived at the University of Virginia, this September 11 attacks happened. And when the attacks first happened, I think I was like a lot of young adults that had never been to New York City or Washington, D.C. and that I was watching these events unfold on the news, and I recognized that something really awful was happening, but it didn't really resonate or feel really personal to me.

Again, I'd never been to Manhattan, I'd never been to Washington, D.C. It felt like this might have will be some big event that was happening somewhere far off in the world. But over the course of my first year of college, like a lot of college students, I started changing quite a bit. I started growing up a lot, I was living away from my parents for the first time.

I started thinking a lot more seriously about what it meant to be a good adult, and whether or not I was on the track to be coming on. I started thinking a lot, and I'm sure if any of you guys are undergraduates of Middlebury, you're in the same boat, a lot and a lot about careers. And I really started to identify what the men and women that were in the World Trade Center the day of the attacks.

If you'd asked me in my freshman year of college where I thought my life was going to go, I would have loved to answer that I would be an attorney working in Manhattan for some huge firm, part of some really big project. And as I identified more and more with the people that died in the World Trade Center, I started thinking, "Whoa, you can have everything going right for you. You can have a beautiful family, you can have this awesome job, and just show up at work one day, and for completely stupid, horrible reasons, die." And that really, I mean, maybe I'm sounding like a really 19, 17 or 18 year old, but that blew my mind when I put those two and two together.

You can have everything planned out to the finest detail, but still at the end of the day, it might be that doctors completely outside of your control make your projects meaningless. And so I was also becoming a philosophy major at this point in my life, so you can imagine me sitting in my dorm room, the end of freshman year, beginning of sophomore year, pondering these big existential questions for the first time. And I was taking philosophy courses, and I was getting some solace from what I was hearing in my courses.

I had really good professors. I was really interested in the questions that they had and the ways that they had of analyzing these questions, but it wasn't enough for me. And I remember this was probably like the distinctive move that brought me into the Christian

faith was the anniversary of the September 11th attacks.

I was reading the New York Times and was really avid newspaper readers, all good pre-law students should be. And they had a cover story about the children who had been left behind because their parents had been killed in new tasks. I actually remember reading that story and just feeling like incredibly sad and thinking like, you know, it's so sad that things like this happen.

What is it that really gives our life meaning? Not finding it necessarily in the philosophy I'm reading, though I think that's part of the right track. I called my parents work and I was like, I just really want to talk with you guys about like meaning and love today. Then they were at work and it was a Wednesday and I never call on Wednesdays.

And my mom was just like, you know, this is really wonderful. Is everything okay? I don't have time for this right now. So I had this conversation with my mom and thinking, well, you know, that was great.

I'm glad that I did that, but that wasn't really what I was looking for either. Who are the people that try to start like making meaning out of tragedies like this? And I thought for a minute, I was like church people. This is a kind of thing like church people give speeches about stuff like this and they're more emotional than what my philosophy professors are doing, but they're also like a little bit more intellectual than what I was getting for my parents.

It's like, I got to go find some church person to say something. And there was a Catholic church that was near my dorm and I noticed it and I've been kind of curious about it. I've been thinking a little bit more about like what religion meant over the course of the whole year.

But I thought, you know what, they're doing a service this afternoon. I'm sure the service is just going to be people making speeches about September 11th. I'd really like to hear some people talking about this right now.

Why don't I go? So I went, if any of you guys have been to Daily Mass at a Catholic church, you'll realize immediately what my mistake was because there are no speeches at Daily Mass at Catholic Church. It was like me, three really old ladies, a priest. They did the usual service like some readings that had nothing to do with September 11th that had been chosen years and years and years in advance.

I'm very sure homily they had nothing to do with September 11th, prayer and communion and then everybody left. And I remember going and sitting quietly because I didn't know any of the things that you were meant to say or when to stand or sit or whatever. Going to the service and thinking one, this is not what I expected.

Whatever these guys are doing is not at all what I thought was going to happen. But two,

there's something really wonderful here. I don't know what it is.

It's still very confusing for me, but something great is happening in this space and for these people. And it's something that I need and I'm not getting anywhere else in my life right now. So I started going back, started going back secretly first to other weekly masses and hiding out and old ladies would sometimes give me the side eye, but they never asked any questions and the priest was very friendly and nice.

Then I started going on Sundays, started getting more interested in learning about Christian faith. The church that I had started going to was run by Dominican priests. They were very intellectual and philosophical but also really caring.

They were really wonderful and they kind of reached out to me and let me ask questions at my own pace. I got a lot of solace about attending services there. After about a year of going to services, I thought maybe I actually want to become Christian.

In the Catholic tradition, if you want to become Christian, everything is super complicated. They make you take a class for a year to make sure you really, really want to get confirmed in the church. You know what you're signing up for.

So I signed up for the class. That was the easiest part because I was already a hyper college student. Going to the classes every week, learning more about Christ, learning more about what being Catholic in particular entails, but also about Christianity in general.

I got a lot of exposure to the philosophy of the Christian faith and thought every point in that year, like, I am going the right direction. I can't tell you why. That's something like great is happening here.

I was confirmed in the church my third year of college. This weirded everyone I know out. Basically, everyone that I wasn't going to church with, first I didn't tell people for a long time that I was even going.

But then, it gets time for like your confirmation. You got to start telling people. My parents would have been really upset if I hadn't invited them, so I invited them even though I could tell it was kind of weird for them.

My friends and my philosophy major thought this was crazy. It's one thing maybe to read St. Anselm and decide maybe you think there's an all-powerful creator of the universe. But it's another thing entirely to jump full of fledged into full blown Orthodox Christianity with all of its details, and the standing, and the kneeling, and the praying, and the communion, and three persons in one substance in all of the complexity that goes into Orthodox Christianity.

And around the time that I was doing this I felt like, one, this is the right thing for me to

be doing. I really felt like led by God into that process. But on the other hand, I was completely terrified.

I mean by then, I became a philosophy major. I was thinking about becoming a college professor. I was big into student government on campus, so I knew a lot of people and a lot of people knew who I was.

And I just did not want to answer any questions at all about what I was doing with this church thing. It was really important to me, and it was something that was really feeding my identity at the time. But if you wanted to argue with me about whether or not any of this is true, or whether the crusades were really awful, or whether religion is good, or bad, I just didn't have any answers.

At least not any answers that seemed philosophically persuasive. I started to really worry that I thought of myself as this really rational person, and somebody with this great plans for her life. But at the end of the day, some of the most important parts of my life, in particular, my faith, were just deeply irrational, and I just had to hide it from people, at the expense of them thinking that I was bad at philosopher.

So I really worried about that for a while. I went on to Oxford after UVA, and Oxford, if any of you guys have spent time there, it's not necessarily the most comfortable place to be a really open practicing Christian. There was a really good group that I had fellowship with there, and that I got very close to, but for the most part, I just confidently avoided talking about my religious faith at all while I was involved in my academic life there.

I was studying philosophy, and I really wanted people to think I was smart. I don't know if you guys have this view of any of you guys are planning going to grad school, but you want to think that you're really smart and talented. I thought, "Man, if they find out how into this Christian thing I am, they're going to think I'm an idiot." So I kind of buried it there, but people found out eventually.

Then I got further on in grad school, and a couple things happened. One, I got a little bit more self-confident, so I was a little bit happier to tell people, even when they disagreed with me, that I was going to stick to my guns on certain issues. Two, I started being around people who were interested in various parts of Christianity and were way more open about it, and they were really good examples for me.

But three, I also started thinking more seriously about why I was so nervous about talking about my religion or why I thought I was being so irrational, and started looking at the arguments and thinking, "These are not... I don't find these that convincing, and I think there are better reasons for me to be just open about my identity than I thought before." So that's where I'm at now. It's been about 15 years. I'm still a very serious Christian.

My faith has gotten more complex rather than less over the years, so sometimes when I'm writing in philosophy of religion, I make this distinction between thick faiths and thin faiths. Thin doesn't necessarily mean weak, but it does mean that there's just a couple core commitments that you think, "This is what I really care about. Everything else is pretty optional." Whereas thick faiths are faiths where you've got a ton of complicated metaphysical, ethical, historical, moral commitments that guide your faith, and you hold them all in various degrees of confidence.

But there's a lot of dimensions to your religious faith, which means you're a much bigger target because there are lots of things that people could disagree with you about. My faith has gotten way more thicker and complex in that sense over the course of the last 15 years. Now I want to like the worries part.

So that's where I'm coming from. Here are the worries that I used to have about whether or not it was rational to have a really thick, complicated faith like this. And there are worries that I still hear, again from students and colleagues, from other philosophers, people in the public.

But I think that now I feel better equipped to answer them. I'm sure you guys are going to come up with some others, but this will maybe at least get us started for the forum. So the first worry that I get a lot when I tell people, especially I tell people my story, is this objection what you believe is irrational because you only believe it for really contingent reasons.

You only believe it because, and then dot dot dot, fill it in with some really lucky circumstance that caused you to have your particular religious belief. So in my case, somebody might say, look, you only became Christian because September 11th happened and there was a church that was within walking distance to your door. I didn't have a car at that time.

So if the church had been too far away, I didn't know how to take a cab and I didn't have any money. If it had been really far away, I would have found solace somewhere else and I would have never started down this journey and I wouldn't have my religious faith. Or maybe you're this way like you only believe that because you were born in a family that has a certain kind of ethnic or religious background.

Or you only believe that because you were born in the United States. If you've been born in Syria, maybe you'd have a different religion. Here, like the contingency of belief come up quite a bit is something that challenges the rationality of religious faith.

And it's tough to unpack. For me, it's tough to unpack why exactly this is an objection to religious faith. So on the one hand, it can't just be the case that if you have a belief that's really lucky or chancy, the mere fact that it was lucky or chancy makes it irrational.

Because then a lot of our ordinary beliefs would turn out to be irrational, but clearly they are rational. So one example of this is I vowed a couple of years ago to never read the final book in the Hunger Games trilogy and to stop watching the Hunger Games movies because I was so fed up with young adult stuff and I was trying to get adult adults. It's like I'm done with Hunger Games.

And then I'm on an airplane last year or a couple months ago. And the third Hunger Games movies on. And I watch it because there's nothing better to do because I can't sleep.

And I find out that spoiler alert if you don't want to know how it ends, cover your ears. Katniss kills the president at the end of it, which is real shocker because the president seemed like it was your ally. So I now believe, and so do you, as I told you, that Katniss Everdeen kills President Collion at the end of the Hunger Games series.

Now it is really lucky that I came to that belief. If I hadn't been on the airplane, if I remember to take a value before the flight took off, any number of factors have gone slightly differently, I wouldn't have any beliefs at all about how the Hunger Games trilogy ends. So it's really lucky that I have that belief, but I'm totally justified in holding it because I did watch the movie and I did get that bit of evidence.

It might be the people who haven't had a chance to see the movie yet. They don't know those, they don't have justified beliefs about Hunger Games yet. That's like bad for them given their situation, but it doesn't impute my belief in any particular way.

So it can't just be the case that just because a belief is really lucky or improbable or chancy, that makes it unjustified. I think that would be a bad epistemology. But you might think, no, religious belief is not like the kinds of beliefs that you form in virtue of watching movies.

Religious belief is formed in some really weird way, and the fact that it's formed in a weird way is a reason for thinking that it's unjustified. Now it's a different kind of argument. It's not focusing on the chanciness of your belief so much as it's focusing on the particular ways that people come to get religious beliefs.

Here, I think the issue is a little bit more complicated. For people in different Christian traditions, it might have really different stories about the evidence that they used to come into the Christian faith. But for me, when I think really seriously about what was going on in that phase of my life when I was becoming Christian, I think about the reasons that I was entertaining, none of them seem on surface to be that fishy.

I mean, what was I doing? One, I was introspecting quite a bit, but introspecting can be a source of knowledge. Two, I was trusting what other people were telling me, and I was trusting authoritative texts that the church was exposing me to, but trusting texts and

trusting other people's testimonies is also not necessarily a bad way to go about forming your beliefs. It wasn't the case that I had any serious mental disorder that formed in my life, or that I was taking a lot of hallucinogenic drugs, or doing any of the kinds of things that usually leads to bad belief forming processes getting started.

So if somebody wants to pose the objection to me that I just got this really lucky and really bizarrely formed set of beliefs that that way is in my life, then I like to push it back and ask them, "Well, what do you think was the bizarre thing that was going on that is not a good way to form beliefs?" Because when I look back on that, I think I was a smart college student investigating the world, and the way I normally investigate difficult philosophical questions, and this was just something that I came into. Now maybe you think, for anything besides direct observation of the world, we're not justified in trusting our ways of forming beliefs. So if you have really narrow view about what are justified ways of forming beliefs, then probably religious beliefs is going to look pretty nuts to you.

But if you have a really narrow view about how we justify those form beliefs, then lots of philosophical beliefs are going to seem really crazy to you. And then I'm just in deep trouble because I'm a professional metaphysician. I'm very into forming beliefs in ways that don't necessarily rely on direct observation of the world, but rely on inference and introspection.

So that's not something that troubles me very much, or if it troubled me, it would trouble a lot more than my Catholicism. So I was one set of worries that I hear quite a bit, and they used to keep me up at night, but now it doesn't keep me up at night as much. Maybe you guys are going to find a way to problematize it.

What about the second set of worries? This is the one that my Notre Dame students bring up the most often. So I don't know how much of this is a big thing in Middlebury, but... At Notre Dame I'm surprised by the number of students who come into intro to philosophy, with the argument that a poor faith can't be rational, because religious faith or any faith, by definition, is irrational. Faith is just belief without evidence, or belief without reasons, which is the opposite of rationality.

Rationality is belief based on reasons. So that's how I understand it. And I know where my students get this, because it's in the air.

You see, in some of Richard Dawkins' writings and videos, he just starts off defining religious faith this way, and then goes on to make his arguments about why things are too bad, because of that. Another example I saw recently, I was reading Brian Leiter's *Why Tolerate Religion*, which is a sneak book about religious freedom that just came out. And Leiter defines religious faith in the following way.

It's worth reading out, because I think he's a great example of a mainstream philosopher

who's just in the grips of this view of faith. He says in the book, "For all religions, this is what it is to be religion. There are at least some beliefs central to the religion that, one, issue in categorical demands on actions.

That is, demands that must be satisfied no matter what an individual's antecedent desires, and no matter what incentives or disincentives the world offers up. So there's some stuff you have to do no matter what that the religion commands. And two, do not answer ultimately or at the limit to evidence and reasons, as these are understood and other domains concerned with knowledge of the world.

Religious beliefs and virtue being based on faith are insulated from standards of evidence and rational justification, ordinary standards of evidence and rational justification, the ones that we employ in both common sense and science." So here, he's just saying, like there's something by definition about religious faith that insulates it from reasons that makes it have to have a really weird kind of epistemology, and then Leiter goes on to argue in the book, these are reasons to think that religious belief doesn't deserve a special protection. I just reject that definition of religious faith. I know it might be common in some traditions, but I definitely don't think in order to be Christian you have to be saddled with the view that faith is just belief without any evidence.

I think what makes faith faith is that it's belief in a supernatural being, it's belief in God, or it's belief in a certain set of facts about this being and what he asks us to do. I think Leiter's right to say that most religions issue categorical demands on action. But I think that there are also reasons behind a lot of those claims, and that no religious faith, no Christian faith, worth having is one that asks you to believe things based on no evidence at all.

In fact, the very best thinkers in Christian tradition from the Gospels are on board have all been trying to give you reasons for the things unseen, the things that they want you to believe. So if you're willing to just accept the word faith or the concept of faith implies no evidence, then yeah, this is a really quick one premise argument that religious faith is irrational. But I don't think that serious believers have to accept that that's what religious faith is.

And I think as a matter of course, all of us are created to look for reasons, to be only satisfied when we're finding reasons for our beliefs, and to always be looking for further and deeper reasons. And that doesn't apply just to our scientific investigations or philosophical investigations, but it also applies to the really deep questions that frame our lives. I think the search for reasons is one of the things that drew me into the faith, and for a lot of people, motivates them to be Christian in the first place, is they think like, "Yeah, school is really complicated.

I'm not really sure what role demands there are on me or what this all means." And that need for reasons drives you to look closer into these faiths. So that's why I reject that

word, because I think it's based on a pretty naive conception of what it is to have faith. The third worry that comes up quite a bit is that if you have really thick Christian commitments, really thick religious commitments, and you believe a lot of things are part of a complicated religious tradition, something about expressing those commitments is going to be inconsistent with tolerance, or with the respect for pluralism, or living in a pluralistic or democratic society.

And so the fact that there's a lot of pluralism, or the fact that pluralism is really desirable, is a good reason to think that there's something irrational about either having or expressing faith commitments. And this is something I think I worried about for quite a while. I've always been working and been around students of really different religious backgrounds, of secular backgrounds.

My own family has a huge gamut of backgrounds when it comes to religious questions. And you really respect these other individuals. And the fact that there's this pervasive disagreement between me and them does give you pause.

So then the question to ask is what is it about pluralism that seems to threaten the rationality of really thick, complicated religious beliefs? And there are a couple different ways that you can go on that question. One way you can go is to say, look, the mere fact that so many smart people disagree with you on this question is a really good reason to think you're wrong. So whenever there's pervasive disagreement on a question, there's really good reason to think that you've made some mistake in looking at the evidence.

And there's clearly pervasive disagreement on the question of whether or not Christianity is correct or whether or not these thick religious commitments are justified. So that's the reason why you should have pause. And I think that is a tough objection.

There's a huge branch of philosophy and epistemology that's concerned with this question of how we should handle peer disagreement. So we say somebody's your epistemic peer. If they've got roughly the same evidence as you, and they're roughly just as rational as you, the question is if they come to really different views than you do, when they're looking at the same world and the same situation, does that mean that neither of you guys should be really confident in your beliefs because they're so chancy that you could go one way or the other? This is a big problem.

When it comes to trying to address this problem, I think just the mere fact that there's a lot of disagreement about a question is not a devastating blow to your confidence in the particular thing that you believe in. Why do I think that? One, I think some ways of understanding what's going on with massive disagreement are just like what's going on with your beliefs or really chancy kind of objection. It just turns out that people in different situations can go on different ways on questions after examining some set of evidence.

But more than that, I think this objection has the potential to overgeneralize in ways that I think would be really bad. So it's not the case that we just have pervasive disagreement about questions of religion. We also have pervasive disagreement about moral questions, pervasive disagreement right now, especially in our country, about political questions, about how we should organize our lives.

Really big, difficult, philosophical questions. We tend to find a ton of disagreement. Does the mere fact that there's this disagreement mean that we should suspend on all of these questions? One, I don't find a life where I suspend on all of these questions a particularly desirable kind of life.

So I'm with William James on this front of like sometimes it's better to just have more beliefs and be open to the fact that they might be wrong than they constantly suspend judgment and wait until the evidence comes in. But also, I think there's this question when there's a lot of disagreement, is it a subject matter where we should expect, given our abilities and evidence and rational capacities, a ton of agreement? Or is it the kind of question that we think, man, this is incredibly difficult? Like the question of how to reconcile quantum mechanics and special relativity, where a lot of disagreement is just evidence that human minds are wrestling with really complicated phenomenon, the disagreement is something that we'd expect given the difficulty of the question that we're pursuing. And I think when it comes to the fundamental questions that go into a thick Christian faith, we're more like the second camp.

It's more like doing quantum mechanics in this respect than it is say calculating out the tip in a complicated restaurant transaction. It's the kind of thing where I guess I would expect a lot of disagreement because the subject matter is so difficult. So the mere fact of disagreement, I don't think it's a really easy way to argue from that to the irrationality of someone's particular beliefs.

But then you also have this moral and ethical question. So suppose that the mere fact of disagreement is not enough to convince you you're unjustified holding your beliefs. Still, if you're somebody like me who's committed to democracy, who's committed to tolerance to living in democratic communities, is there something fishy about talking too much about your religion, about putting forward arguments for your religion, about those being in the public sphere? I think this is something that would worry quite a bit about these days, and something that I've heard about for a long time.

As I've thought more about it, and especially in teaching philosophy, I started to think actually the opposite is true. That it's part of living in a vibrant democracy, part of a commitment to pluralism, that you allow a lot of these use and arguments to be expressed openly in the marketplace, and that you make sure that these arguments and discussions are happening rather than being suppressed. And then in fact, when you come across people who really disagree with you on questions of faith, one of the best

things that you can do is listen to their arguments and put forward your own arguments and take them seriously as rational agents.

I've been ruined by Kant. I used to hate the manual Kant. He was really dry.

But I've been teaching him a lot recently to my freshman, and every time we go through the groundwork for the metaphysics of morals, I think like, "Ha, maybe he was onto something." And Kant's big line is, "Most important part of us is our rational nature, our ability to respond to reasons and our ability to exercise our agency and respond to those reasons." And I think there's some deep truth that Kant was onto about that, and something that's relevant to this question of religion and pluralism. Part of respecting somebody who really disagrees with you on religious questions is not to never bring up the questions in the first place, and not to refuse to give them any of your reasons or evidence. Just to respect the fact that they're also a reasonable person who is capable of handling evidence and making up their own minds, and treating them with respect, but at the same time also making those evidence and arguments available to them.

So I don't think that there's anything inherently undemocratic or intolerant about expressing religious views. Obviously, it matters quite a bit how we do it, and whether or not we do it from this attitude of respect for other people's rational agency. But part of respecting agency is making all of these evidence and arguments available in the first place.

Since I also don't think that necessarily has to be challenged to rational religious faith. Something that I really appreciate as I've grown into my faith and become more open about it in philosophy is, before, I would imagine people would find out that I was Catholic or Christian, and they'd be nervous to talk with me about it, and they'd kind of treat it like me reporting that my favorite sports team is the Boston Red Sox. That's not true, but since we're, I don't know, you guys are Red Sox fans? They'd be like, "Oh, that's great.

I disagree with you on that bullet. There's nothing else that we can say about it." When you treat somebody as religious identity that way, it's kind of a sports team that there's nothing more to do to convince them out of it. It's just an affiliation that they have.

I don't think it's really taking it how seriously that that identity is to their life. Something really serious like your religious faith is the kind of thing you also want to have discussions about, and be presented with evidence and dialogue about. It's not something like just being affiliated with a particular sports team.

So another reason why I think that respect for pluralism is sometimes when we start talking more about these issues and offering more arguments in the public sphere rather than less. So those are three worries, and again, why I say they don't keep me up quite as much these days. Maybe just in closing, talk really briefly about how I think these

issues are handled within the Christian tradition.

So one of the things that's been really important to me as a girl in my faith is seeing examples of figures from the tradition, from the Gospels, who really struggle with this question about whether they're being reasonable. I think we get really good examples of people approaching reason and rationality in the right way, in the Bible, that are instructive to those of us who are trying to make our way as contemporary philosophers. The two clearest examples for me are probably Christ himself and Mary.

So start with Mary first. Mary gets this huge truth bomb basically dropped on her out of nowhere. It's like God is returning.

You're going to help. This is all imminent. It's not happening all the way that you guys expected it to happen.

This is big news. Think about it. And Mary, to her credit, the verses, that she holds all of these things in her heart.

She gets this really complicated, really unexpected, really surprising, I'm sure completely terrifying, mystifying news. And instead of immediately trying to chip away at it or interpret it or make it less terrifying or less weird, instead she just waits for more evidence, she's waiting for more things to come in, but she's holding it all together. Anyway, that's a great example of what we as scholars, in particular as philosophers, ought to be doing.

Oftentimes there are these really complicated questions and our initial gut reaction is to try to reduce them as much as possible, because that's where you get journal articles from if you're a philosopher. But sometimes they're really tough questions, and they're not that easily reducible, and from things that really matter to us and our lives, that might be that we face certain periods of tension where we've got to hold all of these together for a certain amount of time. I think that the gospels give a skid example of that.

And then the second example in Christ himself, Christ was really happy to give people arguments and what we would call in philosophy thought experiments, examples that illustrated important moral points. But most of his ministry, if you read the gospels, is not necessarily always providing those arguments and thought experiments, but instead encouraging the disciples and the people that he was around to care in the first place. So don't worry so much about deriving the right answers immediately, but just wake up and care about finding the answers in the first place, especially on these really big questions like our need for redemption and what we owe to each other.

We see lots of examples and arguments, but just as often we see just as called to attend and care to the particular details. And this view that these questions are really profound

and extremely difficult. And I think sometimes due to service in contemporary universities by focusing quite a bit on critical thinking, so on teaching students how to just like somebody else's argument, I teach students how to do this for a living.

Teaching people how to analyze and organize information, which is a really important skill, but not always the second part of that skill, which is to care and love in the first place and to be willing to go after the really thorny, really complicated, messy questions rather than the questions that adapt themselves to this easy form of analysis. And so I think, you know, we'll talk about the question of rationality and reason and the Christian tradition. One of the best examples of rationality we get in the tradition is this view that, yeah, your own arguments and your own examples and theories from the views, but at the same time that's not the whole point of the tradition.

And to be a reasonable person, a reasoned seeker also means just loving and attending to the facts that are around and taking these questions really seriously in the first place, not necessarily expecting easy answers. And that's been a really profound insight for me. It's changed the way that I've approached my teaching and it's also changed the way I've thought about these problems that we inevitably face and reconcile the faith and reason.

So that is a ton of material. I think I went way over time, which I warned you guys and probably happened. Why don't I close out there, I'm mostly interested in like debate and discussion with you guys.

So maybe I'll turn it over to Matt. Great, great. Thank you very much.

[applause] So if it's okay, Professor Sullivan, I'd be asked to give a couple starter questions. Sure. And then we'll open it up to the group.

One of the things that I was wondering about in your discussion, you started with fairly personal story and I'd like to bring this full circle if it's okay. And so sometimes you're listening to the students here. Sometimes what I hear some of the students of faith report is that their conclusion that they allow one of faith is one that others look at and assume that therefore their logic must not be rigorous, right? Because of the conclusion that arrived at whatever process they arrived at must not be rigorous.

Even at your stage, with your degrees and with your training, do you still run into that attitude? So do you think, would it be helpful to keep standing up too? I hope you want back to see. Is there a question about whether or not I still get accused of being irrational or whether or not I've worked differently out? But that the conclusions that you've arrived at has resulted in people kind of fundamentally assuming from the outset. Without the hearing art, the conclusions that arrived at must mean, you know, she seems very bright, Professor Sullivan must not be a very rigorous thinker.

Yeah, I think in professional philosophy circles, and I primarily work in secular circles, there's still some knee-jerk bias among some philosophers that if somebody's really invested in a religious tradition, especially a pretty developed Christian tradition, then there's something off of that then. Usually the argument that you get is something like the following. The problem of evil is like the best philosophical argument that any human being has ever come up with.

So if you guys aren't familiar with the problem of evil, it's if there was an all-powerful, morally perfect God, then there wouldn't be any pointless evils in the world because he could stop them and he would stop them if he was morally perfect. There are tons of pointless evils in the world, therefore there is no God that answers to that description. Two premises, looks like it's logically valid, seems like the best philosophical work we've ever come up with, so philosophers will say, "Look, that's a decisive refutation of whatever it is that you're doing, so you've got to be completely irrational to keep going forward in light of that." There are a lot of people that teach intro philosophy exactly this way and hoping to destroy a bunch of students.

And the problem of evil, that is a big problem. If you're going to stay up at night worrying about a philosophical problem, that's a great one to stay up at night worrying about. And I think that there are philosophically compelling responses to the problem of evil, but none of those responses is as quick to give as the problem itself.

The responses all get you into really complicated theological claims, so why would God allow suffering, what does suffering mean in the Christian tradition, what is God doing about suffering, and is it things that we think would be obvious for a morally perfect being to do? Some of it's about our ability to know the motives and intentions of a morally perfect being. Starting to give the response to the problem of evil takes a semester. I have colleagues that have spent their entire careers writing books about this, and you can't give a really snappy response to it the same way you can present the problem so quickly.

I think that puts a lot of religious philosophers at a disadvantage in these debates, because they can't come up with a really snappy rejoinder. And I certainly felt that way. I've become more comfortable with that partially as I've thought up my answer to the problem of evil a bit more, but also partly as I've realized sometimes the reasons that you have the answer philosophical problems can be given in a really snappy way.

But sometimes for really complicated philosophical puzzles the answers themselves are also really complicated and there's no part of philosophy that makes it better or worse just in virtue of being quick and sharp and snappy. It should be true and accurate and well formed and part of a well developed system. And so sometimes I think the challenge of answering the problem of evil is something that the burdens are unfairly, unfairly placed in the dialectic.

But yeah, I think I have a lot of, most of my colleagues are really wonderful and I speak at a wide variety of different departments, especially when I'm doing talks in philosophy of time, and religious issues never even come up. But occasionally you run into people who think like you've got to be nuts to still be involved in this. Thank you.

I saw a number of hands go up so I will just turn it over to the audience please. And I'm wondering if we might work best with this. Try your voice first and let's see how it goes.

Okay. Can everyone hear me? Okay. So I just was interested in returning to the arguments in Gator about contingency.

And I like the movie example you gave and I just thought maybe we did. I had another idea about that. And then also I'm interested in this issue, which you didn't address as much in the English.

It wasn't the purpose of your talk. But feel like adjudication between beliefs. So not so much the rationality per se, but sort of if you have several beliefs that are rational but conflicting.

Yeah. What you do with that. So to get to the movie example.

So it's clear that you're believed, I forget exactly what happened. But whoever killed whoever in the Hunger Games, that was contingent on your watching that movie. But say that there was another version of that movie where the story turned out differently.

And then so you're believed. And say a person like you watched that other movie. And then both of your beliefs are contingent on the movie and they're both rational.

But they can't, if the state of affairs is, I don't know if this quite makes sense. But you know, maybe there's a conflict between the beliefs. And so maybe people, you can think about watching different movies like being sort of, you know, learning about different traditions.

And then how do you, and you can say both movies are rational. But how do you adjudicate between them? Yeah. So you might, maybe, start with your name? Matt.

Matt. Yeah. So many bats in the world.

So you might imagine a scenario where I'm on the plane. Everybody's watching Hunger Games. And afterwards we started having a conversation about it.

And I'm like man, it was really messed up when she killed President Coyne at the end. And the person sitting next to me is like she didn't kill President Coyne. Third person is like there was no President Coyne as a character in that film.

We don't have like massive disagreement about what it is that we actually saw. Does

that lead me to believe like I'm not justified in believing this anymore. Is that kind of like your case? Sort of.

I guess, I think about the confused I want to kind of say. But I mean part of it is I guess just assume that the movies really were different. Not that you're interpretation of the movie.

Is this, you know, this guy not just having an epistemic. Probably really it's like your sort of presentience with a different movie altogether. Yeah.

That's sort of what I'm going to question. So is your question, one of my things about your question, to one extent do I assume that there is like a fact of the matter out there? I guess that's kind of what I'm saying. You know you're saying that there's this movie that you watch.

Yeah. And that's, you know, that's an opinion but leads sort of rational. But we do kind of saying well what if, you know, just to argue about what if they're part of these different movies.

That everyone watches and like well this was what happened in this movie. Yeah. This is what happens in other movies.

Have you adjudicated between statements that are rational based on each person's situation? Yeah. So one way philosophers have tried to make sense of the problem of disagreement and why it's, why it's what pluralism is to say. Like look everybody gets a different piece of reality.

Culture tradition gets a different piece of reality to think of that. And the pieces that we got are all different. So that explains why there's so much disagreement.

It's like the stuff that we're basing our beliefs on is just different in each case. The metaphor that John Hickey uses, I guess this is kind of like a really old parable. But you imagine a bunch of blind men, they're investigating this elephant.

Like one of them just touches a trunk and reports that elephants are shaped like snakes and another one touches the thigh and reports elephants are really broad. They're each like reporting something true and seems incompatible which is they got different pieces of reality. And that's a wide explanation for pluralism.

There's not one single truth about God out there that we're going to discover but just different pieces that different people get access to. I find that way of reconciling pluralism with rational faith kind of disappointing for a couple reasons. One, I mean I'm a hardcore metaphysical realist.

So I think there is an objective reality out there that many times has nothing to do with

our mind or our language but that we're able to discover and represent with our mind and our language. And so I think God is either part of that reality or not part of that reality but it's one that could be commonly shared. That's like my hardcore philosophical proselytizing for the day.

If you ask me why I believe that I'll give you a really complicated story that you'll find completely unsatisfying. But another reason why I think that that approach to pluralism is unsatisfying doesn't rely on any complicated claims about metaphysical realism is I think it doesn't do justice to what a lot of the different faith traditions say on behalf of their tradition. At least in Christian, some Jewish, some Muslim faiths, the faiths themselves make the claim that there's one single ultimate reality that God has not divided up or that God has fully revealed himself in a certain way.

Or that they're making true claims and that some other religion is making less true claims. Part of taking other people's faiths seriously is taking them seriously, warts and all, truth claims and all. And I think it doesn't do great respect to other religious traditions to say like, "Ah, we're all really practicing the same like religion that's not quite accessible to any of us." And all of those claims that you made that your rap was a better, more effective way to the truth are really false.

That's not respecting that person's claims anymore than it is to say like, "We're just having a disagreement about which claims are true or false." Does that make sense? Yeah, that makes sense. Would you say then that the idea of watching these different movies sort of just doesn't, that's not... You wouldn't want to assume that in the products argument. I would want to assume that if we're thinking like one of the best hypotheses for pluralism is that God reveals himself in really different ways to different traditions.

I think probably God reveals himself in different ways to each of us individually. But I also think it's not taking the tradition seriously to think that like, you know, it's one in the same being, who's kind of either misleading all of us or giving us all in little bits of the story. I think that's not taking justice to what these traditions typically claim.

So I find that like less credible hypothesis than just, "We're just disagreeing, which is okay." Right. Okay, yeah, thank you. Understanding that the books stand very answered sort of outside the scale with this talk.

Mm-hmm. Is it a philosophy of time question? No. No, I just want to ask for a little bit of elaboration on your own response to the problem of people.

Yeah. How much time do we have? Yeah, for any minutes. Give me a minute for that.

I get this question all the time from my students because when I teach our big intro class, I always introduce the argument from evil. It's like one of the coolest, full, soft arguments we ever came up with and one of the hardest to respond to. And then they're

always like, "Okay, but what's your real answer?" You say there's an answer.

I think my strategy personally for thinking about it, and I haven't ever really written anything extensively on this, but how I think I'm roughly at, as a philosopher, I'm dealing with a problem right now, is one, we've got to separate out different kinds of evils. So, the free will defense, this idea that God permits certain evils out of respect for our freedom, that's going to handle certain kinds of suffering in the world, but it's not going to handle all kinds of suffering. We need really different kinds of explanations for dealing with catastrophes that happen before humans evolved, or catastrophes that happen as a result of seemingly natural phenomena that humans aren't responsible for.

Increasingly, we're responsible for more and more of it, but there are periods where we want. So, we need to divide and conquer, but that's the first strategy. The same kinds of reasons that might seem rationally convincing for dealing with some really troubling forms of evil are not going to help with other kinds.

When it comes to natural evils, that's the really tough problem. I'm hopeful that there are ways of expanding views of why God wants us to develop in certain ways, where it would be consistent with him permitting these kinds of disasters. There are certain fantasies out there that are like, "God has a plan for how humans needed to evolve, that involve these kinds of catastrophes." I'm interested in those, but I'm still kind of skeptical about whether or not those moves are correct.

Bracket natural evils for a minute, and just say, "That's like the million dollar problem, which I agree is a really big problem, and that's the one that keeps me up with my." I think the free will defense has something going for it. Lately, I've been flirting with different answers to the problem of hiddenness. Is this something you're familiar with? What's your name? Liam.

Liam? So, problem of hiddenness is like a variant of the problem of evil where you say, "If God exists and he's all good and believing things about him is really important to your life going well, then why does he make it so weird to form beliefs about him? Why doesn't he make it way more obvious or way easier?" Which is a version of the problem of evil because there's an evil in like not knowing, especially if you're inside the Christian faith. That's a problem. I feel like I've got more interesting thoughts on, and I think part of the answers to that are, one, it's really important to God that we come to have certain kinds of beliefs and a relationship with him of our own free will, and then provide him too much information, coerces.

That's a common the opposite greatness I find really compelling. But also increasingly that it's really important to the Christian tradition, the Christian view of God, that we come together and help each other out and be a community, partially because we're so morally screwed up that it's only a community that we can start to have for ourselves. Find more content like this on baratos.org and be sure to follow the [baratos](http://baratos.org) forum on

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