

EXCERPT FROM:

Michael Rota, *Taking Pascal's Wager: Faith, Evidence, and the Abundant Life*
(Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016)

Introduction

Is it rational to believe in God? Is it reasonable to commit oneself to God – to live a deeply religious life? And how much certainty does one need before the time has come to decide? If you've pondered these questions before, this book is for you.

I was raised Catholic, although religion was not a major part of our family life. We prayed before meals and went to church on most Sundays, but there was little discussion of religious matters and no regular personal prayer, at least not on my part. Sometime in my early teens I began to wonder about the truth of the religion I had been born into. Does God really exist? If he does, then relationship with God is the most important part of human life. But if he doesn't, then the religious person is enmeshed in a massive deception. "We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty...", I found myself saying at Mass. But did I really mean it? I wasn't sure, and the fear that I was being dishonest concerned me.

I continued to wonder about God and the rationality of Christianity throughout high school, in college, and in graduate school. Now, as a professor of philosophy, it's my job to think about these topics every day. My research focuses on the rationality of religious belief, and I wrestle with arguments for and against God, with classes full of students from every point of view,

almost every semester. I have become convinced that it *is* rational to live a deeply religious Christian life. Indeed, it may be irrational not to do so.

When contemplating the choice to commit to living a Christian life, one might suppose that one should refrain from making a commitment in the absence of rock-solid evidence for the truth of Christianity. Reflection on personal relationships suggests otherwise. In *The Will to Believe*, William James asks us to consider a man who hesitates “indefinitely to ask a certain woman to marry him because he [is] not perfectly sure that she would prove [to be] an angel after he brought her home. Would he not cut himself off from that particular angel-possibility as decisively as if he went and married some one else?”¹ In the area of romantic love, it can be reasonable to invest deeply in a relationship, and eventually make a lifelong commitment to the beloved, even in the absence of airtight evidence that the marriage will be a happy one. Because there is so much at stake, it can be reasonable to make a commitment to a personal relationship even when absolute certainty proves elusive. Applying this to the question of God: even if the evidence for and against God were roughly on a par, considerations about the possible value of a relationship with God might favor the decision to make a religious commitment.

The seventeenth century French mathematician and theologian Blaise Pascal gave an argument that expands on this insight. Pascal’s Wager, as the argument has come to be known, is addressed to those who aren’t sure whether Christianity is true, but think that it *might* be true. The argument can be summed up in one simple sentence: It is rational to seek a relationship with God and live a deeply Christian life, because there is very much to gain, and relatively little to lose.

As the Wager is usually presented, what's to gain is eternal happiness for the wagerer. An alternative and more powerful version of the argument, however, focuses not just on self-interest, but also on goods that go beyond self-interest. If one commits to God and God does in fact exist, one brings joy to God, and one is better able to help others attain union with God. And if Jesus really is who he claimed to be, we may even have a moral duty to commit to living a Christian life. If Christianity is true, we have a duty to love God and have been called by God himself, who has given us everything good that we have, to live a deeply religious life. More than just self-interest can motivate one to take the wager.

On the other hand, if Christianity is false, the committed Christian has still lived a meaningful life, has pursued moral excellence, and has enjoyed the many empirically well-attested benefits of belonging to a religious community. Much to gain, relatively little to lose.

In Part One of this book (Chapters 1-4), I'll present an updated version of Pascal's Wager, strengthened by cutting-edge research from psychologists, sociologists, and philosophers. After introducing and laying out the basic argument in Chapters 1 and 2, I turn to objections to the Wager in Chapters 3 and 4. These include the objections that committing to God on the basis of pragmatic considerations is immoral, that the cost of religious commitment is too high, that the existence of religions other than Christianity nullifies the argument, and that Christian doctrine itself casts doubt on the Wager. When addressing this last issue, I discuss grace, free will, and predestination.

In Part Two (Chapters 5-12), I'll take a careful look at arguments for the existence of God and the truth of Christianity, showing how – once we no longer demand certainty – the available evidence is sufficient to make serious Christian commitment entirely reasonable. Together, Parts One and Two present the book's main argument, which can be summarized as follows:

- (1) If Christianity has at least a 50% chance of being true, then it is rational to commit to living a Christian life. (The conclusion of Part One)
- (2) Christianity does have at least a 50% chance of being true. (The conclusion of Part Two)

Thus (3) It is rational to commit to living a Christian life.

The argument of Part Two proceeds in two stages. First, I present evidence for theism (the view that there is a God); second, I present evidence for the more specific view of Christian theism. I begin by asking the question of why physical reality exists at all. Chapter 5 argues that there is at least one necessarily-existing being which explains the existence of contingent beings.

(Contingent beings are things that reality didn't have to include, like all the physical objects we see around us.) Chapters 6-8 then provide an argument that the cause of physical reality is an intelligent being. In the last several decades mainstream physicists and astronomers have come to realize that the life-permitting character of our universe is balanced on a knife's edge: if several features had been ever-so-slightly different than what they in fact are, then stable, self-reproducing life would not have been able to arise. Chapter 6 introduces some of the scientific evidence for this conclusion, and gives a preliminary statement of what has come to be known as *the fine-tuning argument*. This argument has been summarized for non-specialists in several places, but not always with enough rigor and background for the strength of the case to be fully displayed. In Chapter 7 I explain the parts of probability theory required to appreciate the power of the evidence that our universe is the product of an intelligence. Chapter 8 contains an original

reply to the strongest alternative to design, the multiverse hypothesis. (This is the hypothesis that our universe is just one of a vast number of universes, most of which are not life-permitting.)

Taken together, Chapters 5-8 provide evidence for God, drawing on the best recent research, but written so as to be accessible to the general reader.

In Chapter 9 I turn to specifically Christian doctrines, suggesting that the beauty and existential resonance of Christianity are clues to its truth. Chapter 10 concerns the two most powerful arguments against theism, the argument from divine hiddenness and the argument from evil. (As arguments against all forms of theism, they are arguments against Christian theism as well).

These topics deserve not a single chapter, but whole books of their own. And they have them. In Chapter 10, I summarize what I take to be the strongest replies to the arguments from hiddenness and evil, focusing on the recent work of Peter van Inwagen and Eleonore Stump. Finally, in Chapters 11 and 12, I turn to arguments for the resurrection of Jesus. This is just one of many Christian doctrines, of course, but logically speaking it holds a special place. If one has reason to believe that Jesus rose from the dead, then one has reason to believe that Jesus's teachings have the divine stamp of approval and are therefore true. So an argument for the resurrection is an argument for the truth of Christianity (or at least the larger part of one). In this pair of chapters I draw on the most recent work on the issue by historians, theologians, and philosophers. While I think that the evidence of Part Two is by itself sufficient to justify belief in Christianity, agreement on this point is not required for the main argument of the book to succeed. For given the argument of Part One, all that is required for a demonstration of the rationality of Christian commitment is that the evidence render Christianity at least as likely as not.

It's sometimes said that the longest distance in the world is the distance from the head to the heart. And so in Part Three I'll try to illustrate how a life of Christian commitment is not just reasonable, but worth desiring as well – satisfying both the head and the heart. To do this, I'll tell the stories of three exemplary individuals who took Jesus up on his invitation to follow him. The lives of these individuals were enriched, and in turn enriched countless others, in ways all of us would want to be true for our own lives. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jean Vanier, and Immaculée Ilibagiza demonstrate how heroic, noble and beautiful a Christian life can be. Jesus is recorded as having said “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10). The abundance that so often characterizes a devout Christian life is not a matter of external goods or material wealth, but is internal and spiritual, flowing from a close personal relationship with God. Life focused on God offers comfort, inspiration, and a peace that the vicissitudes of fortune need never take away.

The landscape of English-speaking philosophy has changed significantly in the last forty or fifty years. In the 1960s and '70s, it was taken for granted in many philosophical circles that traditional Christian belief is unjustified and irrational. Thanks to the work of philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga, Eleonore Stump, Peter van Inwagen, and Richard Swinburne, things have changed.² Recent decades have been a time of enormous productivity for philosophers defending the rationality of Christian faith, answering objections to Christian doctrines, improving traditional arguments for the existence of God and formulating new ones. In the pages that follow, I'll explore some of the most important results of this body of work. I've written this book, though, without presupposing that the reader has had formal training in philosophy or theology. My hope is that it will be useful for anyone who is interested in the evidence for God,

or the evidence for Christianity more particularly. I also hope that college students in philosophy and theology courses will find the material worthwhile.

Since this book is about evidence and reasons for religious belief, it's worth addressing at the outset the question of why people believe what they do on religious issues. Isn't religion a matter of the heart? Does anyone really believe on the basis of logic or argument? Many committed Christians believe in God not primarily because of *argument*, but because of *experience* – they have an intuitive sense of God's presence. Perhaps not all the time, but certainly much of the time it just seems that God is there, aware of what we do and think. This is how it is in my own case. But what if you don't happen to have such an experience yourself? Or what if you have it occasionally, but it is fleeting and open to doubt? In those cases, it makes good sense to spend some time examining rational arguments and publicly available evidence relating to questions about God and religion. According to Christianity, faith is a gift. But for the person who does not have faith, a careful look at arguments for (and against) Christianity is a natural and reasonable step to take. Examination of evidence can also be worthwhile for the person who does have faith, but has doubts, too. In what follows I give an extended presentation of evidence for the truth of Christianity and a rigorous argument for the reasonableness of Christian commitment.

While this book will focus on the rational case for Christianity, it's important to acknowledge that there are many factors involved in a decision to commit to a Christian way of life, factors that go beyond impersonal philosophical reasoning. One's upbringing, one's experiences with individual Christians, the attitudes and views of one's closest friends and family, one's emotional life, one's deep-seated hopes and fears and one's own particular way of viewing the world – all

of these come into play when one encounters the message of Jesus. I believe that the philosophical argumentation contained in this book will be helpful to many people; but philosophical argumentation is only one part of a larger picture. When it comes to religion, logic may or may not be where one starts, but it's certainly not where one should end. Living a Christian life is an act of the whole person – mind and heart, body and soul. Still, precisely because a Christian life involves the *whole* person, there is a place for the mind, and thus for reason, evidence and logic.

Finally, a few words are called for regarding a concept that will play a key role in what follows: *probability*. Everyone has many beliefs, but some of those beliefs are held more confidently than others. For example, I believe that I'll still be alive 24 hours from now. I'm not absolutely certain I will be, but nonetheless I do believe it. I also believe I'll be alive 24 days from now. But I'm less confident in this belief than in my belief about being alive 24 hours from now. How about 24 *years* from now? In my case, I wouldn't say that I believe I'll be alive 24 years from now. I also don't believe I *won't* be alive 24 years from now – there's just not enough information to form a belief one way or the other.

Philosophers sometimes use the language of “levels of confidence” when discussing beliefs and probability. Levels of confidence come in a scale from 0 to 1 (or 0% to 100%). To be absolutely certain of something (e.g. $1 + 1 = 2$) is to assign it a level of confidence of 1. To be absolutely certain a claim is false (e.g. $1 + 1 = 17$) is to assign it a level of confidence of 0. In such a situation, one could say that the probability of the claim is 0%. There's just no chance that you've gotten confused and “ $1 + 1 = 17$ ” is really true. What about a proposition like “this

normal penny will come up heads when I flip it”? Here it’s reasonable to assign equal levels of confidence both to this claim and to the claim that the penny will come up tails. So we’d assign both claims a level of confidence of .5, and we could say that the chance the coin will be heads is 50%. How confident am I that this six-sided die will show either a 1 or a 2 when I roll it? 33.3%. You get the idea.

The word “probability” will come up often in this book. I’ll sometimes also talk about how *likely* something is, or what the *chance* is that such-and-such is true. Unless otherwise noted, these are all just different ways to talk about the same thing: what philosophers call epistemic probability. Roughly, the epistemic probability of a proposition (that is, a statement or a claim) is the level of confidence it’s reasonable to assign to that proposition.³

Probability, evidence, moral heroism, commitment...all of these factors will enter into our discussion of the reasonableness of Christian theism. But enough with introductory matters. On to deeper waters!

¹ William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 30.

² The number of journal articles and books by each of these authors is large, but see the following for a representative sample. On epistemology and the rationality of religious belief: Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), or Plantinga’s condensed and less technical version of this material, *Knowledge and Christian Belief* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015). On the problem of evil: Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) and Peter van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). On a number of issues: Peter van Inwagen, *God, Knowledge and Mystery: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press,

1995). On arguments for the existence of God and the Resurrection, respectively: Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) and *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

³ Somewhat less roughly, the epistemic probability of a proposition, relative to some set of background information, is the level of confidence a rational person having that background information would assign to that proposition. For a discussion of epistemic probability, see Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), chs. 8-9.