The Fordham Center on Religion and Culture
UNEASY GRACE: CAN FAITH AND DOUBT COEXIST?

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Moderator:
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Presenter:
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Respondents:
Lamin Sanneh
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James McCartin: Good evening. Welcome to Fordham University. I’m Jim McCartin, Director of the Fordham Center on Religion and Culture.

I’m happy to be able to say that with tonight’s event on faith and doubt we seem to have struck a chord. That there has been such an interest in this particular event is not much of a surprise. First of all, I suspect that there is no doubt that our three panelists and our moderator tonight, just by agreeing to be here in conversation, will expand our understanding in one way or another.

Second, I think that our theme — the perennial question of what faith is, what doubt means, and how they relate — is as near to universal as anything is in our diverse society. All of us, or nearly all of us, are conscious that we somehow sometimes, or even all of the time, inhabit that space and tension between faith and doubt. It is, of course, true in our religious and spiritual lives, but this tension is also present in our relationship to other flawed human beings, just as it is in our relationship to the institutions of our government, where I think it’s fair to say that we frequently teeter between faith and doubt.

Despite the encompassing character of what we will be exploring tonight, it seems to me that in parts of our culture today the notion of religious faith is often enough understood as shorthand for religious fundamentalism. At times, doubt and skepticism, at least in certain hands, also, ironically, assume the shape of an alternative species of fundamentalism, a fundamentalism that can be as insistent as any creed of any religious believer.

But I suggest that we begin with the premise that faith and doubt and the relationship between them are far more complex and interesting than what is on offer in much of our public conversation today. I further suggest that it is now as necessary, and potentially as fruitful, as ever to explore the in-between space where faith and doubt interact. This, of course, is why we are here tonight.

Before we proceed, (1) please take the time to silence your electronic devices; (2) if you haven’t already done so, please be sure to sign up for our mailing list on your way out
before you leave tonight; and (3) very importantly to this conversation tonight, I want to ask that all of you make use of the cards on your seats to draw up the questions that come to your mind as you listen to our speakers tonight. Please write your questions out legibly, hold them up, and one of our student assistants this evening will come and pick them up. They are arrayed along the side and they will bring your questions forward.

Tonight's moderator, Elizabeth Johnson, is Distinguished Professor of Theology at Fordham and an award-winning teacher, a past president of both the Catholic Theological Society of America and of the American Theological Society. She has been deeply involved in national and international initiatives around interfaith dialogue, the role of women in church and society, and the engagement between science and theology.

She is a Sister of St. Joseph of Brentwood and is the author of numerous books, including the groundbreaking and award-winning volume in feminist theology called She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse. Perhaps you have read this book in one of the thirteen languages into which it has been translated.

Her next publication will be released in January, and is called Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love, a book that places evolution at the center of God's relation to the world and the human vocation to care for the earth.

Please welcome Elizabeth Johnson.

ELIZABETH JOHNSON: Thank you, Jim.

On the Catholic calendar, today is the Feast of Teresa of Ávila, a 16th-century Spanish woman who is a doctor of the Church. One of her lines makes a fitting opening for this forum: “To have courage for whatever comes in life, everything lies in that. Indeed, it takes courage to live faith with its accompanying doubt.”

I first encountered the dynamic of faith and doubt in my college years, when I had the great good fortune to stumble upon a little book by the theologian Paul Tillich, entitled Dynamics of Faith. He described faith as a state of being ultimately concerned, and argued that doubt is a necessary element of faith — not doubt about facts or conclusions, but doubt as an element that is present when one takes a risk. Faith accepts this insecurity and takes it into oneself, he thought, in an act of courage. In fact, “Serious doubt is a confirmation of faith. It indicates the seriousness of one’s concern.”

These words came back to me when, in short order, I wrestled with the meaning of faith in the crisis mode typical of young adults, and I thought: Ah, this doubt just shows how ultimately concerned I am. And I was consoled. [Laughter]

In recent weeks, we have heard a similar but updated version of this faith/doubt dynamic from Pope Francis. In his now-famous interview, he said, “In this quest to seek and find God in all things, there is still an area of uncertainty.”

The Pope went on to argue that people who are legalists, who want everything clear and safe, who long, in his words, “for exaggerated doctrinal security,” in the end find nothing. They turn faith into an ideology among other ideologies. And he said, “If one has the answers to all these questions, that is the proof that God is not with him [or her, we could add]. It means that he is a false prophet using religion for himself.” And the Pope continued, “The great leaders of the people of God, like Moses, have always left room for doubt.”

Then the Pope put a positive spin on this idea, interpreting doubt as humble openness to the God of surprises, rather than clinging to our narrow certainties. And in a great metaphor, he said, “Our life is not given to us like an opera libretto, in which all is written
down, but it means going, walking, doing, searching, seeking. We must enter into the adventure of the quest for meeting the living God. We must let God search and encounter us.”

And so this forum, as Jim has already indicated, raises a set of deep questions: What is faith; what is doubt; what is the dynamic between them? I look forward with eagerness to what our main speaker and our respondents will have to say, and I will now introduce them.

In the center, Terry Eagleton is a scholar whose breadth moves across an enormous spectrum, from literary criticism, to the problem of evil, to American culture, to Irish culture, to the philosophy of Karl Marx, and beyond.

Having previously taught at the universities of Oxford and Manchester, he currently holds three academic appointments: Distinguished Professor of English Literature at Lancaster University, Professor of Cultural Theory at the National University of Ireland, and Distinguished Visiting Professor of English Literature at the University of Notre Dame.

He is the author of some forty books. In 2010, he joined the company of William James, Albert Schweitzer, Mary Douglas, Charles Taylor, and Jean Bethke Elshtain, when he delivered the Distinguished Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh.

He is our lead presenter this evening, exploring the question: Can faith and doubt co-exist?

Lamin Sanneh is D. Willis James Professor of Missions and World Christianity at Yale University. He is widely regarded as among the most astute analysts of global Christianity and has served on both the Pontifical Council of Historical Sciences and the Pontifical Council on Religious Relations with Muslims. The author of a dozen books on the history of religion in Africa and the African Diaspora, his most recent publication is a memoir entitled Summoned from the Margins: Homecoming of an African, a book tracing his own spiritual journey as he moved from his native West Africa to Europe and eventually to the United States.

Meghan Sullivan is John A. O’Brien Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame, where she has served on the faculty since 2011. She is a Rhodes Scholar and has published several articles in leading philosophy journals, such as Nous and Philosophical Studies. Her current research, which will be funded next year by a Distinguished Fellowship from the University of Sydney in Australia, focuses on the philosophy of time and metaphysics. She has written, taught, and presented internationally on a wide range of subfields, ranging from epistemology to the philosophies of language, science, and religion.

Our main speaker and two respondents will follow in that order, then we will have conversation among the panel, and then begin to entertain your own questions and insights.

Terry Eagleton?

TERRY EAGLETON: I’m delighted to be here. I see from this piece of paper that I am at the University of Nottingham. Actually I’m not. It’s one of the very few universities I’m not at actually.

And also my name is misspelled. It’s surprising they don’t call me “Teresa Eagelton” as well. However, human beings are fallible.

In a remarkably cheap, extraordinarily attractive book, entitled Reason, Faith, and
Revolution, written I believe by myself [Laughter] — I write so much that it’s not always easy for me to remember what I did write and what I didn’t; whether, for example, I wrote War and Peace or whether that was somebody else [Laughter].

I’m not a great believer in reading other people’s books, I must admit. [Laughter] I always feel that’s a kind of violation of their personal space somehow. If I want to read a book, I write one. It seems the commonsensical thing to do really. [Laughter]

Anyway, in this remarkably cheap and extraordinarily attractive book I wrote a few years ago, I take to task what I call the “Yeti” or “Bigfoot” “Theory of Faith,” according to which we have to make do with faith in circumstances where we can’t be certain. The evidence as to whether Bigfoot actually exists is obscure and ambiguous, with the result that some people believe that he is padding stealthily around the place somewhere, while others don’t.

Substitute “God” for “Bigfoot” here and you have a version of what faith consists in, which is common, I think, both to believers and nonbelievers.

But of course it won’t do. Abraham had faith in Yahweh, but, given his historical circumstances, he almost certainly wouldn’t have been able to imagine that Yahweh didn’t exist.

The devils are said to believe in the existence of God, since good and evil are, of course, on intimate terms, both of them superior to the mere moral middle classes like ourselves. But the devils don’t have faith in God.

In fact, it’s perfectly possible for human beings as well to believe that God exists but not to have faith in him. Dostoevsky’s Ivan Karamazov might fall into that category.

To say “I have faith in you” isn’t to declare that I subscribe to the proposition that you exist, a statement which might be of more interest to my psychiatrist than to theologians. It’s to say “I’m committed to you, I have trust you won’t let me down, I put myself in your hands,” and so on. Of course, all that assumes that I believe you exist, since it is unwise to put oneself in the hands of imaginary people — Captain Ahab, Homer Simpson, or whatever.

Oddly, however, it doesn’t assume that in the case of God, since God doesn’t of course actually exist. Existent things are determinate objects within the universe, which doesn’t of course include God. God isn’t any kind of entity, object, principle, phenomenon, or even a person in the sense in which Al Gore is arguably a person. [Laughter] And He is not inside the universe, but He is not outside it either. He is the reason why any entities exist at all, in which case He has to take the rap for Dick Cheney and Sarah Palin [Laughter], as well as to be warmly congratulated on Helen Mirren and Sacha Baron Cohen. [Laughter]

He is not only the reason why any entities exist at all. He is also, of course, the reason why being is good, why beings are good, and therefore why evil is deficiency, defectiveness, nonexistence, trivial. God is the reason why it is good that there are turnips and turtles and telephone boxes around the place. So it is admittedly a hard case to extend to Mel Gibson. [Laughter]

The traditional Christian teaching is, of course, that faith is a matter of certainty. The Anglican funeral service speaks of our “sure and certain hope of resurrection,” a phrase which contrasts, interestingly, with our usual use of the words “I hope,” which carries the rider “but I’m not sure; I hope so, but I’m not sure.”

Christians, rather strangely, hope in something they take to be certain and have faith in
something they take to be certain as well, which is not the way these words normally behave in our vocabulary.

The claim that faith is a question of certainty, however, only seems to be presumptuous or dogmatic or overweening to those who have a false idea about the nature of certainty, those who, by and large, think of certainty only in scientific, rationalist terms. How odd, however, to imagine that certainty is confined to the laboratory, which probably nobody did before, say, 1700.

We can be certain about all kinds of things — that we are in love, that Regina Spektor is a better singer than Donald Duck, and certainly than Donald Rumsfeld; that roasting small children over fires is not the most resplendent form of moral behavior, unless they have been very naughty; that Rome is the capital of Italy; and so on.

I can be certain that I am in pain, although, according to Ludwig Wittgenstein, being in pain doesn’t involve any kind of knowledge. So there is a form of certainty which doesn’t actually involve knowledge at all.

Faith is a mode of passionate commitment, conviction — conviction is probably a better translation of the great word than faith — which, like all the commitments that go to constitute one’s identity, one isn’t wholly responsible for — it’s not some callow act of will, for example — and which we find that we can’t walk away from however hard we try, as Willy Loman both tragically and admirably can’t walk away from the problem of his own identity. It’s not really totally under our control, like all the most important things.

Faith is the kind of loving devotion manifested by a suspected political criminal — the Romans, of course, reserved crucifixion only for suspected political criminals — tortured, reviled, and at the end of his tether, floundering in darkness and bewilderment, who nonetheless still manages to remain faithful to what he calls his father.

The believer, as Kierkegaard remarked, is someone in love — all a very long way from Bigfoot or the Yeti or the Loch Ness Monster.

Faith isn’t exactly something we decide, as we might decide to become a drug pusher. This, I think, puts it somewhat at odds with an American culture which to an outsider, in good Protestant fashion, places an inordinate degree of emphasis on choices, heroic acts of will, options, strenuously self-defining decisions, and the business of determining your own destiny — all rather alarmingly hubristic stuff, I think.

That’s not of course to say that faith doesn’t engage the conscious mind. Faith must be rational in the sense that one must be able to advance reasons for it, rather as we must be able to advance reasons for the claim that Shakespeare’s Othello entertains rather too idealized a version of himself.

It is of the nature of such claims, however — it’s not accidental to them; it’s built into them — that others can dissent from them. Someone must always be able to argue that Othello is the most humbly self-effacing creature in the literary canon, a fact that need make no difference to the rationality of my own claim, or indeed to the certainty with which I hold it.

On the other hand, it always might. I might come to accept the other person’s point of view. This is always possible in the nature of this kind of claim, not just a matter of my own open-mindedness, admirable and wonderfully deep-seated though I assure you that is. [Laughter]

Faith must be rational, but reasons don’t go all the way down. Reasons are not wall-to-wall. If I tell somebody else “I love you,” I am bound to state my reason for that;
otherwise saying so is just making some curious kind of noise. I am bound to point out to
this person such reasons as “you have an enormous amount of money,” “you are
remarkably tolerant of shiftless, indolent men like myself,” “you are able to introduce me
to a lot of fashionable people,” and “you make Kate Winslet look like John McCain.”
[Laughter]

But the other person could always agree with those reasons without loving her himself.
Like faith, love isn’t independent of reason — that will be the heresy of feelism — but it
isn’t reducible to them either.

If faith, then, is a matter of certainty, what becomes of doubt?

Well, for one thing, doubts only exist in a context of certainty. A doubt only make sense
against the background of certain taken-for-granted certainties, or at least things which are
certainties for now, whatever one might consider in two weeks’ time. This is one
reason, surely, why Descartes’ attempt to doubt absolutely everything is so wildly
implausible, because by definition that doubt has no context against which to have any
force. It simply doesn’t mesh with anything. It’s like a freewheeling cog in the machine of
language. It’s a bit like saying, “I’ve decided to call everything buttleday.” Well, so what?
As Wittgenstein might say, “Such a claim cancels all the way through and leaves
everything exactly as it was.”

Just as you have to have reason to believe, so you have to have reason to doubt. Doubting
entails certainty. It isn’t just the opposite of it. Ask yourself what it is you are doubting,
and how, and why, and where, and notice how many certainties that involves.

You can make too much of doubt, as the Victorians did, just as you can make a dogmatic
bogeyman out of certainty — I mean dogmatic in the everyday, pejorative sense of the
word. Of course, the word really just means a set of incontrovertible truths, such as
“Montreal is pretty cold in the winter or “Clint Eastwood is not a Neoregelian” and so on.
No bugbear there.

People make too much of certainty. They identify it. In a liberal, agnostic society,
certainty becomes identified with dogmatism.

Faith just is the kind of thing that entails doubt. Doubt isn’t contingent to it, it’s not a
kind of regrettable aberration, some sinful lapse from an unwavering and tenacious faith.
It is actually built into it. It’s a condition almost of it. A proposition that you couldn’t
doubt wouldn’t be a matter of faith. That “Avignon is in France” isn’t a matter of faith,
but “Wherever there is injustice, there is very likely to be rebellion against it” is a matter
of faith. You can be certain that you love someone or you can be certain that people will
rebel against injustice while succumbing to the occasional doubt about it.

Scientologists — a ridiculous name of course; it’s a tautology; it means “the knowledge of
knowledge,” scientology; they can’t even get their name right [Laughter]. The opposite of
tautology, of course, is an oxymoron, so a contradictory phrase like, say, “business
ethics.” [Laughter] Scientologists are faithless not because they regard their faith as a
matter of certainty, but because they regard it as a matter of scientific certainty.

The version of Christianity that I was asked to swallow as a child wasn’t one of the kind
that one could have doubted. But, for the very same reasons, it wasn’t one that one could
have faith in either, any more than one could have faith in a set of geometric theorems. It
was that kind of Christianity.

In fact, advanced capitalism as a whole is a remarkably faithless way of life, even in the
extraordinarily godly United States. It is faithless because, though you may still need
religion for ideological reasons, and though hordes of people may still go to church, that
doesn’t really matter. What matters is, of course, not what you say but what you do. It’s the beliefs implicitly embodied in your practices which really count, and what you do in the secular, pragmatic, relativistic, rationalist, materialistic marketplace, or political arena, doesn’t really involve faith at all — I don’t just mean religious faith; I mean any kind of faith.

The good bourgeois is full of faith in church or in the bosom of his family and is a raving agnostic in the office or the bank or the supermarket. In fact, in those conditions faith is more likely to be a problem than an asset, since it is divisive and it is controversial.

But it is also in a certain sense superfluous. Faith is not what holds advanced capitalist societies today, as it holds, say, the Boy Scouts together or the Lutheran Church together. As long as citizens get out of bed, roll into work, pay their taxes, and refrain from beating up police officers, the citizens of liberal capitalist societies can believe more or less anything they like, a doctrine that would have been absolutely astonishing to somebody from classical antiquity or the Middle Ages. And a lot of them do not believe much at all, even though some of them may imagine they do. Don’t look at what they say with their pious hands on their hearts; look at what they do in their routine existence.

Postmodernism is notably nervous of conviction which, disastrously, it tends to confuse with dogmatism. That is why young people in the United States, and increasingly elsewhere on the globe, say “like” every four seconds. [Laughter] To say “it’s 9 o’clock” sounds unpleasantly dogmatic and authoritarian, whereas to say “it’s like 9 o’clock” is suitably tentative and provisional, open to perpetual revision, and so on.

The world is, accordingly, divided, at the moment at least, between people who believe too little (the agnostic secular champions of the capitalist West) and those who believe too much (fundamentalists, whether Texan or Taliban). And then there are reasonable, moderate, commonsensical people, like myself, in the middle, leaning neither too much to the one side nor too much to the other. That was meant to be funny, but you don’t have to laugh. It’s all right. [Laughter]

Moreover, it’s not just a matter of two camps. Each camp helps to bring the other into existence. There is a kind of stalled dialectic as it were between the two. Fundamentalism, of course, is largely the reaction of the furious, revengeful, resentful, and humiliated against a triumphalistic post-Cold-War West that felt that it could ride now roughshod over weaker societies. Radical Islam is in large part, historically speaking, the creation of the West, this “thing of darkness,” as prosperous as one must to some degree acknowledge as one’s own, which of course the West refuses entirely to do.

The fundamentalists forget that certainty can kill, and the middle-class liberals forget that it can liberate, that there are certain people who cannot afford to do without certainties of moderate kinds at least. There are certain oppressed groups who cannot afford not to know how things stand with them with a reasonable degree of certainty, whereas there are other more privileged types who can afford their agnosticism.

In some Western societies, faith has, accordingly, been privatized, along with the railways, reduced to a kind of hobby, like breeding golden hamsters or collecting insanely expensive porcelain pigs. As the Englishman said about religion — and he was being ironic — “It’s when it starts to interfere with your daily life that it’s time to give it up.” [Laughter] It’s like alcohol in that respect, really.

Liberals tend to turn certainty into a kind of bugbear, whereas it is actually quite a modest workaday sort of notion.

In some Islamic regions, by contrast, faith is a state ideology, a whole way of life, as it was for us in pre-modern conditions, not the kind of thing that one could conceivably doubt.
One doesn't even associate it with the concept of doubt, and a faith not to be associated with doubt is rather dangerous.

One of the things that means is that liberal capitalist societies are at a distinct disadvantage, ideologically speaking, when it comes to the metaphysical certitudes of radical Islam — one reason, I think, why we have the so-called debate on atheism. Suddenly, at the very point in postmodern capitalism where it seemed that grand enlightenment narratives were over, that truth, faith, science, progress, and so on were finished, suddenly they are revived by good old 19th-century rationalists like Richard Dawkins and my old political comrade Christopher Hitchens.

Why is it that those grand narratives, a rather kind of off-the-peg version of enlightenment, suddenly are revived? Many answers. But you could do worse than say “9/11”; you could do worse than say “the beginning of a new grand narrative,” just when the West thought, post Cold War, it had put all that to bed, which once again puts on the agenda, as it were, metaphysical certitudes, absolute truths, foundational principles, and so on. In that situation, a merely pragmatic, relativistic West is ideologically disarmed.

One of the several prices that liberalism pays for freedom is, of course, a potentially ideologically disastrous lack of consensus. Almost everybody believes that tearing people limb from limb when they arrive at the age of twenty-one, perhaps in some elaborate coming-of-age ceremony complete with champagne and caviar, is not to be recommended. But the remarkable thing is we cannot agree on why we agree on that, and we probably never will. Hence, the need for these interminable conversations known as ethics or political theory or whatever. And while valuable in many ways, that sort of liberalism isn’t the best way to arm yourself against a political enemy who suffers from far too little self-doubt.

How does one best reconcile certainty and open-mindedness? My dear lifelong friend in the English Dominican Order, the theologian Herbert McCabe, who died some years ago, once gave a lecture in Cambridge criticizing, as a good Thomist, certain arguments advanced by the Anglican Bishop of Woolwich. “I don’t want to claim,” Herbert announced, “the difference between the Bishop and myself as a matter of emphasis, as though he is leaning a little in one direction and I am leaning a little in the other. I want to claim that I am right and he is wrong” [Laughter] — “or, if he is right, then I am wrong.”

Now, there’s the best of Catholicism for you.

LAMIN SANNEH: Thank you very much for including me on the panel. I read the lecture of Dr. Eagleton and profited enormously from it.

I should say, by way of an apology, I am something of an interloper on this panel. I am not a theologian or a philosopher. I am really a historian of religion, so I present my remarks in that context.

Once I was on an assignment teaching summer school in San Anselmo, Marin County, in California. I was introduced to the friend of a friend at a cocktail party in a private home. The stranger, who had been told a little bit about my religious background, stepped up to me and, with a California-sized confidence, said with a self-assured smile, “Hi. I am David and I am an atheist.” [Laughter]

Thrown on my heels, I responded, a little sheepishly: “Hi, David. I am Lamin and I don’t have your courage.” [Laughter]

We became close friends almost immediately. He was in deep recovery, he told me, after his beloved pet dog died. He took me to his home to show me where his dog was buried
and to mourn in my company.

We had lunch afterwards and he drove me to San Francisco Airport when I was leaving. We kept in touch for a very long time after that.

G.K. Chesterton once observed that the problem with Thomas Hardy as a self-proclaimed atheist is that Hardy knew too much about God to be dogmatic in his denial. To doubt concerning the truth of God is one thing. To deny that truth entirely is a courageous leap of confidence that such denial brooks no contradiction whatsoever.

I suspect, as with my friend David, that this place from which the truth of God has been removed has to be filled with a substitute mystery that evokes the faith it denies. Our own company, it turns out, is not enough to make us complete, however appealing the temporary diversions and stopgaps.

As some of you may know, I went through a stripping process of faith and doubt and came out feeling rather chastened. I knew very little about Christianity growing up in a Muslim environment, but that didn’t stop me from making confident statements about the falsehood and error of other religions.

It is not difficult to do so if you are certain about your own claims. The idea I had of religion was sound enough to qualify me to reject other ways of being religious. In my own echo chamber, I just kept running into confirmation of my own self-understanding.

Faith in that form carried the stamp of self-approval and the backing of like-minded folk. It justified the view that it was not enough just to be religious; it had to be at the expense of someone else’s religion. No element of doubt entered my mind at this point.

One way to describe my journey is to say that I lived in a culture where religion was in terms of law and custom. In that form religion brooked no doubt whatsoever. At a certain point of its history, Europe similarly made a transition that fundamental, from the idea of religion or faith as law and custom.

The radical nature of atheistic rejection of God as a reaction to faith — as Terry Eagleton put it, “as the strenuously self-defining heroic acts of the will” — that characterizes so much of the modern way of approaching the subject seems to me to be two sides of the same coin, that coin being individual autonomy, what Pope Benedict XVI elsewhere describes as “the sovereignty of the self.” It joins one other sovereignty to define the contemporary modern cultural scene, the sovereign jurisdiction of the nation and the nationalism, and sometimes chauvinism, it spawns. Based on sovereignty of reason whose source is God, religion is hemmed in by the rival sovereignties of self and nation.

As human beings, we cannot live alone, nor can we live by self alone. Reason compels a deeper reckoning with the meaning and purpose of human life.

Agnosticism is unfulfilling as a stopgap, and so is an alias[?] philosophy that everything is in flux, and so commitment to truth is a delusion, a philosophy that gives the ephemeral primacy over any notion of ultimate truth. What matters is the search, the quest, not the goal or the destination, and that is what should have the primary claim on our allegiance and our efforts.

But this is, I think, trying to have it both ways, trying to say that our sense of values is important, even though we cannot attribute any true value to ultimate reality. Both cannot be true.

Belief in our souls concerning progress cannot survive if purpose or the destination has no intrinsic merit. If ultimate reality has no value, then any sense of value must
ultimately be whimsical, and that would strip the ground from under any idea of value. As Oscar Wilde contended, “We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.”

In my own quest, I rummaged in the limited resources available to me and settled on Islamic critical thought with reference to how we distinguish between an argument for argument’s sake and an argument of substance. The chain of transmission supporting an argument is not really a matter of the elegance of the links of the chain; it depends on the substance of what the chain conveys.

Faith gives reason the substance that is worthy of it, so that reason grows by contemplating the subject of its life. Reason is sound to the extent of its being in harmony with the truth of its nature. Reason is not for its own self-rehearsal. You can learn, for example, an algorithm and learn the language of the computer, which is logical if you can crack the code, and you can hack. But that is not what reason exists for. That is the light that reason must give account of itself, in terms of its true source. This is the light in which we see all light.

When I was groping myself, stumbling, picking myself up and stumbling again, I felt there was a reason. I had no name for it. I was not even looking for a name for it. But I knew that it was reason that held everything together and made sense.

In their distress, my pre-Islamic forbears, buoyed by their brew of choice, patronized concrete emblems in shrines and altars. But apart from fragile memories, which my mother tried to convey to me, they left no vindicating testimonies. Their legacy has dissipated into the mists of time. So there I was, standing, if you like, almost spiritually naked.

In his Encyclical *Fides et Ratio* on the relationship between faith and reason, John Paul II expresses this idea with, I think for me, all the persuasive force of his pastoral office. “In believing,” he affirms:

“We entrust ourselves to the knowledge acquired by other people. This suggests an important tension: on the one hand, the knowledge acquired through belief can seem an imperfect form of knowledge, to be perfected gradually through personal accumulation of evidence. On the other hand, belief is often humanly richer than mere evidence because it involves an interpersonal relationship of faithful self-giving with others. Knowledge through belief, grounded as it is on trust between persons, is linked to truth. In the act of believing, men and women must entrust themselves to the truth which the other reveals and declares to them.”

He continues: “Human beings are not made to live alone. They are born into a family and in a family they grow, eventually entering society through the activities of the family. From birth, therefore, human beings are immersed in traditions, which give them not only a language and a cultural formation, but also a range of truths in which they believe almost instinctively. This means that the human being, the one who seeks the truth, is also the one who lives by belief.”

This statement, I think, succinctly lays out the right relation of truth to reason, with relational experience the culminating point.

The traditional and [inaudible] formula of faith in search of understanding seems in the light of *Fides et Ratio* a little tantalizing. Rather, it seems to me that understanding in the way we have gathered it through life, through our parents, through family, through the community — understanding must seek faith to make inquiry at all meaningful and purposeful. If you don’t believe what you are searching for is worth the effort, you search in vain, and doing it rigorously makes no difference whatsoever.
Alexander Pope satirizes the idea when he states: “And spite of pride, in erring reason’s spite, One truth is clear, Whatever is, is right.”

Gratitude — at least my understanding of the Catholic tradition — is a natural response here, for that the Church has instituted the Eucharist, where mystery joins faith to embrace and to overtake understanding. That way the divine life touches something universal in all of us, whatever our rational powers or personal condition.

This experience, it seems to me, is capable of being transcribed in so many different ways and in diverse ways in so many other traditions. The idea for me is well developed by John Henry Newman, who wrote: “He is truly Three if He is truly One; He is truly One, if the idea of Him falls under earthly number. He has a triple Personality, in the sense in which the infinite can be understood to have Personality at all. If we know anything of Him — if we speak of Him in any way — if we may emerge from Atheism or Pantheism into religious faith — if we would have any saving hope, any life of truth and holiness within us — this only do we know, with this only confession, we must begin and end our worship — that the Father is the One God, the Son the One God, and the Holy Ghost the One God.”

Thank you.

MEGHAN SULLIVAN: Thank you all for coming tonight. It’s a real thrill for me to come to Fordham to participate in this forum and to hear from very distinguished scholars whom I have admired for a long time, and also to hear from you guys and to have this debate, because I think this is a very important subject and one that touches not only on philosophy and theology and history, but also on our own lives. So I’m really interested to hear where you’re coming from.

I think Professor Eagleton is right when he encourages us in his comments tonight to worry less about certainty and worry more about how we act from faith, his advice to people in the West who are thinking about the role that faith and doubt plays in their life.

While I think he is right to point out that there are different senses of faith and that faith as hope and an expression of love is very important, I also think he neglects somewhat the important role that propositional faith, that the particular articles of belief, play in the life of a believer and the very real tensions and real problems that doubt can play in that area of our lives.

I wanted to spend my time in our comments tonight discussing how I see this tension between propositional faith and reason. I want to talk about some unconvincing ways I think people try to dodge the tension. Then, at the end, I will give a really quick sketch of one way I think it is rationally acceptable to handle these doubts in our lives.

But, first, to understand where I’m coming from tonight, it might be helpful to have a little bit of biography.

The great crisis of faith for me came, as I suspect it did for many people in this audience, when I was in college, except it went the opposite direction: instead of going to college a believer and becoming an atheist, I came to college what can best be described as a bored atheist and became a believer.

I was an atheist in the sense that, if you had asked me, I would have said I didn’t think God existed. But I was bored in the sense that I also didn’t particularly care. I think the new atheists are very enthusiastic atheists, they like to talk about it a lot. I definitely was not in that camp.
I was a very enthusiastic prelaw student. I was planning on majoring in political science. I came in with a very clear academic chart set before me: I was going to go to an excellent law school, I was going to travel the world suing people [Laughter], and make a lot of money, and that was really how I envisioned my life as an adult. If you had told my high-school self I would have ended up a metaphysician talking to an audience about faith now, I would have been horribly ashamed. [Laughter]

But two events happened very early in college that changed my life dramatically.

First, I took an ethics class and I fell in love with philosophy and philosophical argument. It was writing a paper on Hume’s defense of suicide that really sold me.

By the end of my freshman year, I declared philosophy as my second major. Then, after a very disastrous summer law internship, it became my primary major. Then, my academic advisor told me that philosophy could be one’s profession rather than law, and he thought perhaps this was a good idea for me. In fact it was, and I never looked back.

So that was the first big event.

Here’s the second. While I was in college I became a Catholic. I really became a Catholic by accident — or, looking back, it seems like it was by accident.

On the anniversary of the September 11th attacks, which is going to date me a little bit, I was feeling particularly upset and I was looking for someone to talk to about it, somebody who I thought would say something profound or meaningful. There was a Catholic church right next door to where I lived. I had it in my mind that on a momentous anniversary like this these kinds of people would have some kind of memorial service or town hall meeting where they would talk about a big issue like this.

So I went to their regularly scheduled weekday Mass. I think it was a Wednesday. As is typical of weekday Masses, there were no great speeches about politics of the day. There wasn’t even a memorial service. They didn’t mention September 11th at all. It was me, the priest, four very sweet old ladies, a few readings, and communion that, happily, I had the wherewithal not to take, because I didn’t know what was going on. It wasn’t anything like I expected.

When I was leaving, I had two thoughts: (1) that was really weird; and (2) something about that felt right, like something these people are doing felt like a really good thing that is missing from my life.

So I started going back. Then I started going back a lot. Then, after a year and a half of dating the Church, I took the RCIA course and I learned a lot more about what Catholicism meant. That also made a lot of sense to me. So I joined the Church.

At the time, these two decisions, becoming a philosopher and becoming a Catholic, seemed to have nothing to do with each other in my mind, other than the fact perhaps that they were two really important life decisions that I was making behind my parents’ back.

But, as time passed, these two parts of my life started to develop into a real conflict. For instance, while I was officially converting, I was very secretive about my faith. In fact, I didn’t tell anyone close to me until we were very close to the end.

This was partially because I was sure I couldn’t defend any of my choices if I was pressed. I was hanging out with other philosophy majors at this time. If they asked me to provide arguments or to defend myself against the arguments against faith, I did not feel at all equipped to doing it.
And you have to admit, when you take a step back, Christianity at least, the faith I know the most about, seems a little bit wild. You believe there is a being who knows all of your innermost thoughts and foresees the future. You think his Son, who is also Him, turned water into wine, died, rose again, and somehow his return from the dead is crucial to repairing all that’s wrong with the world. If you take a step back, some of this does sound pretty crazy.

And you add to that the problem of evil, the real doozy. How could an all-powerful, morally perfect being seem to permit all of the atrocious evils that we see in the world?

None of this belief seemed very philosophically respectable to me. But in their own way, all of the teachings of the Church really helped me to make sense of the world and to make sense of my place in it.

So I treated Catholicism like my dirty Sunday habit, and I worried that when it came to what mattered most in my life I was in fact a very unreasonable person.

Now, I think this is the wrong conclusion to draw about when propositional faith start to conflict with other parts of our lives. But here’s why the tension between faith and reason seemed so acute for many Christians: We don’t just have what Professor Eagleton call “Yeti or Bigfoot faith.” Rather, our faith is thick. Being a Christian means not only acting in certain ways, it means not only having certain hopes or aspirations for others; it also means believing with at least some confidence a very complicated set of historical, philosophical, theological, and moral claims.

I think good faiths are thick, and the thicker your faith gets, the more opportunities there will be for science, history, logic, and ethics to contradict some of your beliefs. Our best history might challenge claims about Jesus’ life. First-order logic entails that it is impossible for three beings to be identical to one being (that’s the one I actually worry the most about in my own life). Our best moral theories declare that it is unconscionable for any moral agent to permit the 2004 Christmas tsunami if he had the power to prevent it. The thicker your faith, the more prepared you should be for doubt from these different corridors of your life.

So then the question becomes: What should you do when your deeply held religious beliefs, the ones that are really central to you, the ones that seem very plausible to you, the ones that you are confident in, start to conflict with our best history, science, logic, and moral philosophy that also seem very plausible and important to you?

Well, you might think that the rational thing to do is just lower your confidence in the religious teachings.

My colleague at Notre Dame, Gary Gutting, thinks that the heart of Catholicism is that it gives us a model for an ethics of love. In a recent article he published in The New York Times around Easter last year, he says we shouldn’t be preoccupied with questions of whether and how God exists or whether any of the historical claims of the Christian faith actually hold water.

This approach seems like a mistake to me. If Catholicism turns out to be nothing more than an ethics of love, then it seems to me there is no non-arbitrary reason to be a Catholic rather than, say, a Buddhist or a secular humanist.

I think it also gets the tradition wrong, again just looking at the Christian faith. The central kind of love in the Christian tradition is love for God, which transforms us in such a way that we are able to love each other. But how could you possibly love a being like God while being indifferent as to whether He exists, or what He is like, or in what sense
He exists, or what He has done in the history of human life? What is left in this faith to love if you are indifferent to all of these other questions?

Now, I think surely there are times when we realize we have misinterpreted our faith and we need to change our mind. I think one of my favorite examples of this is from the beginning of Acts, when Jesus ascends into heaven and the disciples are standing there. I always imagine them with their jaws open, kind of drooling, like staring up at the skies. He goes all the way and doesn't come back. They just stand there outside staring at the sky. They thought he was going to come right back. It was a huge change for early Christians to realize that they had misinterpreted Jesus when he said that he was coming back. They had the timing a little bit off. This is an area where reason helped us to understand a doctrine of faith. In fact, we realized we had gotten something wrong.

But if we dilute the faith too much, if we start to doubt all of the metaphysical and historical claims of Christianity, I think it is going to lose much of its coherence, and it is also going to lose much of the original value that it played in our life.

So much for the strategy of dilution. I'm not going to recommend that to you tonight.

Another option is to go to the way of fundamentalism. When a teaching of your faith conflicts with some other claim that you find plausible, you should just always dismiss or radically reinterpret the other claim.

Now, we could talk more about this in Q&A, and I had a big rant about it in the early part of this talk that I took out. But I hope you will agree with me that this is a bad strategy.

Cults ask you to accept their teachings without reason, or despite reason. Respectable religions, I think, tell us that reason is a faculty by which we can develop our faith, that the very same faculty which enables us to distinguish bad and good science is at work when we distinguish trustworthy and untrustworthy religious sources. In fact, this is a very great gift that God has given us.

Indeed, I think we make a huge mistake when we claim that faith and reason are somehow separate faculties, or that at some point reason has to be mistrusted, or reason is going to exit the picture and then faith will fill in.

My undergraduate students at Notre Dame — I teach a really big intro class for freshmen and we talk about faith and reason — they almost to a person instinctively claim that having faith in something means believing it without any evidence. They treat faith and reason much the way that parents treat warring siblings on long car rides: “Faith gets this half of the backseat, reason gets this half of the backseat, and we just hope they don’t hit each other before we get to our destination.”

Now, I don’t think it is at all clear that we can distinguish these faculties in this way. In fact, insisting on these kinds of distinctions gives a lot of ammunition to the new atheists, who then criticize people of faith for being deeply unscientific.

For every belief I have there is some reason or other that I am looking for me, even if I don’t have it, to support holding it. I believe that this event would be held on a Tuesday because the organizers told me and I trust them. I believe that kicking puppies for fun is immoral because I think puppies are sentient and it is wrong to harm sentient beings just for fun. I believe God is all-powerful and morally good because I think this is the best explanation for order in the universe, because I trust the testimony of other believers, and because I believe that I have perceived such a being working in my own life.

Even the mysteries of faith are mysteries not because they are believed with no reason whatsoever, because you are asked to believe them without any bedrock reason, but,
instead, because the reasons were the kinds of information that God had to reveal to us, that we wouldn’t have been able to figure out on our own — but still have reasons nonetheless.

The way I see it, religious faith, like every other part of our cognitive lives, is always looking for reasons and always questioning whether or not those reasons are good or bad compared with the other parts of our reason. Indeed, that is why I think religious doubt, doubt in the propositional part of faith, can be so crippling for believers, because we are designed to look for these reasons, and when we don’t find them the system crashes.

So where does that leave us?

For thick faiths, a certain amount of doubt is going to be inevitable. But I don’t think it is irrational to continue to hold beliefs in the core teachings of a faith, even in the face of conflict with other seemingly plausible beliefs. This is because there are many other occasions, both in our lives and in scientific practice, when we find ourselves with a package of beliefs that we know to be inconsistent, but nevertheless we don’t give up on any of the particular beliefs.

Indeed, these problems come up very acutely in logic and physics. For example — and here’s my boring philosophy lesson of the night — we know that our best formal logic is provably incomplete. Basically, the foundations of mathematics are provably incomplete. The two components of this system will never agree.

A logician named Kurt Gödel proved this in 1931. Now, in the last eighty years since Gödel announced this astounding proof, we have not stopped using mathematics or formal logic. We don’t know with any confidence which part of the system is causing the problem. But it would be horribly foolish to arbitrarily pick some part of the system to favor over the others at this point. The only way that we are going to have any hope of fixing logic is to keep doing logic and to have faith that at the end of the day our errors will be revealed to us.

A similar conflict faces physicists trying to reconcile general relativity and quantum mechanics. Our best theories of the universe disagree. But there is no reason to favor quantum mechanics or general relativity over the other. We don’t have any evidence of where the problem is. In fact, the only way that we are ever going to come up with our best physical theory is to do more physics, to keep trying to expand on this imperfect system, while fully aware that at some point we have made a mistake.

I think a similar strategy is available to those of us who find ourselves with a thick faith that we in fact have a lot of confidence in but which is in fact deeply in tension with our other beliefs. It is no less rationally respectable to maintain, or even expand, your faith in response to challenges.

I think it is rationally embarrassing to abandon your beliefs very flippantly, or to arbitrarily choose to favor faith over reason, or vice versa, without good reason.

In my personal life, I think the best example of this strategy for reconciling faith and doubt comes from Mary in the Bible. In the Gospel of Luke, we hear about how astonished she was — rightly so — when the angel told her she would give birth to Jesus. This claim made absolutely no sense given her circumstances. Luke reports that even postpartum, when the shepherds were coming to visit Mary, she was absolutely astounded at what was happening. But she didn’t conclude that her understanding of biology or human reproduction was wrong; she didn’t conclude that she was just having a very vivid dream. Luke tells us instead that she treasured all of these things and she pondered them. I think believers can emulate Mary when it comes to tackling the deeper and very real conflicts between propositional faith and reason that we face.
There is nothing embarrassing about being a philosopher and a believer. What is embarrassing is leaving no space for reason to help us dig out of these conflicts when we find ourselves in these situations.

Thank you and I look forward to the discussion.

ELIZABETH JOHNSON: The panel will now interact for a few minutes. While that is happening, if you do have a question or something to raise, if you’d write it on the card, the students will be picking it up and bringing them forward.

Let me turn now to our distinguished panel and ask for responses to one another, something anyone said that someone else would like to respond to.

Terry?

TERRY EAGLETON: I would just make a few points very quickly.

One is atheism has been much mentioned. One of the problems with a lot of atheists is they really buy their atheism on the cheap. It doesn’t cost them much to be atheists. One of the major reasons for that is the church.

I live in Ireland, and almost all intellectuals in Ireland are card-carrying atheists. I try, boringly and constantly, to point out to them that they are deprived because they have never been exposed to a version of Christianity that was hard to reject. They have been exposed to a version of Christianity that any decent, liberal-minded person would almost certainly kick against when they arrived at the age of reason.

Atheism is to a large extent the product of the Christian church. People who have not been presented with a tough enough and challenging enough version of the Gospel that it costs them something to reject, turn it down by all means, but don’t make things easy for yourself.

I would say to people like Richard Dawkins, who, for example, is so theologically illiterate that he thinks the doctrine of creation has something to do with how the world got started. The doctrine of creation of course has nothing whatsoever to do with how the world got started. Anybody who wants to know what it has to do with, if you just approach me privately later, for an extremely modest fee I will let you know. [Laughter]

A couple of quick points.

Meghan mentioned 9/11. I hope you all remember about the previous 9/11. I hope you remember about the 9/11 that happened thirty years before the tragedy at the World Trade Center, when the United States government violently overthrew the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende of Chile on 9/11 and installed in his place an odious dictator who went on to murder far more people than died in the World Trade Center.

A quick point. Meghan talked about God being morally good. I don’t agree with that — not that I think that He is very, very wicked either; just that I think that not many theologians would think that moral language was applicable to God.

Even when we talk about God as good, then, as Aquinas would say, we don’t really know what we are talking about. We are using language that is analogous, metaphorical, hit and miss, and so on.

Morality is for wretched creatures like ourselves who don’t know how to be happy, who
ELIZABETH JOHNSON:  Meghan?

MEGHAN SULLIVAN:  The point about morality is interesting.  I’ve had this conversation with some of my theologian colleagues at Notre Dame.  I’m always impressed that theologians always seem to be willing to play this transcendence game — like “my God is more transcendent than yours.  You think your God is hard to understand?  My God is impossible to understand; he’s completely unlike anything we know.”  As a philosopher, obviously I can find this challenging.

I think when we talk about God being morally perfect — and I would be interested to hear what some of you guys think — we are not saying so much that we are trying to fit God into human-created value systems, which is where this challenge from theologians typically comes from; but, instead, saying that, whatever moral goodness is, it is what God does and commands; whatever goodness is, it ultimately emanates from Him and we understand it only in light of Him.  So then, when we say, “We believe in God but he permits atrocious evils,” that creates a serious tension in our system.  How could we believe that he is the source of goodness or the fulcrum by which we understand moral perfection, given the fact that this seems to go so counter to other moral claims that we deeply hold?

Actually, I have a question for Professor Eagleton.  This is my one metaphysics question of the night.  In your remarks, you talked about how theologians should also resist the claim that God exists because it would entail that God is in the universe or acting in the universe, which is again like bringing God out of his transcendence and somehow trying to put him into a position that he doesn’t belong in.

I guess I wanted to quibble with that a little bit, because I think there is an even broader sense of existence, a really simple sense of existence, that doesn’t have anything to do with being located in the universe, but just being.

I think it is very important that we understand at least some of the dispute that theists and atheists have as a dispute about whether or not there is a being that is God, regardless of whether he exists in the universe or not.

This is partially because I don’t think we can just categorize a theist as somebody who feels a commitment or devotion or hope and the promises of the Gospel or the promises of a particular religious tradition.  There are some people who we say are definitely not atheists — maybe deists fall into this category — who don’t disbelieve in God, but they certainly feel no commitment to worship Him or moral commitment either way to act for Him.

So I think at least framing part of the debate between theists and atheists as a debate about existence helps give us a framework for understanding all the different ways that these disputes can pop up.  But I’m interested to hear what you think about that.

TERRY EAGLETON:  Could I just say that not only is my name misspelled in the program, but now she’s calling me Eggleton [sic].

MEGHAN SULLIVAN:  I’m sorry.  It’s my Southern vowels.

TERRY EAGLETON:  Just call me Teresa.  [Laughter] Let’s take this to its logical conclusion.

Well, the question of being of course is an extraordinarily hard one.  There are
theologians, like Jean-Luc Marion for example, probably one of the greatest living theologians, the title of one of whose books is *God Beyond Being*. As I say, one can’t even think of God in terms of being, Heidegger’s being is not really identical with God and so on.

I didn’t just say that God didn’t exist within the universe; I said he didn’t exist outside it either. God is nowhere. God is not locatable.

I think the problem — well, of course, given the inadequacies of our language, we are bound to think in terms of God as a being. But the dangers of verification are grievous there, aren’t they, the idea of thinking of God — and maybe we can do no else — as a determinant entity, a being, rather than that which by his love sustains all beings in existence but is not countable up among them? God and the universe don’t make two, for example. God is not reckonable up within the things that He creates because He is the source of creation.

I’ll leave it there.

**ELIZABETH JOHNSON:** I would just add to that that we can’t forget the notion of mystery when we speak of God, as something that goes way beyond our own finite capacity to comprehend. Once you establish that, then our language assumes a more humble approach. I think we need the language of what you are so beautifully calling thick faith, with all of its images and rituals and symbols and propositional beliefs. But none of them comprehend. There is always more. God is always ever greater. So that sense of mystery I think could mediate between what the two of you are arguing about.

**TERRY EAGLETON:** Well, could one meditate in this sense? One of the best aspects of the Catholic tradition surely is that, while utterly agreeing with what Elizabeth says, it also believes that without reason we perish. Faith is not feidism. Faith is not the radical Protestant separation of belief or conviction from reason. Maybe it’s pretty mind-warping for us to try to hold together those two positions.

As I try to put it in my paper, faith must be rational, but reason doesn’t go all the way down. Living in that sort of tension is pretty difficult.

**ELIZABETH JOHNSON:** Perhaps Lamin Sanneh could say something, because you were quoting from *Fides et Ratio* before.

**LAMIN SANNEH:** It seems to me that perhaps there may be two ways to approach language with regard to God.

We are very good in the academy at framing language in such a way that it gives us a tool, a handle, of how to describe God. That way of proceeding has tremendous power in the academy. That is what we are paid to do in the university.

But it seems to me there is another way to look at language; that is to say to look at language as a way in which words can perform the function not only of us being able to capture God, but a way for God to reach us, to capture us, to challenge us.

The first way has been reinforced by the Enlightenment. The second way is a little bit weak. Language is our power to control ideas. In a sense, it gives us the feeling that we can also control who and what God is. It seems to me that we have to balance that. Maybe that is the way to balance faith and reason. But there ought to be a point at which language serves, becomes a servant rather than the master of the subject with which we are concerned.

**ELIZABETH JOHNSON:** We move to the interventions from the audience — or “you
guys,” as Meghan keeps calling everybody. There is a whole set of very rich questions here. We will see how far we can get with some of these.

Take one: “There is a popular saying ‘the enemy of faith is not doubt; it is fear.’ How does fear manifest itself in the church and society, and how can we combat it?”

Anybody want to take a stab?

**TERRY EAGLETON:** Why should we want to combat fear? I mean fear is a perfectly natural and understandable and necessary human reaction. I mean there are rational fears. The idea that fear is, ipso facto, something to be combated, something weakening, seems to me a rather virile notion. There are things of which we should properly and understandably be afraid and we need to protect ourselves. Nothing wrong with fear at all.

**LAMIN SANNEH:** Well, religious language is quite rich in that regard. We talk about the fear of God being the beginning of wisdom. And in certain languages fear of God is a form of piety, the way to approach God.

But I think the sense in which that question is framed is that there is a kind of negative notion of fear that erodes trust among people and becomes more an obstacle to the community nature of faith and that we have to overcome that.

Fear of God is not a very popular way today to promote faith, at least among young people. I remember arriving in Chicago once. It was in the winter. I was going to a seminary to speak there.

In the cafeteria, one of the students came up to me and said, “Do you know we don’t believe that anybody should be able to tell us what is worthy of us? We will not accept anyone to give us our sense of self-worth except ourselves.”

That really cuts off any possibility of trying to create a sense of community. Fear in that negative sense seems to me requires to be overcome with a more positive understanding of Christian faith, including doubt. That’s how I would take that question.

**ELIZABETH JOHNSON:** There is one here directed toward Meghan: “How should you proceed if you can’t bring yourself to believe the central propositions of Christianity, such as Christ’s divinity?”

**MEGHAN SULLIVAN:** This is a great question.

One of the parts of Terry’s talk that I really appreciated was when he mentioned the fact that for many of us these beliefs aren’t like “on or off” choices. Like I can wake up tomorrow morning and choose whether to get a cup of coffee or not, but it’s very hard to wake up and say, “Today’s the day I’m going to believe this complicated metaphysical proposition or this complicated teaching from my pastor.”

One of the ways that the more liberal forms of Protestantism that have flourished in America have distorted matters is by putting so much pressure on people to make a choice on one or another matter as just like an act of will, like buying a cup of coffee, when in fact for many of us that’s just not possible.

Pascal had this work-around in his famous wager. He wanted to trick himself into believing in God so he thought he’d have a chance to go into heaven. He said the way to do this is to start going to church and start going to masses and to expose himself to a lot of people who believed this, just believing that he would pick up the belief indirectly. So that, I guess, is one option.
But I think if you find yourself in a situation where in fact these core teachings are very implausible for you, then the best you can do is try to consult your reason and your internal moral intuition about where you should go look for the truth in these matters.

The horrible dogmatism comes in when somebody says, “If this claim seems really implausible to you, you should still nevertheless believe it rather than consulting these other intuitions.”

So I certainly wouldn’t say that somebody should — or even can — just come to form a belief in one of these core teachings on their own without other faculties intervening.

**ELIZABETH JOHNSON**: This is a comment I will read. This is labeled “not a question, a comment”: “It occurs to me that perhaps even more important than passing on the tenets of the faith from generation to generation is passing on how to remain gracefully faithful in the presence of doubt — doubt that in my experience always draws us deeper into mystery.”

There is a question directed to Terry Eagleton: “Why do you think God is not a person?”

**TERRY EAGLETON**: Could I just say very quickly on the fear of God issue that Lamin raised? What is fearful about God, of course, in the Jewish Bible is his terrifying love, is his ruthless, uncompromising, unswerving love, which is a destructive force which threatens to burn you up. God is a terrorist of love, and fear and love are not separated in that way I think in Scripture.

Why is God not a person whereas Al Gore arguably is? [Laughter] Well, one could say that God is personal perhaps — that might get a little close to it. But, once again, to use the language of “a person” makes him sound rather like an entity or an individual.

To revert quickly to the argument about the limits of our language, all language about God, all theology, threatens to be idolatrous; it threatens to reify, turn into entities. That’s why one of the very first Commandments is don’t be an idolater. The Jews are forbidden to have a graven image of God. Why? Because the only image of God is us, is the personal, and one person in particular. That’s the reason for the ban upon reification which, as it were, begins the Ten Commandments.

Could I just say to the person who finds it very hard to believe the central tenets of Christianity, then don’t be a Christian? What else can one say? There is no obligation to believe them. It’s like saying, “I can’t be an anarchist. I’ve tried. I’ve wrestled, I’ve wrestled with Buchanan’s texts. But I’m lying here, sweating, at 3 o’clock in the morning. I’m incapable of becoming an anarchist.” Then cool it, don’t be. [Laughter]

**ELIZABETH JOHNSON**: I am very tempted to add a p.s. to that, that I disagree. I think to hang in with the community, to hang in with the ritual, to hang in with the Eucharist that Lamin Sanneh brought up, to read the Scriptures, to live the life, to do the praxis, and let the rational propositional beliefs, which are part of the tradition, recede lightly, hold them lightly. As you live, something of what it means then could be revealed as you go along.

In other words, at any one point to say, “I can’t believe this so I’m leaving” is to put too much emphasis at this point on the rational propositional belief, although I agree with Meghan it’s definitely that and not just simply an ethic of love.

**TERRY EAGLETON**: There are also people who hang in with anarchists and who don’t really believe it but they live the life and so on. They’re known as the secret police actually. [Laughter]
But I quite agree with that. Of course Christianity is a praxis, it’s not just a theory. It’s rather like Marxism in that respect, and in many other respects as well. But I took it to mean somebody who had tried to do that and then couldn’t.

You have to admit that, as Wittgenstein says, reasons come to an end somewhere and people shouldn’t be made to feel bad, or the superego shouldn’t torture them, because they don’t live up to certain ideals. Ideals are often very terroristic things. They should just be allowed to get on with whatever kind of life they have.

ELIZABETH JOHNSON: Do you want to get in on this?

LAMIN SANNEH: Yes. I think I just want to echo what has been said.

If you begin with the central affirmation that God is the light that enlightens everyone who is born into the world, and therefore all human beings, not just Catholics, are made in the image and likeness of God, it seems to me that that is not dependent on whether or not I believe a particular doctrine. That is true about my central humanity.

Where faith comes in and where the community comes in, it seems to me, is that this fact does not carry any compulsion; there is no coercion. Therefore, at some point, with all these elements coming together — the community, practices, experience, friendships, and so forth and so on — the will is prompted to surrender, in other words to consent, to agree, to accept. That step I want to say is not necessary for the earlier truth about us as human beings to be affirmed. I want to make that distinction.

ELIZABETH JOHNSON: Let’s move to another question. It is a little bit lengthy, but it comes out in a very good place: “In the history of Christianity and Roman Catholicism we see changes in belief, where one position is directly contradicted by later position, such as: now is it morally acceptable any longer to own slaves; is religious freedom a human right? To each of the panelists, in your understanding of the relation between faith and doubt, how would you describe the process by which humans come to a new understanding of what their faith entails while getting rid of or doubting old faith claims?”

Meghan?

MEGHAN SULLIVAN: I have to start first. This is a wonderful question.

You can come at this from two perspectives, the internal perspective and the external perspective.

The internal perspective is somebody who believes that God through the Holy Spirit is actually still engaged with the world. I think some of our changes in beliefs come about because God has in fact helped us in a pretty direct way to realizing truths that we didn’t quite understand before.

We also have the God-given faculty of reason, to try to figure out these really difficult claims. One of the central problems with fundamentalism is believing that a document like the Scriptures could be read straightforwardly and couldn’t be admitting of many interpretations and couldn’t be the kind of document that you have to wrestle with over entire generations — not even just entire lives, but generations and generations of human history — that God would write like a user’s manual rather than a piece of great literature, the kind of thing that is going to stir you internally and stir your will rather than just giving you this guidebook to life.

So I think that part of the plan internally for our religious tradition, for the
Catholic/Christian religious tradition, is for us to come to greater understanding over time of what these central truths mean and what they mean in our particular culture and day, and that’s one of the reasons why we have been given the faculty of reason.

Externally, I think it is very important that faiths be responsive to the cultures that they are embedded in and the challenges that those cultures present.

Thinking about the Christian Gospel as a criticism of Western capitalism, as Terry does in his talk, I think that’s really interesting and there’s great truth in that. It wouldn’t have made sense 500 years ago to read the Gospel that way. But the Gospel is flexible and it’s admitting of these kinds of changes and interpretations based on the circumstances that we find ourselves in.

So that’s how I see the process working. But I admit that’s kind of like vague and big-picture.

TERRY EAGLETON: I think in the 1960s, when the Church was considering there was a possibility of its changing its teaching on contraception, some Vatican official, some bureaucrat, was asked, “What state would that leave the Church in as far as certainty and doubt were concerned?” To which he replied, “If we change the teaching, the Church will have moved from one state of certainty to another state of certainty.” [Laughter] A very papist ring about that, isn’t there?

Yes, I agree with what Meghan says about fundamentalism. One response to the question would be “Well, things don’t change,” which of course is the fundamentalist response.

Fundamentalism is essentially a mistake about textuality, is essentially a mistake about language. It thinks that you can arrest the sign, you can fix the sign in an unchangeable meaning. That simply is a logical mistake about what a sign is. If signs were absolutely fixed, we wouldn’t really talk about them as signs or meanings.

What we do is — it’s the unofficial motto of the Dominican Order to reinterpret the Gospel in the light of contemporary experience, which again is what Meghan was talking about. I think that’s true not just of the Dominican Order but true in general. There is an ongoing process of interpretation.

LAMIN SANNEH: Let me just answer the point about slavery. I don’t think it is the case that there was a time when slavery was accepted. I know what you mean, but slavery had always been opposed, especially by the communities from which slaves were taken, and often by the slaves themselves.

James Pennington, a slave on a Maryland plantation, in his autobiography said that his mother taught him that although truth may be blamed, it cannot be shamed as a slave. He said he knew, even as a slave, that although his body may be enslaved, his soul was free.

So I think it is a mistake to assume that slavery somehow was something acceptable. There was a shift in Western thinking about slavery. Until the middle of the 18th century, the sentiment of anti-slavery never really acquired social scale. There was not enough of a social pressure built in society against slavery. But that occurred after the middle of the 18th century.

Then the anti-slavery sentiment became so powerful that even slave captains who knew slavery was bad before the middle of the 18th century found themselves in a defensive posture as a result of the anti-slavery movement, which became really a very powerful social movement and spawned many, many ancillary organizations, including petitions, mass mailings, using lobbies, and so forth and so on. It became a very powerful
movement.

So I’d just like to say that it is not the case that slavery was accepted at one time and then rejected at another time. There was very, very strong opposition to it. I’ve just been looking at Portuguese sources in the 15th century, before slavery was actually in place. These Portuguese travelers were talking about the humanity of Africans, for example.

Until the early 17th century, Jobson, an English traveler in West Africa, was adamant that the English were morally superior because they didn’t engage in slavery, they didn’t sell human beings. So, you see, even at that stage the sentiment was alive, that the humanity of the slave, the non-European nonwhite, had to be respected and that slavery was a violation of that.

This is where I think the moral teachings of the Church — in fact, this Portuguese traveler appealed to the moral teachings of the Church and lamented the fact that he was not a moral philosopher to be able to help the traders who were involved in this. This is the late 16th century.

So I think it is important to say that we need a moral compass to guide us through life. It doesn’t matter what stage of history we are in.

ELIZABETH JOHNSON: Here’s another one: “Modernity seems to be inadequate in dealing with doubt, guilt, shame, and anxiety. But what does faith offer in quelling this despair and atheistic, existentialist philosophies and psychotherapy do not?”

TERRY EAGLETON: Well, modernity is not simply about angst and guilt and shame and so on, and it has its own very brilliant analyses of those things and ways of dealing with them, notably Freud, whose greatest and oldest enemy was the superego that makes us feel so ashamed and guilty. Freud spent his whole life fighting that, and Freud is an avatar of modernity.

Modernity, of course, is not reducible to some kind of brooding existentialist despair. Modernity is also an enthralling and buoyant and robust narrative of emancipation and so on.

There is to my mind only one case which says simultaneously — as it were, out of both sides of its mouth — that modernity has been at once an enthralling narrative of emancipation; therefore, that the Jeremiahs ought to be rejected, and it has been one long nightmare; moreover, that those two cases are as close as the two sides of a coin. It’s known as Marxism. But I thought you’d think I’d say that anyway, so there we are.

ELIZABETH JOHNSON: Another question: “If the anthropomorphic God is unacceptable (to me), what is the alternative?”

MEGHAN SULLIVAN: Do you mean by “the anthropomorphic God” — I guess I can’t pick out the individual questioner. If you were a student I’d call on you. Like a God that we project to be in our image — that’s supposed to be the confounding factor or the problematic view.

I think — this might not be answering the question, but it will go back to a topic that I was hoping we could revisit, which is this question of God’s transcendence and how little can we know of God and how much do our human concepts apply to God.

I think one neglected topic in this conversation has been, at least in the Christian faith, the importance of the incarnation, the fact that God made himself in some part known to us in a really visceral, historical way in the form of Christ.
I think when we start to answer this question of how God wants to be known to us and which features does God try to share with us, at least within the Christian tradition, we should be cautiously optimistic that God in fact does want us to know a lot about him.

I sometimes joke with my Catholic undergraduates at Notre Dame — we talk about the problem of hiddenness, which is supposed to be a version of the problem of evil: If God exists, why doesn't he make himself more obvious so that more people would believe in him? This is a problem that is intimately related to these questions of faith and doubt.

One of my very flippant answers that the students and all of you find very dissatisfying is that, if you are Catholic, God is not hidden. You eat Him. How could something be hidden that you are actually digesting?

But I think in a certain sense part of this question of God being known in a personal way, or saying confidently that God is a person, doesn’t require us to anthropomorphize God, at least not within the Catholic/Christian tradition; but, instead, we believe that God has chosen to reveal some parts of his nature to us in ways that we can understand, and in fact that we can be confident that we do understand God, at least in those forms that He has revealed himself.

That’s why I think in some respects being completely unwilling to say of God that he is even a being is to give up something that is actually very valuable for how we understand God through these traditions.

TERRY EAGLETON: We sometimes think, don’t we, of transcendence and incarnation as being opposites, whereas the mystery of incarnation is that they are not? But that is also true of human beings, isn’t it? It’s not as though simply: Here we are limited, fleshly, finite, incarnate beings, so how do we understand transcendence?

The notion of the personal includes transcendence. Human beings are self-transcending beings. That is to say one of the things that marks us out from squirrels and badgers — if you have nothing against badgers; I’m sure they are very splendid little chaps in their own way — is that we are able always to make more out of ourselves than is given. Indeed, a word for that is simply history. Human beings have the capacity to make something of what makes them, to set loose to their biological environment, to set loose to their instincts. Language and culture are very important media in that.

ELIZABETH JOHNSON: I would just add that in terms of the anthropomorphism or personalizing of God, going back to what Lamin Sanneh said about God as light, it strikes me that we could do a lot more than we do with the Biblical images of God taken from the cosmos and usually understood God as spirit. So, for example, the wind or fire — think of Pentecost; or flowing water — so many of the Psalms have God imaged that way; the image of the bird soaring on the wind and then coming back to earth, and so on. There are nonhuman ways of imagining the God of Israel, also in the New Testament, that I think we could put into play and would enrich the understanding of what we mean when we say “God.”

I think what I’ve been missing in this conversation — and I include myself — is the Spirit.
We have talked about God as God the Father, He; and we have talked about the incarnate Jesus Christ. But the Spirit hasn’t come in that much. I think a new accent on that would alleviate some of these questions anyway, somewhat.

LAMIN SANNEH: In that connection, I think of the story of Father Donovan, who was a Catholic missionary among the Masai. He appeared among them and he started to tell them, “God is a great mystery.” He had come to them to, with them, try to search for God and to find God and so forth and so on.

After a while, the Masai elders convened a little meeting with Father Donovan and asked him a number of questions. First, “This great God who is peaceful and loving, did the people from whom Father Donovan came, the people in Chicago — have they found this God?”

Father Donovan thought for a while and he said — well, if he said yes, he would not be telling the truth; if he said no, they would ask him, “Then why do you come to us? Why don’t you go to your people and tell them about this God?”

So he answered, “No, they haven’t found Him. But I have come here so that together you and I can search for this God and find Him.”

Then the next thing the Masai elders told him was: “Father, have you noticed how the lion hunts for the prey, lying in wait, following the prey step by step, until at a certain point it has the prey directly before him, and he pounces and grabs the prey? The Masai elders said to Father Donovan, “Don’t you think God is like that, that he is the one seeking us, hunting for us, coming for us?”

Father Donovan then took that lesson to heart, turned it around, and that became his catechism for the Masai.

But the point to make, it seems to me, in all of this is that surely we have to use human language to describe God. I would have thought that Catholic teaching, in terms of our affinity with the source of our being, who is God, gives us that right, that license, to use human language to describe God.

In the tradition that I came from in Islam, speculative theology is discouraged, in fact is forbidden. What I found in Christianity — actually this is our meat and drink. We have to use human resources, human metaphors, human language, to describe God because the gulf between us and God has been bridged. To a certain extent, we carry in us the marks and the sparks of the divine. So I have become less exercised about the anthropomorphic question in Christianity than I was in Islam.

ELIZABETH JOHNSON: The last question is directed toward each person on the panel: “If you were to recast the traditional creeds, the ‘I/We believe’ statements in the Nicene Creed, etc., what might you be striving for in such a composition?”

MEGHAN SULLIVAN: Do I have to go first again?

ELIZABETH JOHNSON: No.

TERRY EAGLETON: Why should one want to recast them, as though the bright interpretations that I as an individual could give at 3 o’clock in the morning, waking up and shouting “Eureka! I have a much better formulation of the resurrection” could conceivably outweigh the collective wisdom of generations?

That Creed is the distillation, isn’t it — I mean inadequate to be sure — but the distillation of what many millions of people have found it possible and valuable to believe. And who
is a single person, some hubristic intellectual with some bright ideas, to oppose that?

That surely is part of what we mean by tradition. There is somebody who once said very wisely, “We people have always lived in tradition.” His name was Leon Trotsky. Trotsky understood very well in his Catholic kind of way, as a Jewish Marxist, that what people had, they were not talking here simply about a set of abstract propositions that one might want to revise or add to or to trifle with. We’re talking about convictions for which people have lived and died, just as people have lived and died for socialism, over the generations.

These texts are sacred texts. The word “sacred” of course is a very ambiguous word; it means both blessed and cursed, dangerous; “sacred” means “dangerous, handle with care.” Handle these texts with care because they distill a great deal more than simply meaning or language; they distill the life experience of millions and millions of people.

So I wouldn’t myself want to tamper with them at all.

LAMIN SANNEH: I would say that one of the great changes since Vatican II has been the explosion of Catholicism around the world. If you take Africa, in 1900 there were no more than 9 million Christians in all of Africa. Today there are over 500 million, 523 million.

Many of these communities worship in their languages. What is prominent in the Catholic liturgy, of course, has been the vernacular liturgy. There the parts of the liturgy that are translated into the local languages — say the Lord’s Prayer — have really opened our eyes in very fresh ways to not only the nature of the liturgy itself, but the vernacular treasures and insights that had been hidden until the liturgy came along.

I speak some of these languages, and I am astonished. Say, in Dakar, Senegal, Paul Martin from Columbia University and I arrived one Sunday and were booked into the hotel. We thought: Well, we are tired. Tomorrow we can go shopping. It was Pentecost Sunday, and our hosts in Dakar, Senegal, told us that actually Monday is a public holiday because of Pentecost. Pentecost is a public holiday in Senegal.

Paul and I looked very surprised at this. They said, “Don’t you have that in America?”

We said, “No, we don’t have Pentecost holiday.”

“Oh,” they said, “what’s wrong with you guys?”

So the Christian faith brings out things that are there in the vernacular, and translation really reveals fresh meaning, fresh eyes.

One thing I shall never forget in the Catholic Mass is the word for thanksgiving, ginem [phonetic] and the word for compassion, yinem [phonetic] — very close, right? When we apply this to the Holy Mother, you can see how even the idea of thanksgiving carries with it this idea of motherhood and the birth pains that stand for the compassion of God.

The Catholic Sister who was there in the village where I worshiped said to me, “I don’t understand why these people are so spontaneously attracted to the Holy Mother.”

I said, “Well, if you know the language, you will know why.”

So it seems to me we should not be afraid of embarking on new ways of expressing the faith because I think there are a lot more treasures yet to be discovered.

MEGHAN SULLIVAN: I guess I always wondered — and I totally agree with Lamin’s remarks — with respect to the Creed why it doesn’t start with a stronger verb. “Believe”
just seems to me a very — the Creed is an incredibly important statement, and I wondered why the authors didn’t go with “know” or “trust” or some other really strong verb that would relate us to God, rather than “believe.” I have all kinds of belief that I hold very lightly, but this is supposed to be a very important one. That’s a question that I have always about the Creed, is why doesn’t it start with a more powerful verb.

ELIZABETH JOHNSON: I would just add back in the 1970s Pope Paul VI felt that as the liturgy was going into the vernacular, that the way the Nicene Creed was sounding to contemporary ears was archaic, and some people loved it that way, but other people didn’t and were not inspired by it.

So he suggested that the Church make an effort to write what he called “short formulas of faith.” He wrote one himself — it’s available online; it’s interesting to read — how he would —

Back to what Terry was saying, you’re not trying to replace or in some way denigrate the Nicene Creed. But that is written in the language of the 4th and 5th centuries, and to 21st-century ears it doesn’t convey perhaps the fullness and the richness.

So not saying not to say it, but the question was “if you were to recast.” I would just point out that we’ve had a papal effort to do that. Continuously in a living tradition, a church that is alive, what we do believe in gets passed on in new ways. And, as Lamin Sanneh so beautifully said, there are treasures yet to be discovered.

TERRY EAGLETON: Could I just say very quickly one reason why the Creed doesn’t start with “know” is because belief and knowledge are not the same thing, and it’s very important to see that.

In Latin Credo in unum Deum, the accusative case taken from Credo means “not believe that” (propositionally), but “believe in.” Those first few words of the Creed indeed are an expression of trust and hope and faith.

ELIZABETH JOHNSON: With that, we have come to a conclusion. Thank you.

JAMES McCARTIN: I won’t attempt to add anything but gratitude to this panel and to all of you for coming, to Patricia Bellucci and Emily Gordon of the Center on Religion and Culture.

Allow me to invite you back on December 2nd when we will explore the question: What can age-old traditions learn from today’s spiritual seekers and religiously uncommitted? Please join us here on December 2nd.

Have a good evening.

[Adjourned: 8:04 p.m.]