

The New York Times

Is the World Ready for a Religious Comeback?

Oct. 19, 2024



Maansi Srivastava/The New York Times



By [Ross Douthat](#)
Opinion Columnist

The heyday of the new atheism in Western life, when anti-God tracts by Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens bestrode best-seller lists, did not arrive because brilliant new arguments for God's nonexistence were suddenly discovered.


Rather, it arrived because specific events and deeper forces made the time ripe for unbelief — because the early internet served as a novel transmission belt for skepticism, because Sept. 11 advertised the perils of religious fundamentalism, because the Catholic Church's sex abuse crisis undermined the West's strongest bastion of organized Christianity and because the digital-era retreat from authority and institutions hit religious institutions first. The point of listing such forces is not to diminish the influence of Dawkins and the rest. By seizing their opportunity, the anti-God polemicists pushed secularization and de-Christianization farther than they might otherwise have gone. It's just to emphasize that success in the battle of ideas is often about recognizing when the world is ready to go your way, when audiences are suddenly primed to give your ideas a fuller hearing than before.

Such an opportunity confronts religious writers today. The new-atheist idea that the weakening of organized religion would make the world more rational and less tribal feels much more absurd in 2024 than it did in 2006. Existential anxiety and civilizational ennui, not rationalist optimism and humanist ambition, are the defining moods of secular liberalism nowadays. The decline of religious membership and practice is increasingly seen as a social problem rather than a great leap forward. People raised without belief are looking for meaning in psychedelics, astrology, U.F.O.s. And lately the rise of the "Nones" — Americans with no religious affiliation — has finally [leveled off](#).

So the world seems primed for religious arguments in the same way it was primed for the new atheists 20 years ago. But the question is whether the religious can reclaim real cultural ground — especially in the heart of secularism, the Western intelligentsia — as opposed to just stirring up a vague nostalgia for belief.

It's one thing to get nonbelievers to offer kind words for "[cultural Christianity](#)" or endorse the sociological utility of churchgoing. The challenge is to go further, to persuade anxious moderns that religion is more than merely pragmatically useful, more than just a wistful hope — that a religious framework actually makes much more sense of reality than the allegedly hardheaded materialist alternative.

I have skin in this game, since I will be offering [my own attempt](#) at persuasion next year. But the past few months have brought three religious books that enter this debate — covering the philosophical, the scientific and the experiential cases for a religious perspective on the world.



ENLARGE BOOK COVER

BELIEVE

by Ross Douhat, Ross Douhat

On Sale: 2025-02-11

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Book Overview

Author Info

Book Summary

For searchers caught between doubt and belief and for believers struggling to reconcile faith with contemporary assumptions about science and progress, *Believe* by New York Times columnist Ross Douhat shows how religious faith makes better sense of reality than skepticism or disbelief.

About the Book

Do you ever wish you had more faith, but struggle to make religious belief fit with modern assumptions about the world and human life? With a rare combination of empathy, open-mindedness, and persuasive argument, Ross Douhat offers a blueprint for *thinking one's way* from doubt to belief.

As a columnist for the *New York Times* who writes often about spiritual topics for a skeptical audience, Ross Douhat understands that many of us—whether we are agnostic, somewhat religious, or longtime believers—want to have more faith than we do. But we think we can't believe the way our ancestors did, knowing what we know now—can we?

With clear and straightforward arguments, *Believe* shows how religious belief makes sense of the order of the cosmos and our place within it, illuminates the mystery of consciousness, and explains the persistent reality of encounters with the supernatural.

Douhat argues that in light of what we know today it should be harder to *not* have faith than to have it. With empathy, clarity, and rigor, Douhat explores:

- Why nonbelief requires ignoring what our reasoning faculties tell us about the world
- How modern scientific developments make a religious worldview more credible, not less
- Why it's entirely reasonable to believe in mystical and supernatural realities
- How an open-minded religious quest should proceed amid the diversity of religious faiths
- How Douhat's own Christianity is informed by his blueprint for belief

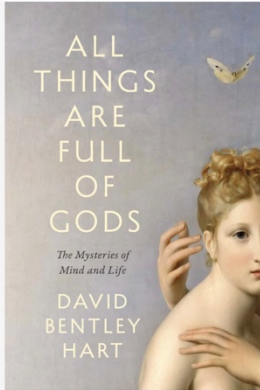
Highly relevant for our current moment, *Believe* offers a pathway for thinking your way from doubt into belief, from uncertainty about our place in the universe into a confidence that we are here for a reason.

Product Details

Imprint:	Zondervan
On Sale:	2025-02-11
Publisher:	Zondervan
Publication Date:	2025-02-11

The philosophical case comes from the polymathic philosopher-theologian David Bentley Hart, who has probably forgotten more about obscure Hindu sutras than I know about my own family. His new book is [“All Things Are Full of Gods: The Mysteries of Mind and Life,”](#) the culmination of decades of

argument against the new atheists and all reductive accounts of human consciousness.



All Things Are Full of Gods
The Mysteries of Mind and Life
by David Bentley Hart

528 Pages, 6.12 x 9.25 in

Hardcover 9780300254723 Published: Tuesday, 27 Aug 2024	\$32.50	BUY
eBook 9780300280395 Published: Tuesday, 27 Aug 2024	\$26.00	BUY

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Description Authors Praise

A world-renowned philosopher's genre-defying exploration of the mystery of consciousness

"[A] masterpiece. . . . The most thorough and rigorous account of the nature of reality to be published in a century."—James Matthew Wilson, *World Magazine*

In a blossoming garden located far outside all worlds, a group of aging Greek gods have gathered to discuss the nature of existence, the mystery of mind, and whether there is a transcendent God from whom all things come. Turning to Eros, Psyche asks, "Do you see this flower, my love?"

So begins David Bentley Hart's unprecedented exploration of the mystery of consciousness. Writing in the form of a Platonic dialogue, he systematically subjects the mechanical view of nature that has prevailed in Western culture for four centuries to dialectical interrogation. Powerfully rehabilitating a classical view in which mental acts are irreducible to material causes, he argues through the gods' exchanges that the foundation of all reality is spiritual or mental rather than material. The structures of mind, organic life, and even language together attest to an infinite act of intelligence in all things that we may as well call God.

Engaging contemporary debates on the philosophy of mind, free will, revolutions in physics and biology, the history of science, computational models of mind, artificial intelligence, information theory, linguistics, cultural disenchantment, and the metaphysics of nature, Hart calls readers back to an enchanted world in which nature is the residence of mysterious and vital intelligences. He suggests that there is a very special wisdom to be gained when we, in Psyche's words, "devote more time to the contemplation of living things and less to the fabrication of machines."

As a culminating work, it is not necessarily the best place for a neophyte to start: That distinction belongs to Hart's 2013 book, "The Experience of God," a much more straightforward introduction to religious understandings of reality.

Whereas "All Things Are Full of Gods" is written in the form of a Platonic dialogue (!) among a group of retired Greek deities (!!) hanging out on Eros and Psyche's estate (!!!) and arguing with one another about contemporary mortal debates in philosophy of mind and neuroscience and information theory.

If that sounds like your jam, it will be, but the new-atheist polemics were written to be whipped through, and this book is not.

The dialogical format does have one great advantage, though: It requires Hart to give extended space to ideas that he's [famous for treating](#) with, well,

Olympian disdain. Through the god Hephaestus, to whom he assigns the skeptical and anti-supernatural part, you get an extended elaboration of the arguments that mind and self and thought are reducible to mindless matter.

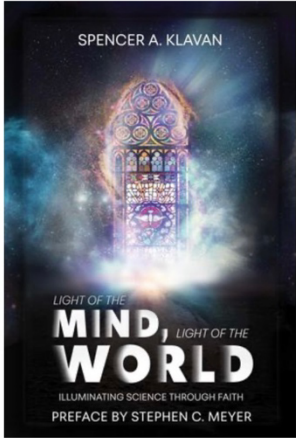
That makes it more compelling when those arguments are defeated (as I think they clearly are) by Hart's argument that mind and spirit have to precede the physical world for our experience of the universe to make any sense at all. If you think this sounds like interesting philosophical noodling but also

fundamentally anti-scientific, you can turn to the next book in my trio, Spencer Klavan's "[Light of the Mind, Light of the World](#)," which is an argument that the development of modern science supplies laboratory evidence for the primacy of mind.


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**Light of the Mind, Light of the World:
Illuminating Science Through Faith**
Spencer Klavan
★★★★★ (0) | Oct 15, 2024
\$28.99
Online pricing. Prices and offers may vary in store.
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plum+ Earn 145 points and enjoy extra savings with plum+. [Learn more](#)



Overview

Language
English

The world is not a machine. Humanity is not a mistake.

For centuries, a grim anti-human outlook has taken hold of the public imagination, teaching us all to view ourselves as random products of a cruel and uncaring natural world. Today, from apocalyptic environmentalism to twisted eugenics and dystopian bionic augmentation, movements are rising around the world to dispense with humanity or subordinate it to a pitiless mechanical logic. For many, it has come to seem as if the human spirit is obsolete, religious faith is illusory, and mankind is destined to be extinguished or surpassed. Some might even see the end of humanity as a good thing.

But that is not our future. *Light of the Mind, Light of the World* tells a daring new story about how we got here, and how we can chart a better path forward. Surveying the history of science and faith from the astronomers of Babylon to the quantum physicists of postwar Europe and America, classicist and scholar Spencer A. Klavan argues that science itself is leading us not away from God but back to him, and to the ancient faith that places the human soul at the center of the universe. Reconciling the discoveries of science with the truths of the Bible, Klavan shows how the search for knowledge of the natural world can help illuminate the glories of its Creator, and how the latest developments in physics can help shatter the illusion of materialism.

[Read more](#)

Publisher: Skyhorse Publishing
ISBN: 9781510783263

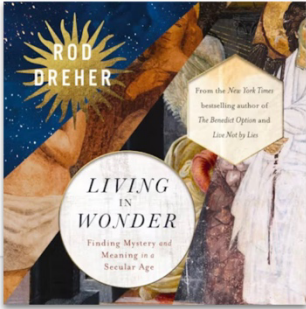
This is not just the familiar case that the fine-tuning of the universe is proof that some Divine Intelligence set the whole thing up. It's an argument that the materialist model of the universe as a closed physical system, in which units of matter bounce around like billiard balls, has been overthrown by the quantum revolution — which demonstrated, to the bafflement of many scientists, that probabilities only collapse into reality itself when a conscious mind is there is to measure and observe.

Klavan argues that really reckoning with this discovery should force a decisive choice. On the one hand, we can embrace some kind of “multiverse” conceit (popular in today's pop culture for a reason), in which there is no singular reality and all possibilities somehow coexist. But that yields incoherence, nihilism, the death of the very scientific project that it's trying to preserve.

Which is why the other choice is preferable, if you really trust the science: Accept that there is only one reality and that it's “created when consciousness gives shape to time and space” — created in some sense every time we look upon it, and created fundamentally by the Power that said *let there be light* in the first place.

This is wild stuff from a materialist perspective, but in my experience with open-minded skeptics, it's not the place where they hit their limit. That's more likely to happen when you proceed one step further, into the territory of the real old-time religion, and start talking about the more personalized and unpredictable ways that supernatural mind might shape material reality — the realm of miracles and revelations, visions and portents, legit angels and real demons.

This realm is the subject of the last book in my troika, Rod Dreher's “[Living in Wonder](#): Finding Mystery and Meaning in a Secular Age.” It's partly a how-to guide for seekers after the more mystical relationship to reality that most human societies have enjoyed but ours has unwisely amputated. But it's also a collection of anecdotal data about the persistence of enchantment even under allegedly disenchanted conditions, the supernatural happenings that flower constantly in our notionally secularized world.



LIVING IN WONDER

by Rod Dreher, Adam Verner

On Sale: 2024-10-22

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ENLARGE BOOK COVER

Book Overview

Author Info

Book Summary

In *Living in Wonder*, Rod Dreher—NYT bestselling author of *The Benedict Option* and *Live Not by Lies*—cuts through the dangerous 'disenchantment' of contemporary life to reveal that deep within the Christian tradition are vital resources that powerfully illuminate our imagination and help regain our awareness of God's supernatural world around us.

About the Book

Join the bestselling author of *The Benedict Option* and *Live Not by Lies* on an exploration of the mystery and meaning of the supernatural world and discover that the universe is not what we think it is: it is far more strange, exciting, connected, and adventurous.

The West has become "disenchanted"—closed to the idea that the universe contains the supernatural, the metaphysical, or the non-material. Christianity is in crisis. People today are leaving the Church because faith has become dry and lifeless. But people aren't leaving faith for atheism. They are still searching for the divine, and it might just be right under their noses.

In *Living in Wonder*, thought leader, cultural critic, and *New York Times* bestselling author Rod Dreher shows you how to encounter and embrace wonder in the world. In his trademark mixture of analysis, reporting, and personal story, Dreher brings together history, cultural anthropology, neuroscience, and the ancient Church to show you—no matter your religious affiliation—how to reconnect with the natural world and the Great Tradition of Christianity so you can relate to the world with more depth and connection.

He shares stories of miracles, rumors of angels, and outbreaks of awe to offer hope, as well as a guide for discerning and defending the truth in a confusing and spiritually dark culture, full of contemporary spiritual deceptions and tempting counterfeit spiritualities.

The world is not what we think it is. It is far more mysterious, exciting, connected, and adventurous. As you learn practical ways to regain a sense of wonder and awaken your sense of God's presence—through prayer, attention, and living by spiritual disciplines—your eyes will be opened, and you will find the very thing every one of us searches for: our ultimate meaning.

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Category 1 :	RELIGION / Christian Life / Spiritual Growth
Category 2 :	RELIGION / Christian Theology / Angelology & Demonology
Category 3 :	RELIGION / Christian Life / Spiritual Warfare

This means that of the three, the Dreher book is the most fun, it tells the best stories, and it covers aspects of human life that are more fundamental to religion's resilience than any argument or theory — above all, the fact that even in societies that exclude any hint of supernaturalism from their systems of official knowledge, strange experiences just keep on breaking in.

But from the perspective of the keepers of official knowledge, the supernatural is often the place where *I'm interested* gives way to *I just can't*. A God of the philosophers or physicists is one thing, but a God of exorcists, miracle workers and near-death experiences is just a bit too disreputable — at least until you have such an experience yourself.

From the religious perspective, of course — Hart’s and Klavan’s no less than Dreher’s — it’s all the same God. So the test for all their arguments is whether a world that’s unhappy in its unbelief can be pushed all the way to this conclusion — or whether contemporary disillusionment with secularism is enough to draw people to the threshold of religion, but something more than argument is required to pull them through.

Ross Douthat has been an Opinion columnist for The Times since 2009. He is the author, most recently, of “The Deep Places: A Memoir of Illness and Discovery.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/19/opinion/religion-atheism-books.html>

Kudos to Ross for doing this. I always end up taking “issue” with something he tries to advance, and though I do not have much faith in the methods he uses to advance faith in the contemporary world, I give him credit for trying.


I don’t think I could ever be a practicing Catholic; too much too much for too long. And then this:

The New York Times

OPINION
MAUREEN DOWD

Trump’s Charity Toward None

Oct. 19, 2024



Michael M. Santiago/Getty Images

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By Maureen Dowd
Opinion Columnist, reporting from Washington

The cardinal should go to confession.

Timothy Dolan let a white-tie charity dinner in New York showcase that most uncharitable of men, Donald Trump.

At the annual Al Smith dinner, Dolan suffused the impious Trump in the pious glow of Catholic charities. Dolan looked on with a dotting expression as Trump made his usual degrading, scatological comments about his foils, this time cloaked as humor.

“We have someone in the White House who can barely talk, barely put together two coherent sentences, who seems to have mental faculties of a child,” Trump told the New York fat cats. “It’s a person who has nothing going, no intelligence whatsoever. But enough about Kamala Harris.”

Trump also offered this beauty: “I used to think the Democrats were crazy for saying that men have periods. But then I met Tim Walz.” When Trump joked about keeping Doug Emhoff away from nannies, even he admitted it was “too tough.”

I have read David Bentley Hart; I like his New Testament translation. His work exposes how much the “standard” translators fail to be true to original work. (Robert Alter’s translation and commentary on past failures in presenting *The Tanakh* make this even more clear.) But the rest of DBH’s work soon leaves me bogged down and unwilling to plough through it. I suppose that if I defined everything as he does, I would reach the same happy conclusions, the point of “rational” approaches to belief. I also have doubts that “religion” has authenticity at the macro-cultural level. Did Jesus speak much, if at all, to the “political” issues, e.g. the Romans, of his time? Was the stand he took “in this world” or elsewhere/otherwise? A way to claim “freedom” from all claimant oppressors? ^{TJB}