

Dialogues

Volume III: Faith and Reason

Compiled by
Anna Lea
President, SPGH

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Copy edited by
Adele Uphaus and Anna Lea

Cover Photo:

Logic and Dialectic Personified by Plato and Aristotle, Marble bas-relief by Lucca della Robbia from the Florence campanile, c. 1437-9. Museo Opera del Duomo, Florence, Italy

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Preface

Dialogues

...is meant to foster discussion between individuals and groups on the myriad ways the ancients continue to shape and affect modern life. The papers included here cover many disparate topics, but they all reflect the central question we pose to each of our speakers: how does the particular topic illuminate the continuing relevance of the classical heritage to society in the twenty first century? Our lives in the modern world are increasingly hectic, fragmented, and driven by impersonal technology, we believe that it is ever more important—and comforting—to remember and reflect upon the common foundation that the classics provide.

Thus, the following essays are designed to demonstrate the ways in which the thoughts, myths and achievements of thousands of years ago can help us understand how we live today. It is our belief that communication about these topics can help to create something whole with which to stabilize our often-overwhelming world.

In this volume, we include papers delivered by the two panelists at a seminar sponsored by SPGH in May of 2008, on the important, and often controversial, subject of “Faith and Reason: The Role of Religion in our Society.” We have also included a transcription of the fascinating audience discussion session that followed.

It is our sincere hope that these papers will encourage further discussion on the important historical and contemporary issues they raise, foster a sense of connection among long-time classicists (both amateur and professional), and inspire new ones to carry on their work.

Contributors

Mary Lefkowitz is Professor Emerita of Classics at Wellesley College, where she was the Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities until her retirement in 2005. She is one of the best-known classicists in the country, esteemed for her work on women in antiquity and the Greek gods. Her most recent book is *Greek Gods, Human Lives* (2003).

Tom Lange is an Indiana-based reporter and writer, whose work has appeared recently in the *Washington Post*.

Sophy Burnham is a Washington, D.C.-based writer, essayist, filmmaker and playwright. Her most recent work is a 2004 edition of her *New York Times* bestseller, *A Book of Angels* (1990), which has been published into 22 languages. In 2002, she was commissioned by the Studio Theater to adapt Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* and to write a modernized conclusion, *Prometheus Released*, both of which were performed in March-April of that year.

Some Reflections on Polytheism and Atheism

By Mary Lefkowitz

I feel somewhat out of place talking about religion in the modern world because I spend so much of my time thinking about the ancient world. Thinking about the past, however, allows us to step back and look at the modern world from a distance. Perspective is one of the great advantages of studying the ancient world, no matter how irrelevant the subject matter may seem, and I am grateful to the work Anna Lea (and Bernard Knox before her) have done with SPGH to promote the study of the classical world.

Today my assignment is to give you a quick introduction to ancient Greek religion and theology, and to say a few words about atheism. To cover polytheism and atheism in 20 minutes is quite a challenge, and I don't suppose I can do it in anything but the most superficial way, but I'll try. We talk about Greek *mythology* because we tend to call the narratives of any religion that we don't believe in ourselves "mythology," and we talk about peoples' stories as "myths," since we believe that we have the *truth*—whereas Greek mythology seems to us to be illusory, because myth and history are opposed in our minds. I myself don't subscribe to such a point of view. Instead of Greek "mythology," we should really be talking about Greek "theology."

As Sophy Burnham observed, “religion” is a Latin word, but there is no equivalent word in ancient Greek. Another difference is that the word “belief” in ancient Greek really doesn’t apply to religion: the ancient Greeks seemed to require no act of faith. Everyone just accepted that there were gods and that people needed to worship them. I would define what we now call religion as man’s attempt to come into right relationship with forces beyond his, or her, control. The forces beyond one’s control, of course, were more numerous in antiquity, when no one understood the causes of earthquakes or sudden changes in the weather or phenomena like eclipses of the moon or sun. An eclipse would seem terribly frightening in the dark world before electricity.

So ancient religion must try to cope primarily with three issues: human powerlessness; human ignorance (we don’t know what’s going to happen tomorrow or even in a few hours from now – we think we know, but we don’t know); and, finally, the fact of death. Everyone’s going to die, and most people don’t want to. Ancient societies imagined that the forces beyond their control were embodied in or controlled by various deities which took a human, anthropomorphic or animal form. But even though the gods are often portrayed in human form, unlike human beings they were powerful, they were knowledgeable, and they were ageless.

In my opinion, polytheism (a religion with many gods) offers a good explanation for the way the world works, because it can account for the randomness of events. If one god has it in for you, another god can’t really stop him or her, because no god can be everywhere at the same time. So if Artemis loves you but she isn’t around, Aphrodite can destroy you. Thus the origin of the world is explained, but

with all its defects. Life is hard because Zeus made it that way. Mankind was not his creation. Zeus simply inherited us from an earlier generation of gods, so the father figure aspect of man's relationship with god is absent in Greek theology.

The "myths," or stories, in surviving texts really don't explain why or how human beings were created. In this way, the stories account for the isolation of humankind from the gods, though occasional contact, often in the form of sexual relations, is permitted. But ancient Greek religion emphasizes the fact of mortality constantly – that's largely what the *Iliad* is about – and with it, the delusions and illusions about ourselves under which we tend to operate. And all this is the will of Zeus. Zeus takes fire away from humans, and when Prometheus steals it back, Zeus punishes mankind with the gift of a woman carrying a jar of vices and diseases: Pandora.

Quarrels among the gods account for the incoherence of human life, and for horrific disasters like the Trojan War. We can think about that war in practical, Marxist terms: the Greeks needed some rich society to invade, so they went to Troy, which was rich in gold, and got the gold and brought it back. But that's a modern way of looking at it. As the Greeks understood it, when Paris carried off Helen, the Trojans committed a crime against the laws of hospitality, which are the laws of Zeus. The Greeks *had* to attack Troy to recover Helen because the Trojans had been guilty of impiety. That is why the *Iliad* must end the way it does, with the prediction of the defeat of Troy. The quarrels among the gods also account for the daily progress of the war. The Greeks do not win for a while because Thetis wants to help her son Achilles, and the gods are fighting on both sides.

Gods do try to communicate with humankind, but there's considerable incoherence there as well. Some gods can predict the future and can choose to tell mortals about what they see, but they always do so in indirect ways that allow mortals to easily misinterpret what they have been told. Oracles and seers help communicate the gods' messages, but, nonetheless, human beings often make mistakes. After the end of the Trojan War, the gods stop intervening as frequently in human life because mortals have become too corrupt for them and they no longer want to mate with or associate with them. In the world after the Trojan War, which includes the present, gods may appear or they may not and we cannot ever be completely sure whether they have.

By now, you may be thinking, "Why would people imagine divinities who behave like that?" But let me emphasize some of the virtues of ancient Greek theology. First, it's extremely realistic to talk about human illusions – for example, the notion that you can invade Iraq and everything will turn out perfectly. People are very good at deluding themselves and others. We operate all the time under partial information, so that we very often get things wrong, and the Greeks understood that.

They also could explain why evil goes unpunished and good deeds are not always rewarded. The gods do not always reward virtue completely because they don't always notice it – they may be asleep, or feasting, or they may be somewhere else. If you're not an important person, they're probably not going to notice you at all. And that can be an advantage, because you won't attract their attention if you do something wrong. "Just lie low" is one piece of advice that's very often given in Greek tragedies, while the big people, the kings (like Oedipus), are suffering.

Not only does ancient Greek polytheism help to account for the persistence of suffering and evil in human life, it also encourages pluralism and openness among its adherents. It acknowledges that other people may believe in different gods, but as long as they acknowledge that *our* gods also exist, we can all get along. They approached other pious people, such as the ancient Egyptians, with great respect, and were perfectly willing to worship their gods and assume that some of their own gods could be associated with the Egyptian gods. So you have common cults put together, and names of Greek gods attached to Egyptian gods. After Alexander came to conquer pretty much the entire Mediterranean world, Greeks came to live in Alexandria, in Egypt, and worshiped their own gods, but they respected and honored the gods of the local people.

So ancient polytheists – the Romans in particular – were taken aback when they encountered Christian and Jewish monotheists, because they found the monotheists to be deeply intolerant: when confronted with the opportunity just to put a pinch of incense on the flame to honor the emperor, Christians wouldn't do it, because they viewed this as a form of idolatry akin to worshiping another god, something their religion condemned. The Romans found these monotheists intractable. According to most martyrologies, it was because of this refusal to accept other gods that the early Christians were persecuted.

That's a quick rundown of some of the advantages of ancient Greek religion, and many of these ideas can be applied to Roman religion as well. But the disadvantages include a lack of central organization, and that's one of the main reasons the Christians won out after the conversion of the Emperor Constantine in the fourth century A.D. Another disadvantage of Greco-Roman polytheism is its failure to offer hope. If this is the way life is, and the gods do

not really care for us, what hope is there, what promise? In these religions, life after death is not pie in the sky or people playing harps on clouds, but a vague existence in a world either on the edge of the earth or under the world. If you've read Virgil's *Aeneid*, you'll remember that the underworld is dark and dank and people in it have an insubstantial, formless existence. Death is terrible because it robs you of life, and even in its imperfect form, life seems better than death. As Achilles says when Odysseus meets him in the underworld in Book XI of the *Odyssey*: "I would rather be a serf or a slave on Earth than a king here." He says this even though he's in the Elysian Fields, where there are daffodils everywhere all the time. Quite limited rewards then, you could say, even for the extraordinary achievers and the well-connected. Performing good deeds while alive may keep you from suffering as much as evil-doers, but even the good suffer, and people like Oedipus can suffer not for their own crimes but for those committed by their ancestors.

Plato and other philosophers understood this problem and questioned the ethics of pagan religions. According to them, Reason says that souls should be rewarded for virtue. In the *Republic*, Plato describes an afterlife that's good or bad depending on whether one is good or bad in this world. But how many people ever believed in that vision? Modern people like it because it seems to anticipate Christianity, but my guess is that in antiquity only limited numbers of educated people ever subscribed to it. Ordinary people went on worshiping the traditional gods right down until the Roman empire switched over to Christianity. The evidence for this is to be found in ancient art and inscription, and in the remains of offerings put out by ordinary people through the fourth century A.D. Even Constantine was following standard pagan practice when he saw in a dream that he would win a battle if he used the sign of the cross, and thought, "Why not? I'll try it."

After Plato, philosophers proposed reforms designed to make traditional religion more coherent and responsive. The absurdities of ancient religion, as perceived by the ancients themselves, were what led Plato and Epicurus and the Stoics to try to devise systems which marginalized the gods and placed emphasis on how people could conduct their lives in an ethical manner without divine assistance.

On the Nature of Things, the epic by the Roman poet Lucretius, is the story of a conversion to Epicurean science. Lucretius' epic begins very much as Christopher Hitchens begins his book *God Is Not Great*, by saying that religion is responsible for the greatest of evils. He offers the example of how the gods required Agamemnon to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia, to take his own child and cut her throat. Hitchens says that religion poisons everything, and that's essentially what Lucretius says as well. Lucretius substitutes science for religion, and argues that everything is composed of atoms and void, and that there is a scientific explanation even for dreams: they're not messages from the gods, but just bits of protoplasm floating around that happen to strike our eyes!

The poetry in which he describes all this is really very moving, and I'm afraid it converted me, at age 19, to a form of atheism. I believe the world can be accounted for in scientific terms and that religion has been responsible for a lot of problems, although I think we would have those problems even without religion. I am not *against* religion if it helps anybody get through life – it hasn't helped me, but I'm not everyone. It has its uses also as a way of preserving culture, of preserving ideas – certainly, you can look at the early Christians and at theologians like St. Augustine, and see that his education, which was a pagan education based in rhetoric, stayed with him throughout his life.

Christianity preserves many of these important pagan ideas, just as Judaism preserves a very ancient and interesting set of texts.

Traditional Greek polytheists would not have approved of my attitude toward religion. They did not consider it acceptable to not believe in the existence of gods. There had to be gods; atheists and the impious and anyone near them might be struck by lightning! People in all times and cultures have needed religion. But I respect ancient Greek polytheism because it does not describe a world in which the gods dish out comfort. For understanding and support, the Greeks had to look to one another. They could comfort each other, and even though we do not believe in their religion, we can learn from Greek religion how essential it is to provide comfort and solace to one another, and to help ourselves. That lesson in itself is one of the great legacies of their religion.

Can Faith and Doubt Co-Exist?

By Tom Lange

I was asked to speak today about faith and doubt and whether or not the two can co-exist. Oftentimes, I think there's a notion that faith and doubt are opposed to one another and can't both be a part of one's own life. I've found the opposite can be true. This isn't a concept I've studied academically, but personally, I've studied it at length.

I'm a non-denominational Christian, which simply means that I believe that God sent Jesus Christ to die for man's sins, so that we can ultimately be united with God. I'm also one of the most over-analytical people I know. By and large, I like to know what I can expect in life; I like to know all the details about new situations I encounter, and I love to ask, "What if?" Thus, it was practically inevitable that doubt and faith were going to co-exist in my life. Managing the two has not always been fun; it's often scary, but ultimately, I've found it's been both rewarding and essential.

I grew up in a Christian home. That meant church on Sunday was mandatory. But my parents also constantly tried to incorporate prayer into the family's daily life, and to show other people the kind of love they believed God showed them. Christianity wasn't a formality in our house, it was more like a lifestyle.

I prayed to become a Christian when I was about six years old. As I said earlier, church was mandatory, and so I'd spent in the neighborhood of 200-300 Sundays in Sunday School hearing about Jesus, his sacrifice, and that if we prayed to accept Jesus into our hearts, we would go to heaven. Now, I wanted to go to heaven – the idea of spending eternity with my family and friends in a city in the clouds where the streets are made of gold and everyone

has his or her own mansion is very appealing to a six-year-old – and so I knelt down one night and prayed for Jesus to come into my heart.

I went to bed that night secure in the notion that if for some reason I didn't wake up the next morning on earth, then I would alternately be in heaven. But the next night before bed found me kneeling down, once again praying for Jesus to come into my heart. Now, as I knelt to pray for Jesus to come into my heart on the third night, I felt very stressed out. Somewhere between the first night and the third night I'd come to believe that I needed to pray for salvation each and every night. I don't remember where this notion came from – all I know is that I was scared of what would happen if I forgot to pray one night.

I consulted my parents on the issue, and they assured me that I really only needed to pray once to accept salvation. Technically, that meant that I had become a Christian the first time I'd prayed, but I still prayed with my parents on the third night, just to be sure there were witnesses who would attest that I did, in fact, pray "the prayer," and did it correctly.

I smile as I think back on this now, because it's one of the first times I can remember becoming enamored with the question, "But how do I know for sure?" I would eventually ask this question many times about many different things over the years, but with a few exceptions, I wouldn't ask it about faith for quite some time.

My first three nights of prayer notwithstanding, it was very easy for me to accept faith in God early on. There are several reasons for this. First, it is much easier to have faith as a child. I had faith in my parents, who told me that I could put faith in God, and that was more than enough for me. It was a very black and white understanding: my parents, who I not only loved but also trusted, vouched for Christianity, and so it was easy for me to accept it.

Secondly, life is simpler when you're young. Don Miller, one of the pastors from my old church in St. Louis, once said that there's no one in life more confident than a ten-year-old. When you're ten, everything makes sense. You've spent the last decade learning about the world and what's in it, and for the most part, it's a very black and white insight, untainted by extensive experience. So nothing had really challenged my beliefs.

Then I turned 13 and everything went to crap.

Up to 13, and for a considerable amount of time after, my faith was really a formality. I believed in God. I loved God. But I was also now going to heaven, and so I didn't really think there was that much more work to do. I didn't need to spend time in the Bible because I already knew and had put into practice the most important part.

When I was 13, I went to a summer camp with my church's youth group. One day, we were at a water park, and after a while, I found myself floating down the park's lazy river. I wasn't thinking about anything in particular, when suddenly I found myself asking, "What if there isn't really a God?"

Now, I'd been going to church most of my life, but I didn't remember anyone telling me that there would come a time when I would doubt God's existence. I assumed that once you prayed to become a Christian, the transaction was done, and you were then essentially just killing time until you made it to heaven. So my question freaked me out – first, because I didn't want to anger God by questioning His existence, and second, because I didn't have any idea how to answer that kind of question. I had no idea how, at 13, I was supposed to prove God's existence.

I asked one of the ministers at the camp about having questions regarding God's existence, and I didn't get very much help from him – he kind of danced around the

topic without really getting to the heart of what I was asking. To his credit, I may have been too afraid to actually get across what I was asking.

So I did what seemed like the logical thing and buried the incident. And my faith in God stayed at about the same level for the next five years. I prayed, but more often than not, it was in passing on my way to bed – unless there was a girl I liked, in which case I actually put some thought into it.

At the end of those five years, I was preparing to leave high school for college, and I felt compelled to know God on a more personal level. I'd known God for most of my life, but I wanted to get closer to Him. We'd been acquaintances for a while, but now I wanted us to be real with one another.

As I mentioned earlier, I didn't spend a lot of time in prayer or in scripture. So I started there. At first, I began to feel satisfied, even a little cocky. Here I was, getting to know God better, spending time in prayer, and spending time in the Bible. But eventually, the same question I'd had years earlier came back: how do I know God really exists? And soon, additional questions were beginning to crop up as well.

Initially, the questions were thought-provoking, but no longer overwhelming: "How do I know God exists?" and "How do I know Christianity is true?" were at the forefront. And as I was now older and a bit wiser, I felt that I at least had the tools to begin looking for answers. At the very least, I felt I could begin to wrap my head around my questions, deepening my relationship with God, and also feeling more secure.

I began to read Scripture and tried to have some meaningful prayer time. I also started reading books, notably *The Case for Faith* by Lee Strobel. Now, my original plan was to read these books, answer all of the

questions I'd ever had about Christianity, and go on with the rest of my week. But that didn't happen. Quickly, as I began to look into my initial questions, more questions cropped up. "How do I know God exists?" then prompted the question "How do I know Christ existed?" Looking into that question prompted, "How do I know He was really the Son of God?"

The question of Christianity prompted questions about the Gospels. How did I know that the Scriptures had been accurately preserved, that the writers of the gospels didn't have ulterior motives? I'd seemingly opened a kind of Pandora's Box in my own mind. I wanted to get closer to God when I went to college, but when I think about that period in my life, one of the first memories that crops up was feeling confused and scared. Questions came up everywhere. They came up as I read, and it didn't take long before I began to question God based on things I saw in everyday life.

I remember going to see "The Exorcist," which had just been re-released, with a bunch of friends, and even watching that movie had me questioning things. It had nothing to do with Linda Blair spewing pea soup all over the place. But in the movie, the mother of one of the priests passes away, and this causes the man to question whether he believes in God.

As I sat with my friends in Applebee's after the movie, I silently asked myself what would happen if I lost someone close to me. Right at the moment, I believed in God. But if I lost one of my parents or my brother, I could see myself asking why this had happened to me. Why had a supposedly loving God allowed this to happen to me? Furthermore, what about the atrocities that were taking place all over the world to people God supposedly loved? I was scared as I thought that, basically, the only thing separating me from losing my faith in God was tragedy.

I was long past being able to take my parents' word for it anymore. As with anything else, I needed to know why I believed it, and so I needed to find out for myself if Christianity could be true.

Now, I didn't know it at the time, but I was already doing exactly what I'd set out to do – I was getting closer to God. I had a notion that "getting close to God" meant reading the Bible, praying, and feeling that emotional connection to Him. What actually happened was that as I read and prayed, I began to lay the groundwork for a deeper faith.

As I read, I learned things that have since become cornerstones for my faith. One of the first things I looked into was God's stance on doubt. While I wanted to get to the bottom of why I believed, part of me was worried about asking too many questions. I had asked the people around me, "Are you sure?" and "How can I know?" enough times to know that eventually they would grow irritated with me. I could just picture God up in heaven rolling his eyes as I went looking for yet another book that explained why the Gospels should be trusted.

I don't remember specifically where this fear of questioning God came from, but I've found over the years that Christians, including myself, sometimes have a tendency to put God in boxes. We attach labels to God, ultimately trying to get Him to conform to a particular kind of idea. Unfortunately, the box God is most often put into is the one labeled "overly authoritative parent."

When I put God in this box, I visualize a very clear-cut path I'm supposed to follow. I see myself walking down this path, nervously keeping my eyes on the road. Directly above me is God, just waiting in case I get defiant and wander off the path. As long as I stay on course, everything will be fine. And if I wander off, he'll be right there to smack me back into place. Also, eye contact is not encouraged.

Ultimately, I believe this is contrary to God's true persona. I believe God wants to have a relationship with us. He wants us to seek Him out, and oftentimes this involves asking probing questions and searching for answers to those questions.

I began to take God out of this constrictive box as I got more involved in scripture. Early on, I spent a lot of time in Hebrews. Hebrews 11:6 became a kind of staple of this part of my life. It reads: "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists, and He rewards those who earnestly seek Him."

That last line was instrumental. Suddenly, it didn't matter how many times I asked the same questions – God wasn't going to smite me to death for them. In fact, I took comfort that He was actually encouraging me to delve deeper.

Also helpful was a verse in James 1:2-5: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, when you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault and it will be given to him."

This underscored the point that it was not only okay, but also necessary for me to be asking questions. And from what I understood, it was telling me that I would eventually find the peace I was looking for. I had a vague understanding of that at the time, but I understand it more clearly now.

I mentioned earlier that I read *The Case for Faith* by Lee Strobel. Strobel is a former atheist who took a look at Christianity after his wife became a Christian. The last chapter of his book deals with doubt, and I probably read that chapter two dozen times during my first semester at college.

In this chapter, Strobel interviews Lynn Anderson, who had been a senior pastor at a number of churches for 30 years and had written a number of books, including one entitled *If I Really Believe, Why do I Have These Doubts?*

In Strobel's book, Anderson makes a number of points that provided me with encouragement and got me thinking about what faith is and what having it means. Anderson says that having faith isn't necessarily synonymous with the "religious high" that zealous Christians describe and that I myself had experienced before. And he says faith that's challenged by adversity, tough questions and deep contemplation is stronger in the end.

This was a new but welcome concept to me. It echoed the points made in Hebrews and James, that having doubts is okay, and even necessary.

Anderson also references an instance in Scripture when a man comes to Jesus with a demon-possessed son, asking for the boy to be healed. Jesus responds by telling him all things are possible to those who believe. The man then responds by asking if Jesus can help him with his unbelief.

Anderson says he connected with that. So did I, and for much of the foreseeable future I'd include the following phrase in my prayers: "God, help me with my unbelief."

Strobel's books provided short-term relief, but I was constantly plagued with the question, "How do I know for sure?"

I'm a journalist. I've been working at *The Truth*, a small daily newspaper in Elkhart, IN since early September. Now, when I was asking these questions about faith, I didn't know whether or not I wanted to go into journalism, but I already had one very important characteristic of the trade down cold: skepticism. One of the creeds of the journalist is: "If your mother tells you she loves you, you need to check it out." We reporters are perpetually looking

to uncover all possible sides to a story and to make sure that we know all there is to know about our beats and the subjects we cover.

Part of what I wanted to know as I sought answers was, what source is trustworthy? How did I know Strobel, or any other author, was competent enough to know what he was talking about? I couldn't know for sure because, if I wanted to, I could look hard enough to explain away everything that Strobel, my parents, and everyone else would have me believe.

Strobel sums up his book by defining "having faith" as "making a choice without having all of the complete information we'd like to have." I'd heard about faith before, but this was the first time someone really communicated to me what it meant. I was now about to make a life-and-death decision- a decision the impact of which could last for eternity- based on faith, and so it was really important for me not to be wrong.

I've told this story various times over the years, sometimes more successfully than others, and I've found that it gets easier as I'm able to put some time between me and the trials. One question that comes up a lot as I tell this story is whether or not I looked into other religions. The answer is, no, I did not. For a long time, I didn't have what some might consider an "adequate" explanation to give people for why I didn't look into other religions, but as I've continued to grow in my faith, I've grown in my understanding of why I didn't. Ultimately, I never doubted Christianity itself, and I wasn't looking for another explanation of God, life or our purpose on earth. In my heart, I believed in Christianity. Even on nights when I would sit up wondering if I would ever find peace, deep down I believed that I would. What I didn't know, and what I ultimately needed to learn, was *why* I believed that.

I wrote an essay last year about my faith that ended with me kneeling on the floor, telling God that even though I had doubts and might always have doubts, I was going to believe in Him anyway. It was a kind of crossroads, where I acknowledged that there was doubt, but that I would embrace Jesus Christ as I looked for answers. I wrote about how relieved I felt after praying that, which I did. But grappling with doubts didn't end there.

Later, I started wondering about salvation. Specifically, what did it mean that I became a Christian at such a young age? Did the fact that I was six and didn't have any real world experience nullify the prayer? Didn't it make sense to make another, more informed decision after I'd gotten older and had more perspective?

And today, I still have questions, namely: Why do I still have sin in my life? Why do sins that I have struggled with for years, that God says are bad, that I acknowledge are bad, that I ask for God to remove from my life all the time, still exist?

Each time, whatever answers the questions, the journey for me is more or less the same. I spend more time in the Bible and in prayer. I read books, I pray with my friends, family and church members about whatever's on my mind and in my heart.

Personally, I would love nothing more than for there to be a book or passage of Scripture for faith crises: a kind of "turn the page only in case of spiritual emergency" packet found in the back of the Bible that would make me forget the questions ever existed, because dealing with doubt and finding answers to tough questions regarding God isn't always a pleasant experience. To be frank, when I'm in the thick of it there's part of me that wants nothing more than for the season of doubt to pass. But ultimately, it's necessary.

When I have doubts about Christianity, I have to look at the evidence, take it in, think about it, sleep on it, and pray about it. It's often not a process that happens overnight, over a week or even over a month, but eventually I come to a point where I make a decision: I will choose to believe this or no, I won't. Or, other times, if I'm seeking wisdom about something I don't understand, after I've asked those questions and prayed about it, I find insight that I didn't have before. And after I make that decision, or have that revelation, I can look back over the last weeks or months and know why I believe what I believe. And I'm secure in why I believe it. And that wouldn't have been there if I didn't have the questions in the first place.

I believe that doubt is necessary for faith to thrive. If my faith isn't challenged, I become complacent. I hated staying up at night, wondering if I was ever going to feel secure about my faith in God again. Ultimately, doubt prompted a desire for closure that got me more invested in my faith, got me reading scripture, got me reading prayer.

After getting up off the floor of my dorm room the first time, it would be all but impossible to go back to the half-hearted relationship I'd had with God before. I was too invested in my relationship with Him.

Faith and Reason: The Role of Religion in Our Society

Transcription of Audience Discussion Session

Moderated by Sophy Burnham, with
Panelists Mary Lefkowitz and Tom Lange.

Anna Lea: I want to welcome you, dear friends, to a very special program. We are counting on your participation, which is very important, as we plan to tape the whole program for the next edition of our publication *Dialogues*, which you will find outside when you go. But now allow me to start with an SPGH commercial. Please excuse our lack of modesty, which is a very important principle for SPGH, but I thought we would break the rule today. After all, as Melina Merkouris said, "If you don't praise your house, the ceiling will fall on you," and we really don't want that! So the good news is that SPGH has been approached by the chairman of the Department of Classics of Stanford University and we are planning to do a series of programs on this same theme, but we will include representatives of various faiths. So this is the beginning, but I see that the majority of you know more than we do, so there is no one to convince today!

I want now to introduce our moderator. We are much honored to have Sophy Burnham with us today. She is a writer, essayist, filmmaker, and playwright. She is the author of a book on angels which has been published in 22 languages and her play *Penelope*, a version of the *Odyssey* from Penelope's point of view, was produced a year ago at American University. Mrs. Burnham also wrote an adaptation of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, adding back

the missing third act. The first time I met her and got to know her is when she wrote that play. So, let's welcome Sophy Burnham.

Sophy Burnham: Anna, thank you very much. It is really a great honor and a privilege to be here moderating this event. I want to add also, and perhaps some of you know, that Anna recently received an award from the American Hellenic Institute for achievement in the promotion of Greek culture, which is well-deserved, and I just want to add credit to Anna for this honor!

Well, today, we are going to explore together a subject of no little importance: "Faith and Reason (or Reason and Faith): The Role of Religion in Our Society." It's a huge topic; it has occupied philosophers from the earliest times, with special nods of course to Socrates and Plato and Voltaire, Pascal, Spinoza, Hume, Bertram Russell and, right up to recently, all of the politicians in America.

As for me, I'm the author of several books on the spiritual dimension, on angels, prayer, and mystical experiences – the direct experiences of the divine and what happens to you after you have such an experience. Especially, I'm known for writing about those moments of grace that fall over us, little coincidences and miracles that you can never point to as being anything except really odd and exceptional, but before which you tend to fall in humility as if there is indeed a presence of *something* that seems to be on our side.

We will hear first from Dr. Mary Lefkowitz, Professor Emerita of Classics at Wellesley in Massachusetts. She is one of the best-known classicists of the century, and she will speak for 20 or 30 minutes on the Greek gods and the ravages of monotheism. We'll have questions afterwards,

maybe two or three questions, and move to Tom. Tom Lange is a journalist and writer who will speak on his personal spiritual search as a Christian and the doubts that have challenged him in his faith. And after these two speakers, we'll have a break for a little refreshment, and come back and have questions.

Before they begin, though, I want to offer a few definitions to paint the landscape. The role of religion in our society – or, indeed, in the world – has reached levels of violence and divisiveness not seen since the bloody clashes of the Cathars in the thirteenth century or the Protestant reformation in the 1500s or the battles between the Catholics and Huguenots in the 1600s; the burnings, the inquisition and religious disputes of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; the Christians and Jews under Hitler; the clashes of Sunni and Shi'a...in fact, there is really nothing new about religious intolerance, but what is new today is the addition of atheism, as best exemplified in the book that came out last year by atheist Christopher Hitchens, called *God is not Great*. Hitchens is brilliant, witty and ruthless in attacking organized religion, which he calls "a poison to society." His main premise, expressed with the zeal of a raving fundamentalist, is that God is a man-made illusion and that humans have done intolerable harm in the name of God and especially in the name of the "Prince of Peace," devolving into the lowest forms of bigotry, violence, massacre and mayhem. Basically, he espouses the elimination of God and he's the one willing to take him out.

Faith and reason are often set up as opposites. Reason, or rationalization, seeks certitude through the formal exercise of the mind: logic, analysis, critical discernment, words. Faith, on the other hand, arises in the heart and abides in silence. Confronted with reason, faith finds no

words with which to argue but she is no less powerful for that. The heart, goes the old saying, has reasons Reason doesn't know. We're told that faith is belief in things unseen, the unknowable, and it is interesting that the word "belief" comes from a German root meaning "love." So, in a way, we're opposing logic and love.

The French philosopher, scientist and mathematician Blaise Pascal is best known for Pascal's Wager, offering a pragmatic belief in God, which says that even if God's existence is unlikely, the potential benefits of believing are so vast as to make betting on it a rational proposition. He's less known for having had a spiritual conversion as a young man, when he had a near-death experience. He nearly died in the overturning of a carriage, and afterwards he carried sewn in the pocket of his clothes for the rest of his life a few words about this two-hour moment that he had. "Fire," he says, "absolute certainty, beyond reason; joy, peace, forgetfulness of the world and everything but God. The world has not known Thee but I have known Thee: joy, joy, joy, tears of joy."

I offer you also the words of the Earl of Rochester, quoted by Voltaire in an essay on the joys of sex, in which he says, "Love would make a nation of atheists worship the deity."

I have a couple of definitions: *religion* is a word that means "to tie together, to link again, to tie us again to God," and religion, with all of its dogmas and dictates, of course is a product of humanity and as such subject to all our human flaws, but it is not the same as *spirituality*, or "the search for ultimate truth." Religion *may*, as Christopher Hitchens charges with righteous indignation, have committed more atrocities than a vengeful God could even contemplate, but its primary purpose is supposed to be

to bond a community, hold up moral and ethical standards, provide comfort in times of sorrow, offer meaning and life, and move us toward some form of happiness.

Now consider faith, which comes from the Latin *fides* – akin to *fidere*, meaning “to trust” – and from which come words like *confidence*, *fidelity*, and *fiduciary*. Unfortunately, the word has been hijacked today by the fundamentalists so that it now means “tradition” or “sect” or “religion.” “Which *faith* do you belong to?” people ask, in a way that makes me cringe. Oddly enough, reason and faith have the same goal: they’re both intended to point us toward happiness, reason through intellect and faith through the spiritual. So, in a way, they’re both urging us toward the state the Tibetan Buddhists call “tranquil abiding” and, at their highest expression, they’re both supposed to lead us toward wisdom and compassion.

Dr. Lefkowitz was the Andrew Mellon Professor in the Humanities at Wellesley until she retired in 2005. She holds three honorary degrees and received the National Humanities Medal for outstanding excellence in scholarship and teaching. She is esteemed for her three books on women in antiquity as well her courageous challenge to the Afro-centric ideas of a black Athena and a black culture that pre-dated Greek culture. Her most recent book is *Greek Gods, Human Lives* – her effort to write the Greek Gods back into the Greek myths. She’s a candidate for the presidency of the American Philological Society, which was founded in 1869 and is the principal learned society in the United States for the study of ancient Greek and Roman languages, literature, and civilization, and it is my real pleasure to sit back now and hear Dr. Lefkowitz.

[Mary Lefkowitz’s speech; see page 1.]

Burnham: We'll have a million questions later, but if there are any essential questions before we move on to Tom Lange we have some time. I do have one question: if the gods don't care at all, why bother with the sacrifice and the festival and the giving praise and all that if you're not going to bend their will?

Lefkowitz: Well, they don't care a lot of the time – they may care some of the time, and that's a very good point. They care in the stories that we call "mythology" – because *mythos* just means "a story." The gods care for their own children – there are a number of people who are descended directly from gods – or grandchildren. For example, Medea is rescued after doing the most awful things: killing her own children. The sun sends a chariot to pick her up, take her away, before the Corinthians can get her. Now, those are connections!

But they also care about the pious to some extent, and eventually justice comes – what is so interesting about Greek religion is that you may not get it in this generation because the gods were having dinner or something, but you will get it in the next generation, so it is worth offering sacrifices because you may influence them or may cause them to hear, just as in the beginning of the *Iliad* Chrysis decrees praise to Apollo and Apollo hears him and the Greeks are punished for Agamemnon's crime. So that describes it all: the big guys can mess up and the little guys suffer – it's sort of like Bear Stearns, you know, and that's real life.

Burnham: Okay, well, we'll move to Tom. Tom is a reporter for a newspaper in Indiana, and you may have read his very interesting article in the *Washington Post* that came out on Christmas Eve about his struggles with faith, and I

have nothing to say at this point more than to introduce you because I'm so interested to hear what you say.

[Tom Lange's speech, see page 9.]

Burnham: Thank you, Tom. We now have a gulf between these two. Do we have comments or questions at this point before we break for refreshments and then come back for the serious discussion?

Audience Member: My son is having a real identity crisis at age 19 – actually, he's only 18, he'll be 19 this summer – and one of the big things he's struggling with is guilt and this notion of God and the devil and being caught in the middle. He was not brought up in a particularly religious family – he was baptized in the Greek Orthodox church and we go to church at Easter and at Christmas – but all of a sudden he has become overwhelmed by this great polemic, and so my question to you is: how much did guilt figure in your questions about faith and did it play a role in your decision to espouse God? I mean, in some ways this could be considered sort of a safe strategy, it's sort of hedging your bet, so I'm being very honest with you, I'd just like to have your input.

Lange: Sure. When I had my initial questions in high school and college, I don't remember guilt factoring in. A few years later, as I was dealing with the salvation questions, guilt was definitely at the forefront of my mind. I was having trouble really accepting that when Jesus dies for someone's sins and you accept that, he accepts it all. In my over-analysis of it, part of me was perpetually trying to ask "Ok, well, what about this?" For example, there are parts of Scripture that talk about the Unpardonable Sin – that was extremely difficult for me to get my head around. Again, to address that here would take a considerable amount of

time, and it's still something that I pray about and ask about. Trying to get back to the heart of your question – it was something that was at the forefront of my mind, and ultimately, again, I came to a kind of crossroads after I had read a great deal of Scripture, prayed, and read books on the subject. I got to a point of understanding that Scripture says that once Christ has you, he has you – he is not going to let you go. Even though you stumble, he's not going to let you fall. You can still ask questions such as, "Are you going to accept this?" When I was praying the initial prayer of, "God, even though I have questions about your existence, I'm still going to choose to follow you," it was the same situation. You know, "God, even though I have questions about salvation, just the completeness of Christ's sacrifice, I'm going to believe that even when I screw up, his grace still sustains me."

Lefkowitz: It's really about the idea that prayer and one's relationship with God is personal and that as an individual you approach God. How much is that really part of modern religion? It seems to me very striking and different from anything I know about the ancient world where no prayer was private – you prayed in public, you stood up out front and raised your hands up – you didn't bow down – and said, "Where's Apollo when I need him?" You are not talking about anything deep or inside your self or about your own understanding of God – you don't question the existence of God, you question why the gods are not helping you out. So the question basically is, where do we get the notion that God personally cares about each of us?

Burnham: There's a big question.

Lea (to Lange): Yes, you went through all these things about faith – how do you explain how people who are very religious create wars and then go to church? Is there any

sort of religion that says you can kill? Is there something in the Bible or whatever religion that says you can kill?

Lange: Especially with what's going on right now in Iraq, I know it's something that's been hotly contested. I can recall being in Nashville a few weeks ago and I was dialing up radio stations and a Christian radio station was getting in a debate with someone who had said no one who was a Christian could be fighting in Iraq because no Christian would kill, and the commentator was countering with what Jesus actually does say in Scripture which is, "I haven't come to unite but to divide." Ultimately, Jesus knew that there were people who weren't going to accept what he had to say. To a certain extent, though – and correct me if I get too far away from what you were originally asking – I think it's really easy for those within the Christian community to legitimize a lot of things, and to say, "Well, God has said to do this, so we're going to do this," oftentimes without then necessarily having the means to back that up. And it's hard for me personally, of course, to be able to attest to that because I don't know if they had that kind of communication with God. In a nutshell, I guess what I'm trying to say is that a lot of times I think it's easy for people within the Christian denomination to demonize things that are dissimilar from themselves, forgetting that Scripture says *all* have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. And so basically, in God's eyes, all men are sinful, and a lot of times, I think that it's very easy for Christians – or for people in general – to elevate themselves over others, thinking that the salvation entitles them to something more than is actually there. And again, I don't know if I'm addressing your question accurately, but I guess it's a lack of perspective there, so to speak.

Burnham: Let's go back to the question that Mary asked, which was, "What gives you the idea that God cares personally?"

Lange: For me personally, I believe the Bible to be accurate – that's where I base a lot of my beliefs. There's one section where Jesus is telling the disciples not to worry, and he uses the example of sparrows and he says that there's not a sparrow that can fall out of the air unless God has granted it to be so. He says not to worry because even the hairs on your head are numbered. I read that and I realize, "Ok, God knows the number of hairs I have on my head – nothing can happen on the Earth outside of His control." That's where I take comfort that he cares for me as an individual and for everyone as an individual.

Burnham: Can I ask a question on top of that one?

Lange: Certainly.

Burnham: The Dalai Lama says that there are three kinds of faith: there's the faith that you have first because someone told you so – you're at your parent's knees and they tell you that there's Europe out there somewhere. Then there's the faith that comes from reading about France or from going there personally and discovering that the plane landed in a place called France and that it really does exist. Finally, there's the third faith that is based on personal experience backed up and supported by reason. But I'm not hearing you speak of personal experience. I'm hearing you say, "I have faith because the Bible told me so," like that little nursery rhyme: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." Do you also have personal experience of a personal God, not guilt and fear but wonder, beauty, joy? That sounds like a very challenging question and I don't meant to challenge you...

Lange: It's interesting because it would be difficult, I think, to provide an explanation and say, "Well, when such and such occurred, this was God acting in my life." Again, it's one of those areas that can be explained away. I guess the instance that comes to mind immediately is when I was in graduate school, constantly just working through projects that I was on a deadline for and I didn't know how I was going to get through it, and then taking time and praying, "God, what I have before me is a seemingly insurmountable task, I do not know how I'm going to get through this" and then lifting it to Him: "I have faith that you're going to carry me through this; I pray that you would." And then I would get through the task. And then the next week it was another project that I felt exactly the same about, and I would go back to God.

Now, again, that's easy to explain away. It's easy to say, "Oh, well, everyone feels like that in college or in grad school or at any particular level of their education, that's not evidence of God." But after praying that, there was a sense of peace there that wasn't there before and then as I was going through it, I could see the pieces falling into place. I could see, after spending five hours on a particular project that was going nowhere, going back first thing the next morning after I had been praying and seeing that all of a sudden, it clicks. Again, it's easy to say, "Well, you had time to sleep on it; you were going back to it after spending an extensive amount of time on it first." Easy to explain away, but personally – that was God acting in my life.

Cathy Mercer: I have a medical background and a scientific background, heavily in biology and chemistry, and so I'm a very analytical and scientific-type person. I am a Christian. I did not start out going to church at all – religion was not pushed on me as a child, but the further I go on in life, the more cells I see under a microscope,

having the privilege of dissecting a human body, looking at a rose, seeing the infinite intelligence and wisdom that goes into the design of this Earth...I am a Christian. I believe in Jesus Christ, I believe in, perhaps, energy, the energy of good versus evil. I think it's a battleground that we all go through everyday and we choose which path we take.

Of course, I know about evolution and what the anthropologists say about that, but I don't believe you can take a soup full of chemicals and form a jumbo 747 out of it, with a design, with that intelligence. Even the song of a bird has a mathematical precision and a design which is intelligent to me. Every cell – the beauty of every cell, of the infinite, the unbelievable and incredible energy or design or intelligence that forms this, to me, makes it seem impossible that atheism even exists.

Burnham: Mary, would you like to comment on that?

Lefkowitz: Well, I think my comment on that would be that I appreciate the beauty of the world as much, I'm sure, as you do, and certainly no one, I think, can account for the existence of life, the animating principle that distinguishes a collection of chemicals from something that is alive. This is one of the reasons that religion can be a way of understanding and appreciating life and all the good things in it and I think that's very understandable.

On the other hand, just because we *don't* understand something doesn't mean that we have to presume that a divinity or divinities created it. I come to this room having thought very hard about it – not only having read a lot of ancient texts, but just from the fact that accident or many other factors in the way the world is organized can explain all kinds of things. I just think we have to simply say we *don't* understand everything and we can appreciate beauty

and we do not have to account for these things by the existence of a divinity or divinities.

Burnham: Now, again, going back to the Buddhists – the Buddhists do not believe in a Creator God, but they nonetheless believe in most of the things that all religions request or try to urge us toward: more wisdom and more compassion and more empathy and more “loving kindness.” Now, of course, it’s the upper echelons that have no belief because the folk Buddhists do have a panoply of gods and demons, but the intellectuals do not believe in a Creator God. Did the Greeks believe in a Creator?

Lefkowitz: Well, the Greeks did believe in the myth of Prometheus – this is one later story that we don’t get from the earliest sources – explaining the creation of humankind. There isn’t an Adam and Eve story at all – [the creation story] is something that isn’t consistent or coherent in any way [in Greek mythology]. But Prometheus did give mankind fire, which enabled [mankind] to then do many things and to live more comfortably, and so that is a gift of the gods. So there is that account.

There are other ways of looking at how the world came into being. The Bible, of course, gives two accounts: one saying that, in the first chapter of Genesis, God created the heavens and the earth in six days and then of course the story of Adam and Eve in chapters two and three. These are two very different accounts and both of them tend to coexist together. So I guess my answer is that I think it’s very confusing, but certainly, [the Greeks] believe that the gods were there from the very beginning. First there was Chaos and then, out of that, Earth, and then Earth gave birth to Heaven, so you get other gods in a kind of long string of “begats,” and that explains why the world is full of gods and there are gods everywhere and therefore

everything can be explained through intervention or their presence or the *lack* of their presence everywhere. I hope that's a partial answer.

Audience Member: My name is Achilles Adamantiades, I'm member of SPGH, I'm also the executive secretary of a committee that we have on behalf of the Greek Orthodox Church of America which is called the Advisory Committee on Science and Technology. We have actually produced a number of papers on this issue, looking from various aspects, and this is an issue that I have thought very hard about almost throughout my life, and I will say a few things that I have concluded from the end of my life. Just a few vignettes – I'm not going to address the issues in any depth because it's huge.

First, the issue of faith and reason. The way I have come to view them is that they are two non-overlapping circles and the trouble begins when they begin to overlap, when religion or faith is trying to enter into the realm of science and science comes into the realm of faith. Now, throughout history we have all kinds of troubles when those two circles that should be looked at as separate and non-overlapping begin to overlap. You have the trial of Galileo Galilee, you have the controversies in the West, you have so many things that occur when the church takes over and its people try to enter into the realm of science. The same thing happens when the scientists try to enter into the realm of religion.

My conclusion, our conclusion, is that the existence of God cannot be proven and the nonexistence of God equally cannot be proven. Therefore, it is totally futile for us to debate the situation! The problem is that much of our discussion, much of our literature ignores a huge part of Christianity which some of us call the Eastern Christianity,

the Eastern *Orthodox* Christianity. I have made some comments on the occasion of another presentation from a young professor from Minnesota. She talked about the same problem – faith and reason – as if this other whole half of Christianity did not exist. She talked about St. Augustine – St. Augustine did not know how to read or how to speak Greek in the fourth century A.D.! My God, he could not read the Bible in the original, only in translation. You can imagine how many errors you make in translation. I have seen many errors.

Ok. There's a whole body of wisdom, of experience – of Ecclesiastical experience in the East. The fathers of the church have talked about these issues for centuries on end and we ignore them. Only St. Augustine and Anselm and Thomas Aquinas – fine, they are great minds – but there are other great minds as well. There's a father of the church in the East that I read because I come from the East who says, "God is the search to find Him." God is not somebody up there with a big beard, or somebody who acts like a schoolmaster, or a policeman, or a lawgiver, or a punisher, or a jailor or whatever – God is the process of *finding* Him. God is, therefore, a state of mind – that's how a father, an established, accepted father of the Church, sort of resonates with your comments. The doubt, the searching – it is a process, it is never *finding* Him, never reaching a conclusion, but always being on the lookout, on the search – that is God.

When I read Mr. Hitchens and the others who rail about the nonexistence of God, it doesn't affect me, because that's not my God. My God is not a policeman, my God is not a schoolmaster, my God is not a big boss – he's not, he's completely different. Therefore, what [Hitchens] says doesn't affect me. He talks about the issue of criminality, how all the religions have committed

criminal acts – of course! There have been massacres throughout history. The Greeks, just to come back to Professor Lefkowitz, they went to Milos, and they slaughtered everyone on sight: babies, women, men, etc. They do it in the name of God...

Lefkowitz: They sell the women and children into slavery, and they didn't do it in the name of God, they just did it.

Adamantiades: But even if they do it in the name of religion, it is a pretext – there are political and economic interests behind it and they fight constantly and they will continue because the interests are built inside in our molecules, our genes. I do not claim complete innocence, but in the Eastern tradition you don't have the religious wars that you have in the West, you don't have the Pope leading armies to go and fight, you don't have a Patriarch who, by official act, institutes torture as an official means of bringing people to the faith – of putting people on the fire as an official policy. We don't have that. And we ignore that there is this half. You have two kings in the Russian experience, Boris and Goleb, who refused to defend their city of Kiev against the invaders because they said, "If there is blood to be shed, it had rather be my blood, our blood, than our enemies' blood." It happened in 950 something in Kiev. So there is also this other body of thought.

And so the issue is evil – a very profound philosophical issue, evil in the world – does it relate to God and does it relate to religion? Is evil conditional upon the acceptance of religion? I think you said it yourself, Professor Lefkowitz: these things would have happened no matter what, even if religion was not there. So it's from our genes – the war, the enmity, the slaughter – the Evil – is built in our molecules.

And so these issues are a little bit more subtle and they need to be explored more.

Burnham: I think that's a wonderful point and I'm going to stop you there so that you don't go into extra points that we can't deal with!

Audience Member: My name's Karl Haigler, I'm a member, and I've been a teacher of Greek philosophy off and on these 20 years. I wanted, if I could, to intrude and mention a Greek text – the *Euthyphro*, by Plato – because it seems to me that it has something to teach us and can perhaps even build a bridge between the two positions here. It has to do, I think, with Socrates, and there are classicists in the room I'm sure who probably know the text better than I so I'm just saying this from memory – correct me if I'm wrong – but Socrates meets this young man, Euthyphro, who's so sure of himself, in religious terms, that he's getting ready to put his father up for trial for killing, I believe, a slave – or a slave died under [his father's] care – and he's going to take his father to court. And this is around the time Socrates is going to court himself. So in a nutshell – and I'm just trying to recall this – Socrates says something along the lines of “Euthyphro, how can you be so sure of yourself, ethically or legally?”

And this is where I point to an ethical issue here and not really a belief, but what follows from a belief or a non-belief, which is how we treat other people and how we deal with each other as human beings. I think that may be really the Greek contribution, and part of the Greek heritage when it comes to Christianity: what it means to love your neighbor. What Socrates says is, “Euthyphro, do you really believe all this stuff?” or words to that effect. And his point was that the piety that Euthyphro had – his certainty, his self-assurance – was going to lead him to do

something which, in familiar terms or natural terms, was anathema: put his father to death, potentially. If you think about the evil that can be done in the name of religion, there's hardly anything more evil than that – at least, that's the Socratic point of view.

So wherever I go in my head I always meet Plato coming back, so I thought I would introduce a classical text here, and I'd like for Dr. Lefkowitz to comment on this, specifically from the ethical standpoint. My question generally would be – from an ethical standpoint – isn't the test of our faith, and our common faith as citizens, how we treat one another, not so much what we believe? As Thomas Jefferson said, "It matters not to me whether you believe in one God, twenty gods, or no gods, as long as you don't pick my pocket or break my leg." And if we see him as one of the guiding lights in American minds, it strikes me that maybe we can begin building bridges and understanding by focusing on ethics and not so much on what size ring God wears on his left finger.

Lefkowitz: Well, I think you represented the *Euthyphro* quite well and I think that Socrates, if we know Socrates at all – of course we only have Plato as our witness – but Plato certainly is getting towards the understanding of the ethical issues behind our everyday acts. One dialogue after another deals with these questions of how can we be truly ethical, how can we construct a society in which we can behave towards each other without hurting each other and in which we can do good, and I think this is Plato's terrific contribution.

The other thing that the dialogue *Euthyphro* gets at is how people who *claim* that they are acting through piety very often have not analyzed what they mean by piety at all. Socrates then goes into one of his tricky little

questioning periods where he makes it clear that Euthyphro has never given the subject any thought at all and never analyzed the meaning behind what is ordinary piety. One might say, well, Agamemnon should have asked the same question when he got the message to sacrifice his daughter – he never questioned it sufficiently – maybe he didn't think he could without getting killed by Artemis, but figuring what happened anyway was so terrible, the only thing he could have done was commit suicide. But that's another story all together.

No, I think Plato's contribution is very great, and the idea that humans must live with humans and that the gods, if they do exist, are just so remote from human life that our own concern must be our conduct towards and with each other.

Lea: What I want to hear from you when we come back from the recess is: what is the role of administration in religion, number one, and number two, is humanity progressing through religion? Are we better human beings?

Burnham: Well, why don't we have a little break and come back and have many more questions.

[Break.]

Burnham: We'll begin with Anna's question about the role of priestly administration in religion and whether humanity is actually progressing as a result of religion – *progressing* obviously needs to be defined in some way, too, doesn't it?

Lefkowitz: Well, the administration, the really organized administration, is a Christian thing. They may have taken some inspiration from Judaism, from the

centralized temple in Jerusalem, but ancient Greek religion is not organized at all. Each city-state had its cults and funded those cults itself, but there was no necessary connection among them. There were common practices but also rather diverting practices – there were many different kinds of temples of Apollo with different things going on and there was no sort of overall administration to say, “No, sorry, this isn’t orthodox.” The term *orthodox* comes in with Christianity, and before that was just complete heterodoxy. Everyone acknowledged the gods’ existence – if you went to another community, you would worship those particular gods with the people there, and there are some theories – we don’t have that much information – that even the notion that there were twelve gods and things like that only come after Homer. Before that, there was even more diversification, and it was only after the existence of a text like the *Iliad* that people began to identify their local deities with one god or another. Some of you have been to the island of Aegina – the temple of Aphaea – there’s a goddess *sort of* like Artemis, but she was there and only there on that particular island, because the islands were isolated, yet they were all Greek.

So administration just doesn’t come up as a topic, and that’s one reason why, in the changeover period in the fourth century, the Christians had the advantage: they were organized, they had hostels and they could do something for travelers, they could do something for the sick, whereas the pagans were just completely separate from one another. Even the state religion of Rome wasn’t a terribly organized state religion.

So does humanity progress through religion? Well, that is, of course, a big question. “Does humanity progress?” might be a question, leaving religion out of it. Certainly, in scientific terms, our knowledge has advanced, and many

other things which I don't have to go into. How much has religion helped with any of that? These tremendous achievements in all branches of science and technology haven't much connection with religion, but religion, as I said in the beginning, is not all bad. It is very good in that it gives people a focus, a means of understanding existence, a way to do good deeds, a way to help other people, a way to be part of a community. And in no place is that clearer than in the Greek Orthodox communities in this country which, in my limited observation, serve as religious centers and cultural centers for many people of Greek background. In that case, religion can help humanity progress, or at least not regress to a worse stage, but progress probably is also possible without religion, as long as you have ethics, and that was a very important point that was brought up.

Lea: How much of ethics did the Christians borrow from the ancient Greeks?

Lefkowitz: Well, I would say some, certainly, comes in through neo-Platonism and the notion that you must inquire and ask what is good, and a whole method of reasoning which is very distinctively descended from Greek philosophy gets into Christianity that way. But I think the strong ethical commitment that we're all familiar with in Christianity comes from Judaism, because the ancient Greek version of it was much less centered on the notion of good God. In Christianity, which has this notion that God is good, the notion that God will enforce a certain system – you see that all in the Torah, with its law.

Remember, the ancient Greeks had no Bible, they had no sacred texts, they couldn't do what Tom did which was to say, "Well, I will turn to the Bible, because in the Bible all these many issues are considered that will help me solve the problems within my life." What could you turn to if

you were an ancient Greek? You could turn to the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, Hesiod – if you were an Athenian, you could see Greek tragedy – but you basically have no one canonized, orthodox set of texts.

Burnham: Mary, I have a question for you, which I think you can answer very quickly before we open up to the audience, and my question is: you say that it is not religion that poisons society but monotheism and that polytheists are more tolerant, if I have understood you correctly, but then I think of the Hindus who were happy to massacre the Muslims in the 1948 partitions and the Christians massacred by the Chinese and I wonder if you can direct, very briefly, an answer to this question.

Lefkowitz: Well, there were also the people in the Mediterranean who professed Christianity and were killed by the Romans and Roman administrative officials in the period of the early church, so, definitely, the problem was that these people weren't polytheists and they couldn't acknowledge that other people's religion meant something as well. It was also felt that because they wouldn't take the oath of loyalty to the emperor, they were seditious, and I think in the case of the Romans – and I'm sure you know much more about other religions than I do, I can only talk about Roman religion – they were worried that when the Christians kept coming up and saying, "We have this Book," which was essentially the Bible (or some part of the Bible – the Hebrew texts had been translated into Greek by the second century B.C., and so they had those texts plus they had the New Testament texts), [the Romans] thought this was some sort of magical book – this is definitely the impression that you get. So I think that, in general, pagans were more tolerant, but usually of other pagans, and they were nervous about the monotheists, but

it was not for their religion so much as a sense of feeling that these were seditious conspiracies against them.

Burnham: Ok. Questions from the audience?

Audience Member: Thank you. My name is Bruce Sullivan. I'm a journalist by trade but I'm not writing a story on this seminar, but, if I were, the lead would be the contrast between the two panelists regarding the personal and the impersonal. I'm fascinated with the fact that you both, in your late teens/early twenties, had these experiences that led Mary to embrace atheism and Tom, on his knees in a college dorm, to embrace Christianity. I think that's notable – lots of things happen to us at that age – and I'm also going to remember the reference to the hairs on my head at my family reunion when my bald-headed brother starts bragging about how much money he makes! As we get older, I guess God isn't watching us as much because the hairs seem to diminish. But, on a more serious note, first of all I think it takes a lot of courage to be an announced atheist in American society –

Lefkowitz: I'm not running for President!

Sullivan: If you were, you might have my vote, just based on that courage. You know, I think of a journalist in American literature as portrayed by Sinclair Lewis in his great novel *Elmer Gantry* – and I forget the journalist's name in the novel – but he had a very unpleasant fate because of his atheism, and we have people like Mark Twain, who questioned it to the end. We have people like Christopher Hitchens now, but he certainly doesn't have the profile that people like that had. The nineteenth century seemed to have a lot more debate over certain things, more tolerance. Liberal Christianity vs. conservative Christianity *now*, in the twenty-first century,

fascinates me. I wonder what happened in the Dark Ages – I wasn't there, I don't know who was – but this root of polytheism and mythology, or Greek religion/Roman religion, that clashed with Judaism and Judeo-Christianity – when did this set of impersonal gods and goddesses, who were basically impervious to our prayers, but conversely they seem to be to be neutral towards our lack of worship of them so they left us alone, turn into this vengeful God?

I meet people now, in modern American society, who were raised in the religion I was and who rejected it, and they always tell me that I was raised, they say, with this punishing God. They were raised Christian or Roman-Catholic and I say I never got that. I was raised a Catholic and I never got that God was a particularly vengeful God, but I get that message all the time. And I hear this a lot: "God takes a personal interest in my life, but if I don't take a personal interest in God, He is jealous or makes a note of that." You mentioned a ten-year-old, Tom, nobody is more certain about life than a ten-year-old – I guess it's kind of charming to think that you're the center of the universe and God focuses on every single second of your life and knows all of your thoughts when you're ten years old, but when you're forty or fifty years old, I don't know if it's as charming. And I wonder what it would have been like to have grown up either in mythology with these impersonal gods – I have traveled in the former communist block a lot and have met people who were raised under "Godless Communism" and they seem to me as well-adjusted as any person I've ever met in a religious society. They practice the Golden Rule in a way that I've rarely seen in my own country. There's less greed in these countries, there's more respect for the neighbors' personal life, etc., etc. I wonder where this came from, this evolution from the impersonal gods vs. the very personal God who is involved in every aspect of my personal life, either pro or con.

Burnham: Is this a question for Tom?

Sullivan: It's a question for both panelists, because they can both comment on the personal vs. the impersonal.

Lefkowitz: Well, I can begin, just to give the historical perspective, and then Tom can say something, I think. To my mind, just having read the Biblical texts and ancient Greek and Roman texts, God taking a personal interest really starts with Jesus and some of his teachings. I think that was one of his great contributions to religion. The ancient Greek religion was elitist – the people who really mattered were the ones with very fine families, the ones who were directly descended from the gods, and the other people, the other 75 or 80 percent of the population, were not of much interest to the gods, or not of nearly as much interest to them.

Jesus did not take this elitist view at all. You get that Christianity is a great leveler. Linda Freeman was reminding me just now of something else that's quite true: that sacrifice is very expensive. If you're giving up your cow, it's like driving your Lexus off a cliff – it's really just doing something that is truly a sacrifice. You get to eat it, yes, but it's one meal and there's no refrigeration and that might be the only meat you get that month. But Christianity gives you the "el cheapo" clean version, which is bread and wine, and there you are – anybody can afford that, anybody can do it, and so Christianity brings a greater egalitarianism and that's another one of its achievements. The Greek gods cared but not as much as we would like them to and people can complain about it. Another point Tom brought up is the questioning – searching for God was certainly okay with [the Greek gods]. You weren't going to be struck by lightning necessarily if you said, "Zeus, I don't understand what's happening" – whereas an ancient Jew might have been in trouble.

Lange: From my own perspective – again, I go back Biblically and as I think about your question, I try to think of examples: “Ok, where do we see God talking to people?” And I think, particularly in the New Testament, what comes to mind are more examples of the non-elite being witnessed to by Jesus: we hear the story of Lazarus who was laying diseased on the step of the rich man’s house and was eventually taken to heaven, and Jesus said, “The humble shall be exalted in a high position.” At the same time, I think of David, who was a king, who controlled vast legions of men, who was a man after God’s own heart. God knew what was taking place in his life, He knew and addressed what was going on when David eventually committed adultery, and He took action to bring this to David’s attention. That’s the most prominent figure that’s coming to mind at the moment, but I guess I don’t necessarily see God having an impersonal relationship – when I look back, I see God having His hands in a little bit of everything.

Sullivan: To bring it up to the current age – again, I’m fascinated by this personal interest thing. Many of our Founding Fathers – Ben Franklin, for instance – were Deists. They believed that God designed the world, threw it into space, and it operates on its own without this personal involvement. We’ve gotten away from that. I’m fascinated by the American experience of religion much more than I am anywhere else in the world, because I find it unique. We are – you can look it up – the most religious people on the planet. You mentioned paganism – they’re going back to Neo-Paganism in Europe, church attendance is way down, yet there seems to be less crime, less poverty, less problems and I just wonder whether you have another comment, Tom, on this current condition of religion which seems to have this idea of a personal relationship with God. And it’s not just Christianity, it might be some of the other

majors except for Buddhism, which doesn't have this, and which is very small in the U.S. I've observed in other cultures that they may not have a personal relationship with God, but they seem to have a much more intimate, personal relationship with their fellow Frenchmen, or Germans, or Japanese...

Lange: Well, I was trying to touch on this earlier and I'll see if I can do a better job of fanning the flame here. Looking primarily just at what I've seen within Christian denominations, sometimes there can be more of an emphasis, for example, on churches trying to raise the number of people that are there as opposed to actually seeing how they're doing spiritually, seeing how each person's relationship with God is, and I think that's kind of in contrast to what God is striving for. After "Love the Lord your God," Jesus said: "Love your neighbor as yourself." I think that really gets to the heart of what God wants his people to do. God, through Jesus, was telling people, "You need to be looking out for each other; you need to be aware of whether your neighbor over here is suffering and if he is, what can you do to help him." And I think, particularly in this day and age, that's something that's overshadowed.

Burnham: I'd like to make a comment at this point, Tom. There was a Harvard study not long ago of terminal cancer patients, and most of the people in the study said that religion or spirituality was very, very important to them. 40 percent said that their needs were not being met by their religious communities and another 45 percent said that their needs were not being met by the medical community. This draws out the question of eliminating religion, organized religion, as what we're actually discussing. There is in addition, however, something spiritual which affected these people to say, "I am deeply spiritual." So forgetting the religious part, as their needs are not being

met there, what is left in your philosophy? Just throwing out one other thing: "There are more things, Horatio, under heaven and earth than we know of." Eliminating religion, organized religion, as Anna was speaking of, is there anything else left? Is there God, if you take away all the religion, if you take away all of the dogma, the doctrine, the Bibles, the words about it, the concepts that we have about it – is there still something there?

Lange: I'm not going to be able to articulate this as well as I've heard it explained to me before, but something that I've heard before that, by and large, I agree with, is that God sought out man, and then there was the Fall, and then God sent Christ to die for man's sins so we can be reconciled with him. And religion is something that springs up independent of that. To a certain degree, I think you can see it within Christianity, as in we've got different denominations, we've got Baptists, we've got Catholics, we've got Methodists, we've got multi-denominations, and at the heart of all of these is that Christ sent his son to die.

Sometimes, the differences between each of these can create barriers between them. People think, "OK, because I following Catholicism this is right; the Methodists are wrong," or the Baptists, or what have you. And I think that's kind of an example within Christianity. But basically, the point I'm trying to get back to you is that ultimately, I believe there is God; God wants to have a relationship with man. Through his plan, he sent Christ down, and that is it.

Mercer: The gentleman said that around the world he sees that organized religion is on the decline and, as you know, I am person of faith and I am a Christian, but I am not for organized religion, and even though I am Eastern Orthodox and I do love my church, I see that in whatever

religion – whether it's Hindu, Buddhist, whatever – there are going to be manipulations of religion, whether it be for political reasons or for control of the masses, the uneducated. That has always, I think, existed. But, I must say: just because people are not going into organized religion does not mean that their faith is any less great. As I said, I don't attend church, but I'm a deeply spiritual person and I have deep faith. So perhaps we're on an evolutionary path toward something bigger and grander than just secular Christian or Buddhist or Hindu or what not. There's a bigger picture that I believe as human beings we are evolving towards...and I must say that I agree with most of what [Adamantides] has said except that I do think that in the future there *will* be a meshing or a meeting between science and this evolution that I believe as human beings we're going through. And I believe – and I'm not going to take credit for this statement because this is not from me – but, I believe myself to be a spiritual being in a human experience, not the other way around.

Audience Member: I'd like to go back to the earlier question: when did the notion that God took personal interest – or when did people see God having a personal interest – and turn that around: when did God first see individuals as being of interest? And I think the answer is the Book of Job, isn't it? It's a backdoor kind of thing: here comes the devil wanting to make a bet with God that He can't do it and God takes interest.

Burnham: Well, actually, that's a very good point – it was certainly in the Old Testament – the great thing of the Jewish monotheism is that there was a God and He was *deeply* interested in his people and as the centuries went by, I think it's in Isaiah that they first discover that God is not only interested in the Jewish people but the Egyptians and

the Assyrians and later it does become even more tangible under Christ – it's a huge evolution of thought.

Lefkowitz: And God created the world, He created Adam and Eve, He *wanted* mankind to exist – which is very different from Greek tradition right there, there's an absolute big split – and He does intervene personally and justice is very high on His agenda, and so I think that notion of a personal relationship with their God is one thing that distinguishes this very odd small group of monotheists who were living in the Palestine region from all the polytheists next door – the Canaanites or Phoenicians who had a polytheistic religion and believed in Baal and so on. All that was much more the norm, but [the monotheists] so believed in their God and the power of their God and they understood that even when he didn't seem to be supportive, he was, and this clearly had a great effect on them.

Burnham: And I have to say one other thing about the sacrifice – and it may not be the place of a moderator to do this – but in the monotheism of Judaism, when they said, “Do not commit murder,” it really was a huge, huge step as an idea. You're living in a time when all over the world there is human sacrifice and those sacrifices lasted well into this millennium, the A.D. millennium – I think it was 900 A.D. when they were still having sacrifices in Europe and certainly they were evident all over the Mediterranean.

Audience Member: Hello. I wanted to continue on the statement/question that Mr. Sullivan, I believe, started, and I don't mean to put words in his mouth, but I do want to step it up a bit, and what I heard in his question was when did God come to Washington and start talking to everybody? Because you can't walk ten feet in Washington without running into someone who consistently talks to

God and says God guides him to do certain things and you don't see this in other parts of the world, and when you do see it, you see it in places where there is not as much progress as there is in this country and many other countries. So the question is: what is the obsession we are developing in this country of wearing our gods on our sleeves? We hold others accountable when they don't talk to God, we blame Him for our mistakes many times – so the question is: have we come to the point where we use God for the things that we want to do and explain Him that way? And I agree with Mr. Sullivan that for all the talk about God and religion, there's an awful lot of sin going on around, and perhaps we should start being a little more quiet about our religion and our religious beliefs and our spirituality. Thank you. Actually that wasn't a question, sorry!

Burnham: What a very good comment.

Audience Member: I do have a question. I would like the panel to consider whether or not they think there can be an ethics without metaphysics.

Burnham: Can you define *metaphysics*?

Audience Member: *Meta* means beyond, so it's "beyond the natural world" – metaphysics is an explanation for what you might call spirituality, what you might call God, whatever is what the Greeks, what Aristotle, would have called "the Prime Mover." So I want to know if you believe that a person can have an ethics without it based it in some religious expression.

Lefkowitz: Well, I think I would say yes, you certainly can, because there are many reasons for ethics, and that a just society, one that operates under rule of law, will

function better than a totally anarchic, un-ruled society. I'm getting that George W. Bush is one of the people who wears his religion on his sleeve, and indeed, I don't think anybody could get elected in this country if he or she didn't say which church he or she belongs to – going to the *wrong* church is something that is alleged about Obama.

As far as ethics, I have to come clean and say that my stepfather, who had a lot to do with how I grew up, was one of those Jews who was an ethical culturist. He had given up on Judaism; he never observed any of the religious practices or attended any Jewish house of worship when I was a child, but he was an ethical culturist and the people in that society strongly believed in principles and ethics, as he did, and that's how I was raised. It can be done – it may be a little tougher, because you can't threaten people with hellfire if you don't believe there's a hell, but on the other hand, you can perhaps encourage them to think *why* justice is better than injustice, and I think that encourages reasoning.

But metaphysics has been very important to all societies and it can often express in very succinct and direct ways things that people ought to do, and therefore I would never want to do away with the spiritual for those for whom that means something.

Lange: It's tricky to answer that question because it's hard, if almost impossible, for me to take God out of the equation there. As I think about it, the short answer that comes to mind is "no." I go back to the Garden, the Garden of Eden, and think, "Life was perfect there." We saw, after the eating of the fruit, the Fall, and since then I think we've been living in a fallen world. And I think – and again, I have to base this in Scripture; it's impossible for me not to base it in Scripture – I think we're in a fallen

world, and I think because of that, as it says, everyone has sinned and fallen short of God's glory. I think God personifies and represents perfection and there is no one we will see on this earth who meets up to that standard. To a certain extent, it depends on what you define as "ethics" or "ethical," but whatever it is, it's going to be short of God's standard. Now that doesn't mean that someone who has not accepted Christ the Savior is, to a certain extent, evil, or vice versa, but at the same time it's kind of a level playing field in that regard.

Adamantiades: You will excuse me for saying that I think our discussion today has been unfocused. The basic question, I think, which in my mind is paramount, is essentially faith and reason. And the second question, which is important but not perhaps as basic, is: "What *kind* of faith, what kind of God?" Are we talking polytheistic beliefs or monotheistic beliefs? Are we talking about Christianity or Buddhism or Sikhism or Muslim and so on? It's a somewhat different question, and we are confusing the two a little bit in this discussion. Let me inform you, if you don't know, that the word *religion* does not appear in the New Testament. How many of you knew that? In the theology, at least in the East with which I am familiar because I read it – I'm an engineer, I'm a very plain engineer, but I read theology – not once do they use the word *theskia*, which is "religion," except to indicate the pagan religions and the Roman religions and the other religions – never Christianity, their faith. Faith is different than religion. There are many of us, including myself, who believe that religion is totally faith, and I think it resonates in some of the other comments that people have made here. Religion, in this particular line of thinking, is an instinctive entity and there is no risk of religion disappearing because it is like hunger and sexual appetite. It is built into our genes. We need religion because it's useful, as

Professor Lefkowitz said – it is very useful indeed. And we use religion in so many ways, most of them evil ways, wrong ways, to do this, to do that – it is useful to us. And so we need to be conscious of this issue: faith is different than religion.

And the other distinction would be this issue of ethics, which comes back to the question. In the line of thinking that I follow – in the theology of the East – morality is not the main line of your faith. Morality is a consequence of your ontology, as opposed to deontology, as Professor Lefkowitz will well understand. *Deontology* means “ethics,” essentially. That is, what you are supposed to do – ethics – derives from your belief in what the world is, how it is built, what your personality is, what is your relationship with the other person, who is the other person sitting next to you? From my perception of our relationship derives my attitude to you – whether it is terms of money, or sex, or whatever other attitude it is, whether it is for me to take advantage of the other person or to look at the other person as being a sister or brother soul, as part of myself. And so the faith puts the world in a different light.

Going back to my field – environment – what do you do with the environment? It depends on how you look at the environment. If the environment is our possession, you go out and take it and eat it. You exploit it, you abuse it, as we do everyday, all of us. But if we believe – belief, not science – we believe that the world is the creation of God, and I am also the creation of God, and I was put on Earth not as an owner but as a custodian – *epistatis*, is the Greek. I am an *epistatis*, I was *appointed* to take care of the world. I am an *epistatis* – then, I cannot go out and exploit the world. Hence, the ethics derives from my view of the world, from ontology.

Audience Member: This is a good time to bring this

up on faith and reason. I have found very useful, in concept, the definition by theologian John Stott in his book on the epistles of the Romans – so it comes from a religious context, but it is *not* a religious definition. Faith is, essentially, a belief or trust in a person, and its reasonableness depends on the reliability of the person being trusted. So he's not opposing faith to reason, he's saying that faith should be based *on* reason. Of course, it goes beyond that: to oppose faith and reason is a false dichotomy unless you're talking about *blind* faith, which gets you to places like Jonestown and Heaven's Gate because Jim Jones was not a reliable person to be trusted. He [Stott] has Christ in mind at first, of course, but the reliability of the person being trusted gives you the reasonableness of the faith. This applies not only to our religious leaders but to our political or any other leaders.

Burnham: Thank you. Now we have only ten more minutes to go and I will take one or two more questions and then we're going to sum up because we're going to leave at 4:00. Does anyone else have a question?

Mercer: To address your question about ethics and religion, I'm sure there are many, many atheists who are quite ethical.

Burnham: Absolutely. In fact, I know many atheists who are a great deal more ethical than religious people I know! My final question for both panelists is this: is there a difference between faith and hope?

Lefkowitz: Well, St. Paul thought that the three important things were *pistis*, *elpis* and *agape* – so he thought of them as being different. *Pistis* – “faith” – and *pisteuo* – “to believe” – are the same – the English has two different words...

Sophy: Hope is the same as faith?

Mary: No, no, different – *elpis* and *pistis* – they have some of the same sounds, but they're etymologically completely different. *Elpis* – “hope” – is something that the ancients Greeks thought of as being rather questionable because it introduced people to false expectations and was part of the system of delusion that their religion was so concerned with getting rid of – and of course realizing that you can never get rid of it because it's built into human beings. And *agape* is “love,” and something entirely different – a kind of general love, not sexual love, but love for one's brother, sister, and family. These are the important three things that remain for human beings. So one may assist another, but they're three different concepts.

Lange: I think my take is that I think they're very similar – I think the difference is that hope has the absence of certainty. If I hope for something to be true, I want it to be true, but I don't know for certain whether or not it is, whereas with faith, even though I might not have concrete evidence, I believe.

Burnham: Any other comments or questions? I'm going to conclude in some way – I'm not sure very well, but I'll attempt it! I have one more question to make to the panel, and my question is: Mary, in the ancient Greek tradition, was there a place for the mystical experience? I know that Socrates has his *daemons*, but I don't know – did they have a personal intuition or a personal sense of the holy and sacred *different* from going to the Delphic oracle?

Lefkowitz: Well, that's a very interesting question and it's very hard to answer given the kind of evidence we have. We have evidence of prayers, but the idea that you have a spiritual experience of some sort is rather rare in the ancient texts. And I think one of the reasons that Socrates

got into such trouble with the Athenians was that he spoke of this *daemonion* – this little divine thing that spoke to him, and never told him what to do but told him not to do certain things. This was very shocking to an ancient mentality – that someone could have a personal voice from a divinity speaking that no one else could hear, because when a god took an action it was usually fairly public and people witnessed it and then you could argue that those people were reliable, but at least the Delphic Oracle was a public thing. So I think there clearly is room – and this definitely gets to be much more important in later texts – for the idea of an individual having some relationship with a divinity in some way. I can think of another couple of references that might speak to something that was close to a relationship to god, but it's not like Socrates' experience, which was much more personal. There was one thing that was devoted to him and that prefigures the Christian notion of divinity. It's one reason that Socrates is so revered a figure even among Christians, and someone who is always compared to Jesus, and I think it rather obscures the real persona, as Plato describes it, of Socrates as being someone very annoying and very critical and very tough to get along with.

Lange: Well, scripturally, it was after Jesus was taken up to heaven, it was the counselor that was sent down. For me personally, it's been in the same capacity, it's been a counselor. For me, the Holy Ghost has been what tells me, when I stray off the path, "Ok, this is contrary to God would have you do." Or when I'm having moments of crisis of some kind, whether it's personal, spiritual, or what have you, it has a multitude of roles: it's there speaking to God in ways that I couldn't. It's also what kind of conveys God's presence to me.

Burnham: Well, with that in mind, I think we're going

to have to do some kind of summing up of a very wide ranging discourse here today. It is almost impossible to sum up everything that said today. I will note a couple of things: one is this idea of the distinction Mary made between mythology and theology. It would not have occurred to me that it was a theology. I was very interested that the Greek gods are not involved at all – they're not only not creators but they're really quite indifferent to humanity and naturally this brings up the question of why Christianity swept the world with such power, because it had a very personal God who was *intensely* interested in even people like women and slaves. I thought that, Mary, your description of the blessings of Christianity was enough to make anyone here who is a Christian convinced that there are good atheists – you did a fabulous job of naming all of the wonderful things that Christians did as opposed to the pagans, like founding hospitals and resting places for the care of the sick and the travelers.

So much went on in this discussion: we talked of virtues, we talked of the personal relationship with God in which you ask questions, and, in my own experience, I have discovered that when you ask there is always a response – it doesn't always come the way you want it, but there is always a response. We spent a lot of time talking about whether there is a personal relationship with God and that is a question that was not resolved, so each person gets to answer that for her or himself.

I want to thank Anna for putting together this program which has been so interesting; I want to thank the audience for coming and providing so much for us; I want to thank our two panelists for giving me a great deal – especially since as moderator I had to do some reading ahead of time, so it's been really fun for me, and thank you.

About SPGH

The Society for the Preservation of the Greek Heritage (SPGH) is a non-profit organization founded in 1974. Our original goal was to assist in the restoration of Byzantine monasteries and churches in Greece and of the historic Plaka House in Athens, which now serves as the headquarters for our Greek affiliate, Elliniki Etairia.

*Our present programs are dedicated to increasing awareness of and appreciation for ancient and modern Greek culture and philosophy, and to the exploration of the interrelationship between classical Greek heritage and contemporary society worldwide. Our activities in the U.S. are generously supported by donations from our members and friends. For more information about SPGH, contact us at:
5125 MacArthur Blvd. NW, Suite 11B, Washington, D.C. 20016.
Tel: 202/363-4337; Fax: 202/363-4658*

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