

Wednesday evening Feb 1, 2017 the Cal Poly Veritas Forum hosted Rhetoric professors Christian Lundberg (UNC Chapel Hill) and Joseph Rhodes (UNLV) speaking in the Cal Poly Performing Arts Center (the PAC) on the subject "Christianity: Cornerstone or Crutch? An Agnostic and a Christian Discuss Identity and the Role of Faith". The Forum is now available to watch or listen on-line. Here are their opening remarks:

Christian Lundberg: So I wanted to start by addressing this "Cornerstone or Crutch" question that is the frame for the Forum. So is Christianity a cornerstone or a crutch? Yes.

As a Christian, I believe wholeheartedly that Christianity is a crutch. I believe that the world is broken. I believe that we don't have to work very hard today to see various examples of violence, see various examples of the world not being exactly what we desire it to be. And I believe that we cannot on our own efforts solve all those problems. So, yes, Christianity is a crutch.

But to me it's also the cornerstone. I believe that Jesus Christ is the literal embodiment of the infinite, all-powerful, eternal divine, paradoxically in a very specific human person who died and by his death and resurrection makes possible for us to fight for, to see, to believe, and to bring about the kingdom of God.

Now when people say Christianity is a crutch there's two basic ways of thinking about it. As a person who does work in rhetoric, I believe that human beings get by using crutches.

I believe, for example, but there are more events, ideas, concepts, and things in the world than our language can name. So we have to stretch language in order to make it address the infinite plurality of the events in the world. I believe that human reason is a powerful tool but it's limited in certain kinds of inquiry.

I believe that we are bound by specific cultures and times. I believe we've all those things that make it difficult for us to imagine getting through the world without having conceptual crutches that organized for us, make sense out of our experience. So I believe all human beings in some way rely on concepts in order to make their way through the world.

If you say Christianity is a crutch in the sense that it's the opiate of the masses or that it's cosmological life insurance policy, to that I'd say it's a very strange kind of crutch. It's a crutch that tells you that your primary obligation is to die to yourself and to die to your desires. It's a crutch that tells you that the primary thing that orients your relationship to the world is others - and the ultimate Other.

It's a crutch that tells you that in order to understand and to know, at least from sense of the propositions we have about God, we have to embrace paradox. You have to embrace the difficulty of knowing. You have to embrace that we cannot, in the context of human language, in the benefit of human reason, know or fully come to terms with the ultimate reality. And yet - we can know it, not as a proposition, but as a person in Jesus Christ. So is Christianity a crutch? If it is it's an awfully strange one that makes awfully strange demands on you. Thanks.

Joseph Rhodes: I was raised in the church. My father was a Pentecostal minister and I don't know how big that is on the west coast, but I'm from Alabama and I grew up the church

building essentially Wednesday night, Sunday night, Sunday morning. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

And one of my earliest memories from childhood were of my grandmother and grandfather when I was about 4 or 5 years old standing on a coffee table. And I remember standing up on top of it with a huge Bible, the Bible that was bigger than me, and I remember waving it around, trying to embody my father's performative gestures. And I remember my grandmother and my grandfather watching me, and clapping and saying: "there's Ma-ma's little preacher man. You're going to make us so proud." I grew up with a sense of Christian destiny. I remember being in a youth group much like some of the youth groups that you're a part of, many of you, and being told "you have so much influence you're going to do great things for the church one day."

And when I was in college two significant things happened to me that have, at least so far, (there's some people who still doubt it) but at least so far, have led me to not fulfill that dream.

One: I was part of a young fledgling Rick Warren Purpose Driven church. It was full of love and compassion and friendship and kindness. Until one day the minister said he believed in predestination from the pulpit and apparently 60% of the church did not believe this.

Instead of simply saying, "well, one can believe this or not believe it. We all love God. We all share the same idea of who Jesus was ..." Instead, they literally became a mob of hatred. And I remember seeing these people who started the church - think about the dedication and commitment it takes to God to start a church and plant it. These people who are so passionate, supposedly, about Jesus had forgotten everything that Jesus had said about love, and compassion, and blessing those who may have different opinions than us, and are poor in spirit. All the gospel - they had forgotten. And I remember saying "If these people can't get it, then what is this thing about?"

And it was about that time that I started experiencing some doubts, and I picked up a book by Christopher Hitchens called *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. And I think Hitchens is correct: it's religion that poisons everything, not God. But, I picked up this book and I remember in the book he asked a question and the question was "why doesn't God heal amputees?" Lizards grow back tails all the time. This is not a feat of nature that even nature cannot accomplish. This is something rather easily done. We see plants, we see some animals, why don't human beings, pray for their limbs to grow back? Knowing that the Bible says if you have the faith of a mustard seed you can take it for your own. Why don't they pray for it? It's because they know it's simply not going to happen. And I found myself in this moment having to come face-to-face with the sort of breakdown of everything I believed and I started from scratch.

And I stand before you today, I change what I call myself every day. Some days I say I'm a believing unbeliever. Some days I say I'm an unbelieving believer. Some days I say I'm a reverent agnostic. Some days I say I'm a Christian atheist. And some days I just say I don't care.

I believe that Jesus was a profound, insightful, wise rabbi who wanted to reform Judaism and who would not recognize many of what you in this room probably call Christianity today. I think he would be utterly dumbfounded by what has become Christianity.

Second, what I believe is that we need to alter our understanding of Christianity if we're going, if it's going, to stay here and it's going to be a formidable force - and I do believe it will be - from an idea of a belief system to a practice.

When someone goes to yoga four days a week, we don't ask them: "Do you believe in yoga?" No. They simply practice yoga. And so I stand before you not believing in the divinity of God, not believing in the divinity of Jesus Christ, any more than I believe in the divinity of you or me, which may be more than you think, but as someone who practices Christianity. I still go to the first African Methodist Episcopal Church, I still love singing the old hymns, and I still recognize that prayer changes you. But prayer does not change God because I doubt every day that a God exists.

Here's a link to the entire Forum: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYi8ZypBH3E>