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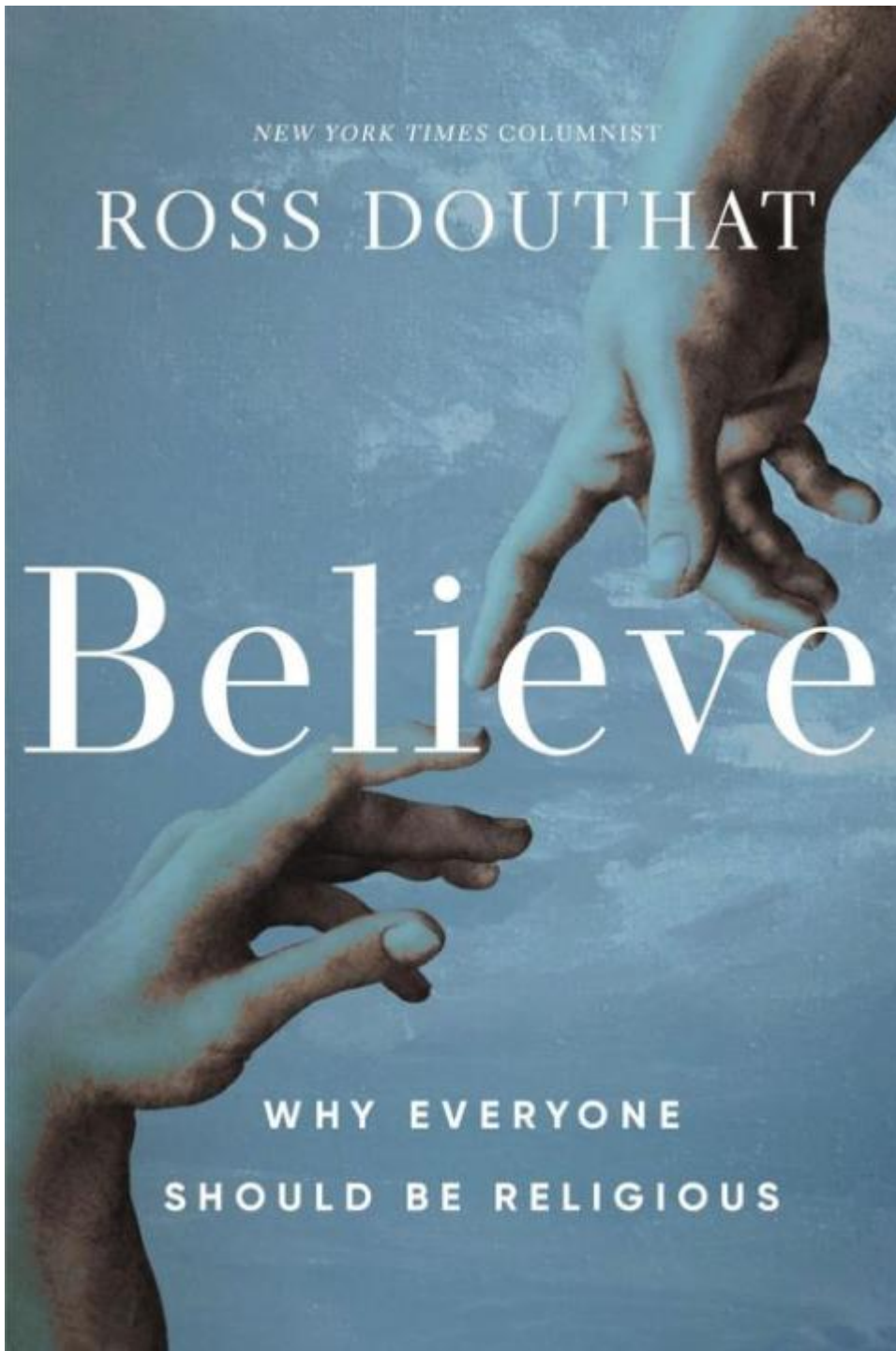
Was it merely coincidence or divine providence that led to my reading Ross Douthat's latest book, [*Believe: Why Everyone Should Be Religious*](#), at the same time that I was working my way through grading a stack of philosophy of religion papers?

It was strange — in a good way — to read Douthat, The New York Times columnist and Catholic convert, grappling with many of the same questions and texts that my undergrad students were addressing.

This was especially uncanny given my assignment. It invited students to consider the reasonableness of belief in miracles according to two philosophers with opposing perspectives. Most engaged David Hume as a defender of the position that one should not believe in miracles. Douthat engages with precisely this question and invokes Hume more than once.

In reading Douthat's book, especially at this particular moment in the semester, I felt as though he had submitted an especially lengthy essay in response to my assignment, albeit one with better grammar, syntax and sourcing than many undergrad papers.

The most significant difference between my students' papers and Douthat's book is his clear thesis: that belief in the transcendent (indeed, the God of Abrahamic faiths) is not only reasonable, but should be embraced widely.



"Believe: Why Everyone Should Be Religious," by Ross Douthat

Douthat is not shy about his commitments to classical theism and the Roman Catholic tradition in particular. Nevertheless, he opens his book with a general invitation to skeptics to consider what he sees as the overwhelming evidence of cosmic mystery and the incomplete narrative materialism and scientific

reductionism offer in response. In a spirit that would delight 17th-century French philosopher Blaise Pascal, Douthat outlines the clear earthly and eternal benefits he sees in betting on the existence of God.

In his introduction, Douthat writes: "Whatever mysteries and riddles inhere in our existence, ordinary reason plus a little curiosity should make us well aware of the likelihood that this life isn't all there is, that mind and spirit aren't just an illusion woven by our cells and atoms, that some kind of supernatural power shaped and still influences our lives and universe."

While Douthat and I disagree on many things, in spheres political and ecclesial alike, we agree that there is something "more" to our lives and the universe than generally meets the eye or that can be explained purely by empirical analysis.

We also share skepticism about what Douthat calls "the myth of disenchantment." The basic idea is, as Douthat summarizes it, "Once human beings inhabited a supernatural-infused cosmos, saw divinity in every tree and waterfall, lived under the influence of angels and demons, gods and stars and spirits." Now, he says, "we inhabit a society defined by reason, science, and calculation, a natural world drained of metaphysical significance, with selves buffered against the mystical and mythological."

This theory, articulated most famously by the Canadian Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor in his 2007 book [A Secular Age](#), has always struck me as both a little too convenient and, ultimately, wrong. More than a decade ago I published an [academic article](#) making this point. I argued that while there may be cultural shifts, changing grammars, and a decline in traditional religious affiliation, a fundamental dimension of human existence is open to the transcendent, to mystery, to the divine. I was intrigued that Douthat dedicated an entire chapter to arguing a similar point.

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Douthat structures *Believe* as an inverted pyramid. He begins with broad, almost universal claims about the human condition, about our historical moment, about the

reasonability of belief in an era that neither requires such religious assent nor necessarily assumes its merit.

As the book progresses, Douthat narrows his scope, inviting readers (especially the religious skeptic or agnostic reader that seem to be his primary audience) to consider why they might want to make a commitment to a religious tradition and why the world's major religions are more sensible than a DIY approach or a New Age startup.

Douthat is not shy about his bias. There may be something universal and enduring about the human quest for the divine. But, he says, "big, resilient, long-enduring faith traditions — Christianity and Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism — are more likely to stand in a strong relationship to the truth about existence than religions that flared and died, that subsist in cultural isolation, or that came into existence the day before yesterday."

After his preliminary push for readers to "get religion" (my phrase, not his), Douthat dedicates a chapter to what he calls "three stumbling blocks," questions that tend to recur among the religiously disaffiliated or disinterested. He explores the question of theodicy, or "Why does God allow so many wicked things to happen?"; "Why do religious institutions do so many wicked things?"; and "Why are traditional religions so hung up on sex?"

Frankly, I found this chapter the most disappointing part of the book. In fairness to Douthat, the question of theodicy, which goes back to the Book of Job and beyond, remains one of the most thorny philosophical and theological topics. I don't fault him for leaving unresolved one of the greatest mysteries, nor do I care for the way he engages the question. I also found his short response to the sex question unconvincing.

However, my biggest reservation is Douthat's response to the wicked religious institutions' "stumbling block." Douthat defends religious institutions, communities and leaders doing horrible things ("this argument almost always references the Inquisition," he begins) by means of the human factor at play. He argues that "There is no good evidence that religion has been a special source of violence in human history, as compared to the entirely worldly and secular aims of conquest or resource control that drive most warfare between countries and peoples."

This strikes me as analogous to something I heard frequently in the early 2000s in response to the revelations of clergy sexual abuse and its cover-up: "Most sexual abuse of children actually takes place within families." This was said in a defensive posture, as if, "Well, what is happening here is bad, but it's worse over there."

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The problem with Douthat's reflections on religious violence — or relativizing the abuse crisis — is that it neglects to consider the higher moral standards at play. What makes religious violence or clergy sexual abuse *especially* terrible is that it is perpetrated by individuals and institutions that purport to represent the divine and mediate God's will for those they are also harming.

Nobody denies that state violence is terrible, as is domestic abuse. But Douthat falls short of addressing the legitimate concerns, scandal and trauma that arise from harm done within religious contexts and by religious adherents and church leaders.

In the penultimate chapter, Douthat offers something of a generic altar call, encouraging readers to make a commitment to a religious tradition. He invites people to return to the religion of one's upbringing, adopt a major world religion, or embrace a culturally predominant tradition.

In the last chapter, Douthat recounts his own religious journey, framed as "a case study." As much as I appreciated his engagement with perennial religious and philosophical questions throughout the rest of the book, I enjoyed the personal dimension of the closing section. There, Douthat shares his own experience and highlights many ways his discovery of Roman Catholicism after a childhood of mainline Protestantism and charismatic churches have been positive for him. It is a good reminder that Catholicism is a capacious tradition — a large tent.

Douthat concludes with a recapitulation of his authorial motive: "The theme of this book is encouragement: to urge people toward religion generally, to suggest that it's better to start somewhere even if it isn't the place I would start, out of a trust that God's providence will ultimately reward all sorts of efforts and enfold all manner of sincere beliefs." As a fellow believer, that's an exhortation I can support.