

Early Life in Saudi Arabia

Charles Mathewes:

Well, I was born in the States, but my father was a civil engineer. So he and I not only had a lot of fun with Legos when I was growing up, but we also moved around in different projects and things like that, that he would build, work on. And so by the time I was eight, we had lived in seven different places. And then when I was eight, we moved to Saudi Arabia. And I really consider my time in Saudi from eight to about 15, the really formative years of my life. We lived in an American... well, a Western compound, a company compound. But it was a terrific place with lots of people from around the States and beyond. A very strange kind of world. I got to know people from all of the oil spots around the world and a girl that I had...

Charles Mathewes:

Before we went to Saudi, I lived in Alaska as well for two years in Valdez and a girl I had been in second grade with, ended up in my fifth grade class from Valdez to a little town called Utilia, Saudi Arabia. And it was a wonderful world to live in for a little kid. And the compound life was extremely structured in some sense on the outside, but on the inside, we were allowed to do just whatever we wanted and the things our parents let us do. Catch different kinds of scorpions or race around in the desert on our bikes. Were the kinds of things that if I thought about it now, just how did they manage to stay sane, knowing what we were doing? But it was a good life.

Charles Mathewes:

And then we would travel every year. We had six weeks of travel vacation time. And we would invariably go around the world, basically. One way or the other. Spend a lot of time back in the States at home with our family, but also just go and visit parts of the world.

Charles Mathewes:

And I realize now, what an unspeakable gift that was. Both to realize something of the enormous differences that exist in the world in terms of ways of living and ways of organizing your time and things like that. Ways of eating, what you eat, but also just the rare unspeakable blessings in many ways of an ordinary life, especially one lived here. I say to my wife now that whenever I go to the grocery store in the States, I still feel this unspeakable thrill for this one instant. It's a very weird thing. I'm not entirely proud of it, but just the awareness of the range of things you can buy in the store. It still astonishes me and I still don't find myself taking it for granted fully. And that's been an interesting fact.

Development of Professional Interests

Charles Mathewes:

So, anyway... But then from Saudi, I... After ninth grade, the Saudis are very wise. They don't want American teenagers in the kingdom, so they send you away. So, I was in a boarding school for three years. And when I was in school, I realized that I really loved international relations and politics and stuff like that. And so, I applied to Georgetown, and I went to Georgetown. First of all, in the thing called the School of Foreign Service, which is their, kind of, international relations program. I loved it, but I discovered, in my first semester, that the questions I was asking were more philosophical than many of the classes in the SSS, as we called it, were asking. And the people I found most impressive at the

university were some of the Humanities professors, who were asking these questions in Philosophy and Theology and English, and the Jesuit fathers.

Charles Mathewes:

I was not Catholic at that point. I was, kind of, broadly, a kind of agnostic Protestant, I guess. But being around the Jesuits was always an enormous blessing. And you had a sense of the real intensity of what they were about and a wry sense of humor that they had that I found incredibly attractive. And so, before I even decided on a career in theology and religion, studying with stuff, I had had these two experiences early on that deeply impressed me about the seriousness of religious life. One, growing up in one of the last functioning theocracies in the world of Saudi Arabia, where, when it was Ramadan, you knew. Everyone knew because Ramadan was a time when no one would drink or eat or smoke outside. Right? That was just not something you would want to do. And living in a religious culture, which was not my own, but which was quite serious, gave me a sense of the seriousness and viability of that. And that was an impressive thing.

Charles Mathewes:

And then, just hanging out with the Jesuits really gave me a sense of the humanity that would be enabled by a life lived fully in devotion to God in that sense. And I found both of those things affecting me and shaping the way I think in the rest of my life. And then I went to grad school, and I was in grad school in Chicago for six years. And that was a... I want to say wonderful, a different and challenging experience, in many ways wonderful. But graduate school is always a challenging time. And then, at the end of my time there, I got the biggest luck in the world and got a job here at UVA. And I've been here ever since. And this is my 23rd year.

Student "kids" of former students today?

Charles Mathewes:

I've not yet seen any of my own students children come to my classes, but now that I've been here long enough, I do have some students who have teenage kids. And I suspect before too long, it will happen that some of them will show up in my classes, which will be a very strange thing. A good thing. I mean, the greatest honor someone can give you is to recommend your classes to their kids, you know?

Have students changed at UVA during your time?

Charles Mathewes:

I like the students very much. They're broadly inquisitive and energized. I've had experience now in what I think are three very different cultures of student life. At Georgetown, which was a pervasively, in a good sense, but deeply unconsciously Catholic institution, the students there did not realize how thoroughly a Catholic formation they were getting. At least it seemed to a Protestant that was what was going on. I thought that was a wonderful, but very local culture.

Charles Mathewes:

The University of Chicago, where I went to grad school was a thoroughly Promethean institution. It's very secular and very vigorously about creating the next big technology or whatever. That has benefits and challenges as well, I think. We used to have a t-shirt that said, "The University of Chicago, where the end of the world began," with a mushroom cloud. That was always fun. The students there were very distinctive as we well.

Charles Mathewes:

Then coming to UVA, you really do get a sense, through all the trials and tribulations of the many generations of students, there's an interesting feeling of self-governance that they have. I think that the institution is still set up to design their lives so that they are running a lot of things, organizing a lot of things, and that's very different. It seemed to me that the experience I had as an undergraduate at Georgetown and the experience I saw my younger friends who were undergraduates at Chicago have, was a much more informal way of organizing your social life and your intellectual life. At UVA, the students really decide very early on if they want to do something they're going to create, a certified independent organization is what they're called, a CIO, a student run organization. They'll create an institution, and they do learn skills of institution building that I actually think are quite useful for citizens in a country like ours. It depends upon autonomous people to generate the civil society energy we need. I've been impressed with that.

Charles Mathewes:

Intellectually, I think they're tremendous. By and large, very interested in big questions. They, I would say, and definitely in the past few decades, the increasing number of women who have enrolled has driven the intellectual seriousness of the school quite a lot. That's been a good thing. One of the jokes we say, and I feel bad for my gender at saying this, but that if you have a lot of men in your class, it's likely that there might be a little reputation of it being a gut class. But if you have a majority of women in your class, the reputation is going to be something the opposite.

Do you have a Worldview? Has it changed?

Charles Mathewes:

Yes, I do have a worldview. I'm happy to share it. It definitely has changed over time. Now that I'm 50 years old, I have both different and maybe fewer well formed opinions than when I was 25. The Mark Twain line about "when I was 20, I had no children and many opinions about parenting and when I was 30, I had three children and no opinions at all," something like that has happened to me as well. I'm a professor at a state institution. And as such, I teach in a department of religious studies. And so it's not a confessional environment in that way, but I'm fortunate in my department to have the ability to talk in a non-defensive and a non-apologetic way about the views that I personally hold and that other people hold. And we try to talk about those in conversation.

Charles Mathewes:

And we do I think pretty well. So I'm comfortable saying both that I am a Christian, I'm a member of the Episcopal church. I attend an Episcopal church. Those two things don't always go together, but I do understand myself to be someone who's trying to be pretty serious about that dimension of life and how it shapes the entirety of my life, including my teaching. Broadly speaking, I would say my worldview is philosophically of a broadly Augustinian variety, by which I mean that I think the world is fundamentally gratuitous. I think that everything we have didn't need to be here at all. And that part of

what we are called to do is see and experience in a deep, affective way, not just mentally or propositionally, but in our hearts experience the incredible gift that everything and every person and every moment is in this life.

Charles Mathewes:

And then, because I'm an Augustinian as well, you have to emphasize, of course, the fact that another thing we have to do is register the many ways we fail at doing that all the time. Augustine did not invent the doctrine of original sin, but he has become famous as one of the most persuasive articulators of that picture. And so I simultaneously subscribe to a picture of the world as fundamentally one marked by a deep gratuity and excess of every everything about it, but also through an Augustinian picture of the flawed character of humans.

Charles Mathewes:

I also do believe that it's a tragically marred world that we have ruined in some ways. And that we are living amidst the ruins of a world that would have been a better world had we not destroyed it as we have. I don't think that drives me to despair. I do think there's a poignant kind of hope that I feel and the narrative of the story of the people Israel, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus for me. And then the continued story of the many ways that we have tried to in the diverse Christian churches, tried to follow out the life of Jesus. And the mission that Jesus gave the community, is to me still a pretty decisive way of talking about how the world hangs together.

Who influenced you the most?

Charles Mathewes:

Yeah. I mean, there's a lot. I think I've been in some ways more marked by my path than I at first realized. This might be again, just a sign of growing up, of seeing your own children imitating you in some ways. Then you reflect back on, "Well, am I like that with my parents?" Both of my parents died many years ago after I was an adult, so I was never in that way a childhood orphan, but I do think that both of my parents in different ways did really decisively influence me.

Charles Mathewes:

One of my favorite books to read with students now actually in a way to kind of shake them up is Marcus Aurelius's Meditations. If you've ever read this, you know that it begins with this really fascinating listing of who it was who influenced him and in what way, what precise things that they did.

Charles Mathewes:

It's a practice that I actually encourage my students to try on for themselves to try to take a couple blank sheets of paper and name people who have shaped you and the distinct ways that you think they have shaped you. It provides both a great deal of ... It can provide a great deal of self knowledge and also, again, going back to that notion of gratuity, it can make you a little more aware of how deeply much you owe to other people and possibly, I hope, make you a little more thankful for them in your life.

Who else influenced you? Alasdair MacIntyre

Charles Mathewes:

Well, let me say maybe as a prelude to that also, that you had asked about other people who have influenced me, and I would put Alasdair MacIntyre in that group. There are other people as well. For me, W.H. Auden, the poet is an incredibly powerful presence. The first real theologian who I encountered in a book form was Martin Luther. And so Luther has, in some ways, decisively influenced me, the liveliness of his presence in his thinking. But yes, Alasdair MacIntyre has been a presence for me in my life as an intellectual storm front, as it were ever since I was maybe 20 years old.

Charles Mathewes:

I was fortunate in my college days to take a seminar with a teacher who's very influential to me, theologian named Diane Yeager, still alive, still very much kicking. And she had designed a class where we would do nothing but read MacIntyre. And I had read a little bit of MacIntyre before this, but reading everything he had written up until this point, which is 1991, was an incredible experience. You get to know a thinker in that way. MacIntyre is a remarkable figure. I don't know the full details of his story, but he was raised, I believe in an Anglo-Irish. So either in Ireland or maybe in Scotland. I'm not sure exactly where, but raised among a culture of people who went back a long way. They understood themselves to be located in a certain place. Intellectually, a remarkably, a vibrant young man.

Charles Mathewes:

He wrote famously a book in his early twenties called difficulties in Christian belief. And as someone else said, he decided after writing the book that the difficulties in Christian belief were in the Super Bowl. And so he stopped being a Christian, and then he became a kind of Marxist and developed over the rest of the 1950s and sixties. And then into the seventies, a rather large analysis and critique of modernity as a place that is existing in some important ways as his most famous book is entitled after virtue. We've lost the capacity to talk about virtue.

Charles Mathewes:

And then in the course of writing these books, he discovered that there were resources, moral and spiritual resources in this broader Christian tradition that still spoke to him in a powerful way. And in the process, I believe of writing the second of these big books, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* He returned to Christianity, became a Roman Catholic and has stayed that ever since though, a famously combative guy.

Charles Mathewes:

We had at the end of our seminar with him, the wonderful, good fortune of having him visit us for a day. And it was one of us. It wasn't a particular person. We all thought this. We all thought we had been very special to have done this class about MacIntyre. And we were all thinking, we were really, really terrific for doing it. Asked him, "Professor MacIntyre, what do you think of our class?" And he's sitting there at lunch eating his sandwich and he says, "Oh, well, I think it's a disaster." And I said, "Well, why?" And he said, "Well, if you had read anything, I had written and understood it, you would've stopped reading me at once and started reading Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle." Which struck me as a fair point.

Charles Mathewes:

I think that most teachers often feel a little weird at becoming the object of student's interest. You want them to be interested in the thing you're trying desperately to get them to look at. And that's the way it is often with a little child. When you're trying to get a little child to look at something and you start gesticulating wildly, and you're saying, "Look, look over there." Of course, you as the wildly gesticulating

person become ever more fascinating to the kid and it's a very frustrating experience. But unfortunately we had not known professor MacIntyre. Well, fortunately for us, actually, we had not known what professor MacIntyre's answer would be and so we had not stopped our class and read Thomas Aquinas. I have read much more Aquinas since then. No offense to professor MacIntyre, I completely understand what he was trying to say. Nonetheless, I still think it was worth our while to have read Alasdair MacIntyre.

Why is there Evil? Our toughest question in life?

Charles Mathewes:

Yeah, I do think that in some ways the toughest question is why is there evil? And I think that we do ourselves an injustice in not allowing ourselves to ask that question in an abstract way, as well as a concrete way. In other words, it's not just enough for us... Although all of us will have this question from time to time, "Why is this happening to me? What have I done to deserve this?" That's a completely legitimate and honorable question. And it's one that everyone is going to have to inhabit at one point or another, probably all of us repeatedly. Behind that question, or maybe alongside it, is this more abstract theoretical question of, "Why do we live in a world where these sorts of things happen?"

Charles Mathewes:

And I can remember, having brought my father home from the hospital, after what was the first of a series of heart problems that would end up killing him, and I can remember sitting with him on the sofa... And he had been a very strong and brave man throughout much of his life, although I don't think he knew that. And he said at one point in that conversation, "I just wish I understood why all these things had happened to me."

Charles Mathewes:

And I can vividly remember where we were on the sofa, our positions, what time of evening it was. And I knew at that moment that letting my father ask that question, in my head, would be a part of my life from that moment forward. And so when I wrote my first book, when I did my dissertation, that became my first book. I dedicated it to my father, but it was about this question of evil.

Charles Mathewes:

And the epigraph to the book is a line from the beginning of Plato's Republic, in which one character is saying to another... And neither of them are Socrates, they're these two figures, but they're starting the argument that will begin the whole Republic. And one of them says to the other, "Oh, I'm getting tired. I have to go do these rituals. I'll hand over the argument to you." And the word for "hand over there" is a version of paradosis, which means "tradition" in Greek, the handing over is the giving you the tradition. And the other character, who is the son, says to the father, "Am I to be your inheritor in everything?"

Charles Mathewes:

And it makes me think, both about the Republic... The Republic, really, is a dialogue of fathers and sons, but it also makes me think that sometimes in our own lives, we are continuing the arguments and conversations that our parents had. And I think that's true about me with my parents.

How do you think of evil?

Charles Mathewes:

I find myself, both for empirical and personal reasons maybe, most compelled by a Augustinian picture of what evil is. And that has, as I read it, two basic parts. On the one part, the idea is that evil is in itself, essentially nothing. It is an emptiness. It is the ruin of something, rather than the thing itself. On the other hand, to understand how evil operates, we have to understand it as warping what would otherwise be good things. So in that case, evil is a perversion and those are the two categories that I think Augustinians are well advised to use, to talk about evil, both ontological privation, and psychological, or moral perversion, in some sense. Turning of, the twisting of the agency in that way.

Is evil pain and suffering?

Charles Mathewes:

So pain and suffering are, it seems to be a natural part of our world. It's potentially a post-fall part of our world, a postlapsarian part of our world. But nonetheless, they don't seem to me identical with the experience of evil. There are lots of forms of pain that we might find as bad in themselves, but part of a larger, good process. So people who are exercising very strenuously might feel a certain kind of pain. We can feel the burn if we're doing some yoga or something like that. I don't know much about that, as you might have guessed, but I think that's one kind of pain. Another kind of pain, which is powerful, but is also clearly related to a good end is often the pain of childbirth, which from what I have witnessed anyway from the outside, seems to be quite bad on one level. But most of the women who I have ... Well, I've only myself seen one woman do this, but that experience of pain, it doesn't seem to me is something they would identify as intrinsically evil.

Will we all secularize, create utopia, and prove evil is a myth?

Charles Mathewes:

Let me take the evil one first and then I'll do the secularization one, because I think they actually relate. I think the idea that we are going to be able to heal the world continues to be a very powerful and seductive idea. I'm not entirely confident that we should kick it to the curb entirely, I like the moral energy it gives us to care for the world in certain ways. I find that admirable and maybe energizing and orienting in good ways. I do worry as a Augustinian, and maybe as a Christian, that the idea that we could heal the world is setting us on a road that could lead us to do more problematic things than we realize. It is an entirely human and entirely admirable thing to rebel against the fact of injustice and suffering and evil and our world. And that's not something I think any of us should want to give up. But I do think that sometimes we end up in situations where we have got ourselves into knots of trying to do good in ways that cause greater evil. And that's a problem in our world. And I think that's an important thing to realize. The power of desiring that we live in a world without suffering is a good power, but we have to be wary about where those energies will take us.

Where is Secularism Thesis today? Great Worldview Diversity

Charles Mathewes:

Secularization is an interesting question, I was actually talking to people about this the other day. In the 1960s and '70s, the general view of many scholars was that within a generation or two, you wouldn't see

much in the way of formal institutional religions operative, at least in the so-called developed West. Everyone was on a trajectory to Holland in some sense, that was the idea.

Charles Mathewes:

It seems to be the case that in by about the 1990s, the foremost of theorist of this view, most famously Peter Berger actually said we were just completely wrong. In fact, secularization is not happening, either at the personal level of individual belief or at the institutional level of church and other religious organizations presence in the public world.

Charles Mathewes:

I think that's still the case. The most interesting fact I have come across lately is that, and it was in either the Pew forums world religions report or a similar report done by, I believe the Lilly Foundation is that actually the world's population in 2050 will be more religious than the world's population in 2000.

Charles Mathewes:

And the reasons for this are complicated, but they have a lot to do with demographics. That it seems to be the case that as people lose their religiosity, they don't have quite as many babies. And so you reproduce at a lower rate and that's going to change the population of the world, it's demographic structure. That's an interesting thought, and I don't know if that's a temporary thing or if it's a longer term thing.

Charles Mathewes:

But I like to point out to my more resolutely secularist colleagues of whom I have a few, that the world that we live in now is probably the most secular world that they will live in for the rest of their lives. And that might mean that instead of just holding your breath and hoping for these religious people and religious organizations to go away, you might actually want to take a breath and try to talk to some people and figure out what that is.

Charles Mathewes:

I think the interesting fact that secularization was trying to get at, and I had a conversation with Peter Berger that made me think he thought this too, was not so much the decline of religion or religious belief, as much as the pluralization of it. That we're in a world where now in my classes, I will have Muslims, Hindus, 18 different kinds of secularists, 14 different kinds of post Christians, Protestant Evangelical Christians of a Calvinist variety, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Roman Catholics, Baptists, American Baptist, Southern Baptists, multiple varieties of Jewish students.

Charles Mathewes:

And the kind of diversity that we have, even in our student body at UVA is I think the future. And that's a simultaneously complicated future, but also one that I think of as incredibly exhilarating, because the possibility of having actual people of deep faith of these traditions and of non-religious traditions able to learn to talk to each other. That's a kind of capacity that I don't think our species has had since at least a Tower of Babel. And that's an exciting for me, exhilarating thought.

Does The Fall in Genesis place all of the blame for evil on mankind?

Charles Mathewes:

So there's multiple layers there. One is that the way that the Genesis account appears and has a role in Judaism is very different than the way it has a role in Christianity. In some ways I am of the view, and I think I'm not unusual in this, in thinking that we end up ramping up the garden of Eden as Christians, precisely because we have this parallel structure of Christ as the Redeemer. We perceive the gravity and the magnitude of the redemptive act in Christ.

Charles Mathewes:

And because of that, we then go back and to try to track back to some fundamental moment where things must have gone so dramatically wrong as to require this kind of sacrifice for us. And because of that then, the Edenic story, in a back shadowing sort of way, gains a kind of significance that if you don't have that picture of the dramatic redemption, it might not have. It is the case that in Jewish accounts of both Eden and then later similar stories, it's not so much that evil is originating in the act of eating the fruit, but rather that these are opportunities that humans have had at different moments to go wrong.

Charles Mathewes:

And it's always been there. That possibility has always been there. It would make me nervous to say that the Jewish people have imagined in some sense and burdened the human race with all evil, in that sense. I think the idea was much more a matter of trying to give an account of how the humans were created in a world that was fundamentally good.

Charles Mathewes:

And this, I think what we know about the early context in which these stories are written down does in fact suggest that the initial people who are telling these stories and affirming them are telling them in a context where the surrounding cultures, especially the Sumerian Mesopotamian cultures, have a much more gruesome picture of what the war world is. The world is basically the corpse of Tiamat, the God, the goddess, the initial goddess of the Babylonian cosmos and the humans are created fundamentally as temple slaves to the gods, to Marduke and the other gods.

Charles Mathewes:

For the Genesis account, it seems that the Genesis account is designed resolutely. Not necessarily, I'm not talking about inspiration here. I'm talking about the way that they framed the account that they were telling resolutely to resist this. No, the world is not made from a Titanic struggle of cosmic deities. It is not made from the corpses of defeated gods. It is made freely and voluntarily by a God who chooses to bring this world into, into being as a fundamentally good thing. That's the first thing.

Charles Mathewes:

And secondly, humanity is not made just as basically the downstairs part of Downton Abbey for the gods. Humanity is made as a participant in a creation in which their lives will be full and enriched. They're not made as the help in that sense. And so the glory of the world and the dignity of mankind are two features of the creation story that the early exilic Babylonian Jews are able to tell and affirm for themselves. I don't think that is a story that was initially and purely composed in the exile. I think that story is deep in the tradition of the people who were taken out of ancient Judea and Israel and moved to Babylon. But I think that affirmation is at the core of what they were saying.

Do Europeans blame Christianity and God for the human errors of World Wars I and II?

Charles Mathewes:

I do think that Europe does, and until you're an American in Europe, you don't realize how in almost every village and in almost every town, if you go to a university, on the walls of the colleges and things, there'll be these long lists of the dead. What's fascinating is that, for Americans, it's always World War II that's the really big thing, but for the Europeans, it's World War I. I think it is the case that there's still an enormous moral trauma that Europe, as a whole, is suffering from, to think about what they did wrong to create the world that flowed from June 28th, 1914, from the murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo.

Charles Mathewes:

I was actually in London in August of 2014, and I can remember walking near Buckingham Palace and looking up at, I think it was wherever the old foreign ministry was or whatever, near Horse Guards Parade. Of course, these are the windows that, famously, Sir Edward Grey, who was the foreign minister of the British government, was looking out of on the night of August 3rd or August 4th, when he saw a lamplighter, lighting the lamps in the park below. He said, "The lights are going out all over Europe tonight, and I doubt we shall see them lit again in our lifetime."

Charles Mathewes:

I think that there's a great and tremendous anger and sense of betrayal that a lot of Europeans, that I know, have in their DNA about the traditions that led them there. I think that those are traditions that are human creatures, they're human creations, but they are in some ways rooted, for them also, in the way that they understand their Christianity, especially, to be at fault for that. I don't think that's a uniform fact for all of the Europeans that I know, and I know many European Christians who actually have that anger more than some European secularists.

Charles Mathewes:

I do think that's an interesting thing for us also to think about, the relationship between the moral sources that we have, the spiritual and moral sources that we have, and the degree to which we may understand them to be misleading us in some ways or not. It's an important question to struggle with.

Are there 3 ways to think about evil?

Charles Mathewes:

Hmm. Well, there are, it seems to me, broadly three big... I wouldn't even call them theories. They are in some sense more abstract than theories, approaches to thinking about evil. On the one hand, you have people who have really picked up on the emptiness or the vacuity of evil. And you can talk about this in terms of people who think about evil as fundamentally a mistake, some sort of misunderstanding, or you can talk about... And that would be a kind of Platonic way of talking about it. You could talk about it in terms of an Augustinian way of an emptiness or a vacuum, and vacuity at the heart of evil. That's all one kind of family of thinking about evil and there's a second one that grabs onto another dimension of evil. And that is this disturbing experience of a positivity in evil.

Charles Mathewes:

This is sometimes called a more demonic account. That there's a way in which in some situations, people can feel a positive presence of evil in driving themselves maybe, or in a place. I remember reading a book about Rwanda and the reporter who was writing the book was at a site where there had been a large massacre and they had left. The people had left the bones of the victims there. And at one point the writer, he hears a popping noise and he looks up and he looks over and he sees that one of the people he's with has accidentally stepped on a skull and crushed the skull or broken the skull. And he writes, "I felt an enormous, overwhelming rage and desire to hurt this person." And then they say, "And then suddenly I felt something beneath my own foot give way. And I looked down and I had done the same thing."

Charles Mathewes:

And that sense of simultaneously knowing that we, and anyone who has felt rage can have this, this feeling of the power of that. So there's a whole collection of these families of evil that start from that phenomenological insight, that there is a power to that, a terrifying thing, right? And it's what the Star Wars will call The Dark Side of the Force. And so there's a kind of family that talk about the emptiness at the heart of evil, this family that talk about the positivity that they see at the heart of evil.

Charles Mathewes:

And then there's a third group of systems that counts that seem to emphasize more evil as part of an ongoing process of maturation. And this may sound insanely optimistic or chipper in some sense, but it actually has very old and respected Christian roots and many thinkers, especially in Eastern orthodoxy have played around with this idea that you want to think about evil as in some sense, a passage into maturation that people have to experience in some sense. And again, if there's a kind of an experience that is common to many people, that the other two families are anchored in, this has its experience too.

Charles Mathewes:

Anyone who has grown up has experienced this idea that in some sense, "I intended it for evil, but God meant it for good." It's a mild modification of a line I believe we've heard before in the Bible. And that idea that in some sense, the things that we do that are terrible might turn out to be good things. That's a plausible... That's a plausible way to begin a story of evil as well. And anyone who wants to think about evil, I would say, is going to have to, even if they don't want to, if they choose one of these routes, they're still going to have to give an account of why these other routes sound attractive and plausible as pictures of evil to anyone.

Dialogue concerning Theory about Evil versus Fact

Charles Mathewes:

I think we have not demythologized demons in the way that we've demythologized other parts of Christianity. But I think that's a curious absence because after the century, we just went through, to not be interested in the question of some kind of force of evil in the world strikes me as empirically, possibly, one sided.

Doug Monroe:

No, exactly. I'm reading a not very history-oriented history book by Winston Groom which talks about, that's my light reading, Churchill, Stalin, and Roosevelt. Stalin was a psychopathic murderer. End of

story. That's what he was. Now, I don't know what you call it, but that's what the man was. And we didn't have a clue when I was in school what... The depths of that. I mean, we knew the Gulag and so on and so forth and thick books written about him, but no, we had no clue at that point.

Charles Mathewes:

The funny thing is right, one of the most famous, putatively scientific thinkers of the 20th century would be Sigmund Freud, who was not very positive about religion. But in the end of his thinking, at the end of civilization and its discontents, he actually makes the argument for humans being caught between a drive to love one another and an equally powerful death drive that lies at the root, almost at a cellular level, at the root of human existence. Now I'm not saying that's the same thing as demons, but that strikes me as a pretty interesting thing for a radically secularizing thinker to come at this idea that humans really, more than anything else in some sense, want to die. Right.

Doug Monroe:

Well, we-

Videographer:

[inaudible]

Doug Monroe:

Yeah, sure.

Charles Mathewes:

Will you do it again?

Videographer:

One of these...

Doug Monroe:

We can see ourselves as having spirit and we can get into a spirit that is perhaps not real good.

Do demons exist?

Charles Mathewes:

Ah. I think, and I don't know that anyone even on my Augustinian team would necessarily agree with me on this. I think evil seems to be a feature of a free creature. On Augustine's own reading, evil doesn't begin with humans. It begins with angels. Right? Now, humans restart it. The demons and the devils for Augustine don't cause human evil, they merely inspire it. But humans are fully responsible for this. So I imagine that if there weren't humans who had this kind of capacity for unspeakable rebellious agency, however you frame that capacity, then it would be hard to imagine, unless you have some other creature with that kind of agency, it would be hard to imagine rocks and fish and birds and plants being something that a disinterested observer would call evil. But that's just me.

Would evil exist without human beings?

Charles Mathewes:

I think, and I don't know that anyone even on my Augustinian team would necessarily agree with me on this. I think evil seems to be a feature of a free creature.

Charles Mathewes:

On Augustine's own reading, evil doesn't begin with humans, it begins with angels. Right? Now, humans restart it. The angels, the demons and the devils for Augustine don't cause human evil, they merely inspire it. But humans are fully responsible for this. So I imagine that if there weren't humans who had this kind of capacity for unspeakable rebellious agency, however you frame that capacity, then it would be hard to imagine... Unless you have some other creature with that kind of agency, it would be hard to imagine rocks and fish and birds and plants having an experience, or being something that a disinterested observer would call evil. But that's just me. I...

Can humans eliminate evil through their own striving?

Charles Mathewes:

Yeah, I think the problem is, in some sense, reducible, in terms of we can render it much more specific. And I actually think that different traditions do this in different ways. I think in the last few decades, well, that might not be that useful to say. I don't think the fundamental core problem is answerable before what I understand the eschaton, before the second coming, I don't think we're going to have an answer to why there is evil. And I think that it would be spiritually unwise to think you have answered that for any of us. I think that the experience of evil is so profoundly wrong, that to think that you could come in this world to some kind of revolution where you were at peace with it, would be itself, in some sense, a problematic surrender.

How important is Augustine to Christianity?

Charles Mathewes:

Well, there are many different strands of Christianity that do not descend from Latin Christianity. The many variants of Eastern Orthodoxy and even the Ethiopian churches do not in that way have much genealogical obligation to Augustine. But anybody who is coming out of what I would broadly call the Western European strands of Christianity, that means anybody who would even understand themselves to be a secularist, has to at some point or other, if they want to be, I think, properly educated, come to an understanding of the kinds of things that Augustine was doing, because he is really important in all sorts of ways.

Charles Mathewes:

Just think about this, think about the following words, law, virtue, grace, joy, city, citizenship, duty, obligation, secular. Any of these words, if you use them in a daily basis, Augustine is this really crucial nodal moment where each one of those words, which a Roman of 500 or a 1000 years before Augustine would've understood, they would've used all of those words, but Augustine is in some ways the intersection through which all of those words get transmitted and redefined in some important ways and delivered to later people. And so he is not inaptly called sometimes the Second Founder of the Faith.

Augustine a once in a century genius?

Charles Mathewes:

One of the blessings of being in a university is you do occasionally run across people whose capacities in different dimensions are so far beyond what you could imagine ordinary humans capacities to be. And I've had a couple encounters with people who are true geniuses. It's one of the things that annoys me. I'm very happy with our public education system, but we have a very, a large fraction of people we call gifted and I'm okay. Everyone is gifted and some basic Augustinian sense, we're all gifted. That's good. But when you have 200 or 300 kids in a high school of 800, who you're calling gifted when they get to college and they discover that there are one or two people who are truly gifted, it will be a kind of a surprise for them. And maybe a useful maturation point. Augustine's capacity as a speaker and thinker are breathtaking.

Charles Mathewes:

And the more you know about him, the more awesome he seems. He starts *The City of God*, which is a book I have a particular affection for. He starts *The City of God*, we think in around 411, and he finishes it 15 years later in the midst of which he's written multiple other treatises, multiple other commentaries and tones, impressive career. But if you go through that text, it does not seem to me that you find that text as one that someone stitched together over 15 years. In other words, how he proposed to write it in 411 was pretty much the way it went until 426. The only person I know who has that kind of sustained intellectual capacity. Well, there are two other people. One is, as you said, "the Dumb Ox", Thomas Aquinas, who was breathtakingly intelligent, terrifyingly intelligent.

Charles Mathewes:

So intelligent, that he took it for granted. That was how smart he was. He didn't even tell anyone he was smart because he assumed everyone else was like that too. But the other one actually was Yohan Sebastian Bach. I actually think that Bach is the only other person that I know and I'm not gifted in this at all, I mean, in terms of music or other forms, who had the ability, if not day after day, week after week, to create things that were eternally beautiful and ravishing, and to do it relentlessly, right? As Dizzy Gillespie said, "A professional is somebody who can do it twice." And Augustine and Aquinas and Bach, for me, are in that sense, consummate professionals.

Why have Christian theologians resisted Augustine?

Charles Mathewes:

It was either Ritschl or Troeltsch. I can't remember who it was, but either Ritschl or... Well, what's the difficulty of Augustine? I think there are a couple difficulties. And again, this is a very peculiar view to me. I think I'm not trying to claim solitary credit for it. I'm just trying to excuse anybody else. I think Augustine was writing his work in the assumption that any world that received his work would broadly be continuous with the world that he inhabited. He didn't really imagine that the world of the Roman Empire would end in that way. He didn't really imagine the apocalypse. He imagined, and maybe this is the case of any of us, we can only imagine an audience that is like the audience that we live around, he imagined that future people who would read his things would be a lot like him or like the people he knew.

Charles Mathewes:

He knew that the times were changing. He knew that he was entering into Christendom, and that previous theologians had been outside of that. There was going to be a world that was very heavily organized and saturated by Christian culture in a certain way. And he knew that the marks of authentic Christian existence had often been defined in terms of opposition to the dominant culture, through martyrdom, through monasticism, through a number of these practices. And he knew that wasn't going to be acceptable in the future. It wasn't going to be a viable route. Right? You'll produce a series of people like Søren Kierkegaard, who are brilliant, but in some ways, the only way they think they can demonstrate their Christianity is by continually offending everybody. That may be the right case. I'm not saying it's wrong, but Augustine tried to imagine a way of being authentically Christian, which would always put you a little bit in tension with the dominant structures of the culture, because the culture was always going to try to normalize and render routine what Augustine thought was never a normal and routine thing.

Charles Mathewes:

If you actually wake up every morning and think the world is a gift, that's not something that you can become callous to. You have to retain that freshness of insight. And he knew that everything about human culture works to routinize us and to organize us into patterns and habits of action. And he's not against patterns and habits of action. My God, civilization would collapse. But the difficulty is that if we confuse religion and confuse our true faith for Augustine with routine, we will never be like the people we are called to be. We should be in a condition of exhilarated astonishment to some degree.

Charles Mathewes:

And the church for centuries thereafter tried to figure out how to institutionalize that insight. And the difficulty is, it seems to me, it's effectively a non-institutionalizable insight. And that's why it kept trying to forget Augustine at the same time that it tried to domesticate.

Augustine's Early Life

Charles Mathewes:

Augustine was born in North African backwater, a little town named Thagaste. And he was born to actually what would've been conceived of almost as a mixed race family. His father Patricius was a Latin, seems to have been a Roman immigrant. His mother Monica seems to have been a Berber or a North African native of some level. And he was raised in that context. He seems to have had siblings. He was clearly the pride and joy of his parents. Again, I said earlier, his name Augustine's seems to suggest, "No pressure kid."

Charles Mathewes:

He was a clever kid and he went to the best schools and his parents were able to get him basically a scholarship to go study also in Carthage, which he was able to do as well. And he ended up at this point, not yet a Christian and his mother was Christian, his father was resolutely pagan, but he ended up getting one of the best educations he could get. And then from his time in Carthage, he actually went to Rome where he was a professor effectively of literature and rhetoric in Rome, where he met many of the big wigs of that world and gained enough respect among them to be moved to Milan, which is where the emperor was.

Charles Mathewes:

And he was effectively hired as one of the speechifiers for the emperor in Milan. All of this when he was not a Christian... As a young man, he had become a Manichaean, which is a kind of, at this point, a quasi-Christian status, although it seemed to be more philosophically respectable, because it was disdainful of the Christian Old Testament, the Jewish Bible, and clearly a much more elitist system. Didn't need to have as much connection with the great unwashed. So in the Roman society of that time, a very hierarchical society, Manichaeism was a respectable kind of philosophical position.

Charles Mathewes:

But when he was in Milan, he met and began to study the Bishop Ambrose. He studied him initially as a rhetor, as a speech writer, he admired him as a speaker. And then as time went on though, he found that his philosophical questions were more and more being asked and answered in the Christian idiom that Ambrose was giving him than in the language that he had found himself attractive earlier, either a Manichaean language or another kind of skeptical or philosophical language.

Augustine Becomes a Christian

Charles Mathewes:

And he famously became a Christian around 383 or 384 through a very dramatic ... He recounts a very dramatic conversion scene in a garden in Milan. He was baptized in Easter of 384. If you go to Milan, you can actually see the ruins of the baptistry, where Augustine was baptized. It's beneath the cathedral in Milan. You can go down and you can actually see the octagonal mass that he would've walked in as a pagan and walked out of as a Christian to be met by Ambrose on the other side. It's a powerful thing.

Charles Mathewes:

After that, he stayed in Italy for a couple years trying to generate a small religious community. Then went back to North Africa, was in a monastic community there for a little while that he was running, more or less informally a monastic community. But then was forced into becoming a priest on a visit to the city of Hippo, a coastal city on the Mediterranean in the far east of Algeria at this point. And then he was made a priest by the crowds in the anticipation that he would become the next bishop of the town, and he became the next bishop. So by 394 or so, he was bishop and he remained in Hippo with travels elsewhere, but he remained in his bishopric until his death in 430.

Augustine's Autobiography - "Confessions"

Charles Mathewes:

So Augustine wrote this very curious book that we don't actually know if it has any antecedents in that sense, that's called The Confessions. The Confessions is potentially understood as the first or maybe at least the first prominent spiritual autobiography, maybe even the first real autobiography we have in at least the Western world. I can't speak for anything else.

Charles Mathewes:

Augustine's Confessions was prompted by, we think, suspicions that were rumored in his day that he was in fact not fully over his Manichaean past. That he had advanced too far, too fast in the church, that he was a little uppity and a little flashy. He wrote this book to kind of give an account of how he had

come to be the person he was. In many ways it was a really interestingly disquieting book for his audience. No one expected him to talk about being a bishop and still having certain kinds of moral weaknesses.

Charles Mathewes:

Even with undergraduates today, undergraduates today, there are still moments of squirm-inducingness in that book. Some of them are about his continued struggles with sexuality, but there're other ones about his continued interest in food and his affection for song and stuff like that. My students will sometimes be almost a little like, "It's too much information, Augustine. I can't handle this." If that's the way we are, imagine what it was like 1600 years ago when everybody presented themselves basically as a marble statue, completely immobile and impervious to any temptations. For Augustine to say these things was well, it was literally epoch making. For him to render a human self in the vulnerable way he did made it possible to be a different kind of creature than we had thought we could be before.

Christian Controversies in Augustine's Day

Charles Mathewes:

There were many controversies Augustine dealt with apart from an ongoing struggle with Manichaeism, which is a kind of quasi-Christian controversy, which is both about the goodness of the world because the Manichaeans didn't believe that the physical world was a good thing. And also the integrity of the revelation history that Augustine and the church understood themselves to possess, which included for them the Old Testament, what the Jews will call their Bible. The Manichaeans thought the Jewish Bible was an objective demon. So, if anyone is out there thinking that Christian anti-semitism is a problem, thank heavens, the Christians and not the Manichaeans won that fight because it would've been much worse. So, that's one big controversy. There's another one that was an ongoing struggle that was local to North Africa, called the Donatist struggle. And that was with a bunch of local people who were kind of believers in a tougher, smaller, fiercer, more oppositional church.

Charles Mathewes:

And they were often the more local, the more ethnically nationalist of the people who were from North Africa against the Latins who had come in to take their land and take their power. And so it was often set up as a kind of the Roman church versus the local North African church. And that was a struggle that he faced pretty seriously all the way up through 411 or so, and then it continued to sputter on, in different ways for the rest of his life about whether or not those churches would be part of a larger Christianity or whether they so pure, they would step back from it. And then third end, in some ways most famously, there was an ongoing struggle with what was called Pelagianism. And that's a struggle about grace and free will. In an enormously complicated struggle, scholars are still arguing about what exactly it was that was an issue there.

Charles Mathewes:

I am deeply charmed by a scholar, Robert Marcus and his account of this, which says that Augustine effectively was trying to give an account that would allow for mediocre Christians to be Christian. They would still be mediocre, but they were Christian. Pelagius was a trained ascetic, and in some ways, an exemplar of an earlier more elite version of Christianity that demanded an absolute and very astringent commitment to a certain set of practices, which were not entirely available to everybody. Augustine was

as a priest and in charge of a church, dealing with a lot of people at different stages of their spiritual journeys. And he wanted to allow those people to be part of the church.

Charles Mathewes:

And so there's large and complicated philosophical and doctrinal debate that this thing gets involved with. But ultimately, I think it's really about the degree to which you understand whether or not you can be still on the way to becoming, in some sense, the saint that you are called to be, or whether you have to be that saint right now. Pelagius thought we all can be the saint we are called to be right now. And Augustine thought I don't think that's true for everybody and everybody has to struggle with the grace of Christ and they have to accept that grace in a long and complicated way. But the struggle to accept that kind of grace is a struggle that can occupy an entire life.

Dialogue about Christian Controversies Today

Doug Monroe:

All those are still morphing today.

Charles Mathewes:

Oh yeah.

Doug Monroe:

And I mean, they're never... I've got a question here about dogma and it's just, there's no other way for humans to deal with things.

Charles Mathewes:

I would say that Augustine is almost as influential for the arguments that he had or the arguments that he made the rest of us continue to have, as he is for the concrete, particular doctrinal views that he held.

Doug Monroe:

He did a great job of shaping the bell curve and sending it out. Sending it forward.

Charles Mathewes:

That's right.

Doug Monroe:

The theological bell curve.

Charles Mathewes:

Yeah.

Doug Monroe:

Okay.

Augustine as Bishop and the Fall of Rome

Charles Mathewes:

There's lots to say about the events of his time as a Bishop. He fought many battles with different opponents and he cared for his community, very vigorously. Rome was famously sacked by the Visigoths in 410. He would've been a major figure in the city of Hippo dealing with the refugees who came over. So a lot of wealthy people had come over, fleeing Rome, after the sack. And so he would've been one of the people helping to organize the city's relief efforts for that. At that point, he began writing the City of God, among many other things he had been writing. That project took him almost to the end of his life, and he finished it in 426. But at that point, the Visigoths had pretty much, the people who had sacked Rome had, had pretty much stayed in Spain, France, and Spain, but another barbarian tribe, the Vandals had actually made their way through Spain and across the Strait to Gibraltar.

Charles Mathewes:

In 429, they besieged Hippo. They were slowly taking over the North African provinces of the Western Empire. Augustine actually died in August of 430, with his city under siege. He did not anticipate, he definitely anticipated that there were, there would be political turbulence. But I don't think he imagined that the political system, that had organized the whole Mediterranean and the surrounding territories under one civilizational structure. Let's call that Rome. Would not really outlive him, but effectively for different reasons. It did not outlive him and Augustine, who wrote for a Christian Roman Mediterranean culture, was within a century or two, read almost entirely by a Western European and increasingly Northwestern European culture, which was a very different context than the one that he had expected to be living in. Be, be read by.

The Purpose of "The City of God"

Charles Mathewes:

The City of God is a book that attempts to explain why it is that, on one level, Christianity is not at fault for the Sack of Rome and for the problems that the Roman Empire faced, that the pagans seem to see as caused by Christianity. That's on one level.

Charles Mathewes:

On one level, it's basically a defensive story. It's a negative apologetic in that sense. But on another level, on a larger level, he's really trying to give an account of what it is like to try to live in a political context, as a Christian, that is going to be the complicated context we would have going forward, a world where there would be many Christians trying to live in the world successfully.

Why "The City" metaphor in the title?

Charles Mathewes:

I actually think this is something that we've not appreciated as fully as we should. We take it for granted because it's there in Augustine, so we think it must be a kind of legitimate Christian way of talking. Honestly, before Augustine, people had not used this word in quite the way that Augustine does in the City of God.

Charles Mathewes:

The word that he's using is "civitas," or city, in this sense, for Rome, but it's not just city in the sense of town. That would've been another Latin word "oppidum." What "civitas" means is something almost like the Republic. It's almost like the Commonwealth. It has distinctively, not exclusively, but a distinctively pagan aroma. In other words, it's not really a word that upright, decent Christians would always be using as a proper part of Christian theological lingo. But here Augustine is in the very title of the book grabbing this word, which seems more natively a pagan word, and "blammo," putting it right in the middle of this Christian salad. That's a, he does with a lot of the words in the City of God, and in a way, it's because of his decision to do that, to take these words, transfigure them and baptize them as properly Christian words, that we still use these words today.

Doug Monroe:

He was making an argument and trying to persuade people.

Charles Mathewes:

Yes.

Doug Monroe:

That's part of it...

Charles Mathewes:

Rhetorically, he was making a very important ... This is important for his background, too, as a rhetor, as a rhetorician. He's trying to make the argument that it's our language that needs to be transfigured, along with our beliefs and our behaviors. The very words we use have to become Christian as well. We don't want to use totally new words, but we have to see how the words we have used in the past, as pagans perhaps, now have a new meaning as Christian words.

Differentiation between "The City of Man" and "The City of God"

Charles Mathewes:

Augustine's famous line on this is that the City of God is composed of those people who love God even to complete dismissal of self concern. And the City of Man, or sometimes it's the earthly city, it depends, is composed of those people who love themselves even to are the contempt of God. So in some ways it's a way of organizing, not necessarily people are resolutely on one team or the other, because Augustine is famous for saying people can shift and people are always imperfect in this life, but they set up two poles of how a society or how people can operate in the society. What do you care about? Are you interested in your self-promotion? Are you interested in a larger scheme of self glorification? Then you're part of the city of the earth, of man. Are you doing something because it's fundamentally the right thing to do in the sense that it will give God glory? Are you doing something because doing this is clearly what God wants you to do regardless of what happens to you in the consequence of you're doing this? Then you have operated as a citizen of the City of God.

Is Augustine repositioning these two cities?

Doug Monroe:

Did the cities relate at all to any cities in, say, Revelation or to the shining city on the hill, or are they coming together? What's he trying to make happen with these two cities?

Charles Mathewes:

So one thing that, again, is interesting for us to think of about, because this language of cities is something we take very much for granted, two things about the Roman world that really infect early Christianity in important ways. One is that the Roman world is very much a world of cities. All the territories and the lands of the Roman Empire were basically organized around cities and the terrains around them that those cities governed. So for example, in the United States, we have states, and they are not, by and large, named after big cities in those states, and we do not understand those states to be serving those cities. We understand them as lands, as territories that are completely autonomous.

Charles Mathewes:

That's not the way the Romans thought of it. For the Romans, their world was a world of cities and the back areas that fed the cities. Okay? That's one thing. The other thing to realize is that the Romans thought about themselves as members of these cities. They would've all thought of themselves as "civis romanus sum," this famous line, I am a Roman citizen, right? But even to say you were "civis romanus sum," you did not think you were a citizen of the Roman Empire. You thought of yourself as a citizen of Rome, of the city. So the language of cities is not just a way of organizing geographically the world. It's a way of organizing politically the world.

Charles Mathewes:

Now, Christianity comes, along and of course, ancient Israel has an image of a heavenly city and the new Jerusalem, but by and large, the idea is the land, the promised land. So in Revelation, in the book of Revelation, you get the struggle between the two cities. And one is clearly the heavenly city, which is coming down, but the other, the city of the seven hills, that's Rome. And so early in Christian imagination, the idea of an urban political imagination is represented as demonic. It's a diabolical imagination. So when Augustine is using this, he's actually transforming what had been a pretty diabolical picture of cities into something that was far more imagined as good.

Dialogue about Classical Theism

Doug Monroe:

Would, if I call myself a theist, which I believe I am.

Charles Mathewes:

Yeah.

Doug Monroe:

As opposed to a pan-atheist, or a pantheist.

Charles Mathewes:

You're really marked by some process people, I can see.

Doug Monroe:

Yeah, really. Really, all those Protestant people. You're right.

Charles Mathewes:

No, process. Process theism.

Doug Monroe:

Process, right. Well, I'm not really a process. I think it's a tough issue. That's what I think.

Charles Mathewes:

I'm not as troubled by that. I grew up around those process people in grad school and I didn't find them as ... I don't find them as disturbing. I think they're a little quaint, but ...

Doug Monroe:

Well, I just look at the world and I say, "If there is a creator god, it's a powerful god." So-

Charles Mathewes:

You're right.

Doug Monroe:

That's the first attribute I give him.

Charles Mathewes:

Yeah.

Doug Monroe:

Power, and smartness, and ability. So anyhow, that's not real process oriented.

Charles Mathewes:

No.

Classical Christian Theism: Augustine's Metaphysics

Charles Mathewes:

There is a God who exists radically outside of what we would consider time. And this God is the creator God who has created both the materiality of our world and the temporal sequence of our world. This creator God is not just a single unified homogenous God, in that sense, this God is also a God who has in some absolutely mysterious way voluntarily affirmed this God's existence as a Triune God, his fathers son, holy spirit.

Charles Mathewes:

And so even before creation happens, this God is in some sense Triune and that for complicated metaphysical reasons that matters to Augustine. But then this God, the most important thing for Augustine, at least in the city about this God is, this God has created this world entirely, voluntarily and

with no real prompting by anything else, because there was nothing else beside this God. And this God continues to love this world in an absolute and completely unimaginably intimate way.

Charles Mathewes:

Part of his argument with many of the philosophers of his time was that they imagined that you needed to have mediators to get to God, you needed to have other interstitial metaphysical, transcendental beings like demons or angels or whatever. And he says, "No, no God literally was present on earth as Christ, as Jesus." And there's no reason to not think that when you are participating in the church, you are not actually intimately in the most intimate way, touching God. Like there's no need for anything between you and God to help you get there.

Charles Mathewes:

And the confessions, he has this wonderful line where he says, God is more inside me than I am, right? More interior to me than my own interiority. And that idea of the radical obviousness of this God in every instant of our existence is for Augustine crucial metaphysical point. And that's part of what makes for him the [pithos 00:02:34] of so much of ancient philosophy so powerful, the sadness of it, because they saw the hunger to touch this God, but they didn't realize and they didn't have to leave the world to get to God, but that God had created the world to be present to them.

The Big C "Creator" / Little c "creature" Relationship

Charles Mathewes:

In some ways, Augustine understood this as an anthropocentric universe, that in some important way, because of the incarnation, there's something distinctive about the human as the interface between divinity and creation.

Charles Mathewes:

That's to abuse any other part of creation. Everything is participating in God in its own way, but humanity has this weird capacity, simultaneously to be fully part of creation and also intimate with God. Eastern Orthodox theologians will often tell you, "You Latins, you don't even really understand that the destiny of humanity is to be joined with God" in some kind of radical, what they'll call theosis, right? This kind of deification, this participation in God's inner life. But actually, Augustine has a pretty vivid capacity for talking about deification, and he'll talk about it both in his treatises and in his sermons. So he's telling his own congregation one day we will not only be nearby God, we will be immediately present to God, and we will participate in God's way of being in a way that's almost unimaginable today. Yeah.

How important is freedom to Augustine and vice versa?

Charles Mathewes:

I mean, Augustine is probably the most important person of the past. After Jesus and Paul, I would say Augustine is the most important person of the last 2,000 years in formulating the language and the questions and the puzzles we have about freedom. He definitely thinks that humans are agents who are marked decisively by our capacity to understand, and also our capacity to be free. And he wants us, he thinks that creation wants us to be free.

Charles Mathewes:

His whole discussion of original sin is a discussion of how people are captive to certain kinds of pathologies that we fall into, even before we are conscious of them. And so Augustine is sometimes read as this great dark thinker of predestination. I don't think that's fair, but whatever the ultimate view of that doctrinally is about Augustine, you cannot gainsay the fact that throughout his texts, he is continually trying to anatomize the ways that we are messed up by our own proclivities towards sin and things like that. And the fundamental way he describes that being messed up is in terms of enslavement or a lack of freedom, an inability to be fully, agentially who we are called to be.

How important is family to Augustine of Hippo?

Charles Mathewes:

I think family is very important in Augustine in many different ways. One of the most interesting things that has recently been argued is that Augustine and other Christians were really important in actually complicating and in some ways undermining the capacity of the Roman "pater familias," the head of the household, who was not just say the father and sometimes the grandfather, but had an absolute capacity even to kill people in his household at his own whim with no legal oversight. And Augustine and others represented a story of what family life was like in which families are meant to be communities of truly harmonious concord, in which the father was not just the archon or the emperor, little emperor but in some important ways, was the first to serve the others in this.

Charles Mathewes:

Now that doesn't mean that he didn't have strong views about paternalism and things like that. He did, but the difference between a classical Roman household and the vision of the family that Augustine had, in part because of his own experience of his mother, Monica, a very powerful and strong woman, really led to the future of family life in Europe being very different than it might have been otherwise.

"Justice in War" to Augustine

Charles Mathewes:

Again, Augustine is in some ways the decisive channel through which ancient thought about war flows to the modern West. I believe it's in book 19 of the City of God, he has this incredibly long discussion of peace. It's the first and perhaps the most extensive discussion of the idea of peace in Western thought up until that time. He talks about what war is in a number of different places in the city. Some people have found the lineaments of what become classic just war theory in him. I think the resources are there for that. That's not the way he would've developed them himself, but they're there for that. He was never a lawyer or a jurist in the way that just war theory often is. He was much more of a pastor. And in that sense, a lot of his thinking about war is about helping people who have suffered it in one way or another.

Doug Monroe:

Yeah, that's very good. So he's kind of laid the groundwork in some ways for later-

Charles Mathewes:

In so far as he hasn't laid the groundwork for just war. He has been a decisive person for communicating the groundwork that other people had laid, but much of the stuff is either original to him or so articulated by him that his formulations become the standard for future thinkers.

Augustine and Hell

Charles Mathewes:

This is a question that I've struggled with, that a lot of people have struggled with. Augustine does think that there is a hell. He thinks it's likely that it is populated by a lot of people. From his point of view, the world we live in is full of people who don't seem finally to be good. There are people out there who are slavers, who are selling weapons to people illicitly, who are abusing children, who are doing all sorts of horrible things. There are lots of people who see that happening and let it happen. And none of these people, he thinks, are the kinds of people who God has elected to bring into the kingdom. Now, of course, God has elected a lot of people like that, but then the evidence marks of reformation of some sort, to borrow an almost Calvinist term, before they die.

Charles Mathewes:

But Augustine does think that hell is in some ways necessary if you think that the moral shape of the world is determinant. The big opponent for him in his discussions of hell is Origen, some brilliant Greek thinker of two centuries before Augustine, two and a half. Origen is famous for the doctrine of what is called Apocatastasis, which is the idea that creation is a matter of going out from some unified God, and then finally returning to of this God. The Origen plays this out in a number of different metaphysical ways. We don't need to get into that, but Augustine found it really problematic to imagine that in the end, everything is going to be redeemed into God, because Augustine thought that means that ultimately, the moral history of the world doesn't matter, that nothing actually has a permanence and a finality. Now, if you talk to an origenist or someone who buys this account, they will say, "That's good news. It's good news that things don't, in that sense, finally matter."

Charles Mathewes:

Augustine wants to say, "No, because you have to believe that in some sense, what matters in the world is your choices, your action, not your free choices maybe. We can talk about that predestination thing again, in that sense, but what matters is the way the world appears. If someone suffers needlessly, that suffering needlessly needs to be acknowledged and honored, not just effaced. The cosmos is trivialized if it is treated giant do over, and that's what I think Augustine worried about. I find this a very interesting thing to think with. I know lots of people who are deeply haunted by the idea of hell, and I'm not sure, for them, an Augustinian hell is the best thing. I don't know what to say about at that. I'm of two minds.

Dialogue about Hell and Justice

Doug Monroe:

Well, let me make a statement, and see what you have to say about that. And if God's a God of justice, then you either have to have justice in this world or some other world, in some other time. And so that's just the deal. And so it doesn't have to be fire forever or anything like that, but there has to be something there. And I'm not saying I believe that or not. I'm just giving an intellectual argument. I don't know what to think. I hope I never find out.

Charles Mathewes:

I think we will.

Doug Monroe:

Yeah, really.

Charles Mathewes:

I think God, the question of the relationship between God's justice and God's mercy, is one of the most profound questions in Christian thought in general. And it deeply haunts Augustine. He believed profoundly in a merciful God, but he also believed that this merciful God's mercy, wasn't universal or it wouldn't be in some sense, the gratuitous mercy that he thought it had to be. And so he thought that God was also just in some sense and that the justice, some of that justice would not be marked by mercy. That's all I can say.

Does our political system reflect Christian theology?

Charles Mathewes:

Yeah do I think that our political system is reflective of our Christian heritage? Absolutely. I actually think we undersell the degree to which the political system we inhabit, and not only the system, but the broader political culture that's broadly, I'll just say, classical liberalism. The idea of the value of the individual, the relationship of the individual to the community being one that is not entirely a one way street, where the individual serves the community, but the community in some ways also serves the individual.

Charles Mathewes:

A recognition of the need for some kind of toleration of the individual's right to create their own understanding of their faith. All of these things, actually it seems to me, have a distinct path into certain moments in Christian thought. And this is not, actually I think really controversial to say anymore. In my world, in the fields of religious studies and some parts of philosophy and sociology, one of the biggest scholarly innovations of the past couple decades has been the argument that the world that we live in is a distinctively post-Christian world in the sense that Christianity has determined it in some ways.

Charles Mathewes:

So the secularism we live in, if we live in a secularism at all, Charles Taylor is an important figure for this. That secularism is very much a Christian secularism, and it renders certain forms of Christianity much more available than even perhaps in an earlier form of Christianity they were available. It hampers other kinds of Christianity, that's okay, that's one of the things we have to acknowledge and then figure out what to do about.

Charles Mathewes:

But the point is that, when we have all sorts of arguments with religious traditions, it's often the case that those traditions will say, this doesn't sound like a neutral kind of secularism, it sounds like it's framed in a certain way to make certain kinds of religiosity available and less other kinds. And these scholars, by no means all of them Christian, have actually said, "Yeah, that's right. The secularism we

have is very much path dependent," that's the term they'll sometimes use, "on the particular history of Christianity and the Christendom that Christianity sponsored."

Charles Mathewes:

And then after that Christendom began to decay and then fell apart, you get these post-Christendom societies in Europe, North America, and elsewhere in the world as well. These societies still have complicated traces, and more than traces, of their Christian heritage funding them.

Is Islam compatible with Western freedom?

Charles Mathewes:

Oh, yes. Well, I'm a potentially biased, but I also think potentially fortunately, a well positioned person to think about this.

Charles Mathewes:

Yes, there are complicated challenges that any religious tradition is going to have with understandings of freedom. And that's true about Christianity, Judaism as well. Islam will have some complications around some things about how to understand people who will de-convert from Islam. That's a challenge that is faced in the future.

Charles Mathewes:

But I actually think that in my experience of both living in a Muslim society, and encountering Muslims in this society, I actually don't think that Islam has insuperable challenges, or the many kinds of Islam that exist in the world, hardly any of them that I know have challenges that will be very, very hard to overcome, so far or in coming decades.

Doug Monroe:

Would you say, kind of a yes or no question, that Islam just hadn't had a reformation yet? Is that-

Charles Mathewes:

There's an argument about that. I don't know that the reformation is the only way in which that transformation will happen. So yeah, I can't... I don't know quite how to say it.

Doug Monroe:

Okay.

Can the human mind escape dogma?

Charles Mathewes:

I don't think that dogma is innate to human beings, but I think it's necessary to them. I think, in fact, if we think about humans, as my colleague James Hunter will sometimes say, as instinct-poor creatures, creatures who are born, in some sense, underdeveloped, they need structures around them, not just physical and not just familial structures, but cultural structures in order to orient themselves properly in the world. Dogma is one of those cultural structures that does that. You're never going to get a

theologian, especially a theologian who hangs out with Augustine a lot, trash talking dogma. Dogma is not a four-letter word for me. So, I think that it's true that dogma is an essential part of human life. What I think is interesting in a more secular or pluralistic age, and I would say pluralistic age, is that people who are more self-aware, self-conscious of their dogma, of the way that their vision of the world is distinctive to how they, unlike other people, view the world.

Charles Mathewes:

People who are self-conscious in this way actually have an advantage because it's precisely when you think that the way you see the world is natural, that you will be ambushed by reality, presenting you with some unpleasant surprises. It's precisely because Christians today are aware of the distinctiveness, it seems to me, of some of the curious statements that we profess. Same way that Jews have been for 2,000 years in Christian societies, that it actually makes the community more self-consciously aware of the distinctiveness of some of its views in a way that allows us, I hope, not always, but I hope to be more intentional about cultivating them and thinking about what they might mean.

Does Christian orthodoxy exist?

Doug Monroe:

With 30,000 Christianities, is there orthodoxy today? And does it matter?

Charles Mathewes:

The struggle for orthodoxy has been a long one since the beginning. I think orthodoxy should matter. And it does matter. I don't know, luckily I'm not a priest nor an authorized religious official. I have been involved in both local inter-religious stuff and a little bit at a national level. And it's been interesting and educational, you know the joke about how do porcupines make love, well carefully. Similarly, the care that people have to take to figure out if we are all saying the same thing about the Eucharist, or if we're all saying the same thing about the holy spirit or whatever, these are actually good kinds of care.

Charles Mathewes:

I know a number of ministers, and I think that most of the ministers would agree that if they were to take a poll of their congregations, the range of beliefs that their congregations would have would be quite astonishing. And that's part of the fact of humanity. And this is like when you have a family meeting and everyone has their point of view, and it turns out that there's five people at the meeting and there's 18 points of view. So, I think orthodoxy is important. I'm also willing to say much of the time orthodoxy is an aspirational goal rather than a thing that we need to fix at the beginning and then go forward from.

Charles Mathewes:

There have been moments where orthodoxy has been very important. The moment that I think of right away is the Barmen Confessing Church in Germany in 1934. When the Confessing Church laid out its doctrine, its confession. It was doing so explicitly to identify how it was not participating in the Nazi German churches of its day. And a lot of good Christian folk said that was, you are politicizing religion. I should still be able to go to my nice little German Nazi church. And I'm sorry, but in fact, I think that there are moments where that's important.

Why the decline in the Mainline churches?

Charles Mathewes:

First of all, I think the news of the past 10 years has been that the challenges the Mainline faced in the '70s and '80s with declines of population, have now come to roost in the more conservative Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic Church as well. The largest religious population today in America, I think, is ex-Catholics. It might be the second largest, but I think it's the largest. The last 10 years, the Southern Baptists have lost a million members. There's a generational problem happening in terms of the replication of church membership and I think that this is not just a numbers game, this is a theological puzzle. What is going on?

Charles Mathewes:

We know that people are not professing atheism, or even agnosticism. Lots of people are out there, who are either this spiritual but not religious, this kind of phenomenon or people who say they believe in God, they'd like to find a church, but they just don't know where it is or what it is. They're not trying very hard, but there's some sort of puzzle going on broadly, where the institutions we have don't seem to be hosting the kinds of contexts for people to be living the kinds of spiritual lives that they, at least, say they want to live. In the old communist societies, people would say, the joke was, right, that the leadership was disappointed in the people and they would disband the people and try to build a better people, right. I feel like sometimes in our churches, we have a similar thing. The problem is the lady or the problem is the people who aren't the lady, but won't come. I just don't know what to do about that.

What would Augustine say about the Constitution, citizenship, the nation-state?

Charles Mathewes:

He would've thought... There's a moment in the City. I don't know quite where it is. I think it's in the first 10 books somewhere where he says, "Look, we live in the empire. The empire is big. It's vast. We can all admit we'd all be better off if we lived in a giant constellation of small city states, but that's not the political structure we have. We have the empire, we have to figure out how to live here." That's a very interesting thought, right? That he's got this history from the Greeks, right, of this image of people like living in small localities and that being their systems. But he recognizes the contingency of political and social form. I think that's an interesting fact. So, he would be interested in that, but I don't know what he would say beyond that.

Are you optimistic or pessimistic about America?

Charles Mathewes:

I am optimistic that if we can get through the next generation, 15, 20 years, I think there is a future America, which is interestingly more realizing of the ideals that we profess. I would say that. I would say that I'm optimistic in the long run, but possibly a little pessimistic in the short run. I don't know what's going to happen in the next eight to 12 years. And I think that there it'll be interesting.

Doug Monroe:

Is there something different going on than there has been. Say a hundred years ago, or 50 years ago?

Charles Mathewes:

One of my friends makes the case, which I think is a pretty interesting one for American history, that the last a hundred years have been remarkably static for the way we've designed our polit. The last time we had a constitutional amendment past was like '72 or so of the 26th amendment. I'm not even sure what that was. So it's almost 50 years. The last state to come in was Hawaii in 1958. The last time the House and Senate were expanded was something like a hundred years ago. Not the Senate, but the House. The house has had 435 representatives. Is that right? Yeah. 435 I think, representatives for a long... For like a hundred years.

Charles Mathewes:

Up until then there were lots of constitutional modifications. So at some point about a hundred years ago, we decided we're not going to mess with the system anymore. And maybe the issue is that we have to fiddle with some of the basic operating system, not just the kind of garbage in garbage out, but actually rework some of the code. I don't know, but it's interesting to think about America has not always been what it is today. And one of the things we did better in the 19th century was constitutional amendments and mess with different things. And maybe that's the way to go. That's what I think.