How did your Midwestern roots help make you a philosopher?

James Hall:

Well, the Halls from the Midwest and the vinings from the Southwest shaped me a lot. I think one of the things that impressed me most when I was quite young was the work ethic. Everybody pitched in. My grandparents homesteaded out of West Virginia into Illinois, came down the Ohio River on a flat boat, farmed, lost their crops, went back to West Virginia, came back, reclaimed their land. So they worked hard.

James Hall:

Grandfather worked hard enough that he got into Northwestern Med School and became a doctor. Down on the other end of the country, my mother's people came down out of Georgia, settled in Texas, ran a farm, worked hard. So the notion that with hard work, and I have to say with a land grant from the government, you could be successful and you could make a life that was worth living. That was one of the things that really impacted on me that life is supposed to be spent working hard at something worthwhile.

James Hall:

That stuck with me. The other thing, and I don't know that it shaped me as a philosopher, but it certainly shaped me as a person, was how very important family was. That was probably as much a product of the era as it was of my particular family, but families hadn't scattered then the way they have now. My father's people, he was one of six brothers, the family had been right there in Illinois for several generations and stayed right there and a few still do. But the others scattered to Oregon and Texas and California and Virginia and Louisiana. That sense of a, cliche, but nuclear family almost doesn't exist anymore. That was very strongly influential on me because I had a very strong sense, with some regret now, I had a very strong sense that there were two ways to do things. One was the Hall way and the other was the wrong way. But there was that strong sense of identity, and I carry that with me.

Johns Hopkins and UNC - Chapel Hill

James Hall:

First of all, let me say that when I was still in high school, and I went to public schools in DC from second grade on, I had an absolute terrific teacher, math, Mrs. Richardson. I never knew her first name, and would not have dared used it if I did. She set me on a fire to be a teacher, a math teacher. So we looked around at a lot of different places, or I did at any rate. And for a reason, some of which I can't remember, and some of which are totally boring, Hopkins came up very high on the list because A) it had a very good math department, B) it was reasonably close to DC, but it was not in DC. You get my drift? So it looked very, very good, and I decided to go there. They gave me a scholarship, that helped.

James Hall:

But when I got there, I discovered that I had made a very, very lucky decision, because the atmosphere there was incredibly progressive. There was no set list of 193 things you had to do. I was assigned a tutor the day I arrived. And he said, "Now we're going to work out what you need by way of an education. And when I decide you're educated, you'll get your degree. Deal?" I said, "Deal." No

differentiation between undergraduates. And it was absolutely electrifying. They don't do it that way anymore. Shame on them.

James Hall:

So that's what got me to Hopkins, and that what makes me remember it very, very fondly, although they've changed. They've actually admitted women. Oh, shame. Oh, shame. Anyway, I wondered from Hopkins to theological seminary for four years. I knew I had done the wrong thing by the time I had been there six months, but as I often say, and I don't mind saying it again, I came to the very, very quick conclusion that either God had made a big mistake, or I had made a big mistake. And I thought the latter was more likely, that I had just had misinterpreted the message and that the seminary was not where I belonged. But the whole work ethic kicked in, and I said, "Well, I started it, I'm going to finish it."

James Hall:

So I worked at that for four years, but by the time I got out of that, I was looking for a grad school, because the old ethos had kicked back in. I wanted to teach, and I knew I wasn't going to be math anymore, but I wanted to teach. We lived in North Carolina because that's where the seminary was. And I was married. And North Carolina had programs that suited my desires and the desires of my wife. She was in public health.

James Hall:

So North Carolina was sort of a destined choice, you might say. Got there, and again discovered that I had made a very, very fortunate decision, not so much because of Carolina, but because of the particular individual who became my mentor, Maynard Adams. He worked with me and on me and brow beat me for the four years that I was there. Two years after that, after I'd been teaching at another school for several years, he moved heaven and earth to get me the job at the University of Richmond, from which he was an alumnus. We remained very, very good friends until he died about five or six years ago. But bottom line, good luck, good people, and a very, very strong sense that education is an individual thing, it's not something that you can do with a cookie cutter.

Your entire career, nearly, at University of Richmond?!

James Hall:

I never thought I'd be in Richmond to stay, seriously. Academics were gypsies in those days. You'd do a few years here, a few years there, move around. Times have changed, but I thought maybe U of R possibility, I'd known about it since I was a little kid, maybe Bucknell up in Pennsylvania, maybe American University in DC, something like that. Liberal arts college was what I was looking for, but I came to Richmond. I got the opportunity to take the job and they had confidence in me and showed it, and that was good.

James Hall:

Got a big raise, figured I'd be here a couple of years. And before I blinked my eyes twice and turned around, 40 years had gone by. I got absorbed into the school, the students, the growth and the change and the progressive atmosphere that it concealed itself very nicely at U of R. And then things happened along the way, totally unpredictably, the Robins benefaction, the bringing in of new talent in the faculty that changed in the demographics of the student body, that changed it from a commuter school to a

regional powerhouse. All of those things had made it more and more interesting over the years as I worked along. Finally, simply the quality of the students I had to work with. They were incredibly talented and usually incredibly motivated, not always motivated in the directions you might like, but they were biddable and they could focus their motivations better sometimes with a little help, but my children had been the same way. They mostly wanted to major in beer and girls.

And the City of Richmond?

James Hall:

It's a funny thing to say in 2016, but the manageability of the city. I've spent most of my life in New Orleans and Washington and Baltimore. Gigantic metropolises by comparisons and they were chaos. And Richmond, if you cared, you could go to City Council meeting and speak up. There was a feeling of hometown and the people were good. And my mother told me, before I came here, "You can live there 100 years and you won't be a native. If your grandmother was there for 100 years, you might make it." Richmond is... it's Richmond. But it's a neat town, good people. Part of the thing that has made it work for me has been very good church connections. At River Road out here, back in the day when Vernon Richardson was there and he had been my pastor in Baltimore when I was an undergraduate.

James Hall:

For the last 35 years, St. Paul's down on Capitol Square, churches that are involved in the community and are committed to making the community a better place. Now, if you can find a school that is committed to that and a church that's committed to that and a city that is willing to let that happen within reason, then you're a very lucky guy. So it has turned out to be a natural for me.

Could you describe your written work?

James Hall:

I can just give you a brief rundown. First book I wrote, "Knowledge, Belief, and Transcendence," was published by Houghton Mifflin. I was very proud of that. Good publishing house, and it was a good book. It was limited distribution because it really was a book that was aimed more at professors and scholars and so on than it was at students. It grew out of the research that I had done on my dissertation, but it was a completely separate work. It picked up where the dissertation had quit. That was a long, long time ago. Second book I did, I had been teaching logic for years and years. And I thought, "There's a book here, and books are always good if you're climbing the academic ladder."

James Hall:

And so I put together a book of many, 100, 200, I don't remember, problems to be translated into the symbolism and solutions run with complete answers in the back, often with two or three different ways to approach the same problem, and just a little bit of a skeleton of instruction at front. And I called it "Logic Problems for Drill and Review." And told the student in the preface that it doesn't matter who your teacher is or what logic book you're using, you need practice and you need lots of it. And you have to promise yourself, "I'm not going to peek. I'm not going to look in the back of the book until I give it my best shot." But that's been successful over the years, and it's still in some use.

And Practically Profound?

James Hall:

The third book took a lot longer to write. I called it "Practically Profound: Applying Philosophy in Everyday Life." It's sort of a panorama of what I had been doing as a teacher of undergraduates over a 40-year career span. It was published the summer after I retired. And over the years, and I'm not bragging, it's the way the world was, when I took my first job down at Furman in Greenville, there were two of us in the department. The chair wrote the schedule, and the schedule that I got my first year was a 15-hour load. That was five three-hour courses in the fall, five distinctly different three-hour courses in the fall, and then five more in spring. And so I taught 10 different courses in my first year.

James Hall:

That led me, many, many years later when I've been asked many times, "Well, what do you do as a philosopher in your department?" And I say, "Well, in a small philosophy department, you are called a utility and fielder. You do whatever needs to be done. So over the span of two years at Furman and two years before that, teaching at UNC, and 40 years teaching at Richmond, I taught just about every course in the curriculum, including aesthetics, including continental philosophy and everything under the sun. Some of it I taught because I loved it. Some of it I taught because it had to be done.

James Hall:

And so what I did when I wrote "Practically Profound" was to try to distill that down, not in terms of schools and history, but in terms of issues and lay out the issue and what are the matters that are at stake and how can we get a handle on this? And then how can we apply it back to that work ethic and practicality? How can we apply that in our day-to-day relationships with each other in our day-to-day work? That has not been wildly successful in the way that the tapes for The Teaching Company have been, but it sees some steady sales and I get very appreciative comments from it, but usually, and this tells me something, usually from adults who have picked it up and read it rather than from some teacher who has adopted it as a textbook. So I've been happy with those results. And then of course, after that I got into the work for The Teaching Company and that changed a lot of things.

The Great Courses

James Hall:

It came out of the blue. I got a phone call, this was long before email or before I knew much about email. But I got a phone call and it was people who told me who they were and I'd seen their ads in the New York Times. So I'd heard of them. And they said, "Would you mind if we came down and took a tape in one of your classes because you've been recommended to us as a teacher?" I said, "Sure, I don't mind." I said, "As long as you let me tell the students who you are and why you're taping", because I run a very open classroom and I don't want anybody intimidated by the fact that there's this strange person over there in the corner with a camera. It wasn't a camera, it was a big reel to reel tape recorder.

James Hall:

And so they did. They came down, they recorded several classes. And we went through focus groups and this and that and the other. But the upshot of it was, I finally, I got contracted to produce a series for them. Very well run organization, very, very smart when it comes to the merchandising end of it as well, I must say. With a mission and a very, very strong mission that adults who are motivated and focused and in mid-career, and usually their marketed place at any rate. They're college graduates, they may have graduate degrees, they may be highly technically trained, but are saying to themselves at 40,

why in heaven's name didn't I take a course in Shakespeare? Why in the world didn't I take at least one course in music appreciation?

James Hall:

Why on earth didn't I take a philosophy course? And the teaching company saying, now's your chance. No pretense of college credit, no pretense taking exams, no pretense of enhancing your teaching certificate or whatever. It's just for your own growth, your own development, your own benefit, that's what they're committed to. They've done a brilliant job of it and I was happy to get into it. So happy that I did a second series with them. First one was on philosophy of religion, second one was on what we called tools of thinking. This is not the way we advertised it, but the way I put at it, is how do you reason from A to B without falling off the edge of the pier.

James Hall:

And I got a wonderful comment on that in an email from a superior court judge in California, who said these tapes ought to be required in the first year of every law school in the United States, because it's just that practical. How do you do it? We're using reason and experience and your head. And from a religious standpoint, God would not have given us reason unless we were intended to use it.

Can philosophy improve one as a religious person?

Doug Monroe:

... as a person? And why or why not?

James Hall:

That's a hard one, because it can go either way. It can genuinely go either way. Let me drop back one step and just in a nutshell, if I can, underscore something that is important to me and my understanding of what it is to do philosophy.

James Hall:

I take philosophy, unlike many, many philosophers, I take it as being inevitably, what we call in the trade, second order or meta. You don't just do philosophy. You do philosophy of something. So what does that mean? Well, that means that as a philosopher, I might decide that I want to examine, not do, but examine religion. Particularly, to examine how it works, what it assumes, what kind of logic it follows. Map it out, get some kind of an internal understanding of how does this machine run? Now, sidebar, most of the graduate students that I knew when I was going through graduate school in the 1960s shared that kind of view. And most of us had come out of majors in chemistry, or mathematics, or religion, or history, or whatnot, and wound up doing philosophy of science, or philosophy of mathematics, or philosophy of religion, or whatnot.

James Hall:

There was not much emphasis on weaving an all-inclusive world picture. It was a much more narrowly-scope mapping enterprise. But when you get done with that and if you stick with it, inevitably, you're going to ask yourself, well, what do the results of philosophizing about religion and the results of philosophizing about science say about how religion and science relate to each other? Can any bridges be built? And we'll come back to that later on.

James Hall:

But that can expand and that can expand. And as you begin to do that, you move out of what I call philosophical analysis and into what I call philosophical synthesis. And philosophical synthesis is the attempt to weave a capital P, Philosophy, or a capital W, Worldview, out of the results of all of that localized mapping and analysis. So I think in that capital P, capital W sense, worldview, philosophy, we're talking about much the same thing... But for me, most of my career, that has been a little bit too grand.

James Hall:

It's, as they say these days, a little bit beyond my pay grade. I've worked a lot on the relationships between religion and ethics. I've worked a lot on the relationship between ethics and science and on the relations between science and ethics, science and philosophy. But there's an awful lot out there I never really got to, so I don't really have a philosophy of history, or a philosophy of literature, or something of the sort, a little bit outside my owned bailiwick.

James Hall:

Last comment, the notion of a big-scale worldview, or to use a word that we used to use when I was in grad school, much more often... Weltanschauung, that good, German, all-inclusive grasping of the world as a whole. That has been more commonly identified with continental philosophy, European philosophy, than it has been with Anglo-American philosophy. And that's not to say that it's better or that it's worse. It's just one of the big differences between the kind of philosophy back in mid 20th century was going on, on the two sides of the pond, or the two sides of the English Channel really.

What are mind and reason?

James Hall:

Very good question. Very good question. Again, philosophy of mind is not in any sense a specialty of mine. I have been particularly influenced by a number of writers, however, in that area. One of the first philosophers in **graduate** school that absolutely blew me away was a man named Gilbert Ryle, who wrote a book called "The Concept of Mind." Very notable book and a very, very good book, I think. Others have as well, Pinker, and then any number of other writers have had their impact on me, but Ryle, who was basically an Aristotelian rather than a Platonist. And That's a complicated distinction, but just take my word for it, for the moment. Ryle was not looking at philosophy in order to get some mysterious metaphysical answer to his questions.

James Hall:

He was, again, doing good hard nosed analytic work. And he invented an idea. I think it was original with him. And it's a very Aristotelian notion that in order to understand something... Well, Aristotle used to say you needed to know it's efficient cause its formal cause its final cause and its material cause. What Aristotle meant by that was it wasn't enough to understand something, to know what it was made of, material cause.

James Hall:

You also had to know how was it structured, formal cause. You also needed to know what triggered it, efficient cause. And I've left one out. Final cause, what's it what's its destiny. Well, Ryle focused in on material and structural, and said the whole crazy chase after the nature of the mind, starting long before

Descartes, but culminating in Descartes, is guilty of a category mistake. They're asking the wrong question. They're trying to sort it out in the wrong category.

James Hall:

And he gave many, many examples, but I'll give you two. Young man goes downtown on a Memorial Day, Remembrance Day as they called it over there, to see the parade and he came home disappointed. And he said, "Well, I saw seven marching bands and I saw company after company of soldiers and I saw floats, But where was the parade?"

James Hall:

Another young man goes off to university and arrives at Oxford, of course, and rights home puzzled. "I've seen the Bodleian Library, and I've seen New College, and I've seen this and I've been there, but where's the university." And Ryle makes the point that the parade is not one more marching unit that you have to look for, especially it's not one teeny tiny one that's hard to find. The university is not one more thing. The university is how all those things are put together. The parade is how all those things are put together. It says the mind, that's how the human being is put together.

James Hall:

It involves matter being structured in a highly, highly functional and productive way. He says, "So we don't need mind and noose. We don't need matter and noose. What we need is matter organized in a particular way." My addition on that is you could use clay to make bricks. You could also use the same material to make computer chips. And it isn't a difference in the material. It's the difference in what you do and how you do it.

James Hall:

So to my mind, the mind, the intellect, reason, the mind is the way we talk about the complex organization of humans, and some non-humans as well. Reason is one of the many, many functions that the mind can carry out by associating and remembering and recognizing similarities and patterns and hypothesizing and experimenting to confirm and test and disprove or confirm the hypotheses. They formed all of those things in a rolling process, which we call science. That's what the mind is. And that's what reason is. And it's not some mysterious thing floating around out there in the ether. It's something that goes on.

James Hall:

Now, that has interesting implications religiously. And I know I'm way out of cycle here, but just one comment in that direction. As Aristotle pointed out, when the structure of a thing is dissolved and the structure is gone, you might still have the unstructured material, but you don't have the thing anymore. It's gone. So it is not easy. And this is really a much more theological topic, but it's not easy to work with a really functionalist Ryle. And Ryle called it operational behaviorism, everything was operationally defined.

James Hall:

It's not easy to work with that kind of concept of the mind and the intellect and so on, and hang on to any traditional notion of immorality, or the world to come or winging our way to some ethereal place on high, et cetera, et cetera. But there are ways to deal with that, which we may or may not get to.

Will computers one day have human consciousness?

James Hall:

Let me make one slight adjustment on that. I don't think they'll be computers, I think they'll be droids, I think they will be living. I think that the life process and the structures that contribute to the life process are probably essential. I don't know this, but probably essential to achieve the level of complexity and, forgive me, the level of quirkiness that having a mind amounts to. Now, we might build a computer that was every bit as smart as Spock. But we probably would never build a computer as such, that was as erratic and unpredictable and lovable as Captain Kirk.

What is worldview versus religion?

James Hall:

Let me start with worldview. I think the distinguishing thing about a real worldview, and I hope we will come back to the notion that I want to say, and I don't want to pursue it right now, but I think we can deal with the notion of a worldview at two levels, the level I want to deal with it right now, a real worldview would be all encompassing. A real worldview would have something to say about every facet and dimension of whatever world it is we're dealing with. So I think a worldview is much less specialized than religion. That's one difference between the two. I think religion focuses typically on a rather narrower set of questions.

James Hall:

Usually, religion's going to focus very heavily on morality values, mores, many different ways to call it. But let me put it this way a little bit harshly, religion typically, priestly tradition and all of that focuses very heavily on maintaining and keeping traditions, whatever those traditions may be. And one of the ways they do that is by elevating those traditions and the symbolic presentations of those traditions into objects of veneration and indeed even worship. And as someone once said sometimes called God and sometimes not. Religion does not necessarily involve calling anything "god" at all... witness Buddhists.

What is paradigm?

James Hall:

Paradigm. I'm a great fan of Thomas Kuhn. I had the good fortune to read the "Structure of Scientific Revolutions" the year it was published, and Kuhn was an intriguing writer with some very, very intriguing ideas. People have grabbed it and run with it in many, many, many different directions and I think some of them not as productively or as useful as they might have. I don't want to chase [inaudible 00:00:34] on that one, but he's an example of somebody who I think went off the deep end. For Kuhn, paradigm really is a model. It's a particular way of conceiving of things. And it could be quite broader or it could be quite narrow. You could have a paradigm for the practice of criminal law. The paradigm he was interested in was the paradigm for the practice of science and it amounts to what we unthinkingly or unwittingly take as given when we go to work in a particular field. So to my way of thinking, paradigms, again, are usually more focused, more localized.

Paradigm versus worldview?

James Hall:

Now, it's come to be with the passage of time that people talk about paradigm shifts and they talk about various different things. And they're pretty much using these days, I think, the word paradigm and the capital W, Worldview all encompassing picture of the world, as sort of interchangeable labels and that's okay. But I think it's very useful to have that tighter sense that Kuhn had, of a paradigm as being a very precise kind of prism through which we're looking when we do our work, that makes it much easier to answer questions that are constantly being put, in questions that I deal with at length in practically profound about how paradigms change.

James Hall:

Because a paradigm, say for science, that has a set of givens, they're just given. If something comes down, so to speak, out of the sky and it just doesn't fit, it won't work, then you change. You just have to, and it may be a bloody process, but moving from the earth as a center of the universe to a heliocentric view of our particular neighborhood of the universe was, pardon in the bad pun, it was earth shaking and it was disruptive, but it was possible. Of course, it was possible, it happened and things that are impossible don't happen. So paradigm shifts do occur usually at some cost.

Are paradigm shifts always disruptive?

James Hall:

Now, a paradigm shift in something like that probably never would have amounted to any disruption to the society at whole, save for the fact that over on the religion side, the religionists at the time had the notion of that Earth-centered universe, et cetera, and everything that went with it. And so they got the frightening idea that what Galileo was talking about threatened the authority of the church and threatened the infallibility of the Bible and all that stuff. And so they had heresy trials and all kinds of things, which people who were committed to the preservation of tradition are very much inclined to do.

James Hall:

On the other hand, science rolled on pretty well and continues to roll and continues to change. Newtonian science is a far cry from contemporary physics. And it's not to say that at the macro level, Newtonian physics is incorrect. The macro level, it works just fine. But at the subatomic level, it doesn't work at all. And as we've learned, things are going on at the subatomic level that are exploitable, sometimes for good, sometimes for ill, but exploitable. And you have to modify, or in this case, I'm going to say add to your paradigm.

James Hall:

You're going to say, "Well, for every motion, there is an equal, an opposite motion, except," and then you start putting in footnotes in and the paradigm has changed. So religion, more focused than big worldview and focused heavily on the preservation of tradition and frequently, but not always on an otherworldly, transcendental, spiritual, supernatural, whatever. Paradigms can be understood several different ways, but I like Kuhn's way. And worldview, a more encompassing, but again, that comes at two levels. And if you don't mind, let me just deal with that now because it connects right in.

Who has a worldview? How do most acquire one?

James Hall:

Everybody's got some kind of worldview. Everybody. You're born with it. Well, you're probably not born with it, but you acquire it with your language. You acquire it with your childhood environment. You acquire it by mimicry, from how the people around you communicate with one another and what they do and how they do it and why they say they do it. It's just part of the atmosphere. In that sense, everybody's got one way or another of sort of taking it in. This is how I see things.

James Hall:

That is not always pursued reflectively. People often will live out, I think, a life with that inherited worldview, lowercase w, without ever really coming to grips with whether it has any gaps or whether it leaves anything out or whether it's misleading or anything of the sort. It's just, that's the way we do things in Richmond. As they say, it takes 11 people to change a light bulb in Richmond, one to actually turn the bulb and 10 others to talk about how much better the old one was. You can get stuck at that level.

James Hall:

But on the other hand, you don't have to. And that's a kind of... And I'm not going to grace it with saying that's philosophy, that would be pretentious, but that's reflection. That's using your mind. That's observing. That's taking what you observe into account. We talked about my grandfather earlier on, the doctor. He said something to me a hundred times, "Jim, if you don't observe, you will never learn anything." And that stuck. He also said a lot of other things that didn't stick, but that's neither here nor there.

Do we adjust or change worldviews?

James Hall:

So you can move from an uncritical, "This is the way we do it, so why not just do it this way?" way of looking at the world, into a reflective, analyzed, studied, thought through, modified, work-in-progress worldview. I think that's what many, many people have done. Plato certainly did that. Aristotle did that. Marx did that. Kant did that. Hegel did that. I'm not there yet. If I have a shining example of a worldview ready to layout on the table before I die, I'll give you a call. But I know I've made a great deal of changes and a great deal of progress since I was six years old, running around on the streets of McLeansboro, Illinois. A large part of it has been willingness to observe, willingness think critically, willingness to conceive of the possibility that I may be missing something, and an eagerness to learn what I can.

James Hall:

I think that worldviews, paradigms, worldviews come in many layers. Religion. There are many kinds of religion. I've been talking a little bit critically about religion as the preservation of tradition. That's not the only thing religion does, and we'll come back to that later. Religion has its positive sides, or I wouldn't have anything to do with it.

How does your worldview differ from strict naturalism? Intent and Freedom

James Hall:

Let me say, and this is a little bit of a back question on your, "How has it changed?" But let me say a little bit about where I am specifically. When your typical empirical scientist looks at the world, they see matter and energy played out in a space time continuum of incredible complexity that's accessible by way of mathematical analysis and empirical experimentation. There's one thing that natural science really doesn't have room for comfortably, and that is the notion of intention or purpose. Natural science is uncomfortable enough with the notion of intention or purpose that people like Skinner have worked for years to try to eliminate the notion of purpose or intention even from our analysis and understanding of human behavior.

James Hall:

It's alien. Everything needs to be analyzable mathematically and by physical experimentation. Now, part of my built-in worldview that I acquired with the language at my mother's knee, et cetera, comes from my relationships with other people and is rock solid on the notion that you don't understand what another person is doing unless you understand what they're doing it for. If you don't understand their intentions, you will never understand their actions. I cannot find a way in my mind to understand human beings without taking the category of intention or personal voluntarism, let me put it that way, free will, purposes.

James Hall:

I can't find a way in my mind to really understand what people are doing without getting that dimension into the picture. So that was part of my initial. Now, that's the one piece of my worldview, I think, that has not changed. And indeed, as I have grown and as I have studied science and as I have studied history and I've knocked around a good part of the world, I continue to be convinced it's absolutely necessary. We're never going to understand what ISIS is up to unless we understand finally what it is they want.

So material machines called human beings have intentions?

James Hall:

I'm of the opinion that the physical world, the world out there, the stage on which we are shredding and fretting our hour, is just as open to questions of intention and purpose as human behavior is. Now, that puts me at odds with many, many secularists, but not necessarily. There are secular humanists and then there are, secular, not particularly humanists. But in any case, that does put me a little bit at odds on that kind of count. And where's the evidence? No more evidence for it than I have for evidence that there's something going on behind your eyeballs.

James Hall:

The inner workings of your mind are not accessible to me, but I'm convinced that they're there. The inner workings of intention and purpose in the world are not accessible to me, but I'm convinced that they're there. Now, if that is part of your worldview, as it is part of mine, that gives you massive problems as you attempt to deal with what actually happens in the world. And we'll come back to that later, if we get to the problem of evil and how in the world all of that could work together.

How has your worldview changed?

James Hall:

Other than that, how has my worldview changed? It has expanded enormously. The only world that I knew as a child, child was family. And apart from the fact that some of us were Methodists and some of us were Baptists, there wasn't much diversity there. There wasn't much to challenge anything at all.

James Hall:

But again, there was something that was there that led me in the right direction. We spent Sunday dinner every Sunday after church arguing theology at the dining table. And the argument usually amounted to my grandfather to explaining why the Methodists were wrong. And my grandmother explaining no, it's the Baptists that are wrong, but we were arguing about two conflicting particular styles. And of course, as I've grown, I've discovered that's just a microcosm. There are 100 different styles. There are 1,000, there are different cultures. There are different languages. There are different traditions.

James Hall:

And then as we've been told, there are millions and millions and billions and billions of stars, conceivably of solar systems, conceivably of other Earths, conceivably of other intelligent life. You got to make a room for all of that. And so one of the big changes in my worldview has been a growing and growing and growing acceptance of diversity, that unless we can accept the variety of humans and the variety of ideas and the variety of ideals and values that they hold, it's hopeless. We're never going to get anywhere. So it's expanding, it's growing. It's grown less traditionally religious, but that's another story too.

Does Darwin's theory eliminate God (and what is . . . That)?

James Hall:

"What do you think of evolution?" Is it a threat to the teachings of the church, et cetera?" And he smiled very beatifically, as only Dominican priests can smile, and said, "No, son. Evolution, that's just how God did it." There's nothing in any particular scientific theory or scientific practice that excludes the notion of intentionality. There, on the other hand, is nothing in material science, at any rate, that requires it. And in some places, it would be very, very weird to ask it.

James Hall:

Let me pursue this for a sec. Early, early on, primitive times, and I use the word "primitive" prejudicially, because I think it was really primitive, the natural inclination, according to the anthropologists that I have read, of people has been, in Animism and other early stages of religious development, has been to view everything, down to the detailed level, as intentional. So, if the volcano blows, and 40 people are caught in the ash and the lava and get killed, that was for a reason.

James Hall:

Well, that's not confined to Aborigines and ancient volcanoes. I've heard, with my own ears, a person say, "Thank God, God was watching out for me on the morning of 9/11, and I missed my bus. And I didn't get to the World Trade Center in time to be killed." Well, of course, from that, it would seem to follow that God was not watching out for the others, or that God wanted them to be there, or something or something or something. If you start trying to in impute intentionality into every particular

thing that happens, you wind up with a very, very... I'll use a harsh word, "barbaric" conception of, allegedly, God. And if, as I argue, and Kai Nielsen argues, and many others argue, that what the word "God" means is "worthy of worship" and nothing else; it's a title, not a name. If what "God" means is "worthy of worship," then to say that natural disasters and so on are punishment, Job, et cetera, is to say that "I want to worship something that isn't worthy of it." And in religious tradition, that's called idolatry and is frowned on harshly.

How could science relate to religion and vice versa?

James Hall:

So I really think that science does best when it doesn't try to talk about intentions and purposes. I really think that religion does best when it accommodates itself to whatever science happens to discover about how things actually work. That leaves the question open. Is there intentionality and purpose? Is there free will? Because you don't have intentionality and purpose without free will. Is there free will at the human level? Or at any other level? I think so, because I think I see it. I see it at work. I understand it in my relationships with other people. But I also know that that does not eliminate statistical predictability.

James Hall:

I do not know whether you cheat on your income tax or not, and you don't know whether I cheat on my income tax or not. But it would be fairly easy to determine that... I'll make up the number, obviously made up. That 13.843729153% of people do. And that therefore there are certain odds that it's likely at a certain level that you do, or that I do. That's not a restriction on our free will. That isn't something that makes me do it. It's simply a matter of being able to statistically describe the way in which large numbers of people exercise their free will over a span of time, given the choices that are open to them.

How does free will relate to causation? Many Causes

James Hall:

Finally on that theme, and I know we've jumped way ahead, having free will doesn't mean that I can wave my arms and fly. Having free will does mean that from time to time, I am presented with genuine options, genuine choices, and among those options and choices that are open to me and that are genuinely possible for me, I of my own judgment and taking full responsibility, I choose A rather than B or B rather than A. And I say I do that because I do it all the time, and I'm aware of the fact when I do it.

James Hall:

Now, is there some long causal explanation behind that? In a way, yes. The way I was raised, the values I was taught as a child, the way Halls do things, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. But all of that, I'll use a metaphor that I've used before, and then I'll leave this. Causation is extremely complicated. You cannot identify the cause of an event. It's going to be a network of causes coming in from a gazillion different directions. If the causal links behind a particular event predominantly are internal, they are predominantly the product of the operation of my own functioning organism, they're mine, rather than external impinging from outside, I want to say that's where free will operates. And it's an operational distinction. A free act is an act that is primarily internally driven. A strictly caused act is one that is

primarily externally driven. And most events at the human level are both. And maybe at the natural physical level, maybe all of them are external, but I don't think so.

Can human secularism or atheism support morality over the long haul?

James Hall:

I can give you a short answer to that one, yes. And the best reference I can recommend to anybody on that, it's a quirky recommendation, but the best reference I can make is a little book by a man named Kai Nielsen, K-A-I N-I-E-L-S-E-N, Kai Nielsen. And the title of the book is "Ethics Without God." And the quirkiness to the recommendation is, for heaven's sake, read the first edition, not the second edition. He went back and he rewrote it for the second edition, and it got much more complicated, much longer, and much, much less clear. First edition just ranks. It's a beautiful little book.

James Hall:

And Kai Nielsen gives all kinds of arguments, and I think very, very powerful arguments that, yes, secular humanism can provide an understanding that can underwrite morality at both the personal and the social level. Now, my opinion is, and I don't think that he and I would disagree on this, although I've never had the opportunity to ask ,my opinion is that the emphasis there in the label secular humanism is humanist. A secular humanist is the person who makes room in their worldview for something more than robots and puppets.

James Hall:

But you could have a view that is genuinely humanistic and genuinely secular, but recognizes people as having free will, recognizing people as operating with intentions and purposes, recognizing people as realizing as they interact with one another that some of those actions are dysfunctional and harmful and horrid, and others are beneficial and progressive and useful, and build out of that a way life and a set of values that could be, I think, very, very admirable. And indeed, I know any number of... I'll use a different word, any number of non-believers who do just that. My closest friend in all the world, now departed, unfortunately, he's a good man, a man named Jim Rachels, was firmly a non-believer in every respect, but beyond any question at all, the most concerned and morally upright man I have ever had any dealings with at all, who carried his concern for sentient beings far, far beyond the humans, right on down the line.

James Hall:

And he was a vegan and wore plastic shoes and all of the whole bit. And I used to razz him about it and tease him about it a little bit, but he said, "They have feelings too." And if you get to the point of being able to say of other people and indeed of whales and indeed of honey badgers that they have feelings too, you've got all that you need to get some kind of ethics and morality going. Now, is it all that you would ever need? Could you improve it by adding in some other stuff? Well, maybe yes, maybe no, but the answer to your question is sure.

How do we know something's possible? Are all supernaturalists & naturalists alike?

James Hall:

... and I'll tack one footnote on that, and that is the question of whether anything is possible is always definitively answered if it has happened.

Doug Monroe:

Correct, and it has happened.

James Hall:

And it has, it has happened again and again, and again, and again, so yes, it can happen.

Doug Monroe:

I also liked your comment where you said, "It's not the secular word that's important. It's the humanism that's important.

James Hall:

Yeah, yeah.

Doug Monroe:

And so I guess the moral of that story is all atheists are not alike.

James Hall:

Indeed, indeed. I, for many, many years subscribed to two publications of the American Humanist Society, The Humanist and Skeptical Inquirer. Both of them brilliantly written, both of them with a very definite agenda. Hey, that's all right. I stopped because the print got smaller and smaller, and there's just too much out there to read anymore. But in reading The Humanist Journal, there was a very, very heavy theme in there of what they openly called religious humanism, and didn't involve belief in God or anything like that. But even trying to develop a vocabulary, and rituals, and traditions into a humanist way of life, that would recognize humanism as a religion, and that's not a problem to me.

Are the major religions after the same thing? Or are there clashes between them?

James Hall:

Well, the short answer to that one is both. Of course, there are fundamental clashes and we are witnessing some of those in the world right now. How much of those clashes are fundamentally religious or punning fundamentalistically religious is another question. I'll come back to that momentarily. I rather like Hick's idea in his later work that God is known by many names and that the various world religions are all various local attempts to describe, and get at, and name, and establish a relationship with God, whoever or whatever the proper name and proper description might be. That is of course, very, very inclusive. It makes me think of the Baha'i people and their religion that has committed itself to that very specifically.

James Hall:

That of course is just outright in the face of what is said by many, many religious practitioners who want to say, "No. We and the Muslims are not just striving to worship the same God, but we happen to call him by different names. Now we're worshiping God, God, and they're a bunch of heathens." And they're

saying, "We're worshiping Allah and they're a bunch of heathens." And so for large numbers of Christians and for large numbers of Muslims, there's a real conflict going on. But is that a real conflict between the Christian religion at its core and Islam at its core? I don't think so because I find lots of Christians who are very, very comfortable with what Hick has to say. And I find lots of Christians who have a great deal in common with what some of our Islamic brothers and sisters have to say. I was watching a wonderful video the other day of a young girl who was saying, "Well, it's obvious why Allah created so many different tribes, so that we would have the opportunity to get to know people who were different and come to love each other."

James Hall:

Now that could be preached from the pulpit of St. Paul's Episcopal Church on any Sunday morning, changing the vocabulary appropriately, and we could all get together and sing Kumbaya. So there are elements out there in the soup of religions that are in the world that favor that Hickian view. And there are elements that favor that 'take no prisoners fight to the death, kill the infidel' view. I'm forever hopeful; give the world enough in time and we don't blow all of ourselves up completely before we have a chance to make it happen. I see no good reason why as the scale of culture expands, as we get to know one another better and better, that those things cannot in time be worked out. And we can still preserve the idiosyncrasies and the local traditions.

James Hall:

The Catholic church, the Roman Catholic church has done a wonderful job of accepting indigenous traditions in lore into their practice. So that if you go to a Roman Catholic church in Brazil, and if you go to a Roman Catholic church in Singapore, they're different, but they're not. If you get my drift. They are using another notion we've talked about before. It all comes together under what Wittgenstein called a family resemblance. And it isn't that there's one characteristic that they all have. It's a vast network of characteristics that all share a distribution of, and yet they're all Catholic, but they're different.

What is your personal point of view here?

James Hall:

In my way of looking at the world, the first given is that if there is a God at all and if God created this world and set it into motion with some point, then everything that is in it is his. And that means that all the people in it are his children. And that means that I am under any kind of filial obligation you want to describe to treat everybody in it as a brother or a sister. And it seems to me, as I read the teachings of Jesus, that's exactly what he says, or for that matter, the Old Testament prophets. What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and love mercy, and walk humbly? At the heart of things, of course that's my definition of the heart of things, but no know where do I find anything that says, "You have to believe the following 93 things. And if you don't, you should be burned at the stake." I don't find that at the heart of religion as I know it and religion as I try to practice it.

Are there important irreconcilable differences between religions?

James Hall:

On the religious side, it depends on who we're talking about. I don't see any way of reaching sensible reconciliation, reasoned, reflective reconciliation, with... I'm not go going to get personal and name names at this point. That would be inappropriate.

James Hall:

But there are folks out there in the US who are, I will call, extreme fundamentalists, who are locked into a particular religious point of view. I don't think they're movable. The particular point of view that they are locked into, to my mind, is so antithetical to everything that the heart of Christ's teachings amount to, that I think talking reconciliation there is hopeless.

James Hall:

Now wonderfully, we live in a country that has nominally religious freedom. And they can do their thing, and I will do mine. And I will ask them, with the protection of law, to leave me alone to do mine. And I will, with protection of law, leave them alone to do theirs. So I don't think that just because we can't agree with each other, that the only solution is kill each other. The better solution is to disestablish religion, separate church and state, and up opt for live and let live.

Do Islamic fundamentalists maintain similar differences?

James Hall:

So far as I know Islam, yes there certainly is an extremely rigid, "I identify with the folks who want to impose Sharia law on everybody," who sort of my way or the highway kind of approach to their religion.

James Hall:

They're more liberal or secularist. Islamic brothers have not seemed to be able to get anywhere reconciling them. ISIS seems to, Islamic State seems to set as its agenda establishing an Islamic theocratic state in which a particular way of life and a particular set of beliefs would be imposed on everybody. They're talking more about imposing it on the rest of the Muslims than they are talking about imposing it on us. So I see the same kind of division there, and yeah, I see the same thing when I read the stories about what goes on in Israel.

Do you see room for freedom & democracy in Islamic culture? Core Social Principles

James Hall:

The only thing I could say on whether I think it's likely that the idea of the separation of church and state could come up and be enacted and be institutionalized in an Islamic state. The only examples that I know of are Muslims who live here and who have to some extent been acculturated in this culture. So whether it could come up indigenously in that kind of culture, I don't know.

James Hall:

One of the things though that made it come up in the 18th century among our founders was the fact that they came out of a European culture, which was religiously repressive and in which rival sides were locked in mortal combat, killing each other willfully and gleefully. You get into what was going on between the Calvinists and the Armenians in the Netherlands and it's amazing. And it's right up there with what's going on in Baghdad today or in Syria.

James Hall:

My point is that the founders saw it as an absolute necessity if they were going to not be locked in this kind of struggle forever. To establish that as a ground rock principle. And a lot of people didn't like it. Now, my particular family was on the side that was very much committed to the separation of church and state. There used to be an organization years ago called Protestants and Other Americans United for the Separation of Church and State. Talk about a clumsy title. They now just call themselves Americans United, which probably better. But Baptists traditionally, and that's what I was raised. Baptists traditionally were very, very big on that.

James Hall:

Well, why? Because back in the mother colony here in Virginia, they were accustomed to being put in the slammer for not practicing the Anglican practices. And I'll tell you, when I kicked over the traces and became an Episcopalian and left the Baptist denomination about 40 years ago now, my father said, "Your ancestors are going to just either be angry or they're going to laugh so hard they drop their harps." He said, "Because the people you're joining are the people who put them in jail." My point. There was conflict here. There were people who did not want to disestablish. There has been continuing conflict in England since we came out and did disestablish before it ever happened there, and it hasn't fully happened yet.

James Hall:

What are the chances of that happening spontaneously or indigenously in Singapore? Unlikely. Unlikely. But on the other hand, I would think that if say the people of Iraq finally got fed up with the internecine rivalry and conflict and killing, et cetera, then they might come to the point of deciding this might be a good idea and try to move on with it. I don't know.

Do you see any disturbing trends in religious freedom in the U.S.?

James Hall:

I despair because I see the commitment to what I call the secular state and the differentiation between the role of the state and the role of religion in our lives. I see the traditional American commitment to that eroding and eroding badly. I don't think that we, as a culture, are nearly as committed to that today as we were even 20 years ago, much less a hundred years ago.

James Hall:

I see, and this is personal, but I speak from personal experience. I see the move from Southern Baptists as being the largest organized group championing the separation of church and state in the United States in the 1950s, to being a primary supporter of prayer in the schools and everything that goes with it in these early decades of this century.

James Hall:

Speaking of traditions, they seem to have lost their sense of direction. They seem to have lost a sense of what it is that made them what they were. My guess would be that maybe if there was a flat-out attempt to reassert a state-dominated religion in the US, that there are enough people of a secular temperament these days that they wouldn't put up with it, and that, for that matter, most of what are dismissively called the mainstream, or sometimes the lamestream, churches these days would probably

line up on the side of disestablishment and maintaining disestablishment rather than going back to this "America is God's country, and let's keep it that way" mentality, which seems to be on the rise right now.

Is there morality, virtue, or religion without freedom?

James Hall:

Yeah, and I really don't know either. I would say this on Locke's behalf, and I agree with Locke about a lot of things. Religion that is practiced out of coercion and compulsion is not voluntary. If it's not voluntary, it's not religion. And I would, I say the same thing in another question you've asked in earlier conversations about whether or not there can be morality and virtue without free will. No. In order for an act to be virtuous, it has to be something that you have volunteered to do.

James Hall:

If God had chosen, I'll use that vernacular for the moment, if God had chosen to create a universe of marionettes who were simply puppet's dancing on strings, and had master puppeteers pulling the strings so that everybody went through all the motions of doing the right thing every time, that would be a world that was utterly without virtue, utterly without morality. The possibility of being moral presumes the possibility of making a wrong choice and being immoral. And I think religion's the same way.

What kind of god do most Westerners worship?

James Hall:

Well, you're quite right. People don't think about theology very much. Historically, among people who have thought about it and people who have done some theological reflection, that kind of thing, the first thing that seems to come to people's minds is that... And this goes back to medieval times even, is that, and I have to use a very $5 word here, that in order for there to be a god, that being, that force, that whatever it is, would have to be described as having say aseity. A-S-E-I-T-Y. That means explainable only in terms of, and dependent only on its-self. There are no external limits, no external sources, it is "It" with the capital "I". And I've even heard it said that when in the biblical story, someone asks, "Who shall I say sent me", and the voice from heaven replies, "I am that's who sent you." That's all you need to know. Well, it begins there. So anything that was in any way, limited or contingent, couldn't conceivably be God in that tradition.

James Hall:

Now, out of that notion of being unlimited and non-contingent in every respect, certain and traditionally, they're called the "omni" characteristics pop up. Omnipotence and omniscience are usually the ones that come up first. If something is without limited and is uncontingent, then something's got to be able to do every thing, omni powerful. They've got to know everything. Omniscient. Quick footnote. That is a very dangerous step in the argument because it fails to take into account the difference between able to do anything and able to do anything that's doable. And knowing everything and knowing everything that's knowable. And I would argue and have argued that if we talk about the only omnipotence in the omniscience of God, we have to be talking about God's being able to do anything

that can be done. And God's know anything that can be known, but that doesn't mean that God can draw round squares, etc.

What is the "bottom line" definition of god to Westerners?

James Hall:

Omniscience and omnipotence properly understood, come up, now. Reasonable question, is that enough? Uncontingent, not dependent on anything outside itself, all knowing, and all powerful, properly understood. I think the consensus of theologians, Christian theologians over the years, and Jewish theologians before them, and the few Muslim theologians that I've read, or Muslim imams that I have listened to speak, no, that's not enough.

James Hall:

Because you could have, hypothetically now, and of course, we're talking hypothetically. You could have a being that was unlimited and non-contingent, totally powerful and totally knowledgeable. Who was an absolute son of a bitch. Who was cruel. Some kind of super android from... What's the bad place in Star Trek? And that would never do. And this is where, what Kai Nielsen had to say, really rattled my cage, the first time I ran into it.

James Hall:

Long before you get to aseity, omniscience properly understood, et cetera, the first thing that God means is, worthy of worship. It's because God's worthy of worship that he can't be limited by something outside himself or herself. Because God is worthy of worship that he can't be dumb. It's because God is worthy of worship, that she can't be weak.

James Hall:

But would a super powerful, super smart, super strong, sadist, be worthy of worship? No, because worship means adoration, unquestioning obedience, fellowship, all kinds of stuff.

James Hall:

So a third omni trait creeps in, and this one doesn't have a good label for it. In my work, I refer to it as omnibenevolence. God, if there is a God, treats everyone with a just and loving hand. And what that means is, God is good.

Summary of Western religion? Ethical Monotheism

James Hall:

You can get into wonderful theological philosophical argument here. If there is a God at all, then would it not follow that whatever God does is by definition good because God did it? Wouldn't saying that describing God as good be putting a limit on what God could do? If God wanted to make sadism good, then sadism would be good. I don't think so. I don't think so at all. I think that to say God is worthy of worship means that if there is a God at all, it has to be the sort of thing that folks like us can appropriately relate to in a traditionally worshiping kind of way. And folks like us are not going to relate well at all to sort of the feature called up in Ol' Man Rivers, "Tote that barge, lift that bale." The whip of the lash. Hieronymus Bosch, if you're familiar with his paintings.

James Hall:

Those notions of a vengeful, et cetera, God, well, yes, they are in the Old Testament, but there's a whole story there that we do not have time for today about the evolution and the growth and the change in the conception of God that is recorded over the span of the Hebrew scriptures. They don't start out and end up at the same place.

James Hall:

And what you find over in the New Testament is just as much of a hodgepodge in fact, but the parts of the New Testament that I think are most on the mark are perfectly compatible with what Isaiah and Hosea and other of the significant Hebrew prophets had to say, back to where we were before, do justice, love mercy, walk humbly is the key to it all and not do what you're told or I'll beat your brains out. So I think that ethical monotheism says there's just one God, there's only one thing that's worthy of worship, there couldn't be two because they would limit each other. So there's only one, it's worthy of worship, can do anything that can be done, knows everything that could be known, and loves us like his children. And that's a whole new ball game when that last part comes in.

What about evil?

James Hall:

And indeed I've been working on a book on natural evil now for the last 20 years, and I don't think I'll ever get it finished, but let me speak to that. The problem is pretty straightforward. If you are where I was just a moment ago in talking about God, if there is a God loving us like His children, then why in the world, or why in heaven's name, either one, do the terrible things that happen in the world happen? Now, you can very quickly distinguish... And anybody that I know of who's ever tried to deal with this issue, which is just generically the problem of evil.

James Hall:

A quick sidebar, when we get into this, we're getting into what is called apologetics. And that is trying to build a counter argument to respond to an argument from a non-believer. And so here a group of people who are practicing Christians, whatever, and they say, "God loves us, one in all." Et cetera. And the non-believers say, "Then why did He allow the Holocaust?" And then apologetics kicks in and says, "Well, what if..." And you try to come up with some kind of an explanation, some kind of plausible story that would allow you to preserve the hypothesis that God is all good, in the face of very, very heavy evidence to the effect that God is either ignorant, powerless or malicious. In which case, God isn't God.

Human evil?

James Hall:

The first move any apologist is likely to make is to draw a sharp line between natural evil and human evil. And the reason they do that is because human evil is much, much easier to deal with, much easier. The best approach to this that I have seen is John Hick in his book "Evil and the God of Love." Just in a nutshell, the argument is built around once again the notion of free will, that in creation, God was not looking for puppets incapable of living a virtuous life. God was looking for people who would live in association and in a worshipful relationship to herself voluntarily. To do so, they had to be endowed with the ability to understand, recognize the difference between good and evil, make choices, and on

occasion, make bad ones. So, as soon as we are fashioned in this way and realize this is all presuming that the argument that the theist is trying to protect is operative, a secularist, a flat out secularist, a flat out atheist, has no problem with human evil at all. It doesn't have to be explained, it's just there.

James Hall:

But a theist who believes the things the theists typically believe, they do have a problem here. They need to explain. And so you come up with the free will theodicy and it has been argued pro and con a thousand times and by a thousand different writers. But it seems to me that it works reasonably well. Now, I have argued, and this is one of the reasons why I have my more skeptical moments, that it does seem to me that on occasion, maybe God cut us a little bit more slack than we really needed, that maybe with a little bit fewer options, it might not have been so easy for us to behave in such really horrendous ways as we have. And so human evil could still have served its function as the price you pay for having free will in the first place, but maybe not quite such a draconian tax, so to speak. But again, the responsibility here is to bring the theology to terms with the way the world is, and the way the world is, is that there's an awful lot of bad stuff going on out there that people do.

What is natural evil?

James Hall:

That of course, if it works at all and that's a big if, but if it works at all, that would cover only those events that are the product of voluntary reasoned chosen free will. That would not address things that arise out of non-intentional events in the world, volcano eruptions, earthquakes, tidal waves. It would not address bad things that happen with people who are mentally deranged and who have no awareness of, or control over themselves in order to exercise any kind of free will and to genuinely act, which we recognize in the law. And that's why we deal with them in a different way. We send them to the hospital or something. So there are evils that aren't covered by the free will argument. Anywhere where free will is not in play, free will argument is not going to amount to anything.

Natural evil and Job: You deserve It.

James Hall:

So theodicy for natural evil, that's the biggie. The first one that I know of is in Job, the book of Job, and there natural evils are looked upon as punishment. Now, Job himself saw that that wouldn't work. He said, "I'm a virtuous man. I haven't done anything that's worthy of all these terrible things that are happening to me." But that's still a very, very popular theodicy among folks for natural evils. There's a big earthquake, well, it just proves that the people out there were doing bad stuff and God got ticked off and zapped them.

James Hall:

Wonderful time, some years back when, oh, the guy, his name may come to me in a moment, the guy who ran the Christian university down in Virginia Beach and also ran the TV network and so on and so on and so on. Pat Robertson, Pat... Robertson, Robinson, Robertson. There was a big, big hurricane headed right toward Virginia Beach. This is many, many years ago, and he went on public and prayed that God out of his mercy would avert and protect Virginia Beach because after all, it was the location of his university, and so it was a very God-fearing place, and to send it somewhere else. And you know where

God sent it? He sent it up and it hit Fire Island on Long Island, just off a bit away from Manhattan, up in New York, one of the largest gay communities in the country. And according to my recollection of it at any rate, the statement was made, "And they deserved it."

James Hall:

Now, it's that notion that you get a hurricane because you deserve it, or your child is born autistic because his parents sinned or something of the sort, or that... Well, I'm not going to recite it, but that whole line of thinking to my mind just doesn't work because if God is omnibenevolent, then minimally God is fair. And there surely is not anything that the people in this town where they had the most recent earthquake, and 40 of them or so were killed this morning, there's certainly not anything that was going on in that town that was any worse than what goes on in Richmond every day. So if they deserve it, we deserve it just as much. And why not us? And why them? It just, it doesn't work so far as I can see.

Natural evil and sin: We all deserve it.

James Hall:

Another move would be to say, "Well, God is fair. The only thing that any of us deserve is eternal torment and eventual annihilation as a mercy. So God can just do anything with us that he likes. And it's perfectly fair. That's perfectly all right, because we're all rotten to the core." Sinners in the hands of the angry God and all of that.

James Hall:

I think that's just playing fast and loose with the notion of what's fair. Anybody who cannot see the difference between the Attila the Hun and Mother Teresa is simply blind. Anybody who would equate... And I'll choose a conservative religious figure. Anybody who would equate Billy Graham with Idi Amin simply doesn't know what they're talking about. Idi Amin was an evil man. Billy Graham was not. So the notion that we all deserve whatever gets heaped on us? Ah, no.

Natural evil and dualism: The Dark Side

James Hall:

I could go on and on, but the thing that has always intrigued me the most goes back to a book that I read when I was in my middler year at seminary by a man named Edwin Lewis, L-E-W-I-S. And the title of that book was "The Creator and the Adversary." "The Creator and the Adversary." And Lewis said, and he was a Methodist theologian and minister. Paid the price for that. Lewis said that the only reasonable understanding he had ever been able to come to, and he says it's perfectly biblical with all of the stories in the Bible about Satan and all of that, is to, if we hypostatize, make a thing of, if we hypostatize a God in order to explain the good stuff, in order to explain there being intention at work in the world, et cetera, he says we've got every bit as much reason and just as good reason to hypostatize, to make a thing of, an adversary that is locked in combat with the creator, trying to tear down and destroy everything the creator creates.

James Hall:

Now, he has been described by various critics as being a person who took the biblical tradition of satanic power seriously. He has also been described as a flat out, 100% Zoroastrian. But some kind of functional

dualism, it seems to me, is the only line I have been able to find so far on natural evil that seems plausible. I don't like it much. I don't like it much at all because, well, for one reason, if there are any reasons at all for rejecting the hypostatizing of a destroyer, those very same reasons are reasons for de-hypostatizing the creator.

James Hall:

The burden of the book that I've said I've been working on for years, and I don't know that I'll ever finish, the burden of that book is that they sort of ride together. The same kind of arguments you have for one, you've got them for the other one. The same kind of negative arguments you have for the other one, you've got for the one. Why bother with either and just revert back to a nice, comfortable secular humanism that says we don't have to explain natural evil, bad things just happen? The world's got rough edges. That's just the way it is. We don't have to explain human evil. A lot of people are bastards and they do really terrible things and that's just the way the world is. End of conversation.

James Hall:

Well, but if we don't want to do that, and if we want to maintain that lovely theistic picture that we live in a world where ultimately, "Everything works together for the good of those who love the Lord," if we want to do that, then that natural evil issue is just right there, staring us in the face, and that has to be dealt with. The title of that book is, if I ever get it written, is going to be "Taking the Dark Side Seriously." What I have in mind there is the wonderful, mythic quality of the dark side, of the force in the Star Wars movies. Whoever really wrote the basic storyline for those films had a very good notion that you can't have the force without having the dark side. They go together.

Natural evil: Creation creates on in mystery.

James Hall:

Final comment in this context. And I know I haven't answered your question. Edwin Lewis held out a very, very forlorn reward for the believers in The Force.

James Hall:

He said, "Ultimately, of course, God has the upper hand. God cannot lose because God can annihilate the destroyer at any time, simply by ceasing to create. And the destroyer can't do that."

James Hall:

So I said to myself, when I first read that, "Well, that's pretty thin rewards, Mr. Lewis, a pretty thin soup."

Natural evil: The need for virtue

James Hall:

I really, I don't know a good answer to the natural evil business. Now I do know one or two interesting possibilities, and I'll just mention them. Very, very popular notion here. Alasdair MacIntyre is one of the writers who has done something with this too, and others, is that the natural evils are necessary because they provide the occasion for and generate the occurrence of what are called second order

virtues. And second order virtues are virtues that we could not have and could not develop if we were not confronted with adversity and sometimes even extreme adversity.

James Hall:

So the thought behind the second order of virtues business is that there's the possibility of a natural evil theodicy in terms of providing challenges that enable us to grow and improve and get better. Now to my mind, the problems with that are two in number, which I'll just name. And one is, it seems to be a little bit overdone, that it's a little bit hard to see why we need that big a challenge to get any growth done. I do recognize I need to spank my child maybe on occasion to prevent them from playing in the street, but that doesn't mean that I put them in a cage and lock them up with feral rats or something to keep them off the street. So, it seems overdone.

James Hall:

So, that's one problem with it. And the other problem with the notion of challenging us is there doesn't seem to be any particular appropriate distribution of the challenges to those who need it most. They just sort of seem to be randomly distributed. And finally, maybe, I'm not sure exactly how important second order virtues are. If absent challenges, et cetera, you wouldn't have needed them in the first place. The kinds of things that get named as second order virtues typically are fortitude and bravery. Well, fortitude and bravery are terrific if you are dealing with really, really bad times. But if you're not dealing with bad times, then fortitude and bravery maybe seem... Are they worth what it takes in order to get them? So, there are open ended dimensions to all of those. And indeed I think there are open-ended dimensions to every natural evil theodicy I've heard about. Now, that's not to say there's not one out there that I haven't heard about because there's an awful lot that I have not read and haven't seen.

A dialogue about heroes, afterlives, inscrutability, and God-given freedom

Doug Monroe:

I'm sorry I can't talk and enter into-

James Hall:

Yeah.

Doug Monroe:

A dialogue with you, because my voice is not going to be part of it, it won't be like a dialogue at all. But I did want to offer some comments and get your response to them-

James Hall:

Yep.

Doug Monroe:

On what you say. I think there's nothing that you have said, or that nothing's out there that you haven't heard of or read about, so I'm not trying to suggest-

James Hall:

Yep.

Doug Monroe:

That anything I say would add to something you haven't already heard already. But, one of the theodicies for naturally that you got to, that you suggested, in your lectures was, I labeled the heroic, "The Heroic Theodicy."

James Hall:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Doug Monroe:

Where if it didn't hurt to get caught by a black bear and really hurt as much, and you're ripped up the shreds as much, and it wouldn't be quite as challenging to you, and you wouldn't be the hero.

James Hall:

Yeah.

Doug Monroe:

Whatever it is the challenge does for us, the second order of virtues.

James Hall:

Yeah.

Doug Monroe:

Okay. That's one thing. The second thing is, I personally don't think you can solve it without an afterlife.

James Hall:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Doug Monroe:

As a believing-

James Hall:

Yeah.

Doug Monroe:

Christian. In other words, the badness of something that seems totally like a baby dying.

James Hall:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Doug Monroe:

My best friend's son that dies at age four, for just no reason, epiglottitis. What could that possibly-

James Hall:
Yeah.

Doug Monroe:
You don't need that to happen.

James Hall:
Yeah. Yeah.

Doug Monroe:
But you can only rationalize it. Not by saying it was justified within a self-contained system.

James Hall:
Yeah.

Doug Monroe:
But that there is something that makes the space and time we're in now less important.

James Hall:
Yeah.

Doug Monroe:
Later on, okay.

James Hall:
Yeah.

Doug Monroe:
And the third thing is, we always have to remember that we're only talking about this because we believe in one God with all these attributes.

James Hall:
Yeah.

Doug Monroe:
Okay. Otherwise, we wouldn't be talking about it at all.

James Hall:
That's right.

Doug Monroe:
Okay.

James Hall:

Yeah.

Doug Monroe:

And so-

James Hall:

We could certainly opt out of the whole thing.

Doug Monroe:

We could certainly opt out. So, if freedom was truly important for any kind of virtue or moral life, then maybe the only way God could have faked us out so that we're totally free and not and uncertain and Scottish verdict. Scottish verdict, that's the one thing-

James Hall:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Doug Monroe:

I'm going to put in my head every time I think of you, which I'm a believer in, is so that we can't ever be certain that he is there-

James Hall:

Yeah.

Doug Monroe:

And you have to throw a curve ball in there.

James Hall:

Yep.

Doug Monroe:

That makes no sense. And could not be justified without an afterlife.

James Hall:

Yep. Yep.

Doug Monroe:

So, you almost have to be a Christian theologian to find the theodicy. It's not going to be a logical-

James Hall:

Yeah.

Doug Monroe:

Philosophical thing.

James Hall:

Before we go to another question, let me go back to what I was talking about just a moment ago, and add one thing that you and I have discussed before, and that I intended to include. On the whole business of, challenge and second virtues and developing and makes us better, and all of that. That would make a lot better sense in a religion that believed in reincarnation. Because then we could come back around for the next round. Better prepared. Or, we could come back for the next round and for worse treatment because we hadn't learned what we needed to.

James Hall:

So, there is a very definite potential, in my mind, for the possibility of a working natural evil theodicy is safe in the Hindu religion. Much more comfortably than your run of the mill U.S. Christian. Now, maybe, and Kant would have bought into this I think, maybe heaven and hell, maybe, could play the same kind of role for a traditional Western Christian, that the possibility of reincarnation could play for Hindu. That at best someone who died horribly and innocently would get a chance for a payback, or reward, or a renewal. Or, that somebody who literally got away with murder for their entire lifetime would get it in spades. Under a final judgment Kant said, somewhere in his writings about religion, that the reality of the world to come was the only way in which to make the world as it is make any sense at all. That if there is not a world to come of rewards and punishment, then this is rollicking absurdity. So, I think that dimension of it, I should have brought up before and I lost track of my count in my head and left those out.

Doug Monroe:

Well, I'd prefer to God, just leave it to the reward and not the punishment.

James Hall:

Well-

Doug Monroe:

Okay. Let's-

James Hall:

Yeah.

Doug Monroe:

Let's just go with reward, all right.

James Hall:

Yeah.

Doug Monroe:

Now, how much time? We've got about-

James Hall:

There are a lot of Christians by the way, who are right with you on that.

Doug Monroe:

Really?

James Hall:

Oh, oh yes. Seventh Day Adventists, for instance, Seventh Day Adventists believe that if you live a bad life and die, you're dead.

Doug Monroe:

Yeah.

James Hall:

You're gone.

Doug Monroe:

And that's my vote.

James Hall:

Yeah.

Doug Monroe:

The problem with that is God is unjust-

James Hall:

Yeah.

Doug Monroe:

At the end of the day. God always traps us in something, that's the problem with it.

Social Justice, Change, and Tradition

James Hall:

First point is we are not unfamiliar in the US today with the notion of that there is such a thing as social justice, and that the concept of social justice that maybe we grew up with as children, which was we're on top, we're in charge, and everybody does what we say, and that's justice by definition. That is undergoing radical and deep change, and it is exceedingly threatening to a whole lot of people. Some quite innocently, it's threatening to them because that's simply it challenges an uncritical worldview that they've occupied and lived in all their lives.

James Hall:

Some of them, on the other hand, because they have a vested interest in keeping things the way they are, or the way they were, or the way they imagined that they were. Traditions are important, but

traditions can change. They can, and sometimes they must. Now, I personally think traditions have a very vital role to play in society. Traditions operate as a warning sign, a caution sign, a yellow light, if you please, to discourage us from making radical changes too fast without calculating the cost and taking into account what it really implies, taking a step back and being reflective.

James Hall:

Tradition gives a certain inertia to keeping doing things the way we've done. But if what you're doing is demonstrably dysfunctional and destructive, and is demonstrably contradictory to the principles that you claim to be operating on, then I think tradition has to give way. Now, how do you do that? Law. Interesting in our country, how often it takes to Supreme Court decision. Threats and wars and rumors of wars over Constitutional Amendments to undo what the courts have done. The passage of time, a lot of time. Habituation into new patterns. And education.

Social justice and women? Equality under the Law

James Hall:

Another piece of social justice? Women. Whatever happened to the Equal Pay Amendment. Women got their right to vote recognized, but I think my mother was the first generation in her family, first generation of woman in her family who ever had the opportunity to vote. And there are still people who resent it, and who want no part of it. There are still people, and I recognize that there are people who are opposed to one of our current front running presidential candidates who shall be nameless, but happens to be of the female persuasion. There are great many people who object to her for a wide variety of reasons, but I also know full well that there are great many people who object to her simply because she's female. And for whom the thought of there being a woman in the White House is scary. So our notions of social justice are changing.

Social Justice and sexual identity?

James Hall:

We're going through a big to-do right now in the great bathroom war and LGBTs, LBGTs, I never can keep the initials straight, but you know what I'm talking about. And transies.

James Hall:

It's so weird to me that we're making a war out of this one, because there are so many simple solutions to it, but that's another story. I can't go to the doctor and use a single sex bathroom because my doctor's office doesn't have any. Of course, my doctor's office does not have my multiple stalls in the same bathroom, either. There's a solution right there for that one. That's just the gratis. It's worth what I charged you for.

James Hall:

But we've had a revolution relative to the social rights of African-Americans. We're in the midst of revolution relative to the social rights of women. We are hardly into the beginning of a battle over the recognition of equal social rights for gays and lesbians, including the equal opportunity to be protected by laws dealing with marriage and inheritance and medical representation and decision making, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera that were clearly and distinctly discriminatory towards same-sex couples.

Social Justice: Law, Habituation, Education, and Discrimination

James Hall:

Two things about habituation and education. They are slow processors. By law and by sanctions, you can modify overt behavior pretty directly, but law and sanctions are not going to get at fundamental attitudes and feelings and values. Education can. Habituation can. Pascal once said that if you wanted to become a Christian and you couldn't really believe it, live like one long enough and you might actually turn into one without realizing. If we can habituate people into treating one another with decency and kindness and fairness long enough, it may begin to come natural to them.

James Hall:

And if we can incorporate into our school curriculum maybe a little bit more about the principles on which we as a nation were founded, a little bit more on such things as social justice, because there are good reasons. And I'll give you one good reason and then just leave it with law, habituation, education, and so on. When you discriminate improperly... Sidebar, discrimination is sometimes appropriate. I do not want to grant surgical licenses to quadriplegics, because quadriplegics lack a technically required facility to perform surgery. So when I say discrimination, I don't mean observing real differences and making judgements in according with those real differences in an appropriate and proper way, but discrimination, discrimination.

James Hall:

When I say, "No, you can't be allowed to run for office. You're a girl." What we automatically do in the case of women is remove slightly better than 50% of the talent from the gene pool, and we're saying we're going to cripple ourselves by not even considering half of the potentially capable people when we decide who our leaders are going to be. And that's absurd. The same with African Americans. The same with gays. I don't mean to engage in cliche caricatures here, but it's interesting to me that artists and musicians are occupations and careers in which gay men frequently, frequently wind up.

James Hall:

Now, is there something about creative talent that goes with non-standard habits? I don't know. But I do know that historically, there have been attempts to kill gay men, and what a loss that would be, what a loss it would be to take anybody who is in any way different that does not genuinely, bonafidely challenge their status as a human being and a member of the community. There are insane people, serial killers, et cetera, that we have to isolate and segregate and deal with. I'm not arguing for capital punishment. That's another issue. But you don't leave them on the streets. But those are objective, discernible, testable, observable characteristics that are a threat to the welfare of individuals and the community at large.

James Hall:

So you deal with them accordingly. A same gendered couple, and I'm thinking of several that I know who have lived together unwed until recently, and they were finally able to get married, but have lived together in commitment and fidelity to one another for over 25 years, they're no threat to the community at all. They're good, decent people, and in their case, God-fearing. They come to church every Sunday morning. So I think, since I know we've made progress since the 1950s in everywhere except the little town in Mississippi where they had to file a lawsuit just last week to desegregate the

last school in the state that had not desegregated. I nearly fell off my chair. But except in that instance, we've made real progress since the 1950s on race in America.

Social Justice: America with a Long Way to Go

James Hall:

Our conception of social justice has changed. I think we've made progress on social justice in women. I think we're going to make progress on gays, lesbians, transgendered, and the like. But we've got a long, long way to go. The thing that occurs to me is, what's next? Because one of the things that trying to address social justice does, as we identify a dysfunction in society and try to mend it and go to work on it, it sensitized us to clearer discernment of other dysfunctions that we haven't noticed yet. And you bet your bottom dollar, there are some that are still out there that need work.

Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future? Due Diligence Needed

James Hall:

I am optimistic. I'm guardedly optimistic. And I'm not saying I'm expecting tomorrow, tomorrow, like out of Annie, but yeah, I see steady progress over the centuries that have gotten us to where we are, and I see no reason why they can't continue short of Armageddon. One of the problems that stands in the way of progress is that we're not very good at what the business people call doing due diligence. We're not very good at figuring out the probable consequences of decisions that we make, and not only the good things that we're hoping for, but also the possible collateral damage that we don't really want to happen, but happens. So of course, any progress that we continue to make is going to be always at risk of there being collateral damage and maybe even regression or harm if we make bad choices in what we're teaching our children and what we're writing into law and what we're trying to habituate ourselves too. And one could find examples of that in the 20th century with various experiments of socialism, the welfare state, free education for all, all kinds of different, very high sounding goals. Why can't we provide absolutely all the medical care anybody needs at anytime, whatever free?

James Hall:

Well, that would be really, really cool, wouldn't it? One of the things that goes with that is fraud, massive fraud, and the amassing of untold fortunes by people who are manufacturing motorized wheelchairs for people, for whom the government will pay for them, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

The Welfare State, Family, and Women

James Hall:

It has been said that the war on poverty and welfare and the Aid to Dependent Children Act, which was of course repealed two generations ago now, but people still talk about it, that all of those kinds of things have led to the creation of a dependent society and the collapse of the family. Logicians have a label for a particular fallacy, which is post hoc ergo propter hoc, which means the fallacy of thinking that because A follows B, A is therefore caused by B.

James Hall:

Now, there certainly have been some disturbances in the stability of the social pond, so to speak, in the last 50, 60, 70 years. But what causes what? Well, holding true tradition urges us to be cautious. Due diligence demands that we count potential costs, and we do it as objectively as we can.

James Hall:

But before I would blame the dissolution of the American family on anything, I first of all would want to have better evidence than I've seen that the American family is radically worse off than it was in the 1950s. Divorce is easier, yes. People are getting married a little bit later in life, yes. A lot of people are living together for three or four years, maybe even having children before they get married, yes. But it seems to me that it is possible that there are deeper reasons at work than daycare centers and Planned Parenthood centers and the pill to explain. Maybe the big reason for the change in the structure of the family is the liberation of women, who have come to the point today, more so than used to be, of being able, if they choose to, to build a career and live a life without being beholden to, as Queen Elizabeth I put it, someone who is crested rather than cloven.

The state of American foreign policy?

James Hall:

Oh Lord have mercy. But on the other hand, when I started teaching in 1962 and '63 and '64, and so on, the issue is Vietnam. And the country was torn in two. And young people were pouring out of the country and immigrating into Canada to get out from under this incredibly, in their opinion, misguided war, in which we had no part it. And which we had brought the heavens down on our own heads by means of which. So we are up to our ears in Iraq and Afghanistan, and we're now fighting a curious war with Islamic state, etc, etc, etc. Russia was fighting that same war in Afghanistan 30 years ago, and couldn't solve it and finally bailed.

James Hall:

I would say on that front of foreign policy and international relationships, we're about as well off as bad off as we have been since 1945. I think the threat of things really coming unraveled was greater during the Cuban Missile Crisis under Kennedy back in '63 than any threat we faced from ISIS today because we were faced with having nuclear missiles 90 miles from Miami. And of course, we bought that one ourselves too, because we had just installed nuclear missiles in Turkey and Italy. So some things we don't seem to learn on real well, but I still think progress is being made. And I still have hope for the future.

Dialogue on Finance and Gender Relations

Doug Monroe:

I got a couple of push backs, just like my point of view. One is the financial situation is totally unsustainable. As a finance guy. I think that is absolutely going to transform and see if we got these.

James Hall:

Yeah.

Doug Monroe:

We will be grease for Puerto Rico. And this is a very abstract topic that I find that most people cannot appreciate unless they've been in finance or worked with a big company in finance, they cannot appreciate how math becomes reality. No different than in physics.

James Hall:

Yeah.

Doug Monroe:

Math is reality and in finance, math is reality. So that's one thing and that may put us in a position where we can't do the social justice, where we can't defend ourselves without radical restruction. And the other thing is that I think that I've lived through not, I'm here 10 or 15 years older than me, but I feel all the changes that you talk about very much and I actually don't think we've seen sort of the counter pushback and where that's going to come from is going beyond an assistance on equality to an insistence on sameness, where you're effectively forcing everybody to, it's almost a mind mill where you have to see everyone as the same. I think that's too counter to what nature is. And-

James Hall:

I would agree with you on that one absolutely.

Doug Monroe:

I don't think there's going to be a big pushback or I don't think there's going to be anything radical. I think it'll be more sort of local and person to person. I also think that the women thing and what I'm reading is, especially when you read radical feminists, that all of a sudden supporting men. So I think what women are founding, and I'm just speaking for myself, is women they can demand equality and we're all for equality at least all the men I know. I actually don't know any men there with traditional male chauvinist picks, I didn't know any in the seventies and I don't know any now. No one would admit that.

James Hall:

Yeah.

Doug Monroe:

But what women can't do is force men to view them a certain way.

James Hall:

Yeah.

Doug Monroe:

Whenever you're getting into trying to forcing people to think of you a certain way, when it's not natural, again you're just bumping up against a difference.

James Hall:

Yeah.

Doug Monroe:

And it's actually a complimentary thing. And the men I know, don't view women differently in a bad way. They view differently and very good way.

James Hall:

Yeah.

Doug Monroe:

And that deserves a lot of explanation.

James Hall:

Yeah.

Doug Monroe:

And I think the old school feminists looked at and were insulted by where the newer feminists are seeing that and actually saying, "Hey, we might as well use that to our benefit as people."

James Hall:

Yeah.

Doug Monroe:

Except human nature for the way it is, if you don't want. It may be a nurture, not a nature thing. You know what I'm saying? But men are just saying, they're just checking out and saying, "Okay, fine."