



Michael Rota (PhD, Saint Louis University) is associate professor of philosophy at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota. He was a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard from 2006 to 2007, and is the author of several academic articles in philosophy and philosophical theology.

“God is, or he is not” – and you must take the wager.

Blaise Pascal's wager argument made a famous contribution to Christian apologetics. Drawing upon that theme, Michael Rota reflects upon the dynamics of doubt, evidence and decision-making in order to consider what is necessary for people to embrace the Christian faith – and the difference it makes in people's lives. The brief interview that follows is adapted from the introduction of his new book, Taking Pascal's Wager.

How does your personal background influenced the writing of *Taking Pascal's Wager*?

Michael Rota: I was raised Catholic, although religion was not a major part of our family life. We prayed before meals and went to church on most Sundays, but there was little discussion of religious matters and no regular personal prayer, at least not on my part. Sometime in my early teens I began to wonder about the truth of the religion I had been born into. Does God really exist? If he does, then relationship with God is the most important part of human life. But if he doesn't, then the religious person is enmeshed in a massive deception. At Mass, I found myself saying, “We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty . . .” but did I really mean it? I wasn't sure, and the fear that I was being dishonest concerned me.

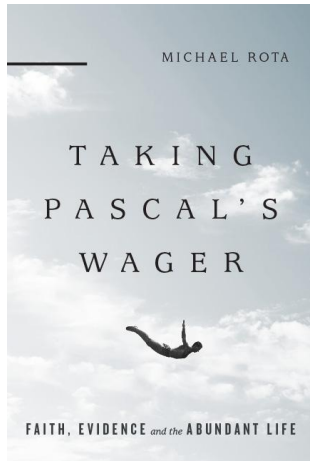
I continued to wonder about God and the rationality of Christianity throughout high school, in college and in graduate school. Now, as a professor of philosophy, it's my job to think about these topics every day. My research focuses on the rationality of religious belief, and I wrestle with arguments for and against God, with classes full of students from every point of view, almost every semester. I have become convinced that it *is* rational to live a deeply religious Christian life. Indeed, it may be irrational not to do so.

What questions do you hope to explore and even answer in this book?

Rota: Is it rational to believe in God? Is it reasonable to commit oneself to God – to live a deeply religious life? And how much certainty does one need before the time has come to decide? If you've pondered these questions before, this book is for you.

Why is it unnecessary and perhaps irrational to expect to find rock-solid evidence for the truth of Christianity before making a commitment to the Christian life?

Rota: In *The Will to Believe*, William James asks us to consider a man who hesitates “indefinitely to ask a certain woman to marry him because he [is] not perfectly sure that she would prove [to be] an angel after he brought her home. Would he not cut himself off from that particular angel-possibility as decisively as if he went and married some one else?” In



Taking Pascal's Wager: Faith, Evidence and the Abundant Life

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"The conventional wisdom is that Pascal's wager has been completely discredited. . . . But Michael Rota shows that the conventional wisdom is wrong. In Taking Pascal's Wager, Rota confronts the usual objections to the wager and argues that they all miss the point. . . . This is a book that should be read by any honest, thoughtful skeptic and that will also answer many of the questions of believers who are questioning their faith. As Rota shows, Pascal's wager can be as powerful an evangelistic tool today as it was in the seventeenth century."

— **Forrest E. Baird**, Whitworth University

the area of romantic love, it can be reasonable to invest deeply in a relationship, and eventually make a lifelong commitment to the beloved, even in the absence of airtight evidence that the marriage will be a happy one. Because there is so much at stake, it can be reasonable to make a commitment to a personal relationship even when absolute certainty proves elusive. Apply this to the question of God: even if the evidence for and against God were roughly on a par, considerations about the possible value of a relationship with God might favor the decision to make a religious commitment.

The seventeenth-century French mathematician and theologian Blaise Pascal gave an argument that expands on this insight. Pascal's Wager, as the argument has come to be known, is addressed to those who aren't sure whether Christianity is true, but think that it *might* be true. The argument can be summed up in one simple sentence: It is rational to seek a relationship with God and live a deeply Christian life because there is very much to gain and relatively little to lose.

Is the philosophical argument you explore in *Taking Pascal's Wager* all that needs to be heard to make a decision to lead a Christian life?

Rota: While this book will focus on the rational case for Christianity, it's important to acknowledge that there are many factors involved in a decision to commit to a Christian way of life, factors that go beyond impersonal philosophical reasoning. One's upbringing, one's experiences with individual Christians, the attitudes and views of one's closest friends and family, one's emotional life, one's deep-seated hopes and fears and one's own particular way of viewing the world — all of these come into play when one encounters the message of Jesus. I believe that the philosophical argumentation contained in this book will be helpful to many people; but philosophical argumentation is only one part of a larger picture. When it comes to religion, logic may or may not be where one starts, but it's certainly not where one should end. Living a Christian life is an act of the whole person — mind and heart, body and soul. Still, precisely because a Christian life involves the *whole* person, there is a place for the mind, and thus for reason, evidence and logic.

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