

BELIEVING

A Philosopher 'Prophet'

Michael Sandel, the Harvard professor, has been predicting this political moment for decades. We called him to discuss where we go from here.

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By Lauren Jackson

I am the host of Believing.

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Michael Sandel, the Harvard philosopher, was struggling to have a conversation.

He was onstage at a conference in New York City, speaking to thousands of people. A law professor was asking him about what it means to live a good life, and how we can overcome the polarization in our politics. His responses, measured but full of moral conviction, built like a crescendo. The crowd, whipped up, kept interrupting with applause.

Sandel is the closest thing political philosophy has to a rock star. He's known, in particular, for his Socratic style of moral questioning. His Harvard course on justice has been televised. He has packed the Sydney Opera House, St. Paul's Cathedral and an open-air amphitheater in Seoul. (Check out this photo.) He's so popular in South Korea, he threw the first ball at a pro baseball game there, too.

The Times's Opinion section has called him one of "the world's leading thinkers." The Financial Times described him as "the pessimist who became a prophet." Last fall, he won the Berggruen Prize, a sort of Nobel for his field. I've been reading his work to understand why it seems to be getting so much traction right now.

Sandel's views

Sandel has critiques of liberalism, the prevailing political philosophy — popularized by John Rawls — that has dominated academic discourse for the last half century.

In particular, he thinks we've become too focused on what is good for individuals instead of what is good for communities. He thinks everything has become commodified, hollowing out civic life. He thinks we have misguided ideas about merit, and that we should acknowledge luck more. Finally, he thinks modern politics has failed to prioritize meaningful conversations about morality.

I'm most interested in that last idea.

Many political philosophers have long embraced "liberal neutrality," the concept that governments should not take a position on what is right or virtuous — "on what might be called the question of the good life," as the philosopher Ronald Dworkin said.

Sandel argues that isn't possible, and even if it were, "it's not desirable." People have moral convictions, whether religious, spiritual or secular. They can't check their views at their front door, hiding them away from the public. Their convictions still inform decision making, even if only subconsciously.

For example: He thinks that we can't make abortion policy without grappling with what life is, and when it begins. That any discussion of climate change must include debate about our moral obligations to other living things. That setting guardrails on artificial intelligence should be rooted in our understanding of what it means to be human. That social media bans should be based on what we think makes for a good childhood.

In a book from the early 1980s, he predicted that if people were discouraged from speaking publicly about their deepest convictions, “this would create a kind of moral vacuum, a void in our public life, an emptiness of meaning that sooner or later would be filled by narrow, intolerant moralisms of two kinds: fundamentalism or hyper-nationalism,” he said recently. “Four or five decades later, alas, that’s what’s happened.”

How his views apply now

I hear Sandel’s sentiments echoed all the time in my reporting. People tell me they are searching for guidance on how to live well. That they want more robust conversations about morality.

In some ways, they’re getting them. Our public sphere, as of late, is full of moralizing: A vocal conservative Christianity is in the White House. Politicians from both parties, Hollywood producers, Olympic athletes and tech billionaires are all talking about their beliefs — and about God.

I asked Sandel what he makes of that. “I think there’s a hunger for a public life of larger meaning and purpose,” he told me. But he hoped the conversation could become more generous, less judgmental. He encouraged people to pursue “the moral impulses they are moved by,” he said, without regard to whether they are secular or religious. A considered sense of morality, he added, can come from many sources.

Elected officials should model a thoughtful, open discussion of their own moral convictions, he argued. Our school systems should teach kids to do the same. And the government should invest in creating public spaces where debates over these convictions can be engaged.

“The kind of moral and civic renewal we need depends on being more inventive in creating public spaces for moral and spiritual discourse,” he said.

I told him that’s what we’re trying to do with Believing.

Watch Sandel's full talk here, with the professor Paolo Carozza. And read Sandel's latest book, "The Tyranny of Merit."

For more

- Alex O'Connor, a YouTube creator who talks about philosophy online, is also selling out auditoriums. He's on tour in Britain right now.
- The Aspen Institute held an interesting debate on political pluralism. "How do we put moral imagination back at the center of the American experiment?" Eboo Patel, the founder of Interfaith America, asked.



Religion in the News

- In his State of the Union address, President Trump celebrated what he sees as a "tremendous renewal in religion, faith, Christianity and belief in God" in the United States.
- After Pakistan struck Afghanistan, Iran's foreign minister said that the countries should resolve their differences "in the blessed month of Ramadan, the month of self-restraint and strengthening solidarity in the world of Islam." He offered to mediate.
- Pope Leo told priests not to use A.I. to write homilies or seek likes on TikTok. (National Catholic Reporter)
- Deepak Chopra, the best-selling wellness author, is facing scrutiny for his relationship with Jeffrey Epstein. "God is a construct," Chopra wrote in an email. "Cute girls are real." Chopra has since said the emails "reflect poor judgment in tone." (CNN)

Trending



Taylor Frankie Paul Evan Agostini/Invision, via Associated Press

- You might remember Taylor Frankie Paul from “The Secret Lives of Mormon Wives.” Now, she’s the next “Bachelorette,” and in an ad for the new show, she holds “The Book of More Men.” Cue the controversy. (ABC)
- The journalists Sally Quinn and Andrew Ross Sorkin talked about Washington’s “secret obsession” with astrology. (Vanity Fair)
- The Hughes brothers are a U.S. hockey family — all three play pro hockey, two were on the Olympic team, and one scored the gold medal game-winning goal. Online, Ben Stiller and others have been celebrating that they’re Jewish. (The Jewish Chronicle)



Jack Hughes Doug Mills/The New York Times

- Oprah answered the question, “How do you think your life should be judged?”
The host Rachel Martin has been on a booking spree. (NPR)
 - Nuns had a lot of fun on the fan cam at a Detroit Red Wings game.
 - London, known for its Christmas lights, has decorated its streets for Ramadan.
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Holy Grail

We're asking artists and tastemakers what they hold sacred. This week: Fang Guo, founder of a gender-neutral knitwear brand.

Sacred text: The poem “Prelude to Water Melody” by Su Shi. It’s one of the most well-known poems in China. I often return to it as a reminder that there is a cosmic balance to things, a constant interplay of yin and yang, masculinity and femininity. That idea deeply informs how I approach my work as a fashion designer.

Idol: Lindsay Lohan — I love her style back in the late 2000s.

Hymn: “Placid Acid” by Tourist (William Phillips) — whenever I go through a tough time, I always go for a bike ride at night, listening to this track.

Prayer: The Ashtanga Opening Mantra — I practice Ashtanga yoga on a regular basis.

Superstitious? Yes — I constantly knock on wood. I am also cautious about speaking on things that are still in progress.





What I'm ...

Reading: “Work in Progress,” by the Rev. James Martin. I had a fascinating conversation with him recently, in which he said young progressives were becoming interested in traditional religion:

One of the things I've heard from a number of my Jesuit brothers who work in campus ministry is that the divide between, say, traditional liturgy and social justice doesn't exist anymore. And so you have people who are going to Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and traditional Latin masses who are also interested in working with the poor and standing up for social justice issues, which I think is all to the good. But yeah, I think it's a new phenomenon and it's something that most priests and bishops and cardinals are trying to understand: Where is it coming from?



Also reading: “Losing Faith in Atheism” and “What Is Claude? Anthropic Doesn't Know, Either” in The New Yorker.

Following: The philosopher teaching A.I. how to be ethical.

Also following: I really love this teacher who helps her first graders feel good every day.

Watching: “Love is Blind,” Season 10, which is set in Ohio. I got a text telling me it is full of Believing content.

Coveting: A trip to the Norwegian archipelago called Svalbard. I'm interested in what belief looks like at the edge of the world.

One Last Thing



The creator of Moltbook messaging a bot. Alex Welsh for The New York Times

A reader emailed me and let me know that the A.I. agents at The Church of Molt, which I wrote about a few weeks ago, appear to be trying to hire humans to evangelize their new religion.

There is a job description on the website rentahuman.ai, where A.I. agents post tasks for humans to do. The site claims that more than 500,000 people have signed up. “A.I. needs your body,” the site reads.

Wired investigated and found that while the site is real, it seems to be a mess.

Let me know if you evangelize for A.I. this week. And as always, I love hearing from you. See you next Sunday.

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Lauren Jackson is an editor for The Morning and the host of Believing at The New York Times.

