

## II. Reorientation

### **RYAN KERN** Interview

**WELCOMED:** Tell us about your background and how you encounter faith on the Stanford campus.

**Ryan Kern:** My experience complicates most expectations. There is a common narrative that college weakens faith, but for me the opposite happened. I came to Stanford without a strong religious life. I believed in God in a vague way, but it was not something I had really explored or built my life around. I did not grow up in a strongly Christian household. My grandmother was the one clear believer in my life. She lived far away, and we only saw her a few times a year, but her letters and the books she sent were full of reminders about God and belief. For a long time, faith remained peripheral to my life. Still, she gave me an image of what it looked like for someone to live with real faith.

When I got to Stanford. I entered a place that felt life-changing, and I found myself reflecting on how I had gotten there and what it all meant. That was the first time I began seriously to pursue the question of whether there really was someone out there. I started going to church groups, listening to sermons, and meeting students who believed. What surprised me was not only that those communities existed, but that they felt welcoming and alive. I found one group that I connected with strongly and have stayed with ever since. I am a junior now, and my faith is stronger than it has ever been. So my story runs against the assumption that college necessarily pulls people away from belief. In my case, college was where belief became real.

My grandmother was the one real exception. Even from a distance, she had a powerful presence in my life. Her faith was not abstract. It showed up in the way she wrote, the way she spoke, and the way she wanted to guide me. Looking back, I think she planted something in me. At the time I did not know what to do with it, but it mattered that I had seen at least one person whose life was truly shaped by belief.

**WELCOMED:** What happened once you arrived here?

**Ryan Kern:** The biggest change was community. I think that is really the heart of the whole story. Growing up, even if I had some sense that God existed, I did not have anyone to share that with. At Stanford, I suddenly found myself around people who not only believed, but lived that belief together. That made a huge difference.

I still remember one of the first moments when it all came together. It was early in my freshman year, during one of the Friday night small groups, basically a dinner gathering where people sang hymns, talked about God, and spent time together. As we were singing and talking, I had this strong sense that I was part of something I had been missing for a long time. I felt grateful to be

there. I felt that I belonged. That moment did not do everything all at once, but it gave me a real experience of shared faith, and from there my own belief deepened.

Now faith is part of my daily life. I pray a great deal. I read Scripture most mornings. I go to multiple gatherings each week. Just as important, I know I can call on other believers when I need support. Faith has become stronger through repetition, community, and practice. It keeps building on itself.

**WELCOMED:** Do you feel comfortable sharing your faith at Stanford?

**Ryan Kern:** In my experience, faith is a normal part of who many people are, even if they belong to different traditions or express it differently. Stanford never pushes me to conceal it, and I would encourage people not to hide their faith. Everyone has something distinctive about them, and belief can be one of those things. That is not something to be ashamed of.

Of course, it can be difficult to explain your beliefs to people who do not share them. But difficulty is not the same as shame. Faith is part of identity, conviction, and how many people move through the world.

I spend time with other Christian students not only at explicitly religious events, but in ordinary life too. We talk about faith, but we also just know each other as friends. That has made belonging and faith feel closely connected for me. I have friends who are not believers as well, and those friendships matter to me, but my strongest sense of belonging has definitely come through the Christian communities I found here.

That visibility has been important. It means I never feel alone in faith. I think that changes everything.

**WELCOMED:** Have there been ways your beliefs or practices have been challenged here?

**Ryan Kern:** Yes, although maybe not always in the dramatic ways people imagine. A lot of the challenge comes through ordinary social life. There are things many people see as completely normal that a believer may decide not to participate in. That can make you feel different. But I have learned that a great deal depends on who you surround yourself with. If you are with people who share your values, or at least respect them, then the pressure becomes much less intense.

I also think people often overestimate how much others are paying attention. You can imagine that if you decline something or choose differently, everyone will care and it will become a big issue. In reality, most of the time people just move on. They may notice, but they do not necessarily judge you as harshly as you fear. That has been helpful for me to learn. It has made it easier to stay grounded in my own convictions rather than assuming I have to compromise them in order to fit in.

**WELCOMED:** What would you say to a student who is unsure how to bring their beliefs into a secular university?

**Ryan Kern:** I would tell them to begin with community. In my experience, community is the foundation of everything. If you are trying to maintain faith in isolation, especially in a university environment where so many people are living in very different ways, the whole journey becomes much harder. But once you find people who share your beliefs and values, you begin to build a stronger sense of who you are. Then, when you encounter people who think differently, you do not feel as unstable or as vulnerable to compromise.

Stanford has many Christian groups, and more broadly, many communities organized around belief and meaning. There are real opportunities to find people. The harder part is often taking the first step and seeking them out. But that first step matters. Once you start connecting with others, it becomes much easier to grow.

**WELCOMED:** When someone finishes reading your story, what do you hope they understand?

**Ryan Kern:** I hope they understand that college can be the place where faith begins. That has certainly been true for me. I came here without much religious grounding, and here I found belief, practice, and community.

I also hope people see that this takes some intentionality. You have to put yourself in the right rooms. You have to seek out people who share your values. But once you do that, faith becomes much easier to sustain, because it is no longer just an idea you are carrying by yourself. It becomes part of a shared life. And from there, you can move through the rest of the university with much more confidence about who you are and what you believe.