The computer scientist Donald Knuth delivered a series of lectures at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1999 at the invitation of MIT’s “God and Computers” project. Anne Foerst ran the latter in an effort to establish a dialogue between the fields of Artificial Intelligence and Christian theology. With support from the John Templeton Foundation, computer scientists from a variety of religious and non-religious persuasions were invited to speak about the meaning of life from their point of view. Knuth’s involvement was a great boon for the program not only because of his stature in the computer science field as the author of [The art of computer programming, Addison Wesley Longman, Bonn (1997–1998)] and creator of the typesetting program TeX, but also because he had recently authored a book [3:16 Bible Texts Illuminated, A-R Editions, Madison, Wisconsin (1990)] which studied in depth the sixteenth verse of the third chapter of each book of the Bible.

Each of his six lectures is transcribed along with the discussion with the audience that followed. (Some audience members are named: Doug Ross, David Rosenberg, Barbara Grosz, Charles L. Perkins, Gerald Jay Sussman.) There are also generous notes about the sources and background of remarks made in the lectures as well as a good index and illustrations (some not well reproduced however). Knuth’s talks are followed by a panel discussion on the relevance of spiritual inspiration in computer science between Knuth, Harry Lewis, Guy L. Steele, jun., Manuela Veloso, and Mitch Kapor. Most of Knuth’s talks are concerned with the 3:16 project that is interesting in itself and served as a springboard to the few deeper discussions that ensued.

In Lecture 1 Knuth reports that Michael Rabin suggested that he discuss the question “Do random numbers really exist?” but this and other topics that could lead to discussions about free-will and the nature of God, are by and large put off until the last lecture. In between are discussions about randomization and religion (choosing the 3:16 verses), language translation (difficulties of translating the 3:16 verses), and aesthetics (the illuminated, handcrafted graphics of the 3:16 verses).

Foerst argues that the program as a whole was valuable on several levels, not least because it showed students that the leading lights in the field were coping with life’s big issues in much the same way as anyone else, building on their own experiences and interests and rarely arriving at final truths for themselves.

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