

## THE EZRA KLEIN SHOW

# Ross Douthat on Trump, Mysticism and Psychedelics

April 25, 2025



By Ezra Klein

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I always enjoy conversations that I have no earthly idea how to describe, and today’s is very much in that vein.

My guest is my Times Opinion colleague Ross Douthat. He’s the author of “Believe: Why Everyone Should Be Religious,” a book I enjoyed very much, even though I had some questions about quite a bit of it. And he’s the host of the new and really excellent New York Times Opinion podcast “Interesting Times,” where he has been interviewing people on the modern American right.

This is a conversation about mysticism and the role it is playing in the Trump administration and this era in politics. It’s also about belief and the role it plays in society and in our lives — Ross’s argument for why we should all be more religious. And the conversation also gets into some things I did not expect to be talking about today on the show.

A note before we get into the conversation: This was recorded on Monday, April 14, the day of the Trump-Bukele meeting and a week before the death of Pope Francis. So even though both topics would have fit into parts of this conversation, we did not talk about either. But, as you'll hear, the conversation stands on its own.

**Ezra Klein: Ross Douthat, welcome to the show.**

**Ross Douthat:** Ezra Klein, it is a pleasure to be here.

**Last year, after the first assassination attempt on Donald Trump, you wrote about Trump as a man of destiny — that he was “a figure touched by the gods of fortune in a way that transcends the normal rules of politics.”**

**How do you think about that now?**

[Laughs.] There were other passages in that column that are worth emphasizing. But I stand by that reading of the Trump phenomenon.

I think one of the ways in which my sense of politics generally has changed over the course of the Trump era is that I have more appreciation for weird forces that are certainly outside the control of people who write about politics.

You can't live through the Trump era as a conservative columnist or newspaper writer and not have the sense of how fundamentally unimportant columnists are to what happens in American politics.

**It's a consistent theme — an exercise in humility.**

It is. But even beyond that, you and I both grew up in a period that was reasonably described as a kind of timeout from grand historical dramas. It was not the end of history in the totalizing sense, but the kind of Francis Fukuyama view of the post-Cold War era, as one that had a certain kind of predictability and order and stability.

**History felt under control.**

History felt under control. Right. And the reality is that much of human history is just not under control in that way. And there are forces that move through history that are hard to predict and assess.

But I do think often they are connected to specific personalities. And there is some kind of marriage between particular personalities and particular moments. And the idea of a man of destiny, a great man of history, is a useful way of thinking about that when it happens, as I think it has happened with Donald Trump, the rise of populism, the crackup of the liberal order and so on.

The reason I laughed at the outset is that it's important to stress that someone can be a man of destiny and be bad. Someone can be a great man of history and be worth opposing. You can look back at Napoleon and say: Man, he was above and beyond, in terms of historical forces — and also root for the Duke of Wellington at Waterloo.

**I agree with you, and I think understanding the interpretation of Trump as somehow mystic is very important to understanding his relationship now with the right.**

**But specifically, how do you think this sense that Trump is a man of destiny has changed the way his staff and his allies treat him?**

It is very hard to go through the kind of drama that Trump himself personally went through in the world that ran from Jan. 6 through his return to power — and, if you're on his side through that story, not come away with a feeling that you were sort of moving with the wave of history.

For people in Trump's circle, there's just a sense that it doesn't matter what the polls say or the naysayers say. It certainly doesn't matter what squishy New York Times conservatives say. They saw the bottom: Trump was disgraced and ruined and persecuted, and he was going to be sent to jail. And then the next thing you know, assassin's bullets were missing him by a hair's breath. And he was making this incredible, unprecedented historical comeback.

Having lived through that, I think it's hard to be swayed by people saying: Hey, guys, your poll numbers are not looking so great. This tariff rollout? Not that well thought out. What are the implications of sending people to El Salvador without due process?

Those are sort of normal, quotidian-sounding objections to administration policy. And I think at least for some people caught up in the Trump phenomenon, they just seem incommensurate with the reality of riding a historical wave.

**But I don't think it's just the external world and its judgment of Donald Trump. You can tell me if you think this is wrong, but I think one of the biggest differences between Trump 1.0 and Trump 2.0 is that in Trump 1.0, his own staff, the people who surrounded him, were perfectly comfortable thinking: President Donald Trump is very wrong about this. His judgment is bad. His impulses need to be foiled. We are the resistance inside the Trump administration.**

**In Trump 2.0, I don't think people around him are comfortable thinking that. There is both a sense that they're there to serve him but also a sense that there is something in Trump — to them, not to me — that exists beyond argumentation.**

**The fact that the tariff policy doesn't make sense on its face, the fact that what he's doing seems like a bad idea — well, if you knew better, then you'd be in the chair.**

**The unwillingness to question him, because there's a belief in either a mystic purpose to him, or that he has a mystic, beyond-argumentation intuition about things, has really changed the nature of the constraints around him — or the absence of constraints around him.**

Yes. I think there's also a way in which the kind of mystic drama of his return to power is projected back onto his first term. Where the experience of Trump's first term — not just for liberals and Democrats but for a lot of Republicans — was obviously sort of chaotic and bizarre and difficult. But there were ways in which the results of that term were better than people anticipated. Certainly, they were better than I anticipated.

I expected — again, as a columnist and observer — for economic crisis and foreign policy crisis to define Trump's first four years in office. And, prior to Covid, they didn't. The economy was in good shape. I think you can make a strong case, actually, that it worked better than Biden's foreign policy.

And I think what's happened now is that not just people around him in the White House but also congressional Republicans, people who would have doubts about the tariffs and so on, have combined the mystical drama with the surprisingly successful first-term record and said: It's both that Trump has some kind of mystic intuition about what to do, and it's also that we doubted him before, but it all worked out OK.

Now, obviously, the problem with that is that one of the reasons it worked out OK was precisely that there were a bunch of people in the White House the first time around who didn't have a mystical sense of Trump's perspective or his goals or anything like that. And that is, I think, very clearly what is missing this time around.

There are people in the White House who could play that role. I think a lot of people expected Scott Bessent, the secretary of the Treasury, or Marco Rubio, the secretary of state, to play the kind of role that Gary Cohn, Steven Mnuchin and H.R. McMaster played in the first term. But no one is actually playing that role, as far as anyone can see.

So in an odd way, the very success of Trump as a man of destiny is unmaking the conditions that made his first term a success. But that is itself a dramatic arc. If you're writing the novel of the story of hubris and nemesis, that would be a characteristic way that hubris and nemesis would manifest themselves.

**We tend to think of fortune now as synonymous with luck. But if you go back to Greek mythology, when you are touched by fortune, when you speak to the oracle, it often doesn't work out that well. You get a clear prophecy that seems like it foretells your success, but laced inside of that is your downfall.**

## **What kind of story, what kind of mystic structure, do you believe we're in? Is it one that is providential? Or is it one where the gods often laugh at human design?**

A mistake that I think some religious people make is to see a kind of force of destiny at work in a particular figure and assume that force of destiny must mean that God, the author of history, wants you to be on that person's side directly.

But in fact, if you read, let's say, the Old Testament, there are all kinds of moments when God is working through figures to accomplish something in the world or to move history — the drama of salvation history, to put it in Christian terms — in a particular direction. But it doesn't mean that the instrument that God is working through is, in fact, the Messiah or the chosen one. If God sends the Babylonians to chastise the wicked kings of Israel, that doesn't mean that you're supposed to necessarily say: Oh, hail Nebuchadnezzar, you are the chosen one.

I think you can see Trump in several different lights. You could say he's a man of destiny, and therefore he is bringing about, in some weird way that we didn't see coming, the New American golden age. And this is obviously what a lot of people on the center right wanted to believe, especially when it became clear that he was returning to power. Or you could say he's a great man of history who is unlocking some sort of change that was necessary — but bringing chaos in order to do it.

I wrote a lot about the concept of decadence — this idea that the West and the developed world were sort of stuck in these cycles and needed to break out somehow. But the reality is you often can't break out of decadence without a big mess. So maybe Trump is the agent of that mess. But that doesn't mean he's a good person.

Or finally, it could just be chastisement for everyone. "All are punished," as Shakespeare said.

I think all of those possibilities have to be taken seriously as readings of the Trump phenomenon.

## **How well do you remember "Batman Begins"?**

I remember it. The League of Shadows destroying Gotham?

**I've had this joke in my head often in the past couple of months — as somebody whose mythic analogies tend to come from the Marvel or DC universe more than the Old or the New Testament — that is: Convince me we're not being governed by the League of Shadows.**

**I went back and rewatched the part where Ra's al Ghul reveals the whole plan. And he says: Look, we have infiltrated every layer of Gotham's power structure. We tried to destroy Gotham's economy through financial engineering. It didn't quite work. Now we're back for No. 2. And the fact that we are here is proof of your decadence. The fact that we could get this close shows that you deserve what we are about to do to you.**

**I'm not saying we are actually being governed by the League of Shadows, but when you brought up decadence, there is a dimension of that when you think about this in those narrative terms. It's a reflection of very dark sides of our own society.**

I've carried on a couple of different running arguments throughout the Trump era that are going to continue. And one is with people on the right who have a sort of League of Shadows view of the overall situation: Things are so bad that you might as well unleash chaos.

You saw a lot of this in response to the tariffs. Real politicians don't say this, but people on social media who are like: Fine, we need a 10-year reset of the whole global economy because things are so bad.

I've spent a lot of time disagreeing with those people. I would prefer not to take the black pill. But I've also spent time disagreeing with the kind of liberals and, sometimes, never-Trump Republican critics of Trump, who I feel don't quite grasp why he's successful and what you need to do in response. Because I don't think he could be this successful if it were enough to just elect Joe Biden to fix our problems.

**Well, clearly that didn't work. We tried that. And definitely trying to elect him twice to fix our problems was not the winning move.**

**A couple months ago, Bari Weiss had on her podcast Louise Perry, who's a British conservative gender and sexuality writer. And Perry made this argument that I've been thinking about, where she said that the difference between Jordan Peterson and Andrew Tate is that Peterson is a Christian and Tate is a pagan.**

**This might be unfair to historic pagans, but the argument she was making —**  
Depends on the pagans.

**Depends on the pagans. But it also depends on the Christians. But the argument Perry was making is that Peterson is, at least in his ethics, somebody who thinks a lot about the weak, who cherishes women.**

**Tate is more interested in power, in dominance, in driving his enemies before him and fathering a lot of children potentially from a lot of people.**

**And I've thought about that question — that war between, crudely, paganism and Christianity is playing out right now on the right and in the Trump administration. There are ways in which those strands seem braided through everything — the drive for power, for a renewed 19th-century masculinity, versus the more Christian dimensions of it.**

**JD Vance is an emblem of the Christian side of the administration. Elon Musk is an emblem of its pagan side, with his many kids from many different women.**

**And Trump is somebody who, in both his traditionalism and also his brashness and will-to-power, has both threads inside himself at the same time.**

Maybe. Honestly, I think Trump may have come to some conception of belief in God after the assassination attempt — just observing his comments.

But I think of Trump as, persistently, a kind of pagan or heathen figure, much more than he is a Christian figure. Notwithstanding the attempts to claim him as a kind of King David or Emperor Constantine. There's sort of an idea that you get from religious conservative supporters of Trump that you have these figures in the Bible or Christian history who are rulers and are sinful in various ways — but maybe, in a way, advance God's cause, despite their sins and failings.

I don't really think of Trump that way. But he is committed in an explicit way to Christianity. And to me, the bargain with Trump has always been, for religious conservatives, some mix of protection and support — a transactional bargain. And then more recently, a hope that some kind of renewal of American dynamism can bring religion itself back with it.

Which, I will say, is a hope that I have indulged in myself. It's like: OK, you have different varieties of post-Christianity out there, and you don't want to ally with the Andrew Tates, but you do want to ally with the people who have big hopes for the future, rather than a woke progressivism that just seems inflected with cultural despair.

That would be an argument that I think a Christian might say who was trying to explain to themselves why they are in alliance with Elon Musk. Better to ally with Elon, who has some good desires and believes that humanity is good in some way and wants a sort of more dynamic future than to take a purely pessimistic perspective — that climate change is going to kill us all and structural racism means we deserve it. That would be the argument.

**But what you just described as pure pessimism — putting aside the idea that climate change will kill us all — which I don't believe, I think most people, even on the left, don't believe. But they believe there's a way out. You just have to really work for it.**

**At the end of your book, you give an account of why you are a Catholic, and why you find it persuasive. And I find your account of it very moving.**

**It's a thing that appeals to me about Christianity. And the account you give is about both the strangeness and the radicalism of Jesus Christ as a figure. How uncomfortable it is to read him. How challenging. How Christianity is a religion about meekness: The camel has a better chance of fitting through the eye of the needle than the rich man does of getting into heaven. There's always been a radicalism in that.**

“The meek will inherit the Earth” is a famous line. Though I would say renunciation more than meekness probably.

**There’s a godliness of those who do not have power.**

Yes.

**At the same time, there is this administration that very self-consciously tries to frame itself as Christian. People in it, like JD Vance, are.**

Many people in the administration are Christian.

**And I do not see in them, or in the way they act in this world, this love of those who do not have power. They made a Studio Ghibli meme out of an immigrant crying.**

**There’s something about the interplay here of a self-conscious Christianity and a self-conscious memetic cruelty that feels very appalling to me and also un-Christian as I understand it.**

The aspect of conservative populism, right-wing populism, whatever you want to call it, that does see itself in clear continuity with Christian ideas and Christian views basically holds that it is speaking on behalf of the weak and the oppressed — people who don’t have a voice in society.

And those people are the native-born working class of the Western world who have been asked to bear inappropriate burdens — I’m just framing the case — beginning with the economic burdens imposed by free-trade regimes that sent their jobs overseas. And continuing with the burden — again, this is the argument — of social disorder and breakdown associated with the drug trade in a globalized world. The free movement of peoples that transforms cities and neighborhoods in ways that fall most heavily on lower middle-class Americans and are avoided and evaded by the upper class.

This is the narrative.

The beneficiaries of globalization are the equivalent of the rich person in various of Jesus's parallel parables. And certainly Jesus does not hesitate at various moments in the Gospels to say pretty harsh things about people who have betrayed their leadership role.

So the one reason I pushed back on meekness is: Yes, Jesus uses the word "meek," but Jesus himself is not a meek figure. And you can go through the New Testament and find plenty of cases where Jesus says incredibly harsh things, mostly about powerful people and sinners. Where Jesus cleanses the temple and drives the money changers out and curses the fig tree that doesn't bear fruit. You can go on.

**But you are talking about the powerful here, and what I'm asking about is the treatment of the powerless.**

**Even if you believe — and I don't contest this point — that many people in this country have bore undue burdens, I understand that as central to liberal politics, too. But the issue is the cruelty with which poor immigrants are treated by the Trump administration — the laughing about it.**

**It's fine if you want to say they should be unkind to Ezra Klein, a New York Times columnist. I more mean that there is an embracive, memetic cruelty — not aimed at the powerful but aimed at other forms of the powerless. Where, as I understand the radicalism of this ethic, whatever your border policy, there should be a profound compassion for, say, Haitians who came here fleeing some of the most desperate poverty in the world to work hard at jobs to build up a life for their families. There's something about the weaponization of cruelty against the powerless that I'm trying to get at.**

As I said before, I think you have what you're describing as Christian and pagan tendencies braided together in the Trump administration. And I think that not all but many of the things that you describe absolutely reflect more of a pagan sensibility than a Christian one.

I agree with you that particular steps the Trump administration has taken in this term are not Christian. They are anti-Christian.

I think it started with the cuts to foreign aid. I think you can completely justify some kind of renovation of the foreign aid program. Christians are not bound to support any particular set of programs.

But I think the way in which the foreign aid programs were reshuffled and cut off and so on was a failure of Christian duty in a pretty obvious way. The core motivations there were just different from the evangelical motivations of the Bush era, and reflected, frankly overall, the decline of Christianity in American life.

I will just say, though, since we're taking a pretty hard line of critique here: You have watched this happen all the time on the left in different ways over the last 5 or 10 years, where people whom I considered to be sensible, good, well-meaning moderate people were in a coalition with people who had more intensity, more passion, more zeal, who made a certain set of demands on them that led, in people I knew and admired and respected, to compromise their own values in ways that also had real-world material consequences.

I don't want to relitigate wokeness, but part of the nature of politics in a landscape where there's no religious consensus, there's no moral consensus, is that forces that appear to have energy behind them — world historical energy, perhaps — will draw people, who have convictions that should put them in tension with those views, into certain kinds of compromises.

But I agree. I do not admire the way that the Trump administration approaches any of the policies that you're talking about, from humanitarian aid to the deportations to El Salvador.

**One of the things I'm getting at in life broadly, but specifically in the policies or rhetoric and the comportment is: I think a lot about JD Vance — who, as a person, should have had some protection from this. I think he is Christian. I think he thinks a lot about virtue and ethics.**

**You brought up the tariffs. I don't think there's anything un-Christian about the tariffs. I think they're bad economics, not bad religion.**

**And a lot of these policies I actually believe that about. I think people can have very mistaken views on policy because they are just wrong about what the policies will do in the world. I have had mistaken views on policies because I was wrong about what the policies would do in the world or the way they would be carried out. But it's more the compatibility with what I think has become a dominant tone.**

**I think we're in a very unstable era in terms of what I might call our political manners. Matt Yglesias had a piece about the way a lot of Hitler revisionism is beginning to happen, out of a feeling that we have overpenalized questions about race and antisemitism. And in order to widen the boundaries of debate, you have to have on World War II revisionists.**

**There's a sense that this sort of politics of manners didn't work, and so a politics of no manners needs to be tried now. Donald Trump has been an innovator and a pioneer in that. And it has created a lot of memetic imitators who, on the one hand, don't have some of his lightness, authenticity or funniness.**

**But on the other hand, even though I'm not myself religious, I'm a little bit idealistic about religion. And I feel this about my own religion, which I think should create very profound sympathy for refugees, and that has not been something I've seen in the past couple of years. And I think this of Christianity, where it feels to me like it should create a kind of buffer against greed and cruelty that I often see broken when it would be politically viable to break it.**

Right. Two things. One is that, yes, you are describing the story of both Judaism and Christianity's engagement with history and fallen human nature. This is something that is in fact advertised in both the Old Testament and the New Testament and all of history since.

The story of the Jewish people in the Old Testament is not a story of people who were chosen by God and given a bunch of commandments and then obeyed them all. It's a story of people who remained the chosen people, despite failing in every possible way, including — to fit our conversation — repeated flirtations with heathenism and paganism and idolatry.

And then you can obviously tell a similar story of the New Testament. Christians don't have political power, but the apostles are always screwing up and messing up. And then, of course, the history of Christianity's entanglement with political power is filled with sins and failings that — again, like this era's set — are not atypical.

But then the second point that I want to push you on is: What kind of argument is this that you think you're going to win with religious believers who disagree with you? You're like: I don't believe in your religion, but I really wish that you would follow your religion so that your politics were more aligned with mine.

That's just not much of an argument at all. And I think, to the extent that all of liberalism, the ideology that you subscribe to, trades on inherited ideas from Christianity about morality and equality and so on, while you've jettisoned the portrait of the universe, the metaphysical structure that gives them meaning, I think it's really hard from that point of view for you to get anywhere in arguments with people who still believe in that structure. Because you're essentially saying: I've stripped away the conceptual framework that makes your moral ideas make sense. But now I'm going to complain that you're not living up to your moral ideas.

I just think that's a really weak argument.

**But I'm not arguing it.**

Well, you're saying it to me.

**I'm asking you.**

I'm a Christian. I'm right here. You're expressing sorrowful disappointment that Christians are not living up to a worldview that you think is false.

**Well, I think parts of it are. I'm unconvinced on parts of it. We'll talk about the view of the cosmos in a minute. But I'm not trying to offend you here. I'm actually asking. I'm not —**

Ezra, does anything about our long relationship suggest that you could possibly offend me?

**I've known you long enough to know when you're getting a bit heated.**

That's totally different. [Klein laughs.] As I was saying, the New Testament is filled with heated encounters.

**I don't think a thing I'm saying here is going to convince somebody on the Christian right to turn around their view of Donald Trump. But I am genuinely curious how somebody of your politics and your religious background interprets somebody like JD Vance, so I'm asking you questions about it.**

Christianity does not provide some kind of incredibly strong bulwark against powerful people doing the kinds of things that powerful people do, which means self-interested conquest of various kinds and so on. What it does provide is an ongoing internal critique that those powerful people have to wrestle with and address in ways that are fairly unique in the historical relationship of power and piety.

So if you look at something like — to take the most famous example, maybe — the Spanish conquest of the Americas: In terms of what is actually done in the course of the Spanish conquest of the Americas, you can find plenty of terrible crimes that you, Ezra Klein, would say: Well, what good is your religion if your civilization commits these crimes?

But from the very beginning, in Spain itself, in the heart of the super Catholic Counter-Reformation era of Spain, there's an ongoing and agonizing, sometimes intensely legal and practical, sometimes high-level philosophical and theological debate that subjects the behavior of the Spanish conquistadors and others to this sustained critique and leads to — at various times, sometimes successful, mostly unsuccessful — reform efforts driven by the Catholic monarchy of Spain.

It ultimately builds out and influences everything from the antislavery movement in the 18th and 19th centuries that's ultimately successful, down to contemporary ideas about human rights and international law that, again, today's secular liberals take for granted as a kind of scripture.

All of that emerges out of the efforts of serious Christians in a context of profound historical temptation and constant sinfulness to generate from within the resources of their religion.

And if you take the Trump administration — for instance, it's not as though you cannot find Christian critiques of Trump administration cruelty. They just are not, at the moment, the primary thing I would expect. I mean, we'll find out.

We're three months into a shock and awe administration, and I think people have been baffled and surprised by some of the turns that things have taken. But certainly people I take seriously within conservative Christianity have spoken out against things like the cuts to humanitarian aid and anything like that.

But I completely agree with you that history supplies constant tests of what your religion is for, and there's no end — until the end — to the testing. And sometimes you succeed. More often you fail. But hopefully you do something that has good effects down the road. And sometimes you fail entirely and then maybe God sifts you and finds you wanting.

I'm not kidding here. It is important to see every moment as a potential moral test that you might well be failing.

I'm a conservative Christian. You could say I'm a member of the Christian right. For your purposes, as Christianity has weakened in American life, a really hard question has become: Who is the most dangerous of your different enemies? Or who is most threatening to the Christian view of the good society?

Is it a woke progressivism that — again, this would just be the narrative — wants to abolish basic ideas about differences between the sexes and supports abortion at any stage in pregnancy? That's hostile to the basic religious liberties of Christians. Or is it Donald Trump's populism, with its heathen cruelties? Is it transhumanism? Is the final boss of this era that religious believers will have to confront, actually, Silicon Valley? And if it is, can you make alliances within Silicon Valley? Is it better to be with Elon Musk and his 117 children than to be with some other people involved —

**It's also Neuralink. It's pushing transhumanism forward very fast, if it can.**

But there's also different transhumanisms, which —

**[Laughs.]**

These are things that I myself am profoundly uncertain about in this moment. What is the greatest danger, from a Christian perspective, to the future of the human race? I'm not entirely sure.

**A big part of your book, as I read it, is about what happens when elite society becomes hostile in its view of the world to the human impulse to seek a picture of reality that runs deeper than materialism. What happens when the seekers have nowhere to go? When organized religion weakens? What happens when they're not channeled into organized religion? And what happens when the lead society becomes too materialistic?**

**From what I understand, one of the forces that you believe is driving the era is a kind of frustrated seeking, a sort of desire to re-enchant the world, like that has run into an elite culture, with maybe its apex being the Obama administration and that moment in American life.**

The apex is “The Ezra Klein Show.” Let's be honest here.

**I always joke that the difference between you and me is more that you're a Catholic and I'm a Californian than that I'm a materialist and you're not.**

[Laughs.] Well, one can use the word “materialist” in different ways, too.

**Sure. When you use it in this context, what do you mean?**

I mean the view that all of existence — life, the universe and everything — is finely reducible to matter in motion. That matter is primary and mind is secondary, rather than the other way around. I don't mean materialism in terms of Madonna's “Material Girl” or something like that — although the two can be connected.

So one of the various arguments in my book is that disenchantment is fake, fundamentally. The idea that you can enter a secular age where, once upon a time, people had wild religious experiences, but now we inhabit the iron cage of modernity, and all of those are off the table — that just doesn't describe reality.

Mystical experience, religious experience — it's not just the impulse. I think secular liberals are very comfortable saying: Oh, well, there's always a religious impulse.

But it's more than that. It's that people have encounters with God — whatever God may be — some kind of higher reality that enters them and transforms them and gives them visions and gives them intense experiences. Or maybe they have them on the verge of death and come back to tell about them.

This is just a feature of human life. It's a very profound and important feature of human life. Maybe it can be explained in nonreligious terms. Maybe there's some reductive explanation. But there isn't a good one on offer right now.

And so the persistence of that means that religion always regenerates itself, because even under conditions where almost nobody is committed to a particular church or creed, people are going to go on having dramatic encounters. Someone like Barbara Ehrenreich, who's famous —

**I had her on for this book.**

Right. She's a famous left-liberal writer who wrote a whole book called "Living With a Wild God."

**And a famous atheist.**

Yes, famous atheist. And it was just a book about a very secular person who had a lot of religious experiences. Experiences that if you went and read William James or a medieval Catholic mystic or something would be totally familiar.

And she didn't have a conceptual framework to fully process them. And she wrote a great, really interesting book about it.

**Can you tell the story that you tell in your book? I don't remember the man's name, but he's the editor of Skeptic Magazine or something like that.**

Right. So this is Michael Shermer, who is one of the more famous professional skeptical debunkers of religious claims, supernatural things and so on.

And in one of his books — though he has told this story several times to his great credit — he writes about getting married. I'm going to butcher this slightly, but his wife had a grandfather who had been very close to her and was the kind of person who would have given her away at the wedding. But he had passed away. So she was feeling lonely and isolated.

And they had a radio that had come from him. The radio was broken. Had never worked. Shermer had tried to fix it. It just didn't work.

And at the end of the wedding, during the reception, they heard music from the back of the house and went into a back room. And there was the radio playing a love song. And I think it transitioned from that to some kind of classical music for later in the evening and then shut off and never worked again.

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This experience affected Shermer. And again, to his credit, it was evidence against interest. And I think, as always with these stories, you have to trust his general reliability and so on — that it wasn't just that there was a battery that was jiggled or something. But the radio really didn't work — and really never worked again.

There was no obvious, material way that this could have happened. Shermer, in the end, wants to have a theory of the multiverse where, in some different timeline, much like in the movie “Interstellar,” his wife's grandfather is capable of accessing our timeline. And to Shermer, this is an escape from supernatural explanations.

But the one reason to just tell that story is that — as I think you know, because I was joking about your show being the epitome of secularization — people have experiences like this all the time.

**This is why I'm not a materialist.**

This is a very commonplace kind of experience. Not super commonplace. You're not going to have one tomorrow probably. But this stuff is just part of the warp and woof of reality.

So to finally, long-windedly answer your original question, I think what happens in conditions when you have weak institutional religions and a sort of secular expert class that is not militantly atheistic but sort of says officially that these things don't happen, is that people feel like they can't really go all the way up to the creator — God, Yahweh, Jehovah — outside of time and space, and they start looking for intermediate powers to become a locus for their own spiritual impulses. Stuff with psychedelics. Stuff with literal paganism, including stuff on the right.

The interesting zone, in a way, is A.I., which is the place where science-fiction or scientific ideas meet a slightly supernaturalist sense of the machine God as this power, into which we are going to commend ourselves.

Again, Christians would say that tendency is bad. It's not that secondary spiritual powers don't exist in the universe. There are, in fact, angels and demons and things like that. Saints and other powers perhaps more mysterious still. But not all those powers have human good in mind. And it's better to approach them through one of the big old traditional religions that tries to subject them to a kind of higher ordering that says —

**Let me hold you there. Because we'll get to this.**

**I want to distinguish two arguments that the book could make, and that you take one path in particular.**

**I am somebody who believes deeply in mystery. I'm that kind of agnostic where I'm —**

Californian.

**I'm a Californian. Exactly. And the first third of the book is about this. It's an argument that you should believe that a new atheist materialism is incompatible with any kind of reasonable understanding of the world and its complexity, in its unruliness, in the experiences people have, in the things that it now increasingly requires you to believe.**

**Either human consciousness is somehow having some profound effect on quantum physics, or — if you're going to take a much more straightforward view of the math — we're splitting into uncountable new realities at all times.**

**The implications are getting weirder and weirder.**

So many podcasts.

**So many podcasts. I love all that stuff.**

**So there's an argument for belief. And then there's an argument for channeling that belief. And I understand the book to really be about the second argument. It's about channeling this belief into organized religion.**

**Given the strangeness of everything you just described, as well as the fact that the big organized religions disagree on many things — a point you make in the book — why go there?**

**Why is it not enough to just say: You should believe that this world is not something we understand how to explain, and you should be open to all these things that violate a materialist intuition about it.**

**What's the argument for going into organized religion as the answer for such profound unruliness?**

Well, a couple things. First of all, I don't think that the case for not being a materialist is a case for total unruliness. To the contrary, I think part of the case for not being a materialist is precisely the order of the universe.

One of the problems that materialism has, that you gestured at, is accounting for the specific ways in which the universe is ordered — the beauty and precision and symmetry involved. And also, as far as we can tell, the extreme unlikeliness that this particular order would be selected for, unless whoever selected it were interested in, you know, listening to lots of podcasts. No — creating planet stars and conscious beings.

So the religious argument is an argument for overarching structure. And then the ways in which it is weird are not themselves entirely random. There are patterns in spiritual experience. There's no predictability to it overall, but the kinds of experiences that people have, have a certain consistency. You can track different kinds of spiritual experiences across different cultures. You can track them in near-death experiences. You can track them in terms of studies of what appear to be miraculous healings and so on.

And again, there just seems to be a way in which you have this overarching order. You have some sort of mysterious relationship between our consciousness and that overarching order. And then you have a lot of religious experiences that seem like higher forces trying to be in touch with us and have some kind of relationship with us. That's the basic picture of that.

Again, most of the big religions offer — allowing for all their differences — Buddhism and Christianity have some pretty substantial differences — but they each describe a universe that's generally like that.

**I want to be careful, because when I say I'm a Californian, I'm being jokey about it. There are, of course, many Orthodox Jews and committed Catholic Christians in California and so on.**

Absolutely.

**But I am very familiar with a kind of California seeker mentality. And I think the answer, from that perspective, to what you just said is: Yes, there are patterns. Yes, there are buckets. There are consistencies to near-death experiences or to**

**memories that young kids have of what at least some people take to be past lives. Or things like the radio turning on. And so on.**

**But none of these really fit in any of the big religions. I've read enough of the religions to say that what I describe as the unruliness — when I say that, I mean enough things that don't fit a simplified view of reality — that it would make me wonder about materialism.**

**But also, I don't think Judaism explains them all. I don't think that Catholicism explains them all. I'm not saying I know what does. Hinduism —**

Well, Hinduism is big enough —

**It's quite big actually. Maybe it explains more.**

I think, arguably, from your premises, you should probably be Hindu.

**I'm not saying that I know what does. What I'm saying is that I'm very sympathetic to how it can spin you into a profound openness.**

**I know many people who have gone there, where what it seems to me now is having come to believe in these kinds of things, it's very hard for them to say where to stop believing. And they now believe a lot of things that are maybe contradictory. Or there are gurus who are all saying different things. But once you open yourself, it can become hard to close back down.**

**But some of them grew up in a faith tradition. For them, the faith tradition didn't explain too much of what they then began to see or experience or come to believe in.**

**I don't think any of the traditions have a really good explanation for why we have weirdly consistent alien abduction experiences — which I don't believe to be alien abductions, but I'm not sure what to make of them.**

**What is your response to someone like that?**

I think that there's a balance that you have to strike in looking for a particular religious tradition, as opposed to just being an open-ended seeker.

You want, I think, a religious tradition that has a set of core views that make sense of a lot of what you've described — and also a certain degree of flexibility and uncertainty about some of the things that don't fit into its world picture.

But the wide array of religious experiences, just the data on its own, would make you a — the term I use in the book is “perennialist.” This is the theory that all the great religions encode some of the truth about reality. You can't go wrong with any of them, as long as they're big enough and old enough. But none of them are the fullness of truth.

I would say, though, as a Roman Catholic, that one of the things that I appreciate about Roman Catholicism is that it has a certain kind of supernatural capaciousness. Not in terms of all its formal doctrines. It's not like you open up the catechism of the Catholic Church and they're like: Well, here's what we think about aliens.

I mean, it's in there, but the pages are taped.

**Certainly in the Vatican, there is quite a bit about: Here's what we think about aliens.**

There is some stuff about that stuff. But if you look at the history of Catholic cultures, in terms of the afterlife, zones like purgatory and limbo and so on have some connection to people's arguments about ghosts and hauntings and that form of the supernatural. Catholic cultures have always been pretty hospitable to ideas about fairies.

I don't know how I've ended up on a nice New York Times podcast talking about the good people. But the idea of a trickster — that there are angels and demons and then there are these sort of weird trickster beings.

If you asked me to make a case for Catholicism's capaciousness, I could make that case.

I'm curious what you think about this: One of the things I argue in the book — and it's not an approvable assertion — is the idea that if there is this overall structure, an order, to the universe, and if there seem to be higher powers interested in talking to human beings, then maybe you should assume that God is not out to trick you. The universe is not a trick. It's not actually presenting you with this impossible, open-ended question.

There are a certain number of big religions. They've stood the test of time. They've had a pretty powerful shaping influence on human history. Why wouldn't you go in for one of them, rather than saying, in good California style: I just have to remain perfectly open.

I think that if you can accept that the universe might have been created with us in mind, then you should give deference.

**So I want to say that I loved the book. I really enjoyed it. And this was the point that helped me clarify where my intuitions diverge, which is: I think, at a fundamental level, I expect that anything that has worked at mass scale, across many different institutional regimes, as an organized religion, is likely to have conformed so much to politics and institutions as to have strayed from how profoundly radical whatever kind of spiritual truth might exist.**

**This is a way in which the gambit I had at the beginning about Trump was connected to the meat of this conversation. I found the argument that you should assume that a religion's success over time is going to correlate to some kind of fundamental truth value — I felt you could take that both ways.**

**I felt you could also take it the other way, which is to say that the religions that survive are going to be the ones that are institutionally compatible with many different regimes and often contort themselves into those regimes.**

**We talked about the Spanish conquest and the Inquisition. I've been reading about the Renaissance recently — Ada Palmer's great book "Inventing the Renaissance." And I wouldn't say the popes of that era cover themselves in glory. I think you could say this about forms of Judaism, about forms of Buddhism.**

**Buddhism has a much more complicated institutional story than people who have been raised in America on West Coast Spirit Rock Buddhism tend to believe. There are all these questions where I believe that whatever sort of ultimate truth is out there is going to be extremely inconvenient and strange.**

**And — as you said earlier, and something I thought was quite stirring — the sense that every moment might be a moral test, that a religion that took that truly seriously would end up being very incompatible with ruling regimes and would have a lot of trouble from them.**

**Which of course, at times these religions have. But then they've often conformed, too.**

Right, I think you're making actually precisely the case for, in different ways, both Judaism and Christianity as probably divinely founded, which is to say these religions have survived and persisted across multiple different kinds of cultures and regimes in each era. Elements of these religions have made compromises, have intertwined themselves in profound ways.

You couldn't get more intertwined than medieval Catholicism and medieval feudalism. I think if you are a secular historian looking at that intertwinement, you'd say probably whenever feudalism breaks up, Christianity is going to go away, too.

Or Judaism. Judaism is a religion of temple prayer. A religion that's centered on the temple and the Holy of Holies and everything else. You look at that as a secular historian, and you're like: Well, obviously, if some empire — we'll call it the Romans — comes along and destroys that, then Judaism is going to disappear, too.

But that's not what happens. Instead, you have these periods of intertwinement that are then shattered in some way. The first thing to say is that the radicalism that you describe persists in those eras, as well. And again, to go back to the point I was making earlier, this is something that religions themselves advertise.

The Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, is a story where the Jews are failing your tests. The tests that you, Ezra Klein, are setting. You're like: Well, if this religion was really from God, they probably wouldn't all become idolaters. And they're like: Ezra, here's our holy book. It's all about how we became idolaters. But guess what? Then God did something new, and people did something new, and the story continued.

I think you think you're setting God free a bit from what you see as the corruptions of Trump-era Christianity or medieval Inquisition-era Christianity. And you're like: No, God is bigger than that, and therefore, a religion that is always getting entangled with worldly power can't be where God is.

But what you end up with is a counsel of despair where you're like: Well, the only religion that would be worthy of God is one that would be exterminated within 50 years of its founding by the cruel state. You end up saying that a religion good enough to join could not exist on the Earth.

**Well, I don't think I'm saying a religion good enough to join could not exist on the Earth. I'm not trying to set God free from anything. Because I genuinely am not sure. It's not a pose for me.**

**I think a couple times in this, you think I'm making an argument when I'm actually genuinely confused. Or, if not genuinely confused, genuinely uncertain.**

**I find the uncertainty radical. And I'll say, within my own belief system — to the extent it counts as a belief system, which I'm not sure it should — mystery and uncertainty are both very much at its heart and very comforting to me.**

**When I was younger, I had a crippling fear of death. Truly terrible mortality anxiety. And somehow what eased it for me was eventually coming to the view that I just was never going to know.**

**I don't know why I found that comforting, and I don't know why that has stuck, but to some degree, it has.**

**So I am actually not saying that I think I have some answer here that you don't. I really don't. I'm actually testing my intuition because I want to hear your answers.**

Right. I'm not trying to be too aggressive, Ezra. As you know, from reading the book, I think that the intuition that a lot of modern people have — that even if you can see that materialism is too limited — there is just this fundamental unknowability hanging over everything.

I think that intuition is mistaken. I think it is correct about certain aspects of religion. I think there are issues in religion and questions in religion that hang over every tradition imperfectly resolved.

I'm not here to tell you I've resolved the problem of evil. The problem of evil is a real problem. It's a real issue. Again, I think it's an issue that's there and acknowledged and wrestled with throughout the Old and New Testaments.

But I don't think you're going to sit down and just reason your way into a solution to that problem. I do think, though, that you can get a little bit further — even in the example that you cited.

I don't know what your metaphysical perspectives were as a kid. But I certainly agree that I would personally find it more comforting to believe that death is a mystery than to be Richard Dawkins and believe that death is just the absolute end and never could be anything else.

I just think it's, in fact, more probable than not that after you die, you will meet God, whatever God is, and be asked to account for your life and so on. And that's not inherently comforting. It's quite terrifying.

But I think that it is something that is reasonable to believe that should give you a little bit more than just the sense of mystery. And more than that, I think it is what God himself, in his infinite mystery and power, wants you to believe, which is why he has me here talking to you.

**[Laughs.] I've often thought of you in my life as heaven sent, Ross.**

No, I mean, it doesn't mean good things about my final destination. I'm just an instrument. But I guess the argument I'm making is: I think one can get a little bit further than just mystery itself.

**One argument you make in the book is you give the canonical example of: If you believe in a merciful God, how do you explain the child with leukemia? And you basically say that, in any reasonable understanding of God, any reasonable understanding of religion, you can't possibly understand the plan.**

**We were in a way talking about this with Donald Trump. The unfolding of things will always be so far beyond the human mind that the idea that you have, like, poked out a contradiction is a little bit ridiculous.**

**I actually agree with that. But then I think that when it comes to the organized religions, you say a few times that you have trouble believing a providential God would allow these religions that are wrong, that are wayward, to expand and thrive in the way that they have.**

**And I think an intuition that probably people like me have is that it is hard to say that some things can be resolved by: Well, a God who is good will not allow X to happen.**

**And some things have to be resolved with: You can't possibly understand why God is allowing X or Y to happen.**

**So questioning it or being unwilling to take this on faith is unreasonable.**

Yes. I don't think you should take on faith that the major world religions are providential. And I think you could imagine yourself in a world where, if you lived in a world where the dominant set of religions all practiced human sacrifice, the case for taking the big religion seriously — you've pushed me on this effectively — can't just rest on their size and scale alone.

You do also have to think that, in the aggregate — as someone who has particular moral intuitions given by God — they have had a positive impact on the world and shaped it in positive ways. And this is also sort of important to my argument — that

they do have real overlaps. The major world religions, if you look at them and analyze their ethical perspectives, you do see a certain kind of overlap.

So yes, I think you have to dig it. It is not enough to say these things are big and present, and you have to take it on faith that they're part of that. They're where God wants you to be. You do also have to actually look at them and pass some kind of judgment on them, as I so often do.

**So I want to go back to fairies.**

Please.

**One of the other arguments you make —**

We should call them the good people. You don't want to attract too much of their attention. So why don't you call them the good people?

**The good people, which I will admit, I am unfamiliar here and did not know that. So forgive me.**

You've come here to learn, Ezra.

**Well, actually this is exactly what I'm about to say. What just happened — depending on whether or not you believe in the good people, I guess — is that one of your other arguments is that if you come to the view that the world has supernatural or extra-human forces, intelligences, agents, etc.**

**If you're a seeker of that sort, one thing the major religions have — which I think it's fair to say has been largely downplayed in a lot of modern society — is actually belief about those dangers and arguably experience with those questions, including maybe what to call, and not call, the good people.**

**One of your arguments here is that there is more spiritual danger once you accept some of these premises than people often give credit to. That it's not just about belief or unbelief. It's about the possibility of falling into the wrong beliefs, of**

**listening to the wrong voices, of following the tricksters, of following more demonic forces. And one thing you appreciate about Catholicism is a little bit more openness to that world of forces.**

**I just found that interesting. I always find your openness to the occult to be —**

Openness to the occult is not what I want to advertise.

**Is that not how you want to talk about it?**

The reality is that in the book, I have an entire chapter on supernatural experience and weirdness, and I actually debated with myself how much to write about things that are explicitly demonic. Catholicism obviously has a special focus on this through the office of the exorcist. There's lots of literature on the demonic and demonic possession, and I ended up feeling quite uncomfortable writing about it too much.

So there are a couple paragraphs and some footnotes and people who are interested in it can follow that material. But there is a kind of balance that you want to strike as just an observer or a writer between acknowledging those weirder and darker and more disturbing realities, but not focusing too much attention on them.

And my joke — or is it? — about saying the good people is part of —

**We both know you are not joking, Ross. [Laughs.]**

Hey, now. One thing I'm absolutely certain about is that if there is a realm of supernatural experience that is real, that is not just your brain chemistry, you can access it maybe through altering your brain chemistry and taking ayahuasca and whatever. But if that reality is real, it is 100 percent dangerous —

**Why 100 percent?**

Well, not a hundred — I don't mean every aspect of it is dangerous. But it is certainly dangerous. There are serious dangers within it.

**Tell me about your views on psychedelics.**

So I have never taken psychedelics. I've never been to an ayahuasca retreat. This is entirely based on reading and conversations.

My view is that some psychedelics almost certainly open you to contact with nonhuman spiritual entities, and that they do so in a way that is different from other forms of spiritual experience. Again, not in every case, but they can be a shortcut.

But that shortcut means that you're entering these landscapes without the kind of preparation that not only the traditional religions but the shamans who use ayahuasca in the Amazon — or wherever they use it — would say is necessary for these kinds of encounters.

And there's a social media joke about getting one-shotted by a six-dimensional Mesoamerican demon, or something like that, that people make about these kinds of drugs. And that's a joke, but I don't think it's entirely a joke.

So I think that possibility is real, and it does not at the same time mean that lots of people can't take these drugs and have mystical experiences that just sort of convince them that there's more to reality than just the material. And that is a correct view.

So in that sense, the drugs teach you something real about the world. But it can be like anything in human life. And one of the points I try to stress is that religion is not out there in some compartment where it's totally different from every other thing, and you can't argue about it the way you argue about other things and so on.

No. Like in other aspects of human life, dealing with the supernatural is like dealing with the natural. There are good things and bad things and dangers and opportunities. And you just want to be aware of that before you throw yourself into a realm of experience that you might not be prepared for.

But I haven't done it. And you have — or have you?

**Say what?**

Have you?

**Yes.**

So you have immediate information that I might not have. But it's the fact that one could argue that doing those kinds of drugs and coming back from it, not with a sense that you've been possessed by a Mesoamerican demon, but coming back with a sense that: Man, there's more to the universe than I thought, but I can never possibly figure out the truth — also could be a deception that has been imposed upon you. Could be all kinds of things.

**I will say, without going into any detail that I had once an incredibly profound and mystical experience that was, to my genuine shock, completely Jewish in nature and not from a side of Judaism that I had been brought up in. And that I've never been able to shake. And that has made me much more open to my own tradition than I would have thought.**

OK. Can you give me a bit more?

**No. [Laughs.]**

OK. That's fair.

**But what I will say about it is that —**

Wait, wait, wait. I've done a lot of these conversations. And this is not the first time when someone in a conversation who is officially sort of a mystician, as you are, has said: Oh, but by the way, I did have that one experience where it did sound like God was talking to me.

I've had a few conversations like that. So what I want to —

**But it was more frightening than that.**

OK, well, even better. So why —

**I'll give you a little bit. I wonder how happy our editors are going to be about this conversation.**

Oh, I think they're happy.

**It felt, for a very punctuated period of time, like a veil had been ripped open, and you could feel how terrifying these forces really were.**

**This is not the part where I'm a mystician. This is a part where some things are very hard to know where to put, and I've been trying to figure out what to do with this within my own tradition.**

**In terms of what I'm seeking, I'm actually seeking something closer to home, not something completely open. But it has to also feel real to me. I need to feel some gnosis from it, as is put in the book.**

But do you have to?

**Well, I feel I do.**

Without over-describing your own experience to you, why isn't it enough to say: OK, the God of my fathers in some way gave me a glimpse of why we're Jews and not mysticians. And I'm just going to pick a politically appropriate synagogue and so on. There are all kinds of issues with that, but I'm going to go to synagogue even if I don't feel gnosis.

I mean, I don't feel gnosis from Sunday mass, with my oversupply of children. Occasionally maybe —

**You seem more comfortable with that than I am.**

This is an interesting psychological thing that I've found in these discussions. I think part of it is having been around other people who had spiritual experiences and observed them, I have therefore accepted that some people have profound experiences.

I don't. Maybe I would if I took ayahuasca. But it's OK for me to be a person who isn't getting gnosis all the time.

I feel good at mass. Not always, but most of the time. It just seems to me that when you're called before the throne of the most high and the cherubim and seraphim are there, and you're like: Well, I wanted some gnosis.

God is like: I gave you gnosis. I gave you the big dose.

**But here's where the question of organized religion becomes complicated. As I said, it comes from a part of Judaism that is not the one I grew up in or even really know how to find out there. It's definitely there. I can find it. I can talk to people in Judaism about it. But it's strange. And the reason it felt —**

You mean the mystical part of Judaism?

**Yes. A much more mystical part of Judaism. But hold on, let me finish. In part because I had so little experience with that, I had to actually find the structure for what it was later — that it didn't feel like something my own mind had just invented — whoa. [Laughs.] I don't know if that got caught on the camera, but part of the ceiling tape just fell down in front of Ross. You can take your signs where you get them.**

OK [Laughs.]

**There you go. [Laughs.] This particular episode will be better on video.**

[Laughs.] Sorry — things happen.

**And then you go to your sort of space that's more organized. And what you're seeing doesn't track that at all.**

That's fair. And honestly, as a kid, we had experiences like that in my own family. My parents, especially my mother — we were Episcopalian, which is a very anti-mystical part of Christianity. And my mother had these intense experiences in a context of charismatic healing services. And it was hard to find, starting in mainline Protestantism, a church where it seemed like the thing that she had encountered was also there in some way.

In the end, we went through a lot of places and ended up as Catholics, in part because I do think Catholicism does a good job of saying: Look, we're not expecting the Holy Spirit to descend constantly all the time. It's a ritual religion, and the sacraments work whether or not you're feeling a blast of God's presence.

But it is a reasonable desire to feel that the encounter you have has some relationship to what is being done on the altar or done in the rituals. I think that's completely understandable.

**One perception of these drugs or medicines — or whatever you want to call them — is that they're pretty profound spiritual technologies if you believe in them from that perspective — as opposed to if you believe they're just inducing random fires of chemicals.**

**So in a world that got disenchanted, you might imagine you would want these big traditions to try to build some containers of safety and knowledge around them.**

**But they seem like a thing that can pretty reliably create an experience that actually connects people, in a very profound way, to their home tradition.**

**Now, it can do other things too. But as you say, that's true for a lot of things in religion. Why should they not be used as that? Why treat them as occult, as opposed to perhaps a providential thing that emerged at this time when people badly need the help of things that create a kind of re-enchantment, and breaks the shell of logic that makes faith so difficult for many people?**

I think that's a fair question. And I think one answer is that they, like all things that operate in reality from a Christian perspective, must have some providential expression.

The Catholic view is that you are not supposed to try and commune with spirits or speak to the dead in certain ways.

You shouldn't go to a séance. There's a certain set of supernatural experiences that Catholics are not supposed to seek out. And there's some biblical warrant for this. There's the explicit teaching of the church.

And the simplest way to express why is to say that the church thinks there's a certain set of things that we know God is present in, and then there's a certain set of things that are just like opening doors.

And God and his providence can certainly be there when you open the door, but we don't have any kind of guarantee of that. And by opening the door, you are opening yourself in a way that is fundamentally unsafe.

Now, again, does that mean that someone can't come to God by taking a psychedelic? No. Absolutely someone can, under this theory. But for the church itself, or for Christians in general, there is a sense that once you are in, then you aren't supposed to go looking in those places anymore. Because we just don't know what the potential dangers are there.

**Here's the other skeptic interpretation of what I just said.**

**The very fact that you can reliably induce mystical experience just shows that this is random firings of brain chemicals. This should make you much more skeptical all the way through that mystical experience has any truth-value to it at all.**

**The fact that something that, in the case of LSD, a chemist synthesized just mere decades ago can be some sort of reliable portal to people feeling like they had some kind of mystical experience — it actually implies that none of this was ever mystical at all.**

**There is some kind of pattern of brain chemicals that you can fire off that, in the same way, some patterns will make you depressed and other patterns will make you think your body is itching. One of those patterns creates the misapprehension of the numinous.**

**And all of this is actually not an argument for any kind of belief. None of it is spiritual technology. What it shows you is that there's kind of nothing here. And it actually just explains away a huge category of experience that leads people toward these fantastical claims.**

Right. And to be clear, I don't think that one should ever rest the case for the existence of God or the supernatural on psychedelic experiences alone. But —

**You write about near-death experiences in the book. There's fasting. There are a lot of induced mystical experiences, and you do take them seriously. So I guess I'm asking: Why not just the brain chemicals?**

No, I think what one should take seriously is the fact that clearly our minds exist in a dynamic relationship to our bodies and to physical reality. And religious experience — again, to take the Barbara Ehrenreich example, there is the kind of religious experience that falls on people unbidden in some way. I have seen this happen.

And I think it's a little bit hard to tell a brain chemistry story where it's like: Why do human beings suddenly have this God apprehension thing that just turns on? Where did this apprehension device come from? All our other apprehension devices are evolved to meet some sort of actual reality.

**Can I force you to steel-man this? Because if you've ever read an Oliver Sacks book or are familiar with mental illnesses, there are many things that happen in our brains where you might say: Why do we have something like that that can ever turn on?**

**But we do.**

Yes. But religious experience and spiritual experience are, at the very least, in a distinct category from mental illness in that people who have religious experiences are very often entirely sane and entirely aware of the strangeness of the experience they've had and so on.

I take your point about the Oliver Sacks stuff. You could just say: OK, well people's brains can misfire in this way and it yields mental illness, and they misfire in that way and they think they're encountering the numinous or something like that.

I don't think that's an impossible view to hold. All I'm saying is that the religious world already takes it for granted that the physicality of your body has some kind of connection to your apprehension of the divine. And most of the time, you are not supposed to be apprehending the divine.

To go back to your vision — the idea that religion is a scaffolding. Reality itself is kind of — the Silicon Valley guys that say it's a simulation. OK, well it's a world that you're supposed to be in. You're supposed to be in this world. Whatever God is up to doesn't work if we're not in this world most of the time.

And having a spiritual experience is getting our mind a little bit out of this material world. But it's not the way things are supposed to work all the time. We're here as material, embodied creatures for a reason.

But yes, I don't think there's anything internally contradictory about thinking that the clear link between the physical and the spiritual means that you could reduce the spiritual to the physical experience.

**Well, I always enjoy that there are these two completely opposite theories of what the brain is doing.**

**And I'm not saying one isn't much more accepted than the other. But there's the more materialistic understanding that everything in our experience is the brain. And then there's the theory that I've heard from some consciousness researchers, that exists in the near-death experience world, that some of the psychedelics people believe that the brain is a kind of like a reducing valve. Tell me about that thought.**

Yes, that's just the idea that whatever the mind or soul or consciousness is, it's capable of this much wider apprehension of reality, including divine realities, whatever those may be, that aren't really fully compatible with being an embodied creature in the world.

And so to be an embodied creature in the world, your mind's capacities and experiences need to be reduced, funneled down to the sensory inputs being processed by your eyes and nose and mouth and ears.

So that's why, when you have moments when you shake up the brain, when you put the brain in extreme circumstances via fasting or when you reach the threshold of death, the mind's experience doesn't actually seem to contract. It seems to expand.

And one of the challenges in explaining something like near-death experiences from the materialist perspective is that they are described not as fragmentary hallucinations — dreamlike experiences, random, chaotic. They are described as more real than real, incredibly intense. They carry back into people's post-near-death-experience lives. They cause big changes to people's post-near-death-experience lives.

And it really is a little bit hard to tell an evolutionary story about why the brain is wired, for some Darwinian reason, to generate its most intense experiences at a time when, for most people, you're just going to die.

**You talk in the book about something you call official knowledge. What's official knowledge?**

Official knowledge is the knowledge about the world that is considered normal and respectable in publications like The New York Times and Ivy League universities. Most Wikipedia entries —

**You can find very strange things on Wikipedia.**

You can, but to their credit, in a certain way, the editors of Wikipedia try to impose some of the same assumptions about the world that are shared by most of the formal institutions of knowledge creation out there.

**One of the things that has happened to you over the years, and that you've written about very beautifully, is you've had profound struggles with chronic Lyme disease. And it made you more open to the way a lot of people feel failed by official knowledge and the institutions that produce it.**

**I've been interested in the generalizability of that experience — which I think is laced in some ways through the book — for you. What happens when, all of a sudden, what is official knowledge no longer conforms to the world as you experience it, and the crowbar of skepticism that places between not just you and that particular institution but maybe you and all of them simultaneously: If this could be wrong, if this could have failed me so profoundly, well, who's to say it's not all failing me so profoundly?**

That is the feeling that you have. Right?

I had — and still have to some degree, though I'm much better — a chronic illness that is not officially recognized by the Centers for Disease Control. And indeed, to say that you have the chronic form of Lyme disease is to identify yourself in some way with just the world of everyone from R.F.K. Jr. to holistic wellness practitioners.

So, in a whole world that is held in severe disrepute by official medical knowledge

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**You say, kind of pointing at me. [Laughs.]**

No, no. I mean, I think this conversation has been the most serious blow to official knowledge since, I don't know.

**[Laughs.]**

So I really was sick. I really did get better using a combination of really strong antibiotics and other stranger things that are not recommended by the C.D.C. But it really did work. And I am morally certain both that chronic Lyme disease absolutely exists and the C.D.C.'s recommendations are absolutely wrong.

So then the challenge is: You've seen that the pillar of official truth has a hole in it. How many holes does that mean that there are? And something that I have very self-consciously tried to do in my own thinking about this — and this applies to arguments about religion and religious belief, as well — is not to assume that because official knowledge is wrong about one thing, it's wrong about everything. That seems like a big mistake.

And, second, not to assume that because official knowledge is wrong about one thing, one important thing that really affected my life, that all evidentiary standards should be thrown out or anything like that.

But that's clearly a really hard psychological balance to strike. I saw it myself. I spent a lot of time in worlds of chronic illness and alternative medicine, and people, for totally understandable reasons, became full-spectrum skeptics about anything

the government said. Anything that the American Medical Association said was just: If they're wrong about my illness and my experience, they must be wrong about everything.

The pull of that is incredibly strong. And in the case of religion, I think one of the things, understandably, that nice secular agnostic people fear about going too far with my arguments is that the next thing you know, we're going to be throwing out all of modern science and progress and locking up Galileo and so on.

And I don't want to say that that's not a legitimate fear. There clearly are ways in which religious belief and religious doctrine can end up being an impediment to finding out what is true about the world. I'm interested in what is true about the world, in the end.

My goal — and your goal, hopefully, as journalists — is to figure out what is true about the world. I think, to my mind, very clearly certain things are true about the world that have to do with God and the possibility of the supernatural that are not encompassed by current official knowledge.

And I think the modern liberal project is correct — that there are just limits to the kind of certainty you can have and how that certainty should cash out, certainly in politics. So there is a balance.

And yes, anytime you're trying to correct an official consensus, you are looking for a balance where the correction doesn't become an overcorrection.

**When we were young bloggers so many years ago —**

Many, many years ago —

**Yes. It felt then that the political system seemed deeply polarized on taxes, on foreign policy, on the Affordable Care Act. And I'm not saying those polarizations don't still exist. They do. But we seem more fundamentally polarized now on official knowledge than on anything else.**

Yes.

**And the parts of the Democratic Party that were outside that consensus, led by a figure like R.F.K. Jr., have become parts of the Republican Party. The parts of the Republican Party that were more inside that consensus and want to stay there — some of them, like Liz Cheney and Adam Kinzinger and Mitt Romney, have moved away from at least the Trump Republican Party.**

**So the coalitions, which used to have a mix of people inside and outside official consensus now are split between them. And this feels to me like one of the things that has really deranged our politics — that the parties are imbalanced in terms of their relationship to institutions.**

Yes.

**Democrats may be too trusting. Republicans, in my view, much too skeptical, with too little empirical grounding anymore.**

**I guess I was curious — before you said yes a bunch of times — if you agreed with that framing. How do you think about it?**

I absolutely do.

Although I would push harder on: I think one reason that Donald Trump is president again is precisely that the party of official knowledge seemed to do a lot of really crazy things, and that made people more sympathetic to the party of outsider knowledge.

But look, now the party of outsider knowledge is in power —

**But let me add to that story just in one way: I think the polarization had already happened. And that's actually part of what that period represented.**

**One of the things Democrats didn't have during that period was actually enough skepticism of the institutions of official knowledge.**

**I think you would agree that the people pushing a lot of the ideas that you see as destructive from them — and some of them, I probably also feel, were ultimately destructive — were doing so wrapped in the garb of official knowledge, wrapped in**

**credentials coming out of universities, etc.**

**It was in part actually an institutional monoculture on the Democratic side that created a loss of some antibodies that might have created some friction between that and going way too far. And now you have the other side in power, also without any antibodies.**

Yes. And I think one of my disappointments about the Trump administration in the first three months is just how pure and uncut its outsiderism seems to be.

I think it was an open question when Trump was re-elected: Would R.F.K. Jr. be running H.H.S.? Or would he be running the president's council on making America healthy again? And we got the timeline where he's running H.H.S.

And you can multiply examples. And I think in many of those examples, you can see a version of the problem that I identified to you just now, you can see it in the trade and tariffs debate, this assumption that the experts got something big wrong and therefore, Peter Navarro should make trade policy. And the second does not follow from the first.

The huge challenge for conservatism right now is to figure out how you generate some kind of stability of actual expertise in a party that is now temperamentally completely anti-establishment, populist and so on.

And I think there was a hope that the Silicon Valley faction that migrated into the Republican camp, in part in reaction to some of the failures of expertise that you just acknowledged, would play a version of that role. And I think definitely Elon Musk has not played a version of that role to date.

So the Republican Party is a party in search of a stable system of official knowledge generation besides whatever Donald Trump decides — and doesn't have one at the moment for the foreseeable future.

**Always our final question: What are three books you'd recommend to the audience?**

So I'm going to give three books on religion that connect to my attempt to shift what official knowledge or the official knowledge of New York Times podcast listeners think about religion.

The first one is a book from about 20 years ago by a physicist named Stephen Barr called "Modern Physics and Ancient Faith" that, I think despite being a little bit dated, is still really the best overall survey of where arguments in modern physics that relate to religion stand, and how a reasonable person might think about it. It's not a dogmatic book. It's a very open-minded and interesting book. So that's Book 1.

Since we were talking about near-death experiences, there are a million books about near-death experiences — many of them bad. I think for people who are interested in this subject, one recommendation would be a book called "After" by Bruce Greyson, who's, I think, a psychiatrist or neuroscientist from the University of Virginia, who just has a good overview, from a perspective of a practicing physician, of why people take these strange stories seriously and why it might unsettle a materialist worldview.

And the third book — I mean, honestly, Ezra, maybe this is unnecessary since you conceded so much ground to the mysterians. But I think a final book that's useful to people who listen to this show and are like: What are these two guys smoking, talking about consciousness like this?

This is a book that was very controversial in the philosophical community when it came out. It's called "Mind and Cosmos" by Thomas Nagel, who's a famous philosopher — not religious — but arguing for the fundamental limits and problems with a materialist framework on the world.

It is a very short book, which is why I don't hesitate to recommend it. A lot of books about consciousness are not short, but this one, I think, you can read and get a sense of why intelligent people might at least be inclined toward an Ezra Klein-style mysterian — if not quite toward the militant Catholicism of Ross Douthat.

**Ross, I enjoyed it a ton. Thank you very much.**

I enjoyed it, as well, Ezra. Thank you so much.

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