

## ***The Ezra Klein Show***

### ***Ross Douthat on Trump, Mysticism and Psychedelics***

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*This is an edited transcript of an episode of “The Ezra Klein Show.” You can listen to the conversation by following or subscribing to the show on the [NYT Audio App](#), [Apple](#), [Spotify](#), [Amazon Music](#), [YouTube](#), [iHeartRadio](#) or [wherever you get your podcasts](#). [ 1 hour and 35 minutes, 38 pages ]*

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.