

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