

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.**