

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 mysteerian, 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 mysteerian. 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 mysteerians. 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?