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 —

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