

**Depends on the pagans. But it also depends on the Christians. But the argument Perry was making is that Peterson is, at least in his ethics, somebody who thinks a lot about the weak, who cherishes women.**

**Tate is more interested in power, in dominance, in driving his enemies before him and fathering a lot of children potentially from a lot of people.**

**And I've thought about that question — that war between, crudely, paganism and Christianity is playing out right now on the right and in the Trump administration. There are ways in which those strands seem braided through everything — the drive for power, for a renewed 19th-century masculinity, versus the more Christian dimensions of it.**

**JD Vance is an emblem of the Christian side of the administration. Elon Musk is an emblem of its pagan side, with his many kids from many different women.**

**And Trump is somebody who, in both his traditionalism and also his brashness and will-to-power, has both threads inside himself at the same time.**

Maybe. Honestly, I think Trump may have come to some conception of belief in God after the assassination attempt — just observing his comments.

But I think of Trump as, persistently, a kind of pagan or heathen figure, much more than he is a Christian figure. Notwithstanding the attempts to claim him as a kind of King David or Emperor Constantine. There's sort of an idea that you get from religious conservative supporters of Trump that you have these figures in the Bible or Christian history who are rulers and are sinful in various ways — but maybe, in a way, advance God's cause, despite their sins and failings.

I don't really think of Trump that way. But he is committed in an explicit way to Christianity. And to me, the bargain with Trump has always been, for religious conservatives, some mix of protection and support — a transactional bargain. And then more recently, a hope that some kind of renewal of American dynamism can bring religion itself back with it.

Which, I will say, is a hope that I have indulged in myself. It's like: OK, you have different varieties of post-Christianity out there, and you don't want to ally with

the Andrew Tates, but you do want to ally with the people who have big hopes for the future, rather than a woke progressivism that just seems inflected with cultural despair.

That would be an argument that I think a Christian might say who was trying to explain to themselves why they are in alliance with Elon Musk. Better to ally with Elon, who has some good desires and believes that humanity is good in some way and wants a sort of more dynamic future than to take a purely pessimistic perspective — that climate change is going to kill us all and structural racism means we deserve it. That would be the argument.

**But what you just described as pure pessimism — putting aside the idea that climate change will kill us all — which I don't believe, I think most people, even on the left, don't believe. But they believe there's a way out. You just have to really work for it.**

**At the end of your book, you give an account of why you are a Catholic, and why you find it persuasive. And I find your account of it very moving.**

**It's a thing that appeals to me about Christianity. And the account you give is about both the strangeness and the radicalism of Jesus Christ as a figure. How uncomfortable it is to read him. How challenging. How Christianity is a religion about meekness: The camel has a better chance of fitting through the eye of the needle than the rich man does of getting into heaven. There's always been a radicalism in that.**

“The meek will inherit the Earth” is a famous line. Though I would say renunciation more than meekness probably.

**There's a godliness of those who do not have power.**

Yes.

**At the same time, there is this administration that very self-consciously tries to frame itself as Christian. People in it, like JD Vance, are.**

Many people in the administration are Christian.

**And I do not see in them, or in the way they act in this world, this love of those who do not have power. They made a Studio Ghibli meme out of an immigrant crying.**

**There's something about the interplay here of a self-conscious Christianity and a self-conscious memetic cruelty that feels very appalling to me and also un-Christian as I understand it.**

The aspect of conservative populism, right-wing populism, whatever you want to call it, that does see itself in clear continuity with Christian ideas and Christian views basically holds that it is speaking on behalf of the weak and the oppressed — people who don't have a voice in society.

And those people are the native-born working class of the Western world who have been asked to bear inappropriate burdens — I'm just framing the case — beginning with the economic burdens imposed by free-trade regimes that sent their jobs overseas. And continuing with the burden — again, this is the argument — of social disorder and breakdown associated with the drug trade in a globalized world. The free movement of peoples that transforms cities and neighborhoods in ways that fall most heavily on lower middle-class Americans and are avoided and evaded by the upper class.

This is the narrative.

The beneficiaries of globalization are the equivalent of the rich person in various of Jesus's parallel parables. And certainly Jesus does not hesitate at various moments in the Gospels to say pretty harsh things about people who have betrayed their leadership role.

So the one reason I pushed back on meekness is: Yes, Jesus uses the word "meek," but Jesus himself is not a meek figure. And you can go through the New Testament and find plenty of cases where Jesus says incredibly harsh things, mostly about powerful people and sinners. Where Jesus cleanses the temple and

drives the money changers out and curses the fig tree that doesn't bear fruit. You can go on.

**But you are talking about the powerful here, and what I'm asking about is the treatment of the powerless.**

**Even if you believe — and I don't contest this point — that many people in this country have bore undue burdens, I understand that as central to liberal politics, too. But the issue is the cruelty with which poor immigrants are treated by the Trump administration — the laughing about it.**

**It's fine if you want to say they should be unkind to Ezra Klein, a New York Times columnist. I more mean that there is an embracive, memetic cruelty — not aimed at the powerful but aimed at other forms of the powerless. Where, as I understand the radicalism of this ethic, whatever your border policy, there should be a profound compassion for, say, Haitians who came here fleeing some of the most desperate poverty in the world to work hard at jobs to build up a life for their families. There's something about the weaponization of cruelty against the powerless that I'm trying to get at.**

As I said before, I think you have what you're describing as Christian and pagan tendencies braided together in the Trump administration. And I think that not all but many of the things that you describe absolutely reflect more of a pagan sensibility than a Christian one.

I agree with you that particular steps the Trump administration has taken in this term are not Christian. They are anti-Christian.

I think it started with the cuts to foreign aid. I think you can completely justify some kind of renovation of the foreign aid program. Christians are not bound to support any particular set of programs.

But I think the way in which the foreign aid programs were reshuffled and cut off and so on was a failure of Christian duty in a pretty obvious way. The core motivations there were just different from the evangelical motivations of the Bush era, and reflected, frankly overall, the decline of Christianity in American life.

I will just say, though, since we're taking a pretty hard line of critique here: You have watched this happen all the time on the left in different ways over the last 5 or 10 years, where people whom I considered to be sensible, good, well-meaning moderate people were in a coalition with people who had more intensity, more passion, more zeal, who made a certain set of demands on them that led, in people I knew and admired and respected, to compromise their own values in ways that also had real-world material consequences.

I don't want to relitigate wokeness, but part of the nature of politics in a landscape where there's no religious consensus, there's no moral consensus, is that forces that appear to have energy behind them — world historical energy, perhaps — will draw people, who have convictions that should put them in tension with those views, into certain kinds of compromises.

But I agree. I do not admire the way that the Trump administration approaches any of the policies that you're talking about, from humanitarian aid to the deportations to El Salvador.

**One of the things I'm getting at in life broadly, but specifically in the policies or rhetoric and the comportment is: I think a lot about JD Vance — who, as a person, should have had some protection from this. I think he is Christian. I think he thinks a lot about virtue and ethics.**

**You brought up the tariffs. I don't think there's anything un-Christian about the tariffs. I think they're bad economics, not bad religion.**

**And a lot of these policies I actually believe that about. I think people can have very mistaken views on policy because they are just wrong about what the policies will do in the world. I have had mistaken views on policies because I was wrong about what the policies would do in the world or the way they would be carried out. But it's more the compatibility with what I think has become a dominant tone.**

**I think we're in a very unstable era in terms of what I might call our political manners. Matt Yglesias had [a piece](#) about the way a lot of Hitler revisionism is beginning to happen, out of a feeling that we have overpenalized questions**

**about race and antisemitism. And in order to widen the boundaries of debate, you have to have on World War II revisionists.**

**There's a sense that this sort of politics of manners didn't work, and so a politics of no manners needs to be tried now. Donald Trump has been an innovator and a pioneer in that. And it has created a lot of memetic imitators who, on the one hand, don't have some of his lightness, authenticity or funniness.**

**But on the other hand, even though I'm not myself religious, I'm a little bit idealistic about religion. And I feel this about my own religion, which I think should create very profound sympathy for refugees, and that has not been something I've seen in the past couple of years. And I think this of Christianity, where it feels to me like it should create a kind of buffer against greed and cruelty that I often see broken when it would be politically viable to break it.**

Right. Two things. One is that, yes, you are describing the story of both Judaism and Christianity's engagement with history and fallen human nature. This is something that is in fact advertised in both the Old Testament and the New Testament and all of history since.

The story of the Jewish people in the Old Testament is not a story of people who were chosen by God and given a bunch of commandments and then obeyed them all. It's a story of people who remained the chosen people, despite failing in every possible way, including — to fit our conversation — repeated flirtations with heathenism and paganism and idolatry.

And then you can obviously tell a similar story of the New Testament. Christians don't have political power, but the apostles are always screwing up and messing up. And then, of course, the history of Christianity's entanglement with political power is filled with sins and failings that — again, like this era's set — are not atypical.

But then the second point that I want to push you on is: What kind of argument is this that you think you're going to win with religious believers who disagree with you? You're like: I don't believe in your religion, but I really wish that you would follow your religion so that your politics were more aligned with mine.

That's just not much of an argument at all. And I think, to the extent that all of liberalism, the ideology that you subscribe to, trades on inherited ideas from Christianity about morality and equality and so on, while you've jettisoned the portrait of the universe, the metaphysical structure that gives them meaning, I think it's really hard from that point of view for you to get anywhere in arguments with people who still believe in that structure. Because you're essentially saying: I've stripped away the conceptual framework that makes your moral ideas make sense. But now I'm going to complain that you're not living up to your moral ideas.

I just think that's a really weak argument.

**But I'm not arguing it.**

Well, you're saying it to me.

**I'm asking you.**

I'm a Christian. I'm right here. You're expressing sorrowful disappointment that Christians are not living up to a worldview that you think is false.

**Well, I think parts of it are. I'm unconvinced on parts of it. We'll talk about the view of the cosmos in a minute. But I'm not trying to offend you here. I'm actually asking. I'm not —**

Ezra, does anything about our long relationship suggest that you could possibly offend me?

**I've known you long enough to know when you're getting a bit heated.**

That's totally different. [Klein laughs.] As I was saying, the New Testament is filled with heated encounters.

**I don't think a thing I'm saying here is going to convince somebody on the Christian right to turn around their view of Donald Trump. But I am genuinely curious how somebody of your politics and your religious background interprets somebody like JD Vance, so I'm asking you questions about it.**