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The Psychology of Finding Yourself | Ross Douthat & Nancy Hill

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The Veritas Forum

This week on The Veritas Forum podcast, we're featuring a conversation with New York Times columnist Ross Douthat and Nancy Hill, a developmental psychologist and professor of Education at Harvard. Nancy's work focuses on the relationship between adolescents and their parents, and specifically, how the beliefs of adolescents are shaped by their parents' beliefs. In this conversation, Nancy shares how the development of her religious and ethnic identity has influenced her vocational pursuits and the person she is today.

Transcript

I was studying issues of culture and race and my work, and, you know, not quite audibly, but audibly and understandably, God just kind of said, "Hey, you know, I'm bigger than your African Americanness. I'm bigger than your racial background. In fact, I created racial and ethnic identity and different cultures.

I created it. You're studying it. Let me show it to you." And I knew then I needed to do that.

I needed to see God as something bigger than my racial background. Welcome to The Veritas Forum podcast. This week we're featuring a conversation with New York Times columnist Ross Douthat and Nancy Hill, a developmental psychologist and professor of education at Harvard.

Nancy's work focuses on the relationship between adolescents and their parents, and specifically, how the beliefs of adolescents are shaped by their parents' beliefs. In this conversation, Nancy shares how the development of her religious and ethnic identity has influenced her vocational pursuits and the person she is today. Hi, Nancy.

Hi. Thanks so much for having this conversation. It is a pleasure to be here.

Thank you. So you are a developmental psychologist and a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Can you tell me a little bit about the work that you do? As a developmental psychologist, I focus on especially adolescent development and their sense of self, how they develop their identities, how they come to understand what they're good at, their talents, their sense of purpose, their future goals and things like that.

I'm particularly interested in parenting and how parents make sense of that and how they socialize and confer and internalize their own goals that they have for children and how they help both shape the goals that their adolescents have and then help them reach them. Tell me a little bit about your work at a granular level. Do you do a lot of interviews? What's the basis of your... I'm a quantitative methodologist.

We do a lot of quantitative surveys, large-scale surveys. We use a lot of the public access data sets that the US government, particularly, the Institute for Education Sciences, collects over the years. And we look at basically survey data around how kids make sense of their goals, their self-esteem, their identity, and then an array of parenting strategies, including advice, support, monitoring, autonomy setting.

And we ask parents, and we ask kids about their parents, questions about this, and then we're able to use statistics to look at correlations or associations between particular parenting practices and children's outcomes. And we're particularly interested in how that varies across socioeconomic status, across community levels, ethnicity, and racial background, and just how culture and ethnicity and social position shape how parents think about their parenting as they parent in context and shape the ideas that they have about what they can shape among their children's development, which is a problem. As a parent of two very young children, one of the things that's been particularly striking, and of course this is totally predictable, is how much children come into the world as their own people, right? And especially when you have a second child, because the first one you think everything they do is somehow a response to your parenting technique, and then the second one comes, and presumably your parenting technique shifts somewhat, but they shift things more.

I guess I wonder, do you see interesting tensions between how parents think about their parenting and what their children actually experience? What do you mean by what do you think? I guess I just mean, do you think that parents and children tend to experience parenting techniques in similar ways? That is, if parents think their technique is very disciplined, focused, and so on. Do children always experience it as disciplined, focused? Or are parents, this is obviously a personal question, but you can't. It's also a scientific question.

To what extent are parents deluded, not only about the effects that they're having, but just how their parenting techniques are actually felt by the kids? There's a couple of

ways to think about. What we find in our data, and this is very consistent with a lot of people's data, is that you can ask parents and teens and children the same parenting questions, and they don't agree, even in the same house. If you look at correlations, which, you know, perfect correlation is one, and no correlation is zero, the correlation between parents and children in the same house, asking them the same questions, you're kind of capitalizing on method variance.

They correlate about .3, and so parents may say, we talk all the time about these topics, and kids will say, we never talk about these topics as it goes. And the other thing that shifts over time is parents vary as their kids grow in the amount of impact they think they have. So parents as parents are parenting kids as they enter their teen years, they actually feel like they have less control, and it's unclear whether they do or not.

And it's interesting, most people think that teens don't want their parents involvement or really separating from their parents, but deep down inside, they really want their parents involvement. And even when they push back and argue with their parents, it's not because they want their parents to stop being involved. And we see that time and time and again with teens when you ask them when they're on their own without their parents standing by, or anyone's parents standing by for that matter.

They will tell you, particularly around the important issues around life goals and broad belief systems and things like that. One, there's just a lot of agreement between teens and their parents, and two, teens turn to their parents for those important things. When you look at the kinds of conflict that ends up being part of the media, parent-adolescent conflict seems to be the mean, it's usually about things that in the grand scheme of things don't matter a whole lot.

Cleaning up the room, taking out the garbage, clothes that they're wearing, hair styles, which are part of this kind of tug and push and pull around autonomy and what should be in the realm of the adolescence control and what should be the realm of the parents' control. And that seems to be where the conflict is. Parents and adolescents aren't having big conflicts about large philosophical questions about life.

That's really interesting. And speaking of those large philosophical questions, the theme of these conversations is sort of the intersection between religion and academic work, God and the university and so on. So I wonder if you could talk a little bit about your own religious background.

You grew up in the African American church and you've ended up still a Christian, but in a slightly different place. Tell me a little bit about your faith journey, as people say. Well, as you said, I grew up in a Christian home and I grew up in an African American Christian home and we went to church and we went to the African American Baptist church and my family have been Baptist for many generations.

It's very much connected to... Ever since the Baptist church was founded by Jesus Christ himself? Right. Who was baptized, which determines that he's a Baptist. An adult baptism.

Right. Right. And it was very much tied to our cultural experience.

I grew up in a very culturally and racially mixed schools and a predominantly white community. And so part of going to church on Sunday meant we left this white community and we went to the African American community and church. And so for much of my upbringing, not only did I understand who God was and understand Christ as my Savior, but it was also very tightly tied to my ethic.

And my understanding of Christ and religion and religious practice and religious rituals were very tied to who I am ethnically and racially. And it wasn't until I was in my teen years that there was a local church, Presbyterian church as it was that was not far from my house and they had a youth ministry. And just because I lived in the neighborhood, I would go to this and they gave me a living Bible, which is a very everyday kind of translation, which is very different than the King James translation that was a part of my African American church.

And I actually thought that Jews learned Hebrew as part of their... Right. The King James English. And I learned King James English as my faith language.

It's great. It's great. How do you make sense of these things as a kid? And so here I had this Bible that spoke a language that I understood.

And so suddenly, God wasn't this far away and distant person or thing or object. It was a God who spoke to me using language that I understood. And I still have that Bible.

And I tucked it away at that time. And as life happens, you know, fell away from my faith in high school and in college. But I always knew that I was going to be the cultural Christian that went to church on Sunday because that's what you do.

And it was in my graduate school and postdoc years that God just really challenged me. I was living far from home and I was trying to find my way in the African American Baptist church and was not feeling connected culturally or religiously. And I was studying issues of culture and race and my work.

And, you know, not quite audibly, but audibly and understandably, God just kind of said, "Hey, you know, I'm bigger than your African American-ness. I'm bigger than your racial background. In fact, I created racial and ethnic identity and different cultures.

I created it. You're studying it. Let me show it to you." And I knew then I needed to do that.

I needed to see God as something bigger than my racial background. And so much to my mother, Shigren, I left the African American church and began looking for a church that would give me this kind of multicultural expression. So I could understand who God was, both within my cultural identity, but looking across cultural identities.

And I started as a faculty member, a young assistant professor at Duke University, and I attended the African American Baptist church around the corner as I should do as a good daughter of my mother and my father. And I just didn't fit. It no longer fit for me.

It was nothing wrong with the church. It was nothing wrong with them. It was what God was doing within me.

And I ended up attending this fantastic international multicultural, multi-ethnic, non-denial national church in Durham, North Carolina, called Kings Park International Church. It just opened my eyes to different ways of worship. I was exposed to the Holy Spirit and charismatic expressions of faith and religious experience and understanding who God was, and it was fantastic.

And I began to be able to see my faith not just being part of my identity, but a lot of the students in my classes, some of them went to the church, which was really crazy for me. It never had that kind of experience where things that were happening in my professional life, in my classrooms, were also happening in my faith community. And to see that intersection was life-changing.

And that's really interesting because so often the assumption in conversations with academics, especially elite academics, who are also believers, is about the tensions between your vocation, your academic life, your academic setting, and religious practice and belief. And it seems like for you, you had this tension in a different place, this familial tension in a way about what kind of Christian you were going to be. Is it fair to say that your academic community in a weird way ended up reinforcing your faith? Or was it, have you experienced tensions of the kind that people assume exist? The kind of tensions between my work and being a Christian in your department? Most people know that I'm a Christian, but they also, I think I get kind of a by being African-Americans because people assume that if you're African-American, you're a Christian, a lot of our particularly the civil rights leaders were also Christians.

It's part of our culture. It's part of our culture. When they find out that I don't attend the church that I'm actually praying on campus, that I'm doing something like Veritas, when they find out the integration, then it becomes something of an anomaly.

But I haven't felt this sense of tension around, "Oh, you're a Christian, you must not be serious about your work." Or Christianity and faith and science that you do as a social science don't marry, and so there must be some. I have not experienced that. That's good to hear.

I wonder on the question of the work itself, do you feel like there's an integration between your faith and your work? Both generally and then obviously sort of on this specific question of you're a Christian raising children, right? And you're studying how people raise children and how parents form character or don't form character as the case may be. Could you just talk a little bit about that? As I study parents' beliefs about their own parenting, I don't study religious beliefs in particular. I'm really looking more at broader beliefs around what parents think are the kinds of practices that will yield change and behavior modification and development.

And giving their children the kinds of skills to navigate the world that they see it as they see it. Where the intersection of my faith and my work comes is really around how I do my work. When I had that experience of integrating my faith and my professional work, when I began attending this church and my students were there and I went on a mission trip with them.

It just kind of came crashing together for me to make that sense of. It was a time I was a young assistant professor and as insecure as they are about whether they're going to get tenure and the papers that were coming in from top journals rejected and these sorts of things. I had this kind of cry, am I cut out for this, which I think everyone has that kind of question.

Yeah, they're going to figure out that I don't belong and I slipped in while no one was looking and I'm going to fail publicly and all those insecurities. I had to then say, "Okay, God, you brought me here. You said you're going to show me culture as you see it.

I'm going to give you my work." And it didn't necessarily mean I was going to ask questions about religious beliefs in my work. It meant that I was going to ask God what truths he wanted me to attempt to illuminate in my work about families and about children's development and about individuals and human beings that he loves. As I study work around youth's goals and their aspirations for their lives and their sense of purpose, there's a whole body of secular psychology literature on that.

But my interest in it is because God has given each one of these kids a set of gifts and skills and a sense of purpose. And God has some ideas about that and he designed it that way. And so I'm not trying to divorce my secular training as a psychologist or co-opt it, but God is giving me these tools as a psychologist and a social scientist.

How do I use those tools to ask the questions that he wants me to ask? And what about your own parenting? Whether from a religious perspective or not, I know you have a 17 year old daughter and a 4 year old son, a wide age difference. So you've been parenting them at very different phases of your own life. But do you find that you take your work home with you in good ways, in bad ways? Do you worry about what you're bringing home from? Do you worry that you have the field data too much in your head? You know, when you're trying to get the 4 year old to put away her toys? You should probably ask

my 17 year old whether or not I agree with my work.

No, but we know that our parental response is right. She's not going to agree with me. So I'm going to tell you I bring only the best home.

I think what it does for me, particularly with our 17 year old, is that having this understanding of adolescent development and parenting makes me a little bit more empathic about the kinds of things that she's going through and the kinds of things that she needs. And when she is, I bet you before, that you know, childhood and adolescence are kind of the same. Lots of brain development, lots of sleeping and lots of, you know, I can do this by myself, right? Right.

And so when she's acting like the 4 year old, I don't turn to my station, you're acting like the 4 year old. And I say, you know what, two of you are in the same developmental stage and we're seeing this right now. It's funny, it's funny because we occasionally find that we're sort of shocked by how much our 4 year old will act like in teenager.

Yep. And we'll say, you know, we didn't think we'd get this kind of moodiness and this sort of, you know, grumbling and existential angst and all these things until you were 13. And then she'll say, well, I want to be a teenager.

She's practicing up for you. Yes. And so I think it makes me a little bit more empathic about what she really needs and kind of angst that she's feeling and uncertainty about her identity and this need to try things by herself and fail at them.

And I'm like, not unlike any other parent, I want to, you know, help my 17 year old not make mistakes and learn from my mistakes, don't make the same mistakes. And I have the same concerns about which mistakes she has to make for herself and in which I can try to prevent. And I think my work helps me realize that how many of those mistakes that she has to make herself and understanding that she needs to sleep.

10 hours to 12 hours a day and they may not be my preferred hours of the day. But just really having a better understanding of what's going on inside as her brain develops and she develops socially. So I tried to think I'm more empathic.

She may or may not agree. Those sound like insights that I will try and keep in mind 12 years from now when I have a 16 year old sleeping 12 hours a day. And anyway, this has been great.

Thank you so much. My pleasure. Thank you so much.

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