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Why the Public Square Needs Christian Voices | Ross Douthat

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The Veritas Forum

New York Times columnist Ross Douthat maps out the America's religious landscape and discusses how essential it is to have influential Christian voices in the world. • From the stage at the 2020 Augustine Collective in Boston, Massachusetts. • Please like, share, subscribe to, and review this podcast. Thank you!

Transcript

Welcome to the Veritas Forum. This is the Veritaas Forum Podcast. A place where ideas and beliefs converge.

What I'm really going to be watching is which one has the resources in their worldview to be tolerant, respectful, and humble toward the people they disagree with. How do we know whether the lives that we're living are meaningful? If energy, light, gravity, and consciousness are a mystery, don't be surprised if you're going to get an element of this involved. Today we hear from New York Times columnist Ross Douthat as he discusses the current American religious landscape and talks about the need for intellectual Christian thinkers in our society.

From the stage at the Augustine Collective Conference in Boston, Massachusetts. So very quickly in a sort of at a breakneck pace so that we can get to the more interesting conversations and questions. I am, as Andy suggested, going to try and sketch out a very crude map of what I see as America's religious, theological, metaphysical divisions right now.

And then at an even more breakneck pace, I'm going to try and relate it to the vocation that all of you have right now as Christian writers and editors and multimedia experts on college campuses and also the lives and vocations that may await you once you are ruthlessly kicked out of your current Arcadian existence, which is really going to happen. I'm sorry to tell you. So I think we tend to think of any divisions in American life in terms of binaries.

There are a bunch of books out in fact just in the last month, including one published by Brea herself called the New Class War, which you should also pre-order after you pre-ordered mine. That's about sort of political and economic divisions based on class in American life. And then there are books about political and economic divisions based on race and based on partisanship obviously.

And this inevitably bleeds over into religion where the conflicts are generally thought of in terms of these dichotomies between belief and unbelief, religion or Christianity and secularism or conservative religion and more liberal forms of religion. And you know, I'm just going to blow your mind and suggest that we should actually have a three-part distinction. No, I know, I know write that down instead.

And basically, I think I'm going to describe this in terms of world pictures. I think there are three big world pictures that are very important for understanding American life right now. And the first world picture is one that most of you as college students right now are having a kind of intimate exposure to.

And it's not incredibly powerful in the country as a whole, but it is incredibly powerful in what we think of as our elite institutions. Be they institutes of higher education or New York publishing houses or, you know, the New York Times, newspapers, media, Hollywood and the like. And this I think can be used, usefully described just as a secular world picture.

And what that means in practice is not a kind of militantly atheistic world picture necessarily. It encompasses the militant atheists in your life, the people who read Richard Dawkins and decide that he's settled every important question now and forever. But most of the secular world picture isn't that hostile to religion.

It can be even sort of friendly to religion in so far as religion manifests itself as a force for social or political changes that the secular world picture approves of. But it is very hostile to anything but the thinnest sort of metaphysics and certainly to anything that smacks too much of the supernatural, the idea that there might be an invisible unseen world of any kind that intervenes in human affairs or that human beings can encounter that can shape history or individual lives. It says hostile to belief in ghosts as it is to belief in the resurrection of Christ.

And the secular world picture, what it tries to do, consciously or not, is basically combine a often intensely moralistic political and social world picture that is influenced by Christianity in various ways without being in any way explicitly Christian with a picture of the cosmos that is materialistic in a fairly strict sense, maybe not the strict distance, but a fairly strict sense. And that's that basic worldview therefore combines a sort of high-minded humanitarian ambition, sometimes a sort of strident sense of a strident thirst for justice, you know, the stuff that gets described by people on the conservative side of politics as wokeness or social justice, warrioriness and so on. All of that can fit within the

secular world picture, this idea that the world is out of joint and should be put right, that there are great injustices that need to be resolved.

And then that is combined with a pretty reductionist view of what human beings actually are, the possibility for meaning, purpose, design, and so on in the cosmos. So that's one world picture. And I think if you added up the number of Americans who subscribed to it fully, you'd be looking at a pretty small slice of the population, but it's a very influential slice of the population.

Then the second world picture is what you might call the spiritual world picture. And this is a much bigger one, and it encompasses a lot of different theological perspectives, some of which call themselves Christian, some of which might call themselves New Age or pantheistic and so on. It runs from the world of sort of prosperity theology and self help Christianity, the sort of world of Joel Osteen on one end to the world of Oprah Winfrey and Eat, Pray, Love and Aneagram spirituality.

Am I pronouncing that right? Is it? Yes. And see, strike that from the record. Anyway, this is why I'm here to teach and to learn.

And it basically covers the big swath of Americans who are not hostile to ideas about the supernatural, who are not hostile, who believe in God or believe in a spiritual reality or spiritual realities, who believe in the power of prayer, who may believe in an afterlife. But what distinguishes this world picture is its skepticism about institutions and its hostility to absolutes. So the sort of what was the paradigmatic text of this worldview, and now it's sort of dated, but I'm getting older and losing my hair.

So I'll be dated with it is a book called Eat, Pray, Love that came out about 15 years ago that maybe some of you have heard of. But it's basically a sort of story of religious pilgrimage by a woman named Elizabeth Gilbert, who lives in the secular world at the start of the book, is deeply dissatisfied with that world. I think she even worked in publishing.

At a certain point, leaves that world, leaves her marriage, leaves her husband, leaves the life she expected to have, and goes on sort of a world tour that starts with the eating, which takes place in Italy, and moves on to the praying, which takes place in an Indian ashram, in the subcontinent. And there she has these incredibly intense religious experiences that do not fit at all within the secular materialist paradigm. But the upshot of those experiences is not a conversion to an Eastern religion.

She doesn't become Hindu or become Buddhist or become Jane. Nor does she sort of return to the sort of thin Protestantism that she was brought up with. She just sort of packages those religious experiences into a very personalized form of spirituality, a sort of church of the God within, basically, and then moves on to the third stage of the book where she falls in love with a handsome Brazilian divorcé, say, in Bali.

So it's basically like Augustine's Confessions. But it is in the sense that it's a culturally resonant story of a religious journey, a search for an encounter with God, but it doesn't end with conversion. And that, I think, is sort of a defining feature of what is right now the American religious center.

It used to be that you would say that a kind of mainline Protestantism was the American religious center 50 or 60 or 100 years ago. Now I think you'd say it's this kind of spirituality that accepts that supernatural realities are there, but is very doubtful that any particular revelation, any particular institutional church, even if people belong to an institutional church to practice faith, could possibly hold the truth, capital T, inside its confines. And then the third world picture, which there's an perfect name for because, you know, encompasses more than one monotheistic religion, but certainly for the purposes of this audience, I think I can just call it the biblical world picture, right, which is a world picture that agrees with the spiritual world picture about sort of metaphysical possibilities, but goes further and sort of insists that a kind of submission to an authority is a necessary part of religious life.

And for Protestants that may mean solo scriptura, for Catholics, it may mean the Magisterium of the church, but there's a sense that there is, you know, that you are not simply pursuing revelation and religious experience on your own, that at a certain point you're joining a tradition, accepting a sacred text, accepting a specific revelation, a specific set of moral teachings, and so on. And those, I think those three groups blur into one another, obviously, around the edges, right, they're sort of large pieces of Christian religiosity in this country that sort of move back and forth between the sort of traditional biblical world picture and this sort of fuzzier spiritual center. And then there's lots of people who sort of who's in their own lives or in their lives around them move back and forth between the spiritual and the secular world picture, feeling like, you know, militant atheist one day and looking at their horoscopes the next.

So there's a lot of blurring, but I think if you were to tell a story of what's been happening over the last 20 years in American religion, you would say that the biggest story is the growth of that middle and it's been growth at the expense in many cases of the sort of traditional and biblical world picture. What we think of as the decline of institutional Christianity that had a sort of a big drop after the 60s and a sort of aftershock in the last 10 or 15 years is heavily a story of people who used to identify, however marginally, with a Christian tradition, identifying as having no religious preference while also maintaining a set of spiritual beliefs that put them in this spiritual box rather than the secular box. And that's sort of a 20 year story that started pretty much when I was your age in the late 1990s.

And then I think, I think, and I'm a little less sure about this, but I think that a story of the last five or 10 years is a kind of weakening in certain ways of the secular world picture. And I made the joke about astrology, but it's not in fact a joke. My perception and you

guys may have a better sense of this than I is that especially among younger Americans who, you know, sort of are operating in secular mille years, there's a lot more experimentation with sort of quasi religious quasi spiritual practices than maybe was the case of people who thought of themselves as secular a generation or 10 or 15 years ago.

And so I think what's happening there is that you can see sort of some of the weakness of the secular world picture, the fact that it tries to put together a sort of moral vision and a metaphysical vision that don't really fit right this high moral idealism and this reductionist portrait of what human beings are. And out of that tension that unfittingness, there's a certain kind of energy and yearning and desire for something more that can partially be answered in political passion and political crusades and the Bernie Sanders presidential campaign. But also I think seeks an answer in spiritual forays and experiments that are sort of half ironic, but also half sincere.

So how long have I been going? 15? Not quite long enough. Not quite long enough. So I'm just, I just, so then so what does this mean for us? Right.

For those of us who aren't part of those two, the world picture that's been growing in certain ways that our world pictures expense and the world picture that sort of finds itself dealing with its own internal tensions. Well, I think, you know, one story that you can tell, which is the pessimistic story, is that these two trends together are actually going to make life in America harder for believing Christians over the next 20 to 50 years than they've been over the last 20 or certainly the last 200 in the sense that you can imagine a future where this sort of fuzzy spiritual middle continues to grow to some extent at the expense of declining Christian churches. And at the same time, the spiritual forays of the secular elite take them in a much an increasingly post Christian direction, right? So a world where the spiritual middle, the sort of post Christian spiritual middle is growing bigger and bigger, and the secular elite are effectively practicing paganism in a sense in various in various ways is a world that I think is, you know, reasonably understood as sort of more hostile and more threatening to Christian practice and belief than has been the case for most of American history.

So that's a sort of dark possibility to throw out. But then I think there are sort of two obvious possibilities, sort of two obvious paths to Christian renewal and revival. And you could think of one as sort of the institutional path and one as the theological ideological path, though obviously there's overlap between the two.

But you know, if you you can think, I think, usefully, if the weakness of the secular world picture, if it's chief weakness is this intellectual incoherence, the most immediate weakness of the spiritual world picture is the extent to which its individualism carries people outside the bonds of community and family and all of sort of the structured aspects of religious life that institutional Christianity in the US has historically provided. And at the extreme is that carries people towards what we see happening in working

class communities all around the country, a kind of culture of drug addiction and despair. But even if it doesn't carry people that far, it carries people more and more towards going through the life cycle, not just, you know, their late teens and 20s, much more alone than people have ever been in the past.

And that is a potential source of social crisis, but it's also a great potential source of opportunity for evangelization, for offering Christian models of community that both manifest the gospel itself and also manifest sort of particular religiously rooted answers to isolation and atomization and despair. And that is how, you know, in practice, religious renewal and revival has often happened in this country and not only in this country, that you have a sort of individualization and fragmentation that carries all before it. And then at a certain point, it carries things as far as they can go.

And people realize that they're missing the institutions that they or their parents or grandparents have left behind, that they're missing the sort of the structured relationship to the past and the future and to God himself, that the institutional church is supposed to offer. And so that's sort of one story you can tell about how the current dynamic shifts that at a certain point, the sort of biblical or traditional world picture and its institutions shrinks down to a dynamic core that then becomes the starting place for an actual new evangelization. Not the hypothetical one that my own Catholic church has been promising is going to happen for the last 20 or 30 years, but a genuine one that actually meets that religious middle and sort of fills the gaps and deficits that the sort of ostentatious to Oprah spiritual worldview doesn't fill.

So that's sort of the institutional scenario for Christian revival, but then there's also the one that I think is most relevant probably to the work you guys are doing right now, right, which is you can imagine a world in which that tension within the secular world picture, that failure of the thirst for justice and the picture of the universe and what human beings are, the failure of that to fit together provides an opportunity for to go back to Peter's beginning, faith and reason together at the highest possible level, awesome dynamic, you know, Augustinian, Chestertonian, yeah, Chestertonian anyway. And that in effect, people like you are there to offer a world picture that has the advantage of truth and the advantages that comes with truth, which is the advantage of coherence to not just a culture, but in elite that finds the secular world picture unsatisfying and also finds perhaps in other spiritual scenarios, things that are maybe a little darker than they expected that make the light of Christianity seem more attractive to. So that's, you know, again, these two things overlap and it's too simple to say that there's just sort of an American middle that needs stronger institutions and American elite that needs better ideas, but as a simplification, I think it captures something of the truth.

And the one final point I'd make and then turn things over to Brea is that, you know, because of the work you guys are doing now, because you're sort of doing Christian

intellectual work in campuses and elite campus environments, I think all of you are in different ways at the moment pointed towards the second mission, the mission where you're trying to, you know, infiltrate the New York Times and fill its op-ed pages with believing Catholics or something like that. And obviously, I think that that's an important, if slightly exhausting, vocation. But I think there's also, and there's also an argument which I can recommend without embodying, you know, that a big part of what America as a society needs, and then specifically what the Christian churches in America need is a way to figure out how to take people who come out of the environment in which you are being educated and have them minister to and work with and connect with people in working-class America in spiritual but not religious America, who are sort of disconnected from conservative or traditional churches and equally disconnected from sort of elite secular institutions.

And that form of bridge building, I think, is in certain ways the most important Christian work that's available. And so I'll end there. And thanks you so much.

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