

# OpenTheo

## **Bulwarks of Unbelief (with Joseph Minich)**

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Joseph Minich is the author of the recent 'Bulwarks of Unbelief: Atheism and Divine Absence in a Secular Age' (<https://amzn.to/42IBNrj>). He teaches for the Davenant Institute and is also the author of 'Enduring Divine Absence: The Challenge of Modern Atheism' (<https://amzn.to/3MSSYMi>). You can also hear him on the Pilgrim Faith podcast (<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLV68MyIL6gMc5ocrY2K7Cn4Jnqm8Z76>).

Joseph joins me to discuss his recent book and some of the causes of the felt absence of God in modern society.

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### **Transcript**

Hello and welcome. I'm joined today by my good friend Joseph Minich, who's the author of a recently published book, *Bulwarks of Unbelief, Atheism and Divine Absence in a Secular Age*. It's a splendid book, and I've got a blurb on the back cover that says as much.

You really need to read this book. I wanted to have Joseph on to discuss some of the issues that he raises within the book. The questions of divine absence, what is the cause of our secular age, what are some of the factors that give rise to our feeling of divine absence, and also what are the different genealogies of this secular modern condition,

and what are some of the ways that we can engage with these.

So first of all, could you say a bit more about what the book is, what your aim in writing it was, and what you hope it will achieve, and how readers might benefit from reading it? Yeah, yeah. Thank you so much for having me on and for your kind words. I really appreciate them.

Yeah, so the book is in some ways an extension of that little earlier book. I've been on the podcast before to talk about enduring divine absence, and that was kind of an earlier stage of my dissertation process, where I was trying to begin to think about the question of divine absence in various ways. It contains the seed of what I wanted to turn into an answer to the modern conundrum of divine absence.

The way I've been approaching it for many years is to start with divine absence not in terms of a... sometimes this can be confused a bit. Sometimes people have the impression when you talk about divine absence that what you're talking about is like the idea that God is not evident, or something like that. What I'm assuming is that God in some ways is evident to the human mind, that you can construct arguments, and they're persuasive arguments, but that somehow after you go through all of that intellectual process, you can find this lingering sense in yourself that nevertheless God could be clearer, and something about that gap, that gap within which he could be clearer, perhaps suggest a divine vacuum that sort of goes all the way down.

Something like that. So in the new book, what I tried to do, and this really grows out of my dissertation, what I'm trying to do in the new book is to perform, I think, an extended analysis of how we came to relate to reality in a way such that God does not seem manifest to us. Maybe another way of putting that is to say, how clear is God in the mirror of modern existence, in the mirror of our habits, in the mirror of our cultural conditions? How much do those block out sort of signals that are evident and obvious, and then shape us to kind of feel like God isn't there because of the way we've been attuned to reality? And effectively what I'm doing in the book, I think, then is trying to look at the modern condition in a fairly specific way.

In the older book, I focused mostly on technology, and I do that again here, but I try to say, how do modern technology forces and modern labor forces, that became, I think, a new contribution in the book, how do those together shape us to perceive reality in such a way that God seems silent or absent? And then I try to put all that within a context of, as you sort of already hinted at, I try to put my hypothesis sort of in the context of this debate over secularization and disenchantment and that sort of thing, all those genealogies. And within that field, I suppose I wind up looking like a kind of supplement to Charles Taylor. I suppose that's how I'm framing myself within that debate, as a kind of post, I assume, Taylor's analysis, and try to take it a bit further and narrow the gap a bit, if that makes any sense.

And you certainly have that allusion to Taylor's book in the subtitle of yours, in the expression of secular age. Some of the things that you discuss within the book, concern not just the rise of atheism as an avowed belief or absence of belief on the part of many people within our society, but the larger, broader plausibility of atheism that is felt by many believers who struggle with the question of atheism in ways that people would not have done the same degree before. Can you say a bit more about what it is that you are analyzing? It doesn't seem to be atheism as such.

It seems to be something a bit broader. Yes, thank you. That really helps bring the plane in for a better landing, I think.

Yeah, the idea there is to start with the shared sensibility that we have across the belief and unbelief spectrum. So in a sense, that's sort of what Taylor is doing, right? So what Taylor wants to say is, whether you're a believer or an unbeliever, what it is like to believe, if you're a believer, is different than what it was like to be a believer in 1500. And that is because you experience yourself as being a believer among a sea of options.

And you feel, by virtue of not just that sea of options, but by virtue of those habits I was just discussing, you feel in some sense the same degree of lack of clarity in some piece of your soul about God's obviousness that your atheist neighbor does. And what you're getting at with that word plausibility, right, is that atheism, even for those who are deeply persuaded that it's not true in their mind, there can be this lingering sense. William James would have called it a living idea, sort of like it's an available possible way of reading reality.

Even if I think it's, what's weird about atheism is even if I think it's intellectually quite literally incoherent, there's something in me that can still imagine it or think I can imagine it somehow. And that is true of believers as well. And so you're right that what I'm trying to get at is, how did we, maybe one way of putting it is, imagine the world? How did we begin to imagine the world and our place in it in such a way that atheism is even a felt possibility, even if we don't think it's an intellectual possibility? It's something like that.

So again, the move there is I think to start with something that's shared across both believers and unbelievers, and then say, what is it that's common about our condition, such that that is something we can kind of feel together, however we respond to that feeling? Yeah. So many Christian accounts, particularly more conservative Christian accounts of modern atheism and the modern world more generally, tend to focus primarily upon genealogy of ideas and how certain ideas came to be spread through, generally, particular figures who advanced those ideas politically and philosophically and more broadly in the society. And that idea that ideas and ways of seeing the world disseminate primarily through explicit propositional teaching and other sorts of social formation that are more explicit and ideological, that approach to the genealogy of ideas

and ways of seeing the world seems to be quite distinct from the sort of thing that you're doing within this book, which has far more of a materialist analysis at certain points, something that people might associate more with, for instance, sorts of movements that arise from Marx in understanding the alienation of modern capitalism or something like that, and how certain technological and social factors give rise to the plausibility of certain beliefs.

Can you say a bit more about that sort of method and what it has to offer? What are some of the maybe ways that we can check some of its extremes? And who are some of the fellow travelers in this sort of analysis within a conservative Christian circle? Yeah, in a way, I would say that this is perhaps where Taylor's influence on me is its deepest, in that what I think Taylor manages to do in a thing like *A Secular Age*, even if you don't agree with all of his conclusions, is he's very sensitive to both the material and the intellectual history kind of together, and he sees them just kind of reciprocally influencing each other, right? And it's kind of, I think nowadays, if I were to rewrite this, I might just say, it's the relationship between form and matter, if we wanted to go Aristotelian about it. Ideas and their embodiment have a reciprocal influence on one another in history, and I think what we've tended to do in our separation of mind and body and all those sorts of things, all the binaries that kind of define modern consciousness, what we tend to do is really think, as you just sort of implied, in terms of an intellectual history that just has sort of downstream effect and implications, that's a lot of worldview analysis and that sort of thing comes from that. Right, what this method, as you suggested, is trying to do is say, you know, material conditions, historical conditions, shape the way that you approach reality and therefore shape what's going to be plausible and implausible to you at an intellectual level in order to interpret that reality.

Where that can get dangerous is if you think the ideas themselves and the mental constructs themselves, the theories themselves, how would I want to put this, when you think those reduce to historical forces. In other words, when you think that historical, you know, it's just power at that point, right? That of course that became popular at that point because, you know, blah, we've all seen, this is the way people think nowadays when they talk about intellectual history. Everything reduces to some sort of power structure or something like that.

I think the appropriate way to get around that again is just to see very realistically and in some ways just very simply how in our own lives those two things fit together, how in our own civilization those two things fit together, and it's just kind of, in one way, it's just how human beings work for those two things to come together. And one thing, in fact, to mention fellow travelers, I really appreciated and I think is often missed about Karl Truman's recent book, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, as he makes two, he says a couple of caveats all the way throughout the book, and one of them is, hey guys, this is just an intellectual history, and you can hear, I can feel him being nervous about

how this could be appropriated. This is just an intellectual history, which is an important part of the story.

You can't understand the modern world without the intellectual side of the story, but that intellectual history can't fully be understood, Truman constantly insists throughout the book, without telling this other side of the story of the kind of the material movement of the modern world, and it's really the reciprocal reaction between them that fully produces what we're experiencing. And in fact, the reason I wrote out to Dr. Truman to write the forward to the book, is I sort of sent him an email, and was like, hey, I think I'm trying at least to tell something like the material side of the same story you're telling, maybe it's a decent compliment to your hypothesis. And so, yeah, I guess in terms of method, I'm not too fancy about that, in a sense, I think just recognizing they're always, always, always playing with each other, and all we're really saying then is that, yeah, some ideas are, I think I'm remembering the taxonomy of William James better, some ideas are just feel like living options in some locations more than others.

That does not mean that somebody outside of that location, there's always the exception, like in atheism is one of them, again, there were atheists who were persuaded atheists before the modern period, they were just very rare, because it wasn't a very living option for most people. That doesn't mean it's wrong. And you can say the same thing in reverse.

Orthodox Christianity in some communities is not, it does not feel like a living option to some people. But that doesn't mean it's wrong, or that nobody, even in those contexts can be a fully Orthodox Christian, if that makes any sense. Yes, your discussion of these things as living options, it seems, to some extent, that the rise of atheism as a living option might entail the, at least the contraction of Christianity as a living option.

Do you think that there's some sort of difference between the ways in which we can accept Christianity as a belief system that we adhere to in some more intellectual way, and it as a way of being in the world and living in the world, is fully a living option? And is there some dearth in our communication of the faith that maybe expresses, on the one hand, how people can think in terms of Christian faith, and maybe be committed to it on an intellectual level, but never quite reaches to the depths of giving people a living apprehension upon? Yeah, that's a really good question. And I think of a parallel in your own work, which is when you talk about gender a lot of the times, Alistair, you've often used this metaphor of the astronaut who is kind of disoriented from kind of natural forces that your internal mechanisms are sort of meant to be within the gravitational pull of. And I think that's such a fascinating observation, because it does something very similar to what we've talked about already, which is it starts in something common.

And I think what we often fail to see is that even if we're the people in the churches who are reading our Ephesians 5 and writing the books about biblical manhood, all those

things, it's easy to think we're the oriented ones, and they're the disoriented ones. But the very fact that there are 500 books published every year on biblical manhood and womanhood suggests to me, we are disoriented from our own natures much more commonly and in our churches. And in a sense, that's all I'd say over here, right? Taking that kind of same analysis to the Christian sphere, it's very easy to think, well, I've got my apologetics down, I've got my biblical economics, my biblical this, my biblical that, and to fail to see the ways, and in fact, use that to hide the ways.

I think that's what the devil wants us to do. Consider that a kind of arrival of soul, and then that hides over the deeper ways in which you, just like everybody else, are disoriented from reality in some very basic ways, because you live in the common world that everybody else does, and it shapes you in ways just like everybody else does. And that's kind of like, you know, when you see the New Testament church, you know, it's interesting when you hear the rhetoric of the New Testament, right? It assumes that everybody at church has been very deeply influenced by everything around us, and it's constantly trying to point us to that, hey, you're going to have that stuff really influence you, and you need to be oriented relative to Christ within, I think, a realistic assessment of that.

And I think what ideology does in an overly kind of brain trippy relationship to the faith, even though, of course, you and I are literally discussing ideas right now, so we're not against ideas, but an overly brain trippy relationship to the faith can leave us with the impression that we have, can leave us from the impression that we have blocked out all the ways in which we can be deceived and deeply disoriented, I mean, deeply disoriented to reality in some very basic ways. Yeah. I found this interesting when reflecting upon such things as the arguments for the existence of God that really were presented within a pre-modern setting, and the ways that we can relate to these today.

One of the books that I think you're going to be teaching in the summer program at Davenant House in a few weeks' time is, if I remember, *God Seen in the Mirror of the World* by Pierre-Marie M&A, and it seems to me that what he's trying to do is to recover traditional intellectual arguments for the existence of God that can often be presented in that sort of key from Aquinas' five ways, and actually trying to give a more existential and phenomenological take upon these that tries to capture them as living ideas in ways that maybe our reading of Aquinas in abstraction from the larger world within which he was writing and the larger framework within which he was presenting his ideas might not give us. And can you say a bit more about how we might engage in that sort of work? Yeah, I think that is actually a really, really important approach to play for the conversion of the contemporary imagination. One of the things about the proofs that's interesting is you, I think a modern person goes back to the proofs and you maybe you read them the first time and you're kind of like, does these even work? And then you understand them a little better, you understand them a little better, you understand them a little better.

And I think where phenomenological analysis comes in, especially for a civilization that has materialist habits of imagination, and I think we could talk about what that means. I think we probably all, whether we think so or not, perhaps have some materialist habits of imagination. And I think a lot of these debates, very basic debates over God and over whether reality bottoms out in mind or matter or something like that, that for modern people, my sense is that they, getting clarity on questions like that often takes the form of having a gestalt shift.

That is to say, it's not just that the argument works or something like that, it's that you frame, you realize I have been framing reality in some basic way in this way. And actually, if I just change the colors a bit, or I say, oh, maybe this has always been there, and I'm just not glancing at it rightly. So a good example is, the idea that we have souls, that we're souls and bodies.

It can take a little, because we so think like, well, a soul must be this thing away from the body, and we kind of separate them out or something like that. And so when we're expecting what would an immaterial thing to look like, we're contrasting it to material, and then we're trying to see, can I find that thing? And what a gestalt shift requires you to see is to say, no, you should never have even been expecting that. That's not what it means that there are souls, that there are invisible and spiritual realities.

Actually, if you just look at the iconic material order that is manifesting to you, and really experience it in its very textures, then you will see that actually some of these things, this kind of bottoming out in mind, that something soulish and personal about the world, is just an irreducible feature of anything you can call reality all the way down. You can't, in a sense, phenomenologically get away from it, if you're staring, I suppose, in a fine-grained enough fashion. And in that sense, I think what you wind up doing is kind of seeing that your default interpretation of what your experience implies is not only wrong, it's that it's not even what you're experiencing.

Maybe that's kind of what phenomenology helps us to see, is you don't actually even really experience a material universe. Your mental construct is against kind of the very textures of what it's like to be, or something like that. And so I think what we're talking about when we talk about something like that is the reshaping of the imagination to grow in, to the reshaping of the imagination to approach the faith, and then to be able to see that it's saying something about reality, perhaps in a different way than we have kind of arbitrarily been trying to shove it in.

And again, I think there's that parallel with gender, that like, what is reorientation? Well, it's not this kind of weird just recapitulation of some lists or something like that, moving through these arguments. It's a more deep re-self-possession of something that is interior to me and my experience, and then performing that. And I've found that very much in my work, that so much of what needs to be done is this deeper work upon the

imagination that precedes what people are looking for, which is definitions, rules, roles, and that's a very narrow range of things compared to the expansive biblical vision that really informs the imagination, your way of being within the world, your understanding of what it is to be yourself, not so much in a very speculative, theoretical way, but just in this practical being sense.

And the struggle to get people to make that shift is becoming quite considerable, because people often think, we more or less know the rules, we can read the Bible, we can see these statements, and yet those statements arise from a deep imaginative way of approaching the world that people have lost, even if they're retaining some, as it were, it's like a peninsula that's gradually collapsing into the sea, but there are these remaining stacks, and people think that since those stacks remain, they're still maintaining the truth, but without recognizing what has collapsed and been lost in the process. So one area that I'd love to discuss with you is how these ideas of divine absence that we might encounter within a more theological idiom, and within the ideas of theology, relate to this experience of divine absence within the modern world. So it seems that there has been something of a theological shift, starting back in medieval period, from an understanding of divine presence as something given in creation itself, to the presence of God being accidentalized, and so God's presence is seen as something relating to his omnipresence, or his interpenetration of reality, rather than seeing reality itself as suspended upon God, that we live and move and have our being, that there's this gift of reality that presents the relationship between God and creation in a way that frames those questions of absence very differently.

And I'm trying to think about some of the ways you might, I suppose, transpose certain of the more felt realities of the modern age into a theological idiom that maybe explains some of their implied ideas, or the ideas that they're... or even thinking about how they relate to the ideas of a more orthodox understanding of God's relationship to his creation. Yes, that's a really good question. In fact, Norris Clark's little book, *A Philosophical Approach to God*, which I had not read when I wrote this book, he has a really interesting thought experiment in there that goes along the ways of, could God... he sort of goes the other direction, he says, could God actually be clearer than he is? And so he does that kind of experiment that I mentioned in *Enduring Divine Absence*, right? What if God pulled back the clouds? Everybody kind of feels in some intuitive way if God pulled back the clouds and waved every day at three, that we'd all be persuaded of his existence.

But what Clark goes on to ask is, how would we know that that was God? An advance... if we put our sci-fi hats on, that's an interesting way to kind of generate a thought experiment. If we put our sci-fi hats on, and we imagine the advanced species, you know, controlling the clouds or whatever, and can get in... how do you distinguish what is possible sort of in your sci-fi imagination from what it would mean that God is evident? And what you just said, I think, is the primal difference, is that the evidence of God, the



evidentness of God in the classical imagination, just is the shining above the abyss of nothing of things. God is present in the very presence of things, and he's more present than presence of things.

They're shadows, almost relative to the fullness of his presence to you. That's the old view of presence. Yeah, I think what happens, as you've already indicated throughout the modern period, is that we cease imagining the universe that way.

Let me back up. Part of what the argument of the book is, of course, is that that way of imagining the universe and relating to the universe was reinforced by a lived context within which that was a living option, a living option reading of the world. In fact, just the default reading of the world.

And what we're seeing in the modern period is the world be related to in a different way, where that's a bit obscured. Where now there's this gap between, as you just kind of put it, I like the way you put that, presence just becomes kind of this thin veneer of omnipresence. Throughout these things that don't otherwise have God's presence.

And this is the modern thing. We always have to reattach God to creation in some way. We have to reattach God and value, mind and matter, whatever it is.

Right, and that generates then a way of relating to the world where it doesn't seem in itself to bottom out in mind. It's just either evidence as or doesn't evidence mind. And so you get to the intelligent designer thing.

Yeah, and so what you see, I think, is a shift from old divine absence rhetoric in the context of the world you just mentioned is generally just a question of the Odyssey, right? I mean, it's generally just them saying, hey, God is not here in the special sense of presence. In other words, it's saying God is not present in a helping me way. He's here metaphysically, but he's not here helping me right now.

And I would like him to be here. That's the Psalms. And right in the modern period, through that kind of orientation to reality, that obscures some of its signals and then creates what you might call a more phenomenological sense of divine absence, which is now the world doesn't feel obviously and immediately like the shining out of God himself in some way.

Once you're there, yeah, you're talking about, you know, the theodicy divine absence becomes a phenomenological divine absence. God doesn't feel present in his being, not just in his saving, but in his being. How does that maybe get reconverted into a theological? How do we kind of put those motifs together and think theologically? I think that's what Dietrich Bonhoeffer is trying to do at the end of the book, is to say that that quote he has about man coming of age in the modern world, very controversial.

It's been used in all sorts of wrong ways. But minimally, I think what we can say is. We

could see, you know, the the phenomenological experience of divine absence, that is to say, the the piece of ourselves that finds it ambiguous, finds God's being ambiguous in some way, is a trial.

We could look at the temptation to feel that as a trial that Christians undergo, and a trial to which God can be present or absent. And see, you do get back to the theodicy, because the answer to some of this is, Lord, help me. It is actually, save me from disorientation to reality, in a sense.

And I think he can and does. And so I very deeply do think you can put these together, in a sense, through the motif of trial. Because it is something of a trial to be this disoriented from how creation mirrors God.

And you can't just get out of it, you have to go through it. And I think God can minister and be present to us and persuade us in that. Let me say a bit about the concept of, I suppose, the word you use is techno culture at various points, and the sort of technological framing of our reality that we inhabit, and how that particularly makes it difficult for us to recognize and feel God's presence.

Yeah, yeah, that's a good question. I use the term techno culture just to emphasize, often, you can have, just like you were saying, we can have this kind of idea-centric narrative, everything is downstream from ideas. Well, you can also kind of have, like, as we've mentioned, a material culture narrative, and everything's downstream from material culture.

And that's especially true of kind of analyses of technology, where it's, even in maybe some conservative rhetoric about technology, where even if we are not technically against technology, it can become kind of an actor in itself, a bad guy in itself. And I'm trying to avoid that. And so the phrase techno culture is to always pull together, when we're looking at technology and its impact, we're really always looking at technology as it's used and appropriated by a people.

And you could talk about how is it going to tend to be used given human nature and all those sorts of questions. But right, it's how it's going to tend to be used by a certain given people. And in the book, as you well know, that's going to wind up meaning looking at technology in its relationship to modern labor.

And the way that that conversation sort of gets pulled out overall, is to say is to contrast effectively, what does God seem and feel? What does God, how manifest is God in the mirror, you might say, of this subsistence agrarian existence? And how manifest is God in the mirror of this kind of kind of wage slave, highly technologized existence, modern techno culture? And what you have to do to kind of answer that question, I think, is to say, how do we get kind of our deepest readings of reality mediated through our experience? And so the thought experiments become things like, right, if you're living in

a place where everything around you, you're subject to, you're dependent on, you have to navigate around trees and grass, even animals and other people as agents, everything is acting on you, that's stubborn, you have to resist it, you also have to know it really well, you have to kind of kind of know it almost like a person in some sense, in the mirror of a whole existence, where the personal, the agentic is just never not there, even in the created order. In a sense, you don't have to be a philosopher, it's just it's, it's turtles all the way down of that it's agency all the way down. And what happens in the materialist universe, I think, is that we, we create a society in which the, the innate forces of nature are kind of suspended technologically.

So everything's, you know, I've walked down a street, I don't have to worry about the terrain, I can get in an automobile, and it's all kind of tailored for me, and the agency of the world itself, that one way of putting that is the agency of the world is numbed and obscured a bit. But then in modern labor, your agency is obscured a bit, you're doing things, but the connection between person and labor, which has been the way we've connected to the community and to the earth, and, and then what that does to community systems, where the way the most agentic thing we've ever, ever experienced is this right here, it's people, but in as much as we even suspend the historical ways in which the agency of people gets intermediated between each other, what we're doing is we're taking things that have been ordinary ways reality has mirrored the, the agency all the way downness of things to you, and we're putting in its place non-agency, passive, your passivity, the passivity of the world, and what does the cosmos in a sense imaginatively look like, and that turtles all the way down instead of mirrors. And then it's materialism, I mean, it just, you know, materialism at an imaginative level, I think, is just an exegesis almost, or an imaginative exegesis of our own habits and cultural orientation.

So in many ways, we can maybe think of our techno-culture as a thin, opaque sheet of ice that we're skating upon over the abyss of being, that we're just not seeing what is lying beneath us, because this reality has, has veiled it to us. Yes, yes, I mean, I think that's exact, I think that's exactly right, and that can sound kind of mystical and weird, but we actually, we all know that this is just how reality works, and we know that especially in relationships, right, it's like the way that you approach somebody, the way all of that shapes what you're going to see and experience and interpret, that's just how humans work. The way we, the way we talk to ourselves, about ourselves and others, and frame others and ourselves to ourselves, and the world to ourselves, deeply shapes our attention and all those things, and that doesn't mean reality doesn't, as it were, poke through the, the, the, the cracks of that veneer you just mentioned all the time, but it's, it's just so easy to go back to that other way of relating, because that's, that's just all around us all the time.

Yeah, that's right. What aspect of your work, I think we've discussed this before, is your emphasis upon labor and human relationship with labor and human nature in its, just the

discovery of human nature and the expression of human nature in our labor. What are some of the shifts in our relationship with our labor and our understanding of ourselves as agents and laborers within the world, within the modern age, that impact upon our understanding and apprehension of God's presence? Yeah, that's a really good question, and I think, I think especially because it helps us set up that we're not trying to be nostalgic here, right, like, you know, again, if we could do the time machine experiment, experiment, you know, it could be that a, a subsistence laborer in 1500 on his farm, deeply non-alienated, if he could get in a time machine and be a wage slave with a house, would make the trade, you know, because, oh, I, it's easier not to die over here, you know, that sort of thing, but nevertheless, yes, the, the basic argument is that historically labor has mostly been subsistence labor, you know, the average human experience is to work not, not always for wages, like, I think what's really hard for modern people to understand, perhaps, is the, the unique role that dependence on money plays in the modern order.

Money has always been around and trade and bartering, and people have always had currency, or not, I say always, but there's, currency is a very old thing, but in, in a lot of historical existence, you're just living on a piece of land, and it's not so much that you owe rent, you don't owe money, there's just land, you chop a tree down, you build a house, you plant a garden, or you go do that for a surf lord, or something like that, because it's easier, and you give them something, but for all practical purposes, you, you, you possess your own project. Now, it might be a miserable project, you might not want to be a farmer, but why you're doing that is deeply connected to your life and meaning. Well, if I don't, then I'll get rained on, and I'll die, and I need food to live.

The, the mean, the, the connection, both between me and my work is immediate, and the connection between my work and my life is immediate, and, and what happens as, you know, the, and this isn't an alarmist way to say this, but what happens is the human population grows effectively, and you, and you, you get less and less kind of common land for that kind of subsistence existence to be sustained. You know, it doesn't go away in America until, you know, practically 1900, because we always have that frontier, right? But for all practical purposes, there's very little frontier that what it does to the human population is shift them, generally speaking, over, you know, this is centuries, a centuries-long process, but by the middle of the 19th century, you see the first time in, in history where a, a, like a truly, I think that might be the tipping point where you see the, about half of the world's population living in, in urban spaces, so there's a massive migration to urban spaces in which life in the modern suburbs are just an outgrowth of this. Life is dependent upon access to wages.

Now, to have a house, and food, and land, and everything you need to live, you have to have this thing called money, and to get that thing, you need to go work now, but now work is not, I'm digging the soil and food comes up for me. Now it's, let me go do a thing for that person to get this thing called money to get those things to bring home, and it

creates this very different ecosystem of relationships that, that it might be considered in some ways as a tendency, one of the primal abolition, abolitions of man, in the sense that most, most kind of high metaphysical and religious traditions, when you look at what they actually say about human labor, this, this actually fascinated me when I was studying this, they all tend to recognize that they're almost as a natural law principle at a just gentium level. Ideally, you want civilization to involve a person's aptitude to connect to what they do, and how that plugs into civilization.

In a sense, the, the New Testament teaching about the, the plugging together of all the Christian gifts is just its redeemed ecclesiastical inflection of a natural law thing. We're all differently gifted, we're supposed to plug together by virtue of those gifts in the civilization, and, you know, again, that's not being nostalgic about the past and its problems, or being overly lamenting of the present and some of its privileges. Nevertheless, irreducibly, what that does is it, it removes our immediate access to some dimension of human meaning, to the meaning dimension of existence, and being a human, that would have just, again, even if I don't want a farm, it means something that I'm doing it.

But what does it mean that I'm, you know, have this stack of paperwork, that's one link in a chain in a bureaucratic process, and then it goes over here, I don't really know how I, that's one thing I'd add there. What happens in modern labor that I think depersonalizes it is many, many, many jobs, you work for this big thing, and it's unclear to you and to everybody around you, how you plug into the social algorithm, if that makes any sense. So it's like, yeah, the idea there is, you need, again, natural law, I think, just gentium principle, you actually need to not only plug into the common good by virtue of your gifts, but also need to be seen by others doing that, that gift.

And what happens in a modern, I think, labor system is you have 1000 people work in a building, and nobody really knows what everybody does, or how they plug into the algorithm. But we all know we we do our piece of the coding or whatever. And somehow it all works out at the end or something like that, that that you lose something by not being able to see, in a sense to see your relationship to the algorithm, and that that gives purpose as well.

And that would, I suppose, relate also to the way that we see God in his images, those he has created to act in ways that reflect and enact some of his rule within his creation. And you talk towards the end of the book about the importance of recognizing almost each other's royalty, that we are kings and queens. And there is a dignity in the human person that, for instance, the way that we recognize in a face a person, and there's something almost within the understanding of the human face, that illustrates this way of perceiving reality more generally, that there is a face like quality to other aspects of creation, by extension, and our ability to see the human being who's alongside us, not merely as a cog within a machine, but as someone who's created in the image of their

creator, and has the dignity and the royalty that comes with that.

That seems to be part of our challenge to recover. Can you say a bit more about some of the ways in which we might recover a sense of the image of God in our neighbor? That's a... Practically, and also just in our ability to, in the organization of society, but also in our ability to see each other, even in a deeply flawed society. Yeah, I think that especially is a spiritual burden of the book, I think that you can detect, which is to say that, what is... Sometimes we talk about the disenchantment of the world, and I can't remember if I use this phrase in the book, but I try to say, I think it's better to say, we're disenchanted.

The world is enchanted as it ever was, but we're disenchanted. And what is the reattunement to the world look like? And again, going back to this ideas thing, for a lot of people, it means get the right ideas about the world. I would want to talk... That's right.

I would want to talk about reattunement to the world itself, but I think the first access point to that is reattunement to persons. That really is where you sever, I think, divine absence, really. In fact, when you cash all of this down, all of the things we've said could be God seen in the mirror of other persons, because technology and labor really are a person.

It's the way we experience persons, and we experience them very impersonally. And what we need to do is reattune ourselves. And I think the way you talk about the face is just right.

And maybe that's one way of putting it, is we need to reattune ourselves to the human face. Yeah. In one sense, that's the significance of another person.

That's the holiness of another person. And maybe there's a reimagining, and I think maybe even a spiritual exercise there. It takes sitting before the reality of what it means to be a human more and more and more, I think, to fully see the significance of what... People in the tradition will talk about losing a human is like losing the whole universe, because of something unique about the human that's open to the whole of things.

There's something really to be revered, in a sense, about those with whom we share co-dominion. And maybe that's another way of putting it, is I think in the ideological sphere, what can easily happen is, oh, what's good for the world is for things to work this way, and then humans will flourish. And along the way, it doesn't matter what's happening with all of these people, because we just need to get this, and then the humans will flourish.

And it's like, no, it goes the opposite direction. You actually have to love the neighbor in front of you. You actually have to learn what it is to... Here's one way of putting it, to know what it is to be in the project of co-dominion with others whose rule is actually not

entirely subject to you.

And in fact, who has a rightful birthright to shape the common good, just as you do. That sense of self-limitation, in a sense, I think is actually very crucial for recovering that. Which, it doesn't go against just war or anything we can talk about that's complicated.

But the idea of that as kind of a default posture, that that's a king and a queen, and my... doesn't mean I'm not, but my reign is limited by theirs. And I come as a co-ruler and a co-negotiator. And I think that is, to me, the ground zero of re-enchantment, is to recover that facial sense between people.

And then, you know, and that's why, you know, when I... Yeah, yeah, I think I just say that. I think of, you know, I talk about Darrell Davis a lot, that African-American view. And I think, like, there's something... I can almost just say, look, that's magic.

And it was mostly not ideological. It was mostly literally getting two faces together and stubbornly doing that. And it re-enchanted the world, I think.

Radically transformed the spiritual imagination of many people. And I like what you said about reality having a certain facial quality. Because I think it puts together what we were talking about earlier, that creation is an icon of God.

One way to really... one thing that attunement to the human face gives us, I think, is a... not an instance of reality, but actually a paradigm of reality. Probably the first thing the infant sees is the face. Or something like, you know, you go out in the world, very quickly you're staring at mom's face, right? And I think it would actually be helpful... the old tradition, the old Catholic high metaphysical tradition, small c Catholic, looks at the human as the microcosm of the whole.

You know, it's really the human that is the receptacle and the bringing together of all dimensions of reality. Which means that we know reality by virtue of knowing ourselves. What we know about reality is some extension of something that we know more intuitively by being a human.

And in that sense, I think you could say, even if the human face is kind of the parent Jesus face, most of all, is the paradigm, sort of central figure of reality. When we look at anything in the creation, we are looking at something facial in the sense that it bottoms out in mind. Something is staring at you, in a sense.

Something is confronting you from a mind by virtue of whatever you are encountering. And in that sense, there's a facial, personal, almost quality to whatever we experience that reflects all the way back up to God. There seems to be a lot of what you're saying that resonates with the work of, for instance, someone like Owen Barfield and his discussion of original and then final participation.

This changed relationship to reality, which is not just trying to recover what was originally the case, but trying to arrive at that in a different mode. And in talking about re-enchantment and in recognizing the face, it seems to me that there's a sort of false re-enchantment that we're really struggling with in the present age, with things like artificial intelligence, which presents a false face, which is humanized. We think about as having intelligence as we ascribe human agency to artificial intelligence.

We talk about it answering, or we talk about it thinking, or we talk about it as an intelligence and in many other ways that humanize. And there's always been a tendency for human beings in the recognition of the face to recognize faces where there are no true faces, to create an idol and to see within the idol that you have made something that is an agent when it's no agent at all. And indeed it can be a mask for demonic agency.

Can you say something about the ways in which, as Christians who are seeking to have a proper maybe enchantment of the world, we can push against these processes of false enchantment or the sort of erosion of the sense of the human face as the image of God with all these false faces that mark human faces that look just similar, but when we look more closely, we notice that the teeth are out of line or something like that. It's not actually a human face at all. What you're seeing is just a procedurally generated image by a computer.

Yeah, that's a really interesting question. Yeah, that's interesting because in a sense, our making of kind of the last man, you know, if we're making our kind of transhumanist AI consciousness in a robot body or whatever it's going to be, our making of the last man in a sense is our statement about what we think mankind really is. In other words, it comes from a materialist imagination to sort of think that's an upgrade.

And what's lost in all of that, of course, is just a gestalt shift about all sorts of things. But most prominently is the significance and even facial significance of genuine vulnerable embodiment. What I think we lose in something like that, in that search for a type of relationship to reality which is absolutely non-dependent.

First of all, you're actually deeply increasing your dependence on one level to gain another kind of independence. But what it means to be a rational animal, to be made in the image of God, to be a soul that doesn't start out as an angel, to start out a little lower than the angels and be destined to be higher than the angels, is to start out in weakness. And it's to start out in vulnerability and need.

And in one sense, we can answer that by talking about human flourishing. Like what do you know, we just don't even know who we are if we think that is what we want. So in one sense, I think the answer would just be to say you don't understand people.

We don't understand yourself, actually, if you think that that is actually what is going to



bring human happiness. It's interesting to me, nevertheless. Oh, you were talking about Barfield.

One thing I'd say there, the difference I would say between the way Barfield approaches that and the way I try to approach that, and that is a very legitimate connection. Barfield tends to think in terms of like transitions internal to maybe the structure of human consciousness or something like that. Maybe even sort of an er consciousness that's all inflected in our particular ones.

My particular approach is to say, I think there are radically different ways we relate to the world and experience it and talk about it, but it's mostly a history of discourse. In other words, the way we talk about something deeply shapes the way that we experience it. And what we're looking at over thousands of years of human history is radical, radical, different ways of talking, really, and therefore relating to the universe and to ourselves.

And so there's definitely parity there. Yeah, I might have missed one end of that, one aspect of that question, though. Tell me if I missed it.

No, I think that's good. One of the things that really stands out in your account to me is you're and you are not looking to go back to some former age and you present the challenge that we face within the modern world as one that we need to we need to work through. And it's not just something we need to return to or recover some past state.

Can you say a bit more about your understanding of of history and divine providence and how that factors into your understanding of what it means for us to be placed within this current age and how we see God's presence historically? And as I think often when people talk about divine absence, there can be an almost an absence from the historical process, a sense that God is present within the world spatially or in some other way, but the historical process somehow mislaid him or he's not really active in that. Right. And so, yeah, you constantly feel like we're in those periods, you know, the hundred years between the patriarchs and the exodus or the hundreds of years between Malachi and Matthew, you know, right, where there seems to be this, yeah, this this period of quietude in the heavens directing history.

Yeah, I suppose some of it is just the conviction that, hey, if we're going through this, presumably this is God's providence. And presumably God doesn't do anything arbitrarily and what might he be up to? And I don't I don't think the goal is to be speculative. So I don't want to turn it into a theoretical kind of Joachim of Fiore three ages sort of thing.

We're entering the age of the spirit or something like that. Not going Anabaptist on anybody here. But yeah, I think the the basic notion there is that we just are who we are and we can't go back.

And I tend to think of it as the metaphor I use throughout the book is one of unhomed juvenility, that, you know, the idea of the young man who's been kicked out of his house in a previous place. I think I even use the word imposed agency, like you have to you're forced, in fact, to relate to your traditions and to your civilization and to yourself in a way that you people haven't had to at a civilizational level. And you can go back or you can decide to go back.

But if you do that again, what I try to say there is when you're choosing to do all the things that your parents did, you have a fundamentally different relationship to those things. And it's a different project and it turns into a different project. It feels different and it results in different things.

Or you can reject everything. That's the kind of the modern that's what we tend to do on kind of on mass here is like, oh, the old you know, sort of this is power analysis. This was, you know, smash the patriarchy, make something fundamentally new, basically.

Yeah. And, you know, you can hear the tertium quit coming. But, you know, one option of the unhomed juvenile, it's how most of us live our lives is we take a lot of things from our parents.

We repeat a lot of the things we parents do and we re-inflect it in a new circumstance and we move toward the future. And really, yeah, in a sense, all I'm trying to argue with toward the end of the book there is. Things have changed so much and we have changed a lot, and that's very important because a lot of people think if I just I can go back and be like my 17th century ancestors.

It's like, no, you can't. You're not them in so many ways that it's just not even funny. You're more like the people you hate in the modern world than you are like your great, great, great, great grandfather.

You understand each other more than you two would understand each other. And I think I think in some sense, then that's just coming from a reading of what it means to be alive and how much civilization has impacted us and then wanting to say also let's recognize some goods in the modern world. There's a lot of goods, a lot of opportunities.

There are losses. So one thing I'd want to say is like, yeah, there are things that feel like it would be an advantage to have that we don't have. And we're allowed to say that and lament that even to some extent.

Nevertheless, we're here and it seems to me that the job is that of maturation. When you're in a trial, why does God give us trials? He gives us trials. It's all over the New Testament.

Trials are for the sake of maturation. And I think there's a lot of maturation going on in the church right now in our thoughts and ideas, in ourselves, in our genders. Again, I go

back to this because I've begun to think of these things as so connected.

All this disorientation from gender, I think one thing we might ask is like, is God going to leave fruit? Is there fruit to be born out of that? Is that disorientation and then needing to reconnect back to the gravitational force, but then inflecting that gravitational force through basically what's going to amount to a maturity and freedom? Does that produce spiritual fruit and dividends that would not otherwise be produced without that trial of disorientation? And so we're here. Seems like God wants us to go through that. And so it seems to me we should be cheerful and go through it and grow up as much as we need to grow up without even discarding at all, discarding or even losing deference to our traditions.

This is extremely helpful. Thank you so much for joining me. The book is *Bulwarks of Unbelief*.

And if you read Joseph's other book, *Enjoying Divine Absence*, you'll find this book really explores many of the themes on a considerably deeper and more expansive level. In conclusion, I'd be interested to hear if people would like to find out more about your work or to maybe be taught by you, where should they go? Yeah, so I teach philosophy classes at Davenant Hall near Alastair. Our offices are only a couple of states away from each other.

But I teach at Davenant Hall, one of the main faculty there. Mostly philosophy courses like philosophy for theology. I'm teaching philosophy of modernity, so a big, just a whole class on reading theories of modernity.

Actually, yeah, we'll do that this summer. You can find, if you look around Joseph Minnick and the Davenant Institute, most of my stuff is through their Pilgrim Faith Podcast that I do with Alastair. He's been a guest several times.

I have a Pilgrim Faith Podcast that has been on hiatus for just a bit, but we're about to kick it off again. And then also a plausible faith podcast, which is kind of a, you might call it a Mr. Rogers for doubters kind of podcast, for lack of a better phrase. Yeah, so I do that.

And then writing, keeping up with writing. Yeah, there's this book and I have another book I'm working on right now. And that's basically, yeah, that's basically my gig, I suppose.

Thank you so much for joining me and thank you to everyone who's listened. I highly recommend this book. You will find so much to sharpen your mind and to encourage you to live more faithfully in the world in which God has placed us.