

# OpenTheo

## **Disenchanted? A Pastor & a Born-Again Pagan Discuss | Tim Keller & Anthony Kronman**

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### **The Veritas Forum**

Pastor, author, and public intellectual Tim Keller is in conversation with Sterling Professor of Law at Yale Law School and born-again pagan, Anthony Kronman. They discuss their theological perspectives on gratitude, free will, and our current political moment.

Moderated by Professor of Systematic Theology and Africana Studies at Yale Divinity School, Willie Jennings. • Please like, share, review, and subscribe to this podcast. Thank you.

### **Transcript**

Welcome to the Veritas Forum. This is the Veritas 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 in the street, don't be surprised if you're going to get an element of this in God. In this episode, Pastor, author, and public intellectual Tim Keller is in conversation with Sterling Professor of Law at Yale Law School and Born-Again Pagan, Anthony Kronman.

They discuss their theological perspectives on gratitude, free will, and our current political moment. Moderated by Professor of Systematic Theology and Africana Studies at Yale Divinity School, Willie Jennings. It is a great joy for me to be here to help facilitate this conversation with two fabulous intellectuals, two courageous scholars and thinkers who have written wonderful works for us to consider.

We have about an hour and a half, and so I want to get right to this. I would like for us to think of this conversation this evening in three movements. The first movement will explore with these two wonderful intellectuals the problem of disenchantment and the crisis of meaning that they have both written so elegantly and profoundly about.

The second movement will explore how the identity of a born-again pagan, as Tony so beautifully puts it, and a professing Christian as Tim has given us help confront the problem of modern disenchantment. And so I don't forget, gentlemen, I want to mark for future consideration when we get to the second movement. I want you both to talk a bit about how the idea of gratitude functions in your theological visions, and I want you to move us all into the deep theological waters of how you understand free will and God's sovereignty.

I'm so excited. Just snap. Just snap.

Please help us understand these crucial theological concepts, how they work in your thinking, and what difference they make in our lives. The third movement is to draw these wonderful gentlemen into conversation on the street and into our current political and racial climate. I will not allow them to leave the stage without thinking about these matters.

I want them to talk about how they understand how their thinking intervenes in our current moment. What kind of theological intervention do you both think is necessary for this crucial time? So that will be our way of proceeding this evening. We probably will not have a whole lot of time for questions and answers, but we might have a bit.

I'll try to save at least one minute. But let's begin then with the first movement, the problem of disenchantment and the crisis of meaning. Tony, would you begin us by talking about that? Of course.

At first my thanks to the Veritas Forum for organizing this event and to all of you, as Professor Jennings said, for showing up on a modestly chilly Wednesday evening, right before spring break, when I know papers are due and exams are scheduled. It's heartening for me to see you here, prepared to spend an hour and a half or so listening to us talk about a subject that certainly has gripped me very deeply, indeed, that has been for some time an obsession of mine, but to know that you're sufficiently curious about it and engaged by it to want to come and spend some time here at the night is to be a great encouragement. Disenchantment.

Esther and her introductory remarks invoked the name of the great German sociologist and social historian, Max Weber, and the phrase, "The disenchantment of the world is most often associated with Weber." In a famous lecture of his entitled *Science and Religion*, he declared that we live today in a disenchanted world, by which he meant that the gods and belief in the gods or in God has become an entirely private matter, has disappeared from the realm of commonly accepted norms and public life. He was perfectly aware that there are still many professing believers, churchgoers, but Weber thought that the deepest tendencies of our entire civilization were pressing in the direction of pushing God further and further and further into the recesses of private life, where one might choose to believe or not. And he recommended a kind of stoical

resignation in the face of that fact.

He said, "God has vanished. You may believe or not. That's up to you, but as a public matter gone, gone, gone.

You've got to suck it up and accept that fact as your fate." And for a long time, in my 20s and 30s and 40s and 50s, I said, "That's right." And I can live a stoical life of that kind. And then it just stopped working for me. And the reason it did, I think I can put very simply, it became clearer and clearer to me that the meaning of my life, the meaning of my commitments, my attachments, of my vocation, my worldly vocation, couldn't for me be ultimately secured in a way that would be entirely satisfying and personally convincing unless I could relate all of that.

My life to something that is not touched by time. The word for that is eternity, but it's a word that isn't often used, well, certainly at the Yale Law School these days. But I came to believe that unless I could work out for myself an understanding of how my life and all that it contains is connected to something that never comes into being and never passes away, but endures, as Scripture says, from age unto age, unless I could work all of that out for myself, though in the end in a non-scriptural terms, that I really wouldn't be at home in my life, let alone in the world.

And so that's why I was moved to sit down and think things through from the start and write the book that I did. I also thank you for bringing me here though, it's not fair to call us two intellectuals. Tony is a real scholar, I am a popularizer of scholarship, that's what a good preacher does, actually.

But I'll tell you, as time goes on we're going to see that Tony's understanding of the character of God in mind as an Orthodox Christian minister is different. But here I'm happy to join with him in the critique of the idea that there's nothing outside of time. I guess you could call it secular materialism, it would be the idea that not only is there no God, but there's actually no transcendent aspect to reality at all, which is what the ancient pagans and eastern religions believe.

There's no transcendent aspect, everything is time, it's in time, therefore everything has a physical material cause, a scientific explanation, if you will. That view, I also agree completely, has got huge problems, you may not know that if you're walking around Yale studying here, but there are some problems, I'll be a little less personal and say here's two. The one is actually the question of moral value and moral norms.

The secular approach, there's nothing but time, essentially says that there is no moral source outside the self for any moral values or norms. So all moral values are either culturally constructed, socially constructed, or they're products of our evolutionary biology, or they're a personal choice. But there's no eternity, there's no cosmic, there's no basis for values outside of myself.

Now what that does in the end is to say, I think, that the good that you're in the beautiful, the old transcendentalists, are really, there's no way to determine them other than you just determine them for yourself, which means there's no way to have a conversation. The good ends up becoming what the majority who has all the power say it is, and there's no way you even have a conversation. There's no higher moral ground.

You can't say, as the, I'm being trying to do everything I can to be in unity here with Tony at this point, you can't say with the Greek philosophers that there is a true and a good and a beautiful beyond time, and that through contemplation and discussion we can discern it. No, basically the good of whatever I say it is. Ultimately the good is a matter of belief, I would say, it's not a matter of empirical reason, so it creates a huge problem.

We're having it right now in our society. There's no ability for us to talk just to yell, just to have power blocks say, this is what I say the good is, and there's no way to even have a discussion. Nothing to appeal to, because there's no, there is no source, a moral source outside the self.

The second has to do with the meaning, and I'll let me get, I agree completely with Tony, let me just add another approach to it. If there's no meaning outside of time, then you're going to have to find your ultimate meaning in something here, like success or money, or even family or love. You're going to have to build all of your, ultimate meaning will have to be something inside this life.

All of your meaning and life will have to come from something inside this life, and this life will take all those things away, eventually. All of those things away. I read an anthropologist some years ago who said this secular culture gives its members less resources, fewer resources, to deal with suffering than any other culture in history, and here's the reason why.

Every other culture, which was a religious culture in some way, always said the true meaning of a human life is something outside of time, just what Tony just said. So if you're a Hindu, the meaning of life is to live a life so that you can eventually get off the cycle of reincarnation and get into eternal bliss. If you're a Buddhist, the meaning of life is to overcome the illusion of this world.

If you're a Jew or a Muslim or a Christian Orthodox, you think the key is to please God and to be with God forever. In other words, suffering in every other religion, every other culture can actually enhance your meaning in life. It can drive you, suffering can actually drive you more into it.

If your real meaning in life, frankly, is the love of God and to please God, and you've gotten onto the treadmill of success, and something happens financially and you have a failure, that can drive you more into the real meaning of your life, which is to please God,

not to become successful. But if you don't have anything outside of time, frankly suffering destroys your meaning in life in a way it doesn't in any other culture. So, yeah, in the end, there are huge problems with living in a disenchanted universe, and Tony and I agree that it doesn't really work, that in the end, even though we're being careful and saying it can work for a lot of people for a while, it doesn't work for us.

I, being a good Christian minister, I go so far to say it's not true. The universe isn't chanted, and to live in a disenchanted universe is not only not functional, but you're out of touch with reality. It's not possible.

I don't think so, and it finally catches up with you. I was too old guys to say so. [laughter] A couple of thoughts in response to what Tim just said.

First of all, it's interesting. If you begin to probe a bit the convictions, the beliefs or convictions of a hard-nosed materialist scientist who's looking for those inner worldly explanations and doesn't want to hear anything about God, and thinks that creationism is just an obscuring superstition, when you begin to probe a bit, and you ask such a person, well, what is it you are? What are you after? The answer eventually will come while I'm after the truth about the world, the way it's organized, the laws according to which things happen as they do. And then if you ask about those laws themselves, which are the target, you might say, of all scientific inquiry, do they exist just for a moment, maybe a very long moment, do they come into being or pass away? Well, no, I mean a law is a law.

A law is a necessary regularity. What do you mean by necessary? Well, something that couldn't possibly be otherwise. Well, something that couldn't possibly be otherwise must always have been and always will be, and at some point they begin to get a little suspicious and worry that you're trying to catch them with a theological hook, which is, of course, exactly what you're trying to do, or at least what I'm trying to do.

And then I say, but when my scientist friend might say at that point, but of course we will never glimpse more than a fraction of the laws that govern the universe. We're always discovering that we're mistaken to which I say, well, what else is new? Of course, we're finite beings. We are moving by the tiniest, infantemmal little baby steps toward a knowledge of reality, which is infinite, timeless, and necessary, and necessarily complete.

And my word for that is God or substance or the eternal and divine. And if I'm my scientist friend permits me to carry the conversation on long enough, I can generally bring him or her around to acknowledging that that. So which puts eternity right smack at the middle of their work, of their enterprise.

It makes it clear to them that their enterprise is unintelligible, literally incomprehensible, without a some conception of the everlasting. If that's true, if that's true, then it seems

to me, it has come to seem to me, the only really interesting question. And it's hugely interesting and hugely difficult.

And this is where serious differences begin to open up is, where do you put eternity? How do you concede? Is it something that is to be defined in opposition to the world and time? Or is it a feature of the world and time? Is it ingredient in them in some fashion? And that division was putting modernity completely to one side. That division of opinion about the proper location of eternity was exactly what separated the great pagan philosophers of classical antiquity from their Christian successors, or perhaps I should say their Abrahamic successors, because Muslim and Jewish philosophers took exactly the same line with respect to this question of where do you put eternity when you start to think about it in a serious way? Tim, would you like to respond to this point about eternity? Well, I think there are certainly Christian theologians that would, like actually Jonathan Edwards, who used to hang her out here in the Yale, I think would actually say that where God is not confined to this world, but that actually the world is, God is infused through the world, and in some ways the world is an aspect of God's being. But then where he differ, I think from your ancient pagans, is what I'd say, but then there actually is, he is also transcendent above the world.

Now, by the way, there are a number of other Christian theologians who said Edwards was just a darn pantheist. So, I mean, there are Christians who wouldn't go that far, and they would be the people I think that Tony is talking about as being a, that's a real cleavage, but I do think there's also a way of thinking about the world that would probably, a Christian way to think about the world that would probably account for the sorts of factors that I think Tony is talking about, but wouldn't stop there. Because ultimately the big difference, I think, is our understanding, Christian understanding, is that God is also personal.

He's not just infinite, I mean, I just use the word he, you know, personal pronoun. God is infinite and personal, not just infinite, and that's the big difference, and I don't know that we're not going to solve that here, but if you're just trying to clarify the differences, that would be the difference, I think. Here is one way perhaps of trisecting, theologically, some views about the relationship between between God and the world or between time and eternity.

First view, the world is eternal, or eternity is in the world. It's nothing apart from it over and above it. God has no separate existence or meaning apart from those features of the world, which really are eternal.

That's Aristotle's view, very roughly. I've just spared you about 1500 pages of dense philosophical material, so there it is in a nutshell. But Aristotle's God, though an imminent one, was not an infinite God.

In fact, for Aristotle and for all of the great philosophers of classical antiquity, infinity was

a curse word. To be infinite was to be unintelligible, formless, shapeless, something that you couldn't get your mind around, and therefore without reality, because the great Greek philosophers in particular equated intelligibility with being, to be, is to be intelligible, and something that isn't intelligible, and therefore it doesn't really exist. So the idea of an infinite God was an oxymoron.

It simply made no sense. The God of Abraham is certainly an infinitely powerful God. God's resources are without bounds or limits, but not an imminent God in Aristotle's sense.

God is to be thought of as a being, a source of being, a God-head, whose existence is defined, at least in crucial part, by its separation from the world. Third theology. This is my tri-section.

This would be my born-again paganism. God is imminent, so we're back to Aristotle. God is no different from the world viewed as Spinoza says, under a certain aspect, namely the aspect of eternity, but my imminent God is an infinite God as well, not localized here or there, not restricted to the general properties or forms or shapes of things, to the laws of the universe, but infinitely present, infinitely present in the infinitesimally least of things.

That's the hardest theology of them all to wrap your mind around, but I think that of the three, it's the best one. How would you answer Aristotle that an infinite God is unintelligible since you believe in an infinite God? Well, this is a hugely difficult question and a wildly oversimplified answer to it. What Aristotle got wrong in my view was his answer to the question, can we ever understand the world in its entirety? Can we ever come to an end in our quest for comprehension so far as the God of the world is concerned? And Aristotle said, yes, we can.

We can understand the divinity of the world without remainder. We can't hold on to that understanding for indefinitely long periods of time because we are finite beings, we get hungry, we need to sleep, but when we're really thinking clearly, we have our minds around the whole of everything that can be minded, that can be thought. That's wrong.

There isn't anything in the world, not the least little speck of an ad, of a flea, of a fly of a thing that can ever be understood completely. There will always be more to be known about it. It runs on to infinity in its intelligibility, which we get up, get our, you know, get a kind of a handhold on, but spend a lifetime, a series of lifetimes, barely making a beginning toward an understanding of this endlessly wonderful, intelligible and beautiful world that we inhabit.

Allow me to draw you back to something you said in the middle of this latter part of your wonderful statement. You mentioned this wonderfully provocative designation that you have for yourself, a born-again pagan. Moving now to our second movement as we are in

our conversation, would you, first of all, explain to us what that is and how you imagine that as a moment that speaks against the problem, a moment speaks toward the problem of disenchantment and meaninglessness.

I would ask you to do the same, tell me what your Christian identity. Let me start. Yeah, why don't you start? So after my youthful phase of a baryon despair, I was for some years an Aristotelian pagan.

I thought that I could make sense of my life and of the world with resources that I was able to put together out of the philosophy of Aristotle. That didn't do the trick for me. There's just too much in Aristotle that I don't believe and too many things that I do believe that can't be found there.

And one of them, maybe the most important, is my deep, deep, my bone-deep belief in the infinite value of the individual. And this is missing in Aristotle. And even on the most generous reading, you can't read it into him.

So that's not going to work. So I asked myself, well, where does this idea, the infinite preciousness of the individual come from? That's a biblical idea, invention, discovery, however you wish to characterize it. It's central to all of the biblical religions.

And so I asked myself, is it possible to take a little from menu A and put it together with a little bit from menu B? Can I have my Aristotelian paganism and supplement it with some biblical individualism? And I was scratching my head about that when I rediscovered Spinoza and then a whole family of thinkers like Spinoza before and after who, on my reading of an attempted to do exactly that to, you might say, Christian eyes or Hebrew eyes, the philosophy of pagan antiquity to reinterpret it, reread it, reappropriated through the lens of the biblical invention or discovery of the value of the individual. And what better name for this reborn paganism, this enriched and revived paganism than a born again paganism, which has passed through the baptism, has received a baptismal charge by being passed through the long middle period that separates the ancient world, which was one of massive enchantment from the modern world of disenchantment, to which I think born again paganism gives us a way and some hope as an alternative to either just outright, let's call it secular, despair on the one hand or a program of belief and commitment that some at least feel that they're not able to accept or to subscribe to. Well, I'm going to give you the headline and then go back and try to make my case.

I would actually say that the inherent dignity of every individual, every human being makes a great deal of sense in a universe in which God is a personal God. He's also a person. Luke Ferry, the French philosopher wrote a book a couple of years ago called Brief History of Thought.

Like I said, those of us like the popularized scholarship rather than our scholars, we love



books like that. Here's a scholar who is boiling it all down and he's an atheist, but he said honestly, he said he doesn't think the idea that every single human being has inherent dignity and equal dignity would have arisen in other worldviews other than the idea that you have a personal God. In fact, I'll say how personal in a second, who creates people in his image and has a love relationship with him.

That's all personal. Kyle Harper, who's a classic professor out at a university of Oklahoma recently, I read an article, a very new article about him looking at whether the Romans, the Greeks, the Stoics, Aristotle, Plato, whether you could get the idea of inherent equal dignity for all human beings out of any of that. The answer is no.

It made more sense in a universe with a personal God rather than an impersonal God or an impersonal force. In a sense, I feel that what Spinoza was doing, and actually what Tony's doing, though my esteem of this, an affection for this man, though it's only about two hours old. We all had dinner together.

Yeah, we had dinner together. It makes me loath to be too critical here, but I'm just saying it feels like what you did was you had a universe in which a particular value, this guy named Larry Seedantop recently wrote a book called *Inventing the Individual*, and he shows that that comes out, that idea of the importance of the individual made sense in a universe in which there was a personal God. It almost seems like you want to say, I don't believe in a universe like that, but I still want to have the value.

I'm really glad you have that value, brother. I really am, and I hope that we can do an awful lot of great stuff together in a city or in a town. Still, it feels to me there's an inconsistency there.

The only thing else to say about the personal thing is Augustine loved to point out that the Christian God is tri-personal, Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and he made this interesting case. He said, if you had a unipersonal God, so what I like about Christianity is not just God's not just personal, but really personal. If you have a personal God, then love would have come in later because if you have a personal God, that guy would have the power to create other beings, angels, humans, whatever, and love is a relationship between persons that would not have happened until the creation.

So if it's true you had a unipersonal God, there wouldn't be love till the creation, which means in that God, power is more basic than love. It comes first. But if you have from all eternity, beginningless eternity, Father, Son, Holy Spirit, knowing and loving each other, that means that, and why would a God, like that, create other beings? The Jonathan Edwards answer and the Augustine answer is in order to share the love that they had.

So that love comes before power, not power before love. So love is more basic. And on top of that, it's a little bit like this God doesn't create people so that he can get, I'm going to use the word he here, worship, because he already had love.

In other words, he didn't need to create people to adore. He already had that inside. They were all adoring and loving each other.

In John 17, Jesus is saying, I had glory with you before the you glorified me, I glorify you. So there's a sense in which this God would unselfishly be creating, love would be more basic than power. The idea of the individual dignity makes sense in that universe.

That all seems to fit together for me. And that's one of the things that animates my understanding of the universe. Though on the ground, I actually have the same basic commitment, how I would treat people as Tony with a somewhat different view of things.

>> Please, yeah. >> In response. Certainly as a matter of historical fact, it was the idea of a personal God that first began to accredit, if I can put it that way, the thought that individual human beings in their individuality were worthy of respect and indeed infinitely so.

That's a thought that just gets no traction in classical philosophy. If you're a worthy human being, Aristotle says, it's because you exemplify a certain type. You have certain characteristics or virtues which others of your type share and exhibit as fully as you do.

But there's nothing in particular about you that's estimable or worthy or deserving of my respect or love. So personal love is just missing there. And it really only comes into the picture as a necessary consequence or implication of the idea of a created world, which is the love thing, if I can put it that way, of a personal God.

But whether or not having provided the indispensable entree for this thought, it is necessary to sustain it. That's a separate question. My view is, and I mean no offense with the image, but it just vividly expresses what I'm thinking.

Perhaps the idea of a personal God is like the training wheels on a bicycle that get you up and stabilized and moving in the right direction. But when you've really learned to ride, you can dispense with them and not only can, but should because they get in the way of your riding as effectively and well as you might. Now, that will sound like a crazy thing to say.

Let me try to make it a little bit more concrete. One characteristic of human love, the love of one human being for another. As I've experienced it in my own incomplete and limited way in my life to this point, one characteristic of it is that when it's really, if it's genuine, it's a love of the other person of the beloved for his or her own sake.

It just stops with them. It isn't because of this or because of that. They are the final target of your loving.

And of course, if you're at all, I should put this humbly self-aware about the limitations of your effectiveness as a lover, you will recognize it. You never love the one you do as well

and is completely issued. There's always a shortfall for sure.

But if you think that the person you love is there and lovable because he or she is the love creation of another, however you describe that other, then your love of the other human being who's sitting across the kitchen table is bound to seem on theological reflection as just a, how should I put this, a stepping stone to a greater love in which this human love occupies just a place or a position. But it isn't the end of all things so far as your love is concerned. And that for me is an obstacle.

That's why I said the training wheels become an obstacle at a certain point. It's an obstacle to living in and with human love in its full commitment to the value of the other for his or her own sake, period full stop with nothing else behind it or holding it up. Well, I think that could be a problem.

It depends on what Christians call your soteriology. And so, "teriology" means how are you related to God if you say, "I will get saved, blessed by God because I love people." Then you're absolutely right, they are a means to an end. You actually are, you may be feeding the hungry, but you're actually feeding yourself because you think if I feed the hungry, God will bless me, take me to heaven, answer my prayers, and actually you're feeding yourself.

You're not really feeding the hungry. That is absolutely right and I'm glad you see that. It's one of the reasons why to me just being a moral person and having a general, sort of a generic belief in God, if I'm a good person, God will bless me somehow, just doesn't work.

On the other hand, if you believe you're saved by grace, if the classic Christian idea is that my salvation is secured through what Jesus does, not through what I do. Faith in Christ means, "I already have my relationship with God, it's secure, it's not rooted in me." Then, now it's different because see, the Christian idea is that God loved me for my own sake. He got nothing out of it.

The idea of God coming to earth, going to the cross, he got nothing out of that at all. I mean, we do not benefit him in any way, so he loved me for my own sake. Now, I naturally want to love other people for their sake, nor am I loving them for my sake because actually I'm not enhancing my salvation or my... So, if you're... So, the technology is right, you really avoid that problem.

If it's wrong, you do exactly what Tommy's saying and it's a huge problem. And he actually, Nietzsche talked about that. Nietzsche was very cynical about the way so many Christians so called love people.

He saw it really as just a way of... It was very paternalistic, it was actually very patronizing and it was completely selfish and that can happen. But that's how I'd fix that,

sir. Certainly, if I can put it in these terms, the vulgar view, which says, "I want to get to heaven and I see that my road is through loving other people, charitable, loving kindness here on earth, but I'm building up salvation points along the way." In the instrumental fashion, you were just, "That's no good." I completely understand why on a thoughtful and attractive Christian view of things.

It doesn't make a lot of sense and it certainly isn't very appealing to me at least. I was thinking of something a little different than that, which is the person who says, "Well, I love him or her, but I have to recognize... I do recognize that they are there, held up and sustained. They're only there by the grace of a person other than themselves, a greater person.

So my love for them would be unsustainable, it would be inconceivable were it not for that support. Now, I'm not going at it in an instrumental way. I'm not thinking of it in those terms, but my love of my friend or my spouse, my colleague, whatever, that is now conditioned on something, which runs against the grain of the unconditionality of the love as I experience it and express it and try to explain it to the beloved and to other people.

Maybe I'm not putting that very clearly, but it's a complication and I think it remains one, for me at least, even if you put off the table, what I think we both agree is a bad soteriology. In your book, you seem to suggest that God, the idea of God and God's sovereignty gets in the way of the kind of agency you are trying to describe so nicely here. Could you say a bit more about how you imagine God's sovereignty as a hindrance to agency, as a problem for? Sure.

I'll try to be very brief and as simple as I can about this. Good luck. Good luck.

Good luck. Go ahead. Exactly.

The problem isn't of my own invention. I call it in my book, "The Augustinian Dilemma" because in many ways, Augustine, who was the thinker on whom the tradition of Western Latin Christian theology rests, discovered this problem and articulated it in its most compelling and acute form. On the one hand, Augustine said, "We human beings have to be free because it is only on the assumption that we or Adam acted freely in disobeying God's command that it is possible to explain the presence of evil in the world in a way that doesn't land it squarely on God's shoulders." So to put it very crudely, if evil is going to be offloaded onto someone or something else, and the mannequians and Gnostics did it in other ways with competing gods and then all sorts of complicated theologies, Augustine's idea was too offloaded onto us, but that would work only in case we are endowed with a sufficient power of self-command, of self-direction, to be responsible for our actions in refusing to do as God has instructed.

So we have to be free. For this theology to work. On the other hand, God is omnipotent,

omniscient.

He is the source of everything and knows everything. And that means, of course, that he has to have known, even speaking in temporal terms here, is so awkward and it can only be a metaphor for a theological proposition. God must have known what we would do with the freedom that he gave us, and he went ahead and gave it to us nonetheless.

Now in the law, we say, if you empower someone and you know precisely what they will do with the power, you give them the tab is yours. You're on the hook for what they do. Well, there is, to put it mildly, there is at least some tension between these two ideas of human agency and divine omnipotence, and Augustine wrestled with the problem and eventually put his, I was going to say, his nickel down, his very large nickel, his immense and weighty nickel on the side of divine omnipotence and became more and it became crankier and crankier toward the end of his life in his writings, insisting that those who would want to open the door, even a little smidge to a fuller human sense of human agency, were off the mark and speaking blasphemously about the God in whose power all lies.

In the tradition of Christian theology, right on through the Middle Ages and the early modern period and up to and including Kant, a major challenge has been to reconcile these competing ideas. And I don't think they can be reconciled at the end of the day. I think you have to pick one or the other and if you do, the other, the one that you don't embrace, will not only fall by the wayside but it will dwindle away to nothing.

So you will either be left with an engorged conception of human agency from which it follows that God is just another invention of ours, which we in our free agency have cooked up like we've cooked up lots of other things, or with a vastly enlarged conception of divine omnipotence in which our human freedom dwindles down to a point and then vanishes altogether in one or another version of the theory of predestination or something of that kind. By the way, it's very, very kind of you to say to a Christian minister that the Christian view of this is somewhat, there's at least some tension here, there's a lot of tension in it. And I don't feel as confident, frankly, what I'm about to say, I don't feel as confident about this I have with some of the other things I've said.

But I don't go to Augustine on this, actually at this point I like to immerse myself in the Bible itself in the text. What's pretty intriguing is the Bible doesn't try to explain the two, but obviously acts as if the two things are reconcilable. So for example, in the book of Exodus, we've got this fascinating narrative where Moses is asking Pharaoh, let my people go, and sometimes eight times it says God hardens Pharaoh's heart, and usually within a verse or two, it says Pharaoh hardened his heart.

And it's pretty clear the narrative doesn't work either way. If Pharaoh is really in charge, so that Pharaoh could really screw up the entire history of the whole world and the people of God and all that, that's obviously not what the story is telling us. But on the

other hand, if Pharaoh is some kind of automaton, then he doesn't deserve anything that he gets.

And in the end, God is in charge and Pharaoh is responsible, and he is psychologically clearly making a free choice, and at the same time God is somehow working his will out in spite of it. And the narrative doesn't work either way, unless you have them both. Secondly, I would say that in my own personal life, I have to have them both.

I'll just be real frank. If I don't believe in that my choices are responsible, that it matters what I do, that I'm held responsible for them in God's sight and everybody else's sight, if I don't believe that actually wrong choices can really screw up my life, then I'll be passive. Did you hear about the fatalists that fell on the steps, he gets up with blood and is coming down his eyes and he said, "I'm glad that's over with." You've heard that one, haven't you? But he hadn't seen the born-again pagan.

This is a Christian thing. Yeah, all right. Anyway, I'm glad that's over with you.

So anyway, if I don't believe in free will, I am passive. On the other hand, if I really do think that I am completely in charge of my life, that is my choices completely determine what's going to happen to me, that God actually is somewhat powerless. I'm not sure I can get out of bed in the morning.

Now, it's the "You're stupid now" principle. You know that you're stupid now principle? When you were 15 years old, you thought you were stupid when you were 10, of course. When you're 20 years old, you certainly thought you were stupid when you're 15.

When you're 30, you'll think you're 20-year-old self-wistupid. When you're 50, you'll think you're 30-year-old self-wistupid, which means what? Class. You're stupid right now.

Right now. You are stupid now, and you are incompetent to really, in other words, if you live long enough, you look back and say, "Oh, my choice is so many of them are wrong." Don't take it personally. Yeah.

So I'm stupid now too, by the way. Just, so unless I believe both those things, I actually can't function. So the narratives of the Bible seem to include the two.

It's true it's not rationally worked out in a philosophical way, and I think there's places where I could see Augustine as time went on, him getting perhaps more fatalistic. But I don't want to go there because I don't think I know enough. But I think that, frankly, I'd say generally, Christian people sort of intuitively know the two things.

As soon as you ask them, how do you put them together? And they get into arguing about predestination and stuff like that. But at the more intuitive level, I think what the Bible says, which, and it leaves it rather mysterious, how the two could both be true, what the Bible says is pretty much the way we function, I think. I'm in complete

agreement with you that as a matter of lived experience, of living from day to day or even over the course of a whole lifetime, you can't do without either of those ways of thinking about the world and your place in an absolute, absolutely right.

And of course, Augustine tried to reconcile the tension between them in theological terms by working out a master scheme in which each would have its place and somehow it would all be harmonious. Other philosophers, I'm thinking here of Kant in particular, who was also deeply Christian in every aspect of his thought, attacked the problem in a different way. He said, I can view myself at any moment from two different perspectives.

I can think of myself as a, this isn't quite the way he put it, but it's close enough. Think of myself as a material being, being pushed and pulled by forces outside of myself and caused to act in one way or another. And if I look at myself in that way as a physicist might or a neuroscientist or a biochemist, then it's determinism all the way down.

There isn't a scrap of agency to be found. But I can look at myself at the very same act from a different point of view. I can consider myself as this is Kant's term as a member of the kingdom of ends, as a numinal being endowed as a person, endowed with a capacity for self-legislation, for self-direction.

That's a lot, it's a live at every moment. And I can interpret and evaluate the very same action from that different perspective. I'm kind of a two perspective sort of guy in, but not quite in Kant's way.

I think that everything that happens and everything I do can be viewed from the vantage point of my experience of the world as a finite being. And I can also understand it, or at least aspire to understand it, under the aspect of eternity. Seen in the latter light, everything I do, everything that happens is perfectly intelligible because perfectly explicable and perfectly explicable because absolutely determined.

But of course, I'm a little finite being. And from my woefully limited perspective, what I know intellectually to be necessity looks like possibility. And what looks like fate looks to me like choice and responsibility.

And to think that I could somehow get away from that way of thinking and talking, choice responsibility, and the ethics of agency that goes with, to think that I could get away from that would be to suppose that I could somehow step out of my finitude, jump over the shadow of my own finite being and become the world, which is not in the cards. So talk to us about from whence comes your sense of gratitude. How is gratitude formed for you? What does it start with? Tim.

I'll do it. Okay, I'll start with Tim. Tim, you're a sense of gratitude given this discussion about sovereignty and agency.

Sure. Briefly, I think. I actually was, I impressed when I was reading the, when I was

reading Charles Taylor's secular age, which by the way is another huge brick, but a lot harder to read than Tony's brick.

Tony's huge book is actually very, very readable. Charles Taylor's is not. But in there, at one point, it did incur, he believed that modernity, let's just call it the disenchanting culture we're in now, does not create humility before the world.

He says it tends to make people say we have control. We can, we can, you know, if we're just savvy enough, we can, we can make the world exactly what it needs to be. We can figure it out with our reason.

There's like no humility before the mystery of it. And what that does, two things. One is, if your life starts to go well, if you have a nice home, if you have a nice family or whatever, you decide that life goes well.

Instead of being grateful, we have a tendency to say I did that. Whereas in the past, our ancestors really realized that that is, that was not, that doesn't happen to everybody. And even a good, hard working people.

And if you have it, it's a gift. The disenchanting society does not in any way cultivate that mindset. The mindset is, if I have it, I worked hard for it.

I got into Yale, got a good job in New York City, I've got the good life. It's, so they don't have that sense of gratitude. On the other hand, Taylor says that when things go wrong, because they don't have a sense of gratitude, when things go wrong, they get furious.

Whereas in the past, our ancestors were more humble before the mystery and say, I don't know why things happen the way they do, but it doesn't immediately, they, they, frankly, modern people have more trouble with suffering because of that. Now, the Christian, what the Christian belief, how Christian belief helps is this. We actually think that, and this goes back to that difference between a, sort of, a moralistic general religious view, which says, if I live a good life and I try hard, then God will bless me.

You know, the radical Christian Orthodox view is that not only, it's sin, by the way, sin is a huge help for gratitude if you believe in sin, because the Christian doctrine of sin is not only we do bad things, but even the good things we do, we do for bad reasons. We, we do it to get God to bless us, to feel good about ourselves, to get control of other people, and therefore, nothing we do merits salvation, it has to be a free gift. And the idea that God, if I have a relationship with God, it's all grace.

It's not like partly, it's not like I've earned part of this, but now God tops it off. It's all grace. And if you, on top of that, actually believe in the Atonement, if you actually believe that the Son of God came into the world and died for you at infinite cost to Himself to get you, then the gratitude gets enormous.



So I would say ancient people, whether they're Christians or not, had a sense of the world as a gift that we have lost today, I think Christianity, Orthodox Christian belief, can actually enhance that. I'm so strongly in agreement with almost everything that Tim has said that I'm inclined just to keep my mouth shut and go on to the next question. I'm trying to do the same thing for you.

But it's my turn and I'm not here. That's why he wanted to go second. I would say this that in thinking about gratitude, maybe the one place to start is by acknowledging the connection between gratitude and love.

Real gratitude is always a response to real love. There are lots of forms of gift giving and expressions of thankfulness for gifts received that are really trades, exchanges in disguise. And the gratitude that shows itself in relations of this kind is a faux gratitude.

It's not the real article. It's a social pleasantry. It's a way of oiling the machine and making sure that the exchanges continue to run smoothly.

I thank people all the time for things they do for me. Someone opens the door. I say thank you, but that's because I'm expected to open the door in turn for someone else later on that after afternoon.

Love isn't given with the expectation of a quid pro quo. It's given for no other reason than that its recipient will flourish and grow as a consequence. It comes with no strings attached.

And gratitude is the response. I think it's a very natural human response which can't be rooted out of us no matter how hard we try to the experience of being loved. And further without the experience of being loved, the world is wilderness.

It's a state of nature in the nightmarish way that some philosophers have imagined it to be. The world is not a completely congenial place. It's full of bumps and obstacles and it's constantly frustratingness and it only tolerates our presence for a while.

All of that is certainly true. But the world isn't a wilderness. It's not a desert.

It's a home. And it's a home because there are others who are here to greet us when we arrive and who welcome us into the world if we're lucky enough to be born in the right circumstances to the right parents. Welcome us with love.

And that awakens in us, I think very early on in our lives, a longing to give thanks in return. And that longing is the nursery bed of all of the good works we do in our lives, not as brownie points towards salvation or anything like that, but the love that we are able to show toward others the work we do, which at its best is a form of love, a loving embellishment of the world and so on and so forth. The worst thing that can happen to a human being is not to be loved and the second worst, which is really so close to it, is to

be almost the same, is to be incapable of loving.

And the experience of love awakens a gratitude, which is the ground of the capacity to love in return and without that, I mean human life is really, what is it? I mean maybe it can be successful in some sense or other, but it's about as vacant as I can imagine any stretch of existence being. Where we disagree, and this would draw us back into the theological weeds is with respect to the specifically Christian way of understanding the source and character of gratitude. And I don't, we've only got a little bit of time left, I don't want to get into that other than just to say very briefly, the doctrine that separates Christianity from Judaism and Islam most fundamentally and most clearly is the doctrine of incarnation.

Jews and the Muslims reject this vehemently out of hand for principle theological reasons. The doctrine of incarnation, as Tim was suggesting that the conclusion of his last remarks raises the stakes for gratitude, not just a little bit, but infinitely so, and beyond our power to respond in a way that we can ever possibly feel is adequate. In that respect it differs from the gratitude we show the human beings who love us, which is as imperfect as their love.

Their love is flawed, our gratitude is flawed, but equally so on both sides. And the experience of permanent frustration at never being able to say thanks in an adequate way, that's not built into the horizontal experience of human gratitude in the way it is vertically if you take, if you accept the doctrine of incarnation. Thank you, thank you.

Gentlemen, we are about to run out of time, but there is yet another movement and we'll reduce this third movement to basically one kind of question. We live in a very turbulent political time, a very difficult racial time at this moment. How do you each imagine the kind of thinking you've been doing this evening, the kind of positions you are outlining, how do you imagine that intervening in this very difficult political and racial moment? Tim, why don't you start with us? Yeah.

I've been, well, I think you're asking what does, I think all we should do is, you know, what does our particular faith, what resources does it bring to the situation? I've been reading a book on the early church by a British scholar, actually as an American scholar, Larry Hurtado wrote a book called *The Story of the Gods*, it's actually about the early Christians, and I was very struck by what he called the revolutionary Christian identity, the identity of the early Christians. He said, there was no such thing as a kind of separate religious identity before Christianity came along because you didn't choose your gods, you know, if you're from that city or from that town or from that, if you're with that people, your religion came along with the culture. So in a certain sense, your religious identity, your cultural identity, your racial identity were all bound up and nobody even thought you could separate them at all.

Then along comes Christianity, which says in Christ there is no Jew or Greek, meaning

that the most fundamental thing about you, if you become a Christian, is your relationship with Christ. And what Larry said, which was really intriguing, he says, on the one hand, what that does is it sort of de-identifies your race, that is the race no longer becomes an absolute value. But it doesn't efface your racial identity, which is a really interesting way to put it.

In other words, when I become a white guy, when I become a Christian, I don't become an Asian Christian. You know, you're an Asian when you become a Christian, you don't become a white, you're an Asian. You're white, you're African American, but you are a Christian.

What that did for me, I'll just say this, what that does for me is it does kind of de-center my whiteness, sort of knocks me around a little bit, means that when I talk to a, which I did, when I talked to a poor African single mother in Soweto, who by the way, in this case was a believer, so I shared this identity with her, she can speak to me and I can hear her in a way I don't think I could have heard her if I wasn't a Christian. In other words, I think it gave me a common vocabulary with her, our faith in Christ, the basic faith in Christ. And I wasn't, it felt like she was able to speak directly to me and not from her blackness into my whiteness.

It was almost like there was like somebody opened a door. And what that does is even though she was a Christian and that's because of our common Christian identity, I was able to hear some things I'd never heard, things that I always thought, oh yeah, yeah, you know, African people, black people, they exaggerate here and there. I was able to hear things from her that I wouldn't have otherwise.

And what that does is that actually affects the way in which I deal with everybody, Christian or non-Christian, everybody. I think Larry's right, he said it was the first trans-cultural religion because you had, and it was also very threatening. It was the first trans-ethnic religion and it was very threatening because it sort of created a kind of egalitarianism that that very stratified Roman world found pretty upsetting.

And that's one of the reasons why it was very subversive and persecuted actually to some degree. So I would say that, put it this way, in our very racially charged situation, I do think that robust Christian faith can be a resource for our whole society because if Christians actually understand what their identity is and live out of their Christian identity instead of out of their particular racial identity as the only way they think about themselves, it could create a cadre of peacemakers and bridge builders and folks that really care about racial justice and not just about my race getting its piece of the pie, which is kind of what's, there is as we know, developing a white identity politics and it does feel to me as a white Christian that that's actually not living out of your Christian identity, that's living out of your whiteness. So anyway, it's not the solution to everything but you're saying what could Christians bring, I think that they could but the reality is

that frankly an awful lot of Christians, frankly a lot of Christians still have the old identity which is their Christianity is actually just a function of their whiteness or their Asian-ness or their African-blackness maybe.

It almost like doesn't get them out. So that's probably maybe more than you want to know it's but I think it's a resource, it's not a panacea but we ought to be a resource and we're not the Christians. Thank you.

One of the heroes of my book is Walt Whitman. I have two European heroes and one American hero and I end the book with a chapter on Walt Whitman who I describe as a born-again pagan, he wouldn't have used the phrase but I think he would certainly have recognized the theology. Walt Whitman was America's great champion of diversity.

Diversity is the highest ideal of Walt Whitman's poetry but he understood diversity in a way differently I think than we understand it today. In our contemporary moral lexicon there isn't a word that carries a greater moral charge than diversity. All you need to do to advance a program or a proposal is to invoke it and to say or show that it will promote diversity in some fashion or other.

But what we mean generally speaking by diversity today is a group-wise arrangement. Diversity is a collection, a distribution of benefits and opportunities among individuals defined as members of groups first and most importantly. So you have whites and blacks and Asians and transgendered persons and but there are groups and individuals are in the groups and their claim to diversity is a claim that they have on account of their membership first and most importantly.

For Whitman diversity was in its most powerful understanding to be located at the level of the individual. The world is unimaginably diverse because it's made up of individuals no two of whom are alike and that used to be a more widely agreed upon element of the American political lexicon than it is today and I would like to use my born-again paganism to revitalize an understanding of diversity that is of the Whitmanian individually grounded kind and move away from the groupthink that we are I think imprisoned in today in ways that provide an endless provides an endless source of conflict and competition because it all comes down to as as as Tim said just a minute dividing the pie up among interest groups or what James Madison in federalist 10 calls factions. The way to get away from factionalism is to diversify diversity and return it to its Whitmanian ground in the infinite splendor of each and every individual that I think is actually an American thought.

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(gentle music)