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Onsi Kamel on Conversion to Catholicism

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Alastair Roberts

Onsi Kamel recently wrote an article for First Things, 'Catholicism Made Me Protestant', which I discuss with him in this episode.

The following are links to several books and articles which we mention in the course of our conversation:

Onsi's article, 'Catholicism Made Me Protestant': https://www.firstthings.com/article/2019/10/catholicism-made-me-protestant

Some citations for Onsi's article on his blog: https://oakamel.wordpress.com/2019/09/13/catholicism-made-me-protestant-first-things/

Davenant articles on Why Protestants Convert: Part 1 - https://davenantinstitute.org/why-protestants-convert-pt-1-conversionitis/ & Part 2: https://davenantinstitute.org/why-protestants-convert-pt-2-psychology-of-conversion/

Books in the Davenant bookstore: https://davenantinstitute.org/bookshop/

My blog for my podcasts and videos is found here: https://adversariapodcast.com/. You can see transcripts of my videos here: https://adversariapodcast.com/list-of-videos-and-podcasts/.

If you have any questions, you can leave them on my Curious Cat account: https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged.

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adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2.

Transcript

Welcome back. Today I'm joined by my friend Onsi Kamel, who recently wrote an article for First Things that I'd love to discuss with him. Welcome to the show, Onsi.

Thank you very much for having me, Alastair. Can you tell listeners a bit about yourself? Yes. My name, as you said, is Onsi Kamel.

I'm currently the Editor-in-Chief of the Davenant Press, which is the publishing arm of the Davenant Institute. I grew up in the Midwest and went to the University of Chicago for undergraduate studies, which is relevant because I mentioned in the article. And then my wife and I moved out to Philadelphia to pursue master's programs.

And following that, I took this job with Davenant. So your article is called Catholicism Made Me Protestant, which is maybe not an article that you'd expect to read often on First Things. But it's a very stimulating discussion of your own journey and also of how important you found Catholicism as part of that journey.

As a conversation partner, as a source of theological stimulation, of fellowship, of rooting you within key truths of the Christian faith and realities of the Christian faith, such as the church. Can you say a bit more about your experience? That's a big question. I guess the place to begin is a little bit after where my article begins.

So like I said, I grew up in the Midwest, which in a part of the Midwest in Springfield, Illinois, which is kind of smack dab in the middle of the state of Illinois. And as a result, has a mixture of southern and northern cultural sensibilities. So it functions, the Protestantism there functions a bit like, you know, Bible Belt Protestantism in the south, evangelical.

And the kind of evangelicalism I grew up in was deeply influenced by the megachurch movement. Pastors often took their cues from the latest book published by, you know, coming out of Willow Creek or Saddleback Church in California or something like that. So it was distinct from, I think, the kind of reformed Baptist evangelicalism that is becoming more prominent and that a lot of my peers, I think, grew up in.

And basically it was a nominally Baptist sort of evangelicalism. And basically, I think the reason Catholicism, when I got to college, became so important for me is that it, to make a long story short, it gave me the categories of traditional theology. These categories were completely absent from my upbringing.

And so in so doing, it taught me how to ask the same kinds of questions that the reformers were asking, the same kinds of questions that, you know, most theologians throughout church history have been asking. And I think because of that, Catholicism

wound up facilitating my, you might say, my return to Protestantism, because it taught me how to read Protestant theology. And what I found there was deeply compelling.

One of the things that I've found in my own experience, and I think for many others in their relationship to Catholicism and to some of the appeal that people find within Catholicism, is its foregrounding of particular parental dimensions of the Christian faith. The fact that we have father figures in the tradition, the tradition has a sort of fathering element to us. And then also the person of the Pope, the figure of Mary and what she represents for the church as a maternal figure.

And I think many people within particularly the context of evangelicalism feel like theological and ecclesial orphans, and they don't have a sense of a tradition to father them, to direct them in the path, and nor do they have a sense of identity, a rootedness within a history that has gone before them. And the church for them is very much defined by associations of individuals on a voluntaristic basis. And there's little sense of the church as our mother.

How do you feel that those particular ways of looking at the Roman Catholic Church played a role within your experience? Yeah, that's, thank you. That's a great question. Thanks.

I think it's important to start with the milieu that I found myself in in college. So not only did the Christianity of my upbringing lack the kinds of categories that the church has consistently operated with throughout history. It also, I think, tended in a biblicist direction.

So the primary Christian unit, you might say, was the individual. And hopefully that individual also had a Bible in hand, right? So it was sort of the individual with the Bible and the church functioned as a means of mutual encouragement, primarily, where Christians would come together with their Bibles in hand and sort of help each other along the way. So it was a very egalitarian, I think, way of understanding the church.

And not only was it egalitarian, it was, well, or perhaps I should say because it was egalitarian, it often didn't have high regard for what had come before. And so when I got to college, I realized that me and my Bible alone weren't going to be sufficient to keep me grounded. In a largely hostile, almost entirely non-Christian and intellectually rigorous setting.

And I think that Catholicism, with its foregrounding of the paternal dimensions of God and the church, and not, of course, that the Christianity of my upbringing didn't foreground God as Father. But it certainly didn't introduce me to the church as a mother, that sort of complementary parental element. And I think the kind of, the sense of authority that the Catholic Church possessed and the sense of tradition was one way of grounding myself in something larger than myself to help me find my way in the

labyrinths of the contemporary secular academy.

And so that's, I think, one reason, at least psychologically, why I found the paternal dimension of the church, Father, priests and Mother Church, so compelling. And I think another reason was that, I think, and this is something that goes under remarked, I think, it's exhausting to be alone with your Bible and just sort of meeting with peers constantly. We need guides.

We need authority figures. We need Christians who, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, have successfully run the race before us to help us run our own races. And I think, so just at kind of a spiritual level, so psychologically, it was helpful.

Spiritually, I think that's what I found most compelling. And then intellectually, I found a rich set of traditions, a rich set of ways of articulating Christian faith that even my secular peers were forced to take seriously. We were reading Augustine in our, you know, gen ed courses in the core, and so on and so forth.

And so I think that was intellectually, it was helpful to find people who had done this before me. And I didn't have to sort of start from the ground up. I wonder also, in my experience, I certainly see some of the appeal within Roman Catholicism for some of my friends and other people I've known who have moved in that direction.

It seems to me to be partly institutional, that you have an institution that is less egalitarian and populist in its structure. And as a result, it's able to foster organizations of excellence that really push people to excel and provide context that nurtures scholars and support the top level of scholarship. And I'm not sure that many evangelical contexts are as effective at doing that.

So often people who are evangelical scholars or moving in that direction in their studies find themselves increasingly lonely as they move up in their studies. They find that they can seem like a threat to their evangelical peers, because it's very much you and your Bible. And if you have someone who has great biblical skills, they can become a threat and a competitor, rather than part of a body of people who are reading the Bible together.

And so there's that aspect. And then there's the aspect of a community of peers. It can be very lonely when you're doing all these things by yourself without fellow travelers.

Yeah, yeah. No, I think both of those observations are very astute. And I think you've written on, you've written, I think eloquently about the institutional component to this in your discussion of the way that the Church of England has, and the university institutions in the UK have maintained structures for Protestants to continue doing excellent work.

And I think one dimension that shouldn't be ignored in the United States is that for a very long time, and it's difficult to sort of imagine this now, but for a very long time Catholics

were shut out of the most prominent American academic institutions. I mean, not entirely, but certainly generally. And as a result, they had to develop their own institutions.

And these institutions are still very robust. And so there's a kind of, now that the sort of cultural winds have shifted, Catholics still have very impressive and robust institutions sponsoring and supporting Catholic thought in a way that I think is difficult, especially for conservative, confessional, or evangelical Protestants to match. Now that many of the mainline institutions are sort of not so interested in what we have to say.

I think often you also find that as evangelicals and Catholics have come across each other more as co-belligerents within culture wars, issues like abortion, etc. Evangelicals realize just how much Catholics have thought about these issues on a very rigorous and deep level. And they just realize within their context, they don't have many people who are asking these questions at a rigorous level.

And there's also, I think, certainly been until recently, something about the Catholic Church's strong stance on certain moral questions of the day has been encouraging for other people in the rank and file. In the sense of it gives people courage, it enables them to stand firm where others are capitulating. Evangelicals feel, we all feel on the front line, because we all have to hold that line.

Whereas if you're in an institution where there's people at the very head who are really holding that line firmly, people in the rank and file do not feel the same pressure. They don't feel as besieged as they do where there isn't that institutional support and structure around them. Right.

No, I think that's definitely right. And one element of my experience of Catholicism that didn't make it into the first things piece was I started reading a lot of anthropology, Catholic anthropology. So, Love and Responsibility, which is, well, by Pope John Paul II, before he was Pope John Paul II, and other books like that, I think, gave me a conceptual framework for articulating things that I thought were clearly taught in the scriptures, but not as, how to put it, not as explicitly elucidated as one might hope if you're trying to give reasons for things to non-Christian peers.

So that was definitely also a, the Catholic churches, especially in the 20th century, robust anthropological output in terms of theological writings was very important for me as well. And so it was actually very helpful to find, through the Mere Fidelity podcast, for example, Oliver O'Donovan, who's written on these issues, or Matt Anderson, who's again, written extensively on these issues, as have you. And so that was actually very helpful for me to realize that Protestants could actually think the same things, that Protestants could articulate, and in some cases, I think, with more nuance, these things that Catholics have pioneered for us in the 20th century.

Behind a number of the issues that you comment upon within your article, and also in the conversation so far, is the question of scripture. Where does scripture fit in? How does scripture relate to the problem of private judgment, which Newman and others have written about? And I think we've all felt that, to some extent, rather keenly, that if everyone is just left alone with their Bibles, that doesn't actually lead to the authority of scripture. It actually can subvert the authority of scripture and end up with just a myriad different popes with their own text that they claim gives them authority.

How does that question, the underlying question of biblical interpretation of the place of scripture, of the place of private judgment, lead to some of the problematics that you find both in evangelicalism and in Roman Catholicism? That's very helpful. Yeah, so as I was wrestling, this for me was the issue, the issue of private judgment at the time. And as I was wrestling through it, I think there were a couple of things that I eventually had to sort of make my peace with.

The first, and actually you've spoken on this recently on this podcast, is giving up the search for absolute certainty, for a kind of unwarranted certainty, perhaps we might say. The kind of certainty that can only come from a thus saith the Lord, that can only be given directly through revelation. And I think ultimately I had to give that up because it's simply not possible to obtain in ordinary circumstances, as I think you showed.

Part of it also for me was recognizing that the way that the problem of private judgment is posed assumes a kind of skepticism, I think. And I think people who really like Newman don't want to grant this, but I think that built into Newman's framing of the issue is a kind of skepticism about our capacity to actually grasp what is. And in the case of the scriptures, he sort of, you know, ratchets this problem up to the nth degree, where for Newman, there really isn't the possibility of being conformed to something outside of myself.

If I approach a text, any judgments I make about that text are disconnected from the text and from others around me. And I just, I think that's, that simply is unsustainable as a model of, as an epistemological model. And I think it was actually a kind of throwaway comment that Oliver O'Donovan made in, perhaps it was his book on the 39 articles, but that the scriptures as an objective reality conform the people who are reading them, to a large extent, not entirely, but to themselves as an objective reality.

And this is the way the world works. We can't sort of fashion it or project onto it whatever we want. It shapes us and limits us and conforms us to itself in all sorts of important ways.

And so really, I think the problem of private judgment can't be put in the way that Newman puts it. As far as how this works itself out institutionally, I think for Catholics, this is actually a bit of a problem, at least for Catholic apologists, because there's a kind of bait and switch where they sort of start with the Thomistic epistemology, and then

when they're making arguments for conversion, they switch to sort of Newmanish skepticism, you might say, at least this is how I experienced it. And I think the problem is that this winds up leading, well, maybe, no, maybe I don't want to say that actually, but I'll simply say that I think the claims that the church makes about the kind of certainty that it can give to the faithful are overblown, which I make that point in my piece.

As far as evangelicalism goes, I think really the reason I felt the urgency of the problem as Newman articulated it, even though I sort of now reject the terms, was because I was sort of looking around at evangelicalism and saying, okay, well, what on earth is going on here? But again, I think that the kinds of problems that evangelicalism, especially in the United States, faces are owed probably more to suspicion of expertise, to a lack of robust institutions that can cultivate learning at the highest level, which leaves regular people, which leaves the laity kind of swimming around aimlessly, trying to, you know, trying to get their way. Trying to choose between leaders. But I don't think that there's a sort of problem, like a deep epistemological problem built into, say, the way that, built into the heart of Protestantism or something like that.

But it took me a while to sort of work my way through that. Now, part of your description of your own journey is coming to that point where you're visiting the primary texts of the Reformation for the first time and really getting into them. And I think this is probably something that's common to many people who've been raised with evangelicalism, where nominally you're a Protestant, but there's no clear sense of a rooting within that tradition.

And then understanding of the logic of Protestantism, of the Reformed confessions, of the Lutheran confessions, of what you find within the arguments of Calvin or Luther. And returning to that particular deposit, I think certainly it's something that's part of your present work, but seems to be a very important part for a number of people in getting beyond the problems that are raised by Roman Catholic apologists. Returning to people like Hooker and Luther and others.

How did you find that an important part of your journey? And how has that... How do you think evangelicals more generally have lost that deposit or how do they relate to it in a way that I suppose holds them out of many of the ways it might address some of the problems that they face? Yeah, those are very big questions. So starting, I guess, with myself and then moving on to evangelicalism writ large, which by the way should qualify when I talk about evangelicalism writ large. I'm, you know, I sort of, I know what my own experience has been and I know what my peers have experienced, but I've heard enough from other people that certain characterizations of mine aren't universal.

So I just caution when I'm speaking about broader institutional issues that they may not be universally applicable. But starting with myself, I think it was... I've sort of been thinking to myself that in most conversations I have with my Catholic friends, they think

that if I only knew, you know, the Fathers better than I'd become Catholic. But really, I think they only think that because they don't actually understand Protestants very well.

That if they just knew Protestants better, they'd know why I'm comfortable where I am, even though I know the Fathers. And so I think for me, it was the biggest, I think, revelation for me was that the Protestants were operating, the Reformers were operating with the same categories as the church throughout history. They weren't, and because they were operating with the same categories, I mean, broadly speaking, obviously there are debates about definitions and such of different terms in the Reformation period.

But because they're debating and thinking in and through the same categories, the conversation they're having is the conversation that the church has been having over time. And I think at a sort of, at the sort of bird's eye level, that was kind of the biggest revelation for me that pointed to their continuity with the church that came before them. And then there were, you know, specific issues on which I found them articulating positions that the early church had held, or that certain, you know, people within the early church had held, that gradually became ruled, that were gradually ruled out of bounds in the West by the papacy.

And often I thought without justification. And so being able to locate, as I do in my article, with just a few issues, being able to locate the Reformers on the map of the Fathers, you might say, being able to show that actually Calvin agrees with Chrysostom on this, or Hooker takes Pope Leo's position on this, was extremely helpful for me. Not only because it meant that there's actually substantial agreement, but because it meant that they're not, they were not undertaking a sort of radical break with everything that came before.

They weren't intending to dissolve the traditions of the church or to free us from the church in the way that I think many evangelicals today tend to think that we are free from the strictures of the church. And as for evangelicals today, in recapturing this, to be honest, I've been thinking about this issue a little bit recently. I'm not entirely sure how we go about reclaiming this kind of relationship to the Reformers from within Protestantism.

I simply don't have a good answer because for me, it took a near conversion to Catholicism to kind of get me to see things this way. Because Catholics gave me all of my categories, they gave me the Reformers categories. And as a result, they were the ones who taught me how to read Protestants.

And so I think frankly, without a near conversion to Catholicism, I wouldn't have been able to read Calvin well, or read Luther well, or read Hooker well. That's very interesting to read someone like, say, Calvin on the supper against the background of Aquinas on the supper. And you realize there's a lot of similarity there.

And maybe if you read Calvin against that sort of background, you'll have a better understanding of what he's doing. Then if you read him as just a radical, this revolution against everything that's happened before. And I think this part of the underlying historical framework of evangelical and Protestant tellings of their own story that really let us down here.

There are certain periods that are ignored. We tend to ignore the period prior to the Reformation. We'll go back maybe to Augustine and before that.

But the Reformation just brackets off this long period of spiritual darkness. Then you have other things after the Reformation, the reform scholastics, for instance. They get dropped out of the picture and then you jump forward to revivals and other things like that.

But there are large periods of our history that have been memory holes that maybe if we attended to them more and listened to them against a different, broader historical framework, we'd have a far deeper and better understanding of where we have come from and why we are at the point that we are. Right. No, I think that's exactly right.

And I think some of the issues of, at least in America, in the church are bound up with America's sort of cultural penchant. And this exists outside the church and inside the church with a sort of predisposition in favor of populist movements, mass movements. And also the history of revivals in the United States, in which revivals are sort of, how to put this, are kind of championing a more less ecclesially focused and more inwardly directed kind of spiritual awakening in a way that relativizes the church's and the other means of grace.

And I think because of this, this sort of permits us to untether ourselves from the broader theological conversation of the church and from the historical frameworks that so shaped the reformers. Now, you mentioned that for your experience, it took a near conversion to Catholicism to come to some of this understanding. And within your experience, that relationship between Catholics here and now helped you to read the Protestant tradition.

How do you think that Protestants in this situation can learn to relate to Catholics as conversation partners, co-belligerents, etc., in a way that will equip them to relate to their own tradition appropriately? Do you mean, sorry, just to clarify, do you mean in the situation that I find myself now or the situation? I'm talking about the broader situation that Protestants find themselves in with respect to their own tradition and in their relationship to Catholics. How can they reorder their relationship to Catholics in a way that will be more fitting to help them to understand their own tradition? I think there are a couple of things, actually. So when I was in college, I was very much in favor of the way that late 20th century ecumenical discourse was conducted, where you have high level theologians from various traditions meeting together and trying to put it perhaps ungenerously, because I think we should recognize the historic contributions that these

ecumenists made in Protestant Catholic relations, but what would essentially try to, I think, paper over doctrinal differences in a way that relativized them.

And I actually think that perhaps paradoxically, the most fruitful conversations I've had with Catholics have arisen out of a forceful articulation of Protestant theology, because I think that there's, perhaps it's best to put it this way, we may be saying different things when I'm arguing on the basis of the Reformed Confessions and they're arguing on the basis of Trent and such, but we're speaking in the same language. And I think that often what happens is for many evangelicals, and certainly in the kind of evangelicalism that I grew up in, there was a kind of a desire to relativize all of the differences, because all of us love Christ, we're all on the same team. And these things are certainly true.

I mean, I don't mean to take away from the deep truths that those kind of sentiments are articulating. It is true that we all participate in Christ and our fellow children of the church, etc. And yet, those kinds of sentiments, if that's where we leave the conversation, fails to take seriously Rome's claims about herself and fails to take seriously the Reformation's claims about the nature of the church, of faith, etc.

And so I've actually found it helpful to articulate very firmly and unapologetically Protestant doctrine as a Protestant in a way that my Catholic friends, and most of my good friends, or at least many of them now are still Catholics, including the best man at my wedding, but in a way that they can really understand, reflect upon, and then respond to. So I think in some ways, my hopes for situating at least academic level Protestants and Catholics involve learning to speak the same language again, even if we're making different assertions within that. As far as on the ground, I mean, I think, frankly, the felt cultural hostility, and I know there are debates about how serious this is, etc., what we should do about it.

But I think on the ground, there's an unmistakable feeling that Christians now hold more in common with one another than they do with the rest of our culture. Whereas, you know, in the 1920s, most of the culture is Christian. So you're sort of like, well, Presbyterians have more in common with each other than they do with Catholics.

And now it's Christians have more in common with one another than they do with others. And I think that that's going to sort of naturally probably produce a kind of, you know, a humanism of the trenches, as it's been called. On that front, when you think about the different sociological factors that frame our relationship with each other, as we're framing relationship with Catholics over against other groups, secular, liberals, whatever it is, or against certain in certain cultural war issues.

On that front, I've often wondered about the difference between the experience of Catholicism within contexts where Catholicism is framed and portrayed primarily by converts, or to a large extent by converts, over against countries and contexts where the primary experience of Catholicism is from those who have grown up as cradle Catholics. I

grew up in the Republic of Ireland, which again frames these things very differently. The Troubles were still going on.

I was a Protestant in an Irish Catholic boys school, which is a very different experience of Protestant Catholic relations than you'd find in the context of the US, where you might have a lot of secular struggles, but and in the UK as well, where you might have secular struggles that both of them find themselves as co-belligerents within. And also, it's different when Catholicism often has its public face is that of apologists, at least as Protestants will experience it. And I wonder if you could comment a bit more upon that.

And you've already noted that you see maybe these things moving under those influences as certain battlegrounds and fronts become more foregrounded within our cultural context. How do you see these developments changing the relationship between Catholics and Protestants? And how do you see the relationship between Catholics and Protestants within somewhere like the US differing from that which we might find in, let's say, a South American country or in some Catholic country elsewhere in the world? Yeah. I think first to the point about converts, I'm certainly no expert.

I know there can be some tensions, perhaps to put it mildly, between converts to Catholicism and cradle Catholics in the United States. I think the caricatures go that converts tend to be more zealous, take a harder line on the teachings of the church, where the cradle Catholics are a little freer to question certain elements of the official history of Catholicism or the papacy and such. I'm certainly no expert in this regard.

But I think part of it, frankly, just stems from the fact that a convert has to declare that he believes the church infallible and a cradle Catholic never does. I mean, there isn't that same assent as a condition of membership for the cradle Catholic as there is for the convert. I think one of the things I'd be interested to hear your thoughts on particularly is the way that a convert will often frame their newfound faith or position against the foil of what they formerly held.

And so Catholicism can be framed against a problematic that arises from a very Protestant context or framework. So you're saying you'd like to hear more about the way that that sort of converts to Catholicism, the way that Protestantism functions as a foil in their narratives. Is that right? Yes, partly.

And how that might differ from people who have grown up within the context of Catholicism. So, for instance, the sort of arguments for Catholicism that you'd find in someone like Newman, is that something that you'd find from a cradle Catholic within a country where there isn't a large Protestant population, where that problematic just isn't as significant as it is for someone who's been in the Church of England, let's say. I think that's a very good question.

The first thing I'd say is that I think in the United States, even for cradle Catholics, the

problematics are... Sorry, maybe back up a minute. So if you think about a place like Ireland, Catholicism is simply the default. Everyone's a Catholic.

I mean, not everyone, but you know. Go ahead. I think the range of viable options, at least in my experience, doctrinally for cradle Catholics seems to be much, much broader than that for converts.

I think in the United States, the situation's a little different, simply because we no longer have a default. So even if you're raised within a particular tradition, and there's no doubt that that tradition will inform how you understand yourself and how you think, there still does come a moment where you have to choose whether to appropriate this for yourself, simply because of the way that we conceptualize maturity and personhood and adulthood and these sorts of things. So I'd almost... I mean, this is probably putting it too strongly, but I'd almost want to say that in the United States, everyone's a convert to something.

And I think that that changes our relationship to our traditions. It makes us much more aware of the boundaries in certain respects. And it makes policing boundaries much more important for us, because these boundaries actually do substantively contribute to and demarcate the bounds of our identities in ways that I think the same kind of like doctrinal boundaries or cultural boundaries don't in a place that has a strong sort of default religion.

Do you have any thoughts on the difference between those whose movement towards Catholicism has occurred primarily within an academic milieu, or those who maybe just marry into Catholicism? Because I imagine that the experience of those who move towards Catholicism along those more academic lines in conversation with theologians and others is very different from maybe the majority of converts who marry someone who's a Catholic, or someone who's just been within a Catholic, more or less Catholic cultural context, and then has moved towards a greater degree of religious commitment. How can, I suppose, those who have arrived at their convictions from a more academic perspective and route relate to people who have maybe arrived at it in far more associative and in ways that seem less academic and more relational? That's an interesting question. And I'm sort of, I'm not entirely sure how to answer, primarily because I think the kind of conversion narrative that I'm familiar with that seems to be prominent right now in Christian dialogue is essentially, exclusively from what I can tell, a relatively elite phenomenon.

It's not something, you know, this is something that happens to college educated people, perhaps at university, perhaps a little bit later, from a particular background. There haven't, as far as I can tell, been that many high profile African American Protestant converts to Catholicism. So I think there's a kind of, there's a certain sort of specificity to the cultural identity of the people who are doing this.

And so, and I'm not entirely sure why that is. It just does seem to be the case that amongst people converting to Roman Catholicism for these sorts of reasons, it's happening in a very specific cultural milieu. As far as how they relate to those who convert for other reasons, I'm not entirely sure.

I think that would have to be something that, you know, sort of converts sort out for themselves, in part because I'm not sure that those who anymore, to the extent that there are, you know, well, and I think there are, but those who marry into Catholicism, for example, I think are necessarily going to have a very different kind of relationship to the church than the, those who convert for primarily theological or sort of, who at least understand themselves to be converting for primarily theological reasons. I'd be curious to know your thoughts on the role of spiritual autobiographies within the context of Catholicism, where within Protestantism and particularly evangelicalism, the spiritual autobiography in the form of the testimony is very important. And it's something that we find in very secular forms as well.

You can think about the coming out narrative for LGBTQ persons. I think within the context of Catholicism, that conversion narrative, I've often wondered whether it's something that owes a lot to the spiritual autobiographies that you find within Protestant and evangelical context. It's something that has a more affinity, a greater affinity for those worlds than it does for Catholicism's own world, where you do have spiritual autobiography.

But I imagine they take a rather different form. Any thoughts on that? Right. That's very interesting.

I mean, you're right. I mean, structurally or formally, you might say the converts to Catholicism are writing spiritual autobiographies that map well onto revivalistic or conversionistic Protestantism, right? There's a sort of crisis, and then there's a moment of conversion. And this always happens as an adult.

And so the analog is, submit to Mother Church or accept Jesus into my heart or whatever it is. That's interesting. Yeah, I can't say that I've read too many narratives of Catholic converts at length, certainly nothing book length.

And I've sort of avoided, perhaps to my detriment, although I'm not entirely sure, the sort of spiritual autobiographies that Catholics tend to write. So I'm not entirely sure about anything except for the formal features that you've sort of hinted at and outlined, that it is sort of interesting to note that conversion narratives written by Catholics tend to sort of have formally evangelical features. Or at least, you might say, baptistic evangelical features, certainly, because I think, you know, a Presbyterian's conversion narrative is going to be very different, I would imagine, than a Baptist's.

Now, towards the end of your piece, you mentioned a number of the historical Protestant

authors that you returned to and found great help in. Can you say a bit more about people like Hooker and Luther and Calvin and others that you found helpful along your way and why? Yeah, so I'm sort of eclectic when it comes to my reading of the Protestants, of the Reformers. Maybe eclectic is the wrong word, but I sort of, I have a big tent approach.

If they're a Protestant, you know, I'll read them and find them, see what I find helpful about them. And I think it's clear to me that they all have different strengths. And so, you know, I end my piece with Luther's exposition of the gospel, because I think that Luther is just, he's a brilliant rhetorician, which makes his prose extremely powerful.

But he's also, I think, the best Reformation expositor of the gospel. And so, it was Luther who first was able to break through to me, to teach me about what Protestants actually meant when they, you know, said things like faith alone, or these sorts of things. And then Luther also has a very high view of the sacraments, and he doesn't feel the need to hedge, I think, in the way that Calvin does.

And there are reasons, there are good reasons why Calvin is sort of borrowing from Luther, especially, but also Zwingli. So it's not necessarily a mark against him. But when I was about to convert to Catholicism, it was very helpful to find someone who wouldn't feel the need to go on at length, you know, like Calvin does about the, you know, spiritual effects of baptism, only to sort of throw in a paragraph at the end, which sort of, you know, calls into question what he wrote before.

So I'd say that Luther was the first one who really got through to me because he preaches the gospel. And then I think Hooker was especially helpful because, one, first he was moderate. He was charting, to me at least on my reading of Hooker, it's a decidedly reformed course.

So I don't think he's, you know, I don't see Hooker as like the founder of the Anglican Via Media, or something like that. I think he's a good reformed theologian. But in terms of his sensibilities, and also in terms of his, the positions he stakes out, he avoids the excesses of Puritanism, which I had very low regard for at the time, and which I think was very, which I still have lots of issues with.

And because of that, he's arguing, well, perhaps I should put it this way, Hooker's two opponents in the laws of ecclesiastical polity are Puritans and Catholics. And so against the Puritans, he's arguing from the scriptures, and against the Catholics, he's arguing from tradition. And I think that these two, the union of scripture and tradition that I found in Hooker was the first, he was the first one to really show me how a Protestant might be able to have a legitimate claim to the tradition, and also hold to something like sola scriptura well.

I found Hooker to be fantastic on a number of the deeper epistemological issues that are

underlying the debates. How to arrive at a modest confidence and conviction without actually going for absolute certainty. How to be people that bring together that sort of pragmatic and judicious approach to reality, along with deep reflection and contemplation upon some of the underlying principles.

How to bring a commitment to scripture, along with reason and the use of wisdom within the world. All of that I found in Hooker to a degree that I didn't find elsewhere. And it's surprising to read Hooker and just see how fresh he seems within the current context.

This is someone who speaks very much to issues of our own day. Yeah, no, I think that's right. I mean, Hooker is a deceptively deep thinker, I think.

I mean, you wouldn't expect to find someone plumbing the depths of epistemology in a book about ecclesiastical polity, or at least ostensibly about ecclesiastical polity. And I think the moderateness of his tone makes him a very winsome person to read. His snark is wonderful when it comes out.

Well, right. But he sort of buries it in, you know, eight line sentences. So you have to be very, very careful or you'll blink and you'll miss it.

But no, I think that's absolutely right. And then I think, finally, for me, Calvin is just a masterful exegete. I mean, just sort of unparalleled, I think, in the Reformation as an exegete.

And so that was also helpful for me as well. And so I think between the three of them, and then with a bit of Karl Barth thrown in, I was sort of able to grab and choose enough from all of them. And to see the significant commonalities.

I mean, that was one of the issues as well was, you know, for me, Protestants seem to be going every which way, sort of each following their own path. And then you actually read Luther, Hooker, Calvin, and they don't agree completely on everything. But there's a substantial degree of similarity amongst really all of the reformers.

So at this point, having gone through your story and your intellectual and theological development at this point, and looking back to your early experience within the world of evangelicalism, you've established a degree of distance from that through near conversion and then development into a deeper Protestantism. How do you look back upon that world of evangelicalism? What are some of the things that you've come maybe to look more favorably upon, to appreciate? And how have your judgments been seasoned with time? And also, if you're speaking to yourself as a young teen, on the outset of your theological development now, what particular things would you say? I mean, I think that's a very important question. For me, personally, it was something that I wrestled with in college.

And I mean, some of it too, you know, some of my issues with the religion of my

upbringing are undoubtedly owed to the fact that, you know, in the West, we all have issues with whatever our upbringing was, right? We all become hypercritical. And especially, you know, you give us one or two books, and we think we know more than everyone who raised us. And for a long time, that informed, I had very little good to say about the Protestantism of my upbringing, which was, you know, obviously, I think, sinful.

I think there was a comment that my actually my Catholic when I was in college, my Catholic roommate, made to me. And I said, you know, how do you how do you relate to the people who raised us in the faith, given that there was a sense, I think, for both my friend and myself that we had been robbed of an inheritance that should have been ours, you know, the inheritance of the church, which I think is overstating matters. But this is how I felt at the time.

And he just looked at me and he said, Well, honestly, they taught us to love Jesus. And, you know, I mean, it was very simple. And he said, we'll always owe them that.

And I think, I mean, it's very simple. It sounds a little trite. But I think at bottom, I say in my, in the piece for first things that I owe Catholicism, I owe to Catholicism, my love for the church.

But of course, I owe to the to the Christianity of my upbringing, my love for Christ. I mean, these are the people who, who formed me and shaped me and first showed me Christ as as images of God. And so I think, for me, it was it was really coming to see that, that I owe them.

And I think that was, I think, the most important thing that helped finally soften my, soften my heart. Again, to put it a little tritely, but sort of helped me to look on my upbringing with charity and grace, as opposed to sort of hypercritical, you know, self righteous judgment. And as for what I would say to my high school self, I think I would probably just do what my dad did, which is start giving me theologians and philosophers.

I mean, I wouldn't have known anything about Catholicism if my dad hadn't handed me a book by a Catholic philosopher that he really liked when I was 14. And that I do think is one of the chief strengths of the kind of evangelicalism of my upbringing. There wasn't a fear of Catholics or a fear of the wrong kinds of Protestants.

And sometimes, I mean, sometimes some fear is healthy. But I think as a result, the reading that my father was giving to me, the books that he was giving to me to read, came from a much broader array of figures than I ever would have been exposed to if I had been raised in a, you know, very firmly confessional, you know, Presbyterian church. My experience with my father was very similar, that he introduced me to a world of theology that I would not have had access to otherwise.

He read very widely, and he encouraged me to do the same, not just to read within a very limited safety zone. Right, exactly. And I think that is one of the chief benefits of trying to relativize differences, which I know I was a little bit critical of earlier, but there really are benefits to that approach.

And one of them is finding what's helpful wherever you can find it as a general disposition, rather than constantly trying to gatekeep or boundary keep. And there's a time and a place for that. But there's also a time and a place for intellectual curiosity, not in sort of the negative sense that the medievals would have given it, but, you know, to see what we can find that's good wherever we can find it.

Just as we conclude, I'd love to hear about what you're currently working upon, what you're excited about, and what listeners can purchase or get involved with. That's great. So we've got a number of irons in the fire at Davenant at the moment.

We've recently kicked off a blog series about why Protestants convert to Catholicism. And it just so happened that my First Things piece came out around the same time. We didn't plan that.

And there are two installments out already, and there should be a few more coming down the pipeline. As far as things that people can purchase, we just released a new translation of Peter Martyr Vermingley's On Original Sin, which is fantastic. He's championing an Augustinian doctrine of original sin over against a Catholic opponent who happens to also be a Pelagian, or at least a semi-Pelagian, although I certainly wouldn't want to say that Catholics are semi-Pelagians, but this actual Catholic was semi-Pelagian.

And that's the first translation of that text since 1583 into English. So it's a very exciting, exciting time. And there will be, it's part of Vermingley's commonplaces, and we will be translating the rest of them as well on other topics.

And then finally, we also have the first four books of Richard Hooker's Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity, which we've been discussing today. We have published a modernization of the first four books of that work, which makes Hooker's prose just more accessible, I think, for someone who's not comfortable with 16th century English. And Hooker is fairly extreme, even in terms of 16th century English.

Right, that's true. I mean, he's not easy to read. I think he's worth it if someone has the hours to sort of make the effort.

But I think this modernization has been used, in fact, by, I know there are some professors using it in their Anglican formation courses at seminaries and such. And so they found it very helpful. And I think if I, I'm obviously owe a huge debt to Richard Hooker.

So, so the more people who read him, I think, I think the better. So I'd recommend those. And as far as books, projects that we're working on, I'm not sure how public I'm supposed to make this.

So I'll just go out on a limb and say we may or may not have a volume on divine simplicity in the works. And I've been reading some of the contributions to that volume. And I think it's going to be a very exciting, very, just some top notch contributions and very exciting books.

So I tell people to keep their eyes out for that in the coming six to eight months. I'd also note that Davenant has a superb anthology of Reformation literature within its volume on Reformation theology that gets many of these texts that may have been forgotten or neglected by many Protestants today, but are worth revisiting. It was done for the 500th anniversary of the Reformation and I've used it to teach and I've read it for myself and it's fantastic.

I highly recommend that. I'll link to all of these in the show notes. Thank you very much for coming on, Ansi.

It's been a pleasure to discuss these things with you. Thank you very much for having me. Thank you.

Thank you. It was, it was a pleasure to be here. And I appreciate the invitation.

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