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#67 NT Wright & Douglas Murray pt 2 - Audience Q&A

May 27, 2021



Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

A continuation of last week's show featuring audience questions to NT Wright & Douglas Murray during their Big Conversation on 'how do we live in a post-Christian world?' ·

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Transcript

Hi there, before we begin today's podcast, I want to share an incredibly special resource with you today. If you're like me, life can get pretty hectic pretty quickly, but one thing that helps me slow down is connecting with God in new ways. And I'd like to share a resource that has really helped me do that.

It's called "Five Ways to Connect with God" and you can download it for free right now at premierinsight.org/resources. I think you'll find refreshment for your soul. So go right now to premierinsight.org/resources and download your copy. That's premierinsight.org/resources.

[Music] The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast.

[Music] Hello and welcome back to the show. It's Justin Briley here, premier's theology and apologetics editor, bringing you another edition of the podcast that brings you the thought and theology of Tom Wright in partnership with premier SBCK and NT Wright online. And today's show continuing the conversation between Douglas Murray and NT Wright, part of our big conversation season three.

You would have heard the first part of that on the podcast last week. This is the Q&A

section of the show that you're going to be hearing today. And it's part of an exciting range of things we've been doing with NT Wright recently.

That included him being part of our Unbelievable Conference 2021, alongside historian Tom Holland and with other speakers on the day as well. If you want all of the sessions, all of the video sessions from the conference, if you weren't able to be with us or you haven't got ahold of them, Unbelievable.live is the place to go to be able to order the digital download of this year's conference. And on a few tradition of the podcast, you'll be hearing the live Ask NT Wright Anything show that was part of the day as well.

But we'd love to know what you think of today's conversation, both the part one that you heard last week and the Q&A that you were going to be playing out today with Douglas Murray. With a special survey, you can find it with the links from today's show. Quick and multi-choice.

We'd love to know what you thought about this big conversation. And if you'd like more from the big conversation with other big thinkers talking big questions, do go to our website, thebigconversation.show and sign up there. Let's get into your questions that came in this special conversation on identity, myth and miracles with Douglas Murray.

Let's put this first question to you first of all, Douglas. And I'll invite you both to be brief if you can, because there's a lot of questions you'd like to get through. So maybe just a couple of minutes each on each of these.

But Dylan asks, Douglas and NT Wright agree on the importance of the Christian story. But does it matter if it's not true, Douglas? How about you start on this one? Well, obviously it matters. It matters a huge amount.

There is a complex corner which I'm obviously at, which is whether you can, whether it is possible. And I'm not dogmatic on this question. But whether it is possible to keep what you need without holding on to the idea of it being true.

Now, of course, what we mean by true in this context is very complex. Let's just park that for the moment. I think there is an enormous temptation which sits at the moment.

It's many people who have written about it. I'm in the first one. I think of most clearly a shop and house in the dialogue in "On Religion" who writes in a fascinating way about the possibility that it is as it were the philosophy for the masses.

I think this is temptation to follow this idea. I also think obviously for any believer it's a great error because the whole thing is a form of shadow play. And I think myself, the answer isn't clear.

How could it be perhaps? The question that I think it was the German jurist, Bockenford, who put the dilemma out. I first came across this in the writings of a Brat Singer, Pope

Benedict. Bockensford's dilemma is can we maintain an ethical and more structure without the roots that gave it birth? Many people think that the conclusion is already in on that and that the answer is no.

I don't know because I think that we're currently living through an attempt at that experiment. It's like the question of exactly where the fire stops and where the heat begins and when you know where you're living in the embers and whether you know whether you can get them going again. It's exceptionally hard to know because you're living through it.

You would expect me to, you would expect me probably to quote St. Paul if the Messiah is not raised, your faith is futile and we're still in our sins. It's pretty basic. There is stuff that happens that was unexpected, that was dramatic, that you couldn't actually have made up anyone 30 years, 60 years later than Jesus, wouldn't have made it up like that.

We know a lot about the stories that they lived on and this kind of breaks the boundaries. That doesn't in itself mean that it's true, but it does mean that if you put that in the middle, you can see how everything else makes the sense it makes around it. I was just thinking as Douglas was talking, saying could we have all the benefits as it were without it being true? It's rather like saying all the things that I most value about having been married for nearly 50 years now.

Supposing my wife didn't exist, but I could still have a lovely home and well-cooked meals, etc. Would that be all right? And the answer is of course not because it's all about her and being with her and together with her. And Christianity is all about Jesus.

It isn't Jesus so that we can have something else, a nice system about to live. It's we have Jesus and because we have Jesus, then all the other things make sense. So if you take Jesus away and that means Jesus being crucified and raised from the dead, then I'm sorry, it's just not going to work.

Theologians and others have tried to do without the resurrection in the last century and their systems basically fail in my view. And the churches that follow those I think have often proved that point as well. So yeah, nice try, no cigar would be my sense.

Yes, but this is the bit where you end up feeling embarrassed in front of Christopher Hitchens, isn't it? If you're required to believe in these things like miracles and specifically the core miracle at the heart of Christianity. Well, here's another question and see what you think of this Douglas. And Sonia asks, when it comes to Douglas losing his faith, was it those intellectual difficulties in miracles, the virgin birth or something else? And I suppose I could ask about the resurrection as well.

I mean, Tom obviously feels if Christianity is ultimately going to be helpful, it's helpful on the basis that something really happened that changes the world, changes people and

then works out from there. I mean, what's your take on that if you're not really sure that you can go down that resurrection route? Well, let me just argue something slightly counter to what I just said, but it doesn't completely counter it, but it might complement it. I remember some years ago reading a very interesting book by George Steiner in which he relayed a conversation.

He said it was one of the most important conversations he had in his life, which was actually in South Africa, which Tom just referred to. I hope it's wrong. This is one of his later books, but Steiner says that late one night over dinner, he's talking with some of the activists and having to be black activists, and I suppose this must have been still in apartheid time.

And one of them says to him, "Steiner has obviously Jewish, but you don't understand we don't have a book." They were stressing things he had ever heard. We don't have a book. Now, obviously these people were not Christian, but what they noticed was they did not have a thing to draw upon in the same way that for instance Steiner, although he wasn't exactly believing.

I think I had the Torah. There's a similar point made by Alan Bloom in one of his books in the 1980s. One where he says, "If you're not going to have the Bible, you would need to have a book of equivalent seriousness to base it all on." And I've always thought this is a very important challenge because there are books that people might put forward to try to base it on, but they are never of equivalent seriousness.

It's actually quite hard to think of equivalent seriousness to the Bible, but I do think this is a challenge. What would you base it all on? Exactly. And it's fascinating because AC Grayling, maybe 10 years ago, produced that thing called the Good Book, which was his attempt to do a sort of secular Bible, and it fell flat on its face.

It was a very shallow and rather distressing production. But the point of the Christian Bible is, yes, it's a book which does this, that and the other. It's a great story, but the Christian Bible, the climax of the story, is of course Jesus.

The four gospels bring the story of Israel to an unexpected and very shocking climax as a result of which all sorts of other things happen. So it isn't that the Bible is just full of abstract teachings and ethics, etc. And oh yeah, we've got this book which tells us what to do.

It's a story and you're invited to get on board with the story and to be part of the onward movement that takes it forward from there. And in a sense, the Jewish Bible does the same thing, but in a much more wistful way because it's telling a story, but the story sort of, well, does it peter out or does it turn into something abstract? That's a question which Jews wrestle with to this day. But the Christian Bible has that climax on Jesus.

And if you take that away, well, it's a lovely idea, but why should we credit it? Yeah, I mean, don't just coming back on that. And there's a question that maps ties into this a bit from Alex who asks you, Douglas, would you consider yourself a moral realist? I suppose the question I want to ask along with that is, do you consider there is a story that we're supposed to be living by? Is there something that transcends us? Is there a purpose? Is there a morality? Is there a something to which we are beholden? Because in a sense, that idea has gone away in a postmodern world in a new atheist world. Life is whatever you make it.

There really is no overarching purpose, no matter narrative. Christianity obviously gave people that and continues to give many people that a story, as Tom says, to live into. But we don't seem to have those kinds of stories anymore.

So where do you find yourself and are you worried at the lack of this kind of a story now? Well, I've said before, I can't be aware that I am, we're clearly, as I think was mentioned, we're meaning seeking beings, we're storytelling beings. That having been agreed, the question then is, are we just meaning seeking beings or are we meaning seeking beings and there's meaning? Now I happen to fall inclined more to the latter position. I don't know exactly what it is, but my inclination goes that way.

And it's partly because I think that I don't get too abstract here, but there are things that you can read even in non-religious texts, which strike you as true. I was reading Brothers Karamazov recently, and of course Dostoevsky's "Seeked in Christian religion", but there are two moments at least in that book where you gasp, because what Dostoevsky is doing is suddenly taking the story into an entirely other realm. You'll know, if you read it, that there's a moment when you realize that one of the characters believes he is being visited by the devil, and the moment of which he says, his brother, how did you know he visits me? It's unbelievably powerful, it knocked me over when I read it, because Dostoevsky is doing something and it seems to me is accurate in our understanding of our lives, which is that we go through them, we act in them as if that is all, and we stumble at strange moments on things that suggest to us that it's not all.

And this is an intimation, I say that this is why aesthetics is important to me, why music is important to me, why Perkrim and art is important to me, because I don't think it's doing something just on its own, I think it's giving us a sign of something. I think that it's what's so extraordinarily important about music is that music tells us something that exists in the language we cannot completely speak, but which we know is inviting us towards something which we understand to be true. I could go on all day about this, but yes, that's my... It sounds very similar to what you've been talking about in your latest book, Broken Signpost, Tom, that all of these things that speak somehow to our soul are a, as you say, broken signpost towards something beyond them.

Yes, the language of beauty, and for me music particularly, is enormously powerful, and

it's pointing towards something, but then the music stops or the sunset fades or the beautiful friend is killed in a car crash or whatever, and it looks as though then we're backwards romping Sartre and say life is just a sick joke. And that's where so much of our culture has been. Yeah, yeah, it was nice stuff, but it doesn't actually mean anything.

And for me, it's only again, Cracray, of court coming up, it's only when you put the story of Jesus in the middle of that and discover that Jesus and his crucifixion are the kind of ultimate broken signpost, because that's where we see justice denied, beauty trampled on, freedom obliterated, et cetera. All those things which were our great dreams, which we have lost, are actually true of the story of Jesus going to the cross, and I would urge anyone to reread the story of Jesus going to the cross, thinking of it like that, not just then this happened, then that happened, but those great things that we love, love, beauty, freedom, spirituality, all of these great ennobling things, they're all there in that story. And Jesus himself, as God incarnate, comes to the place where our dreams let us down in order to be there with us, and then to do the new creation thing out the other side.

That's a summary of a much more complicated argument, but that's where it's going. By the way, so there's one other point we're throwing out that which is that there is another signpost, which is that it is actually exceptionally hard to live as a nihilist. To live as a nihilist.

A nihilist, yes. It's a very interesting thing. Nihilism is spoken about a lot, people quite often describe particular ages as being nihilistic.

But in fact, it is very rare to come across an actual nihilist. Almost nobody lives in that state. I can think of in the modern era, I can think of probably only one person who pretty much approximates it, which is Michael Welber, the French novelist, who certainly writes as a nihilist.

But even he, you get the sense, and sorry, Justin, if I said this before, I can't remember, you get the sense is not completely capable of living as a nihilist either. If I make a quick example, there's extraordinarily disturbing, I know we said we do two minutes with each question. Fine, go ahead, go ahead.

There's an extraordinary moment in a book by one of the surviving journalists from the Charlotte offices who wrote a book with disturbance. He's got a very, very upsetting book. But he described something into Michael Welber at a party sometime after the massacre.

And he recognized him and Michael Welber can have met him before. They've both got bodyguards at this party. And Welber sees the still very visibly wounded journalists come in.

And they stand opposite each other for a moment and it's her moment of recognition. And Michael Welber quotes, "I believe the gospel of St Matthew," he says in French to the journalist. He says, "Men of violence take it by force and then leaves." It suggests to me that in Welber's head, it isn't entirely nihilism either.

That even then, and who knows where that came from, a bit of memory of French Catholicism or whatever phrases that did actually give meaning. That's Jesus' phrase. It's like my favorite novel by the Jewish novelist, Chaim Potok, is "My Name is Ashalev," where the young rabbinic student who discovers he's got an amazing gift for painting, which is not something that his rabbinic community wants to know about at all, is trying to find models for the pain of being a Jew in the modern world.

And he travels from New York to Europe and he goes around the galleries and he comes back and he paints crucifixions. And obviously there's a lot of kind of shagal and so on in the background of that. But part of the grasp of that is a sense of even in an ultra-orthodox community where the idea of a cross on the corner outside a church in a street somewhere would mean those are the people who think that we're God-killers or whatever.

So there's a real fear. Nevertheless, nothing but the crucifixion would do to express what he needed to express. It's almost as though it's now woven in not just a culture but the way that the human race is, but at the very moment when it tries to get away from all that traditional Christianity stuff, the best model with which to do it turns out to be something pretty central to what the Christian gospel was all about.

Hi there. Before we go any further, I want you to know about a very special e-book we're releasing this month called Critical Race Theory and Christianity. This e-book draws from two unbelievable podcasts with Neil Shenvie, Razzleberry, Owen Strand and Jermaine Marshall, addressing questions like, "Has so-called woke ideology taken over parts of the church or is white privilege a problem in the church and is critical race theory compatible with the gospel?" I'd love for you to have a copy of this powerful e-book as my special thanks to you for your gift to Premier Insight today, the ministry that brings you this podcast each week.

You see, all of the conversations, insight, resources and encouragement that you get from Premier Insight programs, like this one, are only possible because of the support of wonderful friends like you. Without your generosity, none of this would be possible. So please go to premierinsight.org/give and make a donation today.

That's premierinsight.org/give and don't forget to download our newest e-book, Critical Race Theory and Christianity as my special thank you. I've got an interesting question here from Carla. We'll start with you, Tom, as she asked this specifically of you.

In a postmodern world, are you concerned that our use of the word "story" has a

worldview confusion with myth instead of truth? In postmodernism, everything is story/myth. Do we need to distinguish Christian truth from story/myth? This is obviously a much more complicated thing than we got time to address because there's at least four or five different senses of the word "myth" which have been out there in the popular discourse. It just means a story about something which we know didn't happen.

That's a very low grade meaning of myth, so we can part that. But I would say it's one of the strengths of postmodernity that it has highlighted the ineradicable nature of story within human life. There was a kind of a modernist rationalism which imagined you could reduce everything to propositions and that stories were just kid stuff to entertain the masses while the real philosophers got it.

And I think we now all know, and this is one of the, say, one of the good things about postmodernity, that yes, we live on stories. But the fact that it is a story then does raise the question, but did it happen? It's the question which comes up in the court of law the whole time. It's no good standing there as a witness and saying, let me tell you a story once upon a time, because the judge wants to know, the jury wants to know, but did it happen? And you can rank stories according to the apparent intention of the storyteller.

Is this a story which was designed? I mean, take Jesus' parables. It makes no sense to say of the parable of the parable son. But what was the father's name or what did the mother say when they came back? Which bit of the farm did he then own? This is the point as a matter of genre.

But if you take Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, actually it would miss the point of those stories to say, oh, they were just spinning these fantasy narratives like sort of pilgrimage progress or something out of thin air. No, Luke is very particular about this. Let me give you the dates.

It was in the reign of so-and-so and so-and-so was the high priest and this, that and the other. This is stuff that happened. And the point is, the happiness of it has changed the world.

And back to something Douglas said half an hour ago, we have sold ourselves short in Western Christianity because we don't know the true story of church history and all the great stuff that has happened and we have believed the enlightenment lie that Christianity was just part of the problem rather than part of the solution all along. That's a whole other topic. But I want to say, yes, beware of story collapsing into myth.

Know what the different kinds of stories are and how they work. I mean, we don't have time to pursue it, Douglas, today, but maybe another conversation to have at some point would be the fact that I think part of your deconversion for want of a better word was to do with coming to doubt the reliability of the Bible and whether it was actually based on historical facts and obviously the miraculous nature of it as well. But do you feel like if

you could be shown sort of the factuality of it as well as the way it makes sense of our culture and everything else that that would, I guess, be the mixing piece for you that would take you back in some sense, maybe even to a new.

It's too complex to say what the missing piece would be or could be and it would be presumptuous of me to try to explain it or suggest that let alone know it actually. I just ducked that about making an observation on one thing just came up which is of all the different understandings of myth, even even the least deep understanding of myth. It still irritates me when you hear the phrase only a myth.

It is an extraordinarily facile phrase. She's in far too common a use. The metamorphosis of obeyed are not history.

They're not only a story. Yeah, but this was the point that grasp CS Lewis wasn't it that he had thought that all this stuff was just myth. And then he turned a corner and realized, Oh my goodness, looks like this great myth actually happened once.

Yes, the dying rising court king or whatever it was. And made that discovery in the company of a great storyteller himself J.R.R. Tolkien. Yes.

And in that sense, there is this idea that these great myth stories, you know, they are, you know, Lord of the Rings is arguably drenched in a kind of Christological overtones and that these are the stories that seem to compel us and grab us and so on. And in that sense, as time is drawing to a closed up this, I suppose, you know, you've been so very gracious because a lot of these have been very personal sort of questions about faith and that kind of thing. But do you wish for it to be true? Do you wish that there was that, as Lewis said, this is the true myth.

Is that something that you could see making sense of the world if there was a really true story that everything sort of came. I mean, I don't really understand people who don't wish it to be true. I don't really understand those people.

I do have known some, we mentioned one earlier, who who don't wish it didn't wish it could be true. No, of course I do. I suppose one thing that I've always found extremely powerful in that regard is whenever I've been in the Holy Land, Israel surrounding area.

I never forget the one the first times I was there I think in 2006 conflict in Lebanon. And I was speaking to, I haven't stopped one day and there was a church that was being built. It's quite unusual to need a new church in that words.

But one was being built for various reasons. And I asked the person who was in charge that day. I said, by the way, what's the name of the church? And he said, it's the church of the transfiguration.

I said, beautiful, how did you decide to do that? And he said, well, we're here. We name

churches after the nearest site and the transfiguration happened there. And he pointed to the mountain beside us.

And I mean, wherever in the world brought up as a Christian, it makes an enormous impact on when you see the physical sites. I've travelled around there a lot. I don't think for me anything quite equals that in terms of making impact on the church.

I think, you know, what we aren't transgoing to ourselves and I'm not transgoing to myself. I have no idea how to answer that question. Well, you've answered a great many questions.

Very helpful. And as honestly, as you can Douglas, thank you very much for the time this evening. Thanks for all the questions that have come in as well on on Facebook and YouTube as well.

Any final thoughts, Tom, that you'd like to leave us with as we close out our discussion? I was fascinated by what Douglas just said about the transfiguration. I have been on one or two mountains which claim to be the site of the transfiguration, the term on Mount Table, et cetera. For me, one of the most moving moments in my life was on Good Friday, 1989, when for the first time I went into the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and spent most of the day there just contemplating this is where it happened.

And when you're actually there, it doesn't seem odd that the hopes and fears of all the years, or like the pain and tears of all the years should be focused on one place. And I intuited that. I felt it.

And I thought it theologically. And in a sense, that was, you know, it didn't teach me anything. I didn't sort of vaguely know already.

But the concreteness of it is so striking there. It's not just an idea in people's heads going around the world. This is stuff that actually happened as a result of which the world is a different place.

The world is claimed by God in his kingdom as a result of those facts. As we close, it reminds me of something you said at the last time you came on the show, Douglas, that you had an experience at Galilee where it made you feel something happened here was the way you put it. Yeah.

I think that's right. Yes. I think it's very hard to come away from that without thinking about it.

Thank you so much for tonight's conversation. It's been a real joy and a pleasure. I wish we could have gone on longer, but our time is over.

Perhaps we can do it again at some point in the future. But for now, all that remains for

me to say is thank you, Douglas, and thank you, Tom. Thank you.

And hope we'll see you again at some point. Thank you very much. Thank you very much.

Well, I really hope you enjoyed today's show. It was a fantastic conversation. Lots of really positive feedback that we had to this live stream conversation between Douglas Murray and Enthryrite.

Again, you can find out more at the big conversation dot show where you can find other similar conversations between big thinkers. We'd love to know what you thought as well of today's one. Do check out the link to the survey as well that's with the info in today's show.

Coming up next time, we're going to be hearing more live content from Tom Wright when he joined me at this year's Unbelievable Conference. And we're going to be playing out the live edition of the Ask, Enty, Write, Anything show with all of the questions that came in from the watching audience and contributions from Tom Holland, the historian who joined Tom Wright on the day and was part of that conversation for a special edition of this show. So that's coming up at the same time next week for now.

Thank you very much for being with us today. We'll see you next time.

(buzzing)