

# OpenTheo

## **Faith Is Not a Sideshow: Why You - and the U - Need To Get Religion | Ross Douthat**

January 23, 2020



### **The Veritas Forum**

In this episode, New York Times Columnist Ross Douthat makes the case for faith and religion in academia. By sharing his own story and religious upbringing, Ross shows the link to deeper, intellectual thinking that his faith tradition and exploration afforded him. • Please like, share, subscribe to and review this podcast!

### **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 a mystery, don't be surprised if you're going to get an element of this involved. Today we hear from Ross Douthat, a columnist for the New York Times, the author of several books, including *Bad Religion - How We Became a Nation of Heretics*, takes to the stage in an argument titled "Why You and the You - Need To Get Religion." I just want to make one thing clear though, I'm here in my capacity as a journalist, not in any kind of capacity as an intellectual. Please bear that in mind for the duration of my remarks.

But I'm going to talk to you guys a bit tonight on the theme of "Why You and the You - Need To Get Religion." I don't think that I came up with that phrasing. It's possible that I did. I have two small children and I do things that I don't remember doing afterwards on many occasions, but I assume I didn't, but it is a very useful frame to work with for a talk because the word "get" can mean so many different things.

And this sort of malleability of that word is going to let me work my way through a number of different reasons and different levels, academic, personal and so on, ways in which I think religion should matter for both academic and campus life, even or maybe

especially in an officially secular university environment. And I'm going to start with sort of the most basic and maybe crushingly obvious level and work my way around, hopefully by the end, to some more personal reflections before we get into Q&A, which will probably be much more interesting than anything in my prepared remarks. So I'll start, as I said, with the crushingly obvious, which is that American colleges and universities and the students they educate need to get religion in the sense of understanding and reckoning with religious commitments and beliefs because religion isn't going away.

Religious belief has been transformed by modernity in some ways. It's been undercut in others. And there are, depending on how you define secularization, and if you talk to six different academics, you'll get six different definitions and what secularism and secularization means.

There are definitions that make sense and where it's reasonable to say that the world has become a more secular place. And at the very least, it's become a place where everyone's religious commitments are always open to challenge and question and confrontation in ways that has definitely not been the case in all traditional societies in the past. But with all of that said, with that concession made, that there have been obviously changes in the way people experience religion in the modern world.

The idea that religion itself is withering away, mattering less and less to human affairs with every technological leap and surge in GDP, has very little credible evidence behind it. And this is particularly important for the academy because an awful lot of academic cultural assumptions going back decades and even centuries now are premised on a sort of sometimes conscious, sometimes unconscious sense that something like that is going to happen and that to the extent the academy studies religion, it studies it in a historical and anthropological sense, but not as a live reality that's going to matter immensely for the future of the human race. But I think, obviously, I think that it is.

And it's true that there are places in the developed world, notably northern Europe, that seem to fit some kind of post-Christian description right now. And there are ways in which institutional religion in the US is arguably weaker today than it was in the 1950s or even 15 years ago. And we've lived through a decade or so in American life, which people in my profession of political journalism have paid a lot of attention to, where there's been a kind of movement towards religious disaffiliation among younger Americans, a lot of Americans in a little bit older than you or your generation and their abouts, in which more people than in previous eras don't identify with a particular church or a particular faith tradition.

It's definitely true that the millennial generation in the US is less religiously affiliated than their parents and grandparents were at the same age. And that is a real shift and it will make a difference for how what forms religion takes and what influence it has in

American culture as the millennial generation sort of moves through the life cycle and life's exciting trajectories, which I know you're all looking forward to. But if you widen your gaze beyond America, as I think most universities now aspire to do, you'll find a world, a planet that's arguably getting more religious, certainly in terms of practice and identification, if not always underlying belief, as it modernizes and transforms.

And I'll just give you a brief sort of tour of what I mean. Start with Latin America, which is rather famously home to the current Pope, Pope Francis from Argentina, where on that continent, his faith, Roman Catholicism, my faith, once a near universal faith has suffered several decades of decline overall. But Catholicism's sharpest losses in the Pope's own Argentina, Brazil, across Latin America haven't come from mass conversions to atheism or religious indifference.

They've come from mass conversions to competitor churches and sects, Pentecostalist and Evangelical, that had no real purchase in Latin American society a few generations ago. So while Latin America is growing less Catholic, these startup groups and missionary efforts and new churches and so on have actually increased religious participation significantly from the levels that you saw when large swaths of Latin America were nominally Catholic, but actually sometimes anti-clerical, sometimes indifferent, sometimes practicing sort of halfheartedly. So there's an argument to be made that Catholicism's decline in Latin America has been associated with religions overall rise or increase.

Then go across the ocean to the Middle East where the post-1960s Islamic revival is not just a phenomenon that's felt on the sort of political religious extremes in manifestations like the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda and bin Ladenism. It's a region-wide phenomenon and really a global phenomenon ultimately, cutting across lines of class and nationality and sect and one that's been furthered in many ways rather than undercut by globalization, by communications technologies, by contact between Muslim diasporas around the world and so on. And just to take a, for instance, the pilgrimage to Mecca, which was once only something that either the truly wealthy or the truly ascetic could attempt, has ballooned from a 100,000 Muslims per year affair 50 or 60 years ago to a 3 million pilgrim per year affair in the last decade.

And that's just sort of a small example of what Muslim revivalism looks like in the Middle East. And there's a reason all across that region that the main alternative to dictatorial or military rule, as evidenced from Egypt to Iraq to Turkey and so on, is some kind of Islamic religious populism. Again, something that just wouldn't have been the case in 1950 or 1965 when more secular forms of politics, pan-Arabism and Arab nationalism, were seen as the coming thing.

And so with some arguable exceptions, you can talk about Iran a little bit as a counter example because there the impact of theocratic rule has arguably undercut religious

belief and practice for the younger generation. But with that exception, the Middle East has arguably spent the last two generations desecularizing and that trend doesn't seem to have run its course. And then Africa is part of this Islamic revival.

It's also home to explosively growing Christian churches as well. South Asia remains one of the most religious regions in the world with both Islam and then especially Hinduism having a stronger political footprint too on the subcontinent than either one did in the 1940s or 1950s. The former Soviet Union, famously officially atheistic, under communist rule is less religious overall in part because of the impact of communism years after the fact than many other parts of the world.

But it too has seen a modest revival overall since the fall of communism and one that's had outsized political consequences again, both for Russian nationalism and also for resistance and rebellion on the Muslim peripheries of the former Soviet Empire. And then there is China, which has long been the most officially the largest most efficient, the largest officially atheistic country in the world. And this was always something of a statistical illusion given the persistence of folk religion and Buddhism and so on and something that is also true to a large extent of other quote unquote secular Asian cultures like Japan.

But now even that illusion is crumbling as Christianity grows of pace and it's quite likely that within our lifetime there will be more Chinese Christians than American Christians and not because of American Christianity's decline. And then returning to where I started even religions decline or institutional religions decline in the west can be overstated. The collapse of institutional religion in some areas hasn't produced legions of militant Richard Dawkins readers but instead legions of spiritually minded seekers who look pretty religious in certain ways even when they aren't religiously affiliated if you ask them about whether they pray or whether they believe in the afterlife and the supernatural and so on.

And this is clearly true in the US in the world of people who call themselves spiritual but not religious and so on. But it's also true to some extent in Europe as well where the void left by Christianity hasn't just been filled by atheism, it's been filled by astrology and new age movements, the return of certain kinds of paganism, one of my favorite statistics. In 2007 45% of Icelanders professed a belief in God but 56% said they thought the existence of elves was either possible, probable or certain.

And then of course so there's your really old time religion. And then of course by the Islamic revival that's been happening within immigrant communities in Europe who have come from North Africa and the Middle East. And the tensions between that Islam and Europe's secular norm, tensions that incidents like the Charlie Hebdo massacre laid bare, show that even in context where secularism is in some sense pervasive, religion still ends up mattering immensely because the collision between belief and secularism

becomes the major source of conflict, anxiety, political tension and so on.

And all of European politics right now is shaped in various ways by the encounter between this sort of post-Christian landscape and growing Islamic communities that pose a test for European secularism that a system that sort of evolved in a Christian context doesn't know exactly how to meet. And so you don't need to go as far as Michelle Wailbeck, the French novelist Pravaatur who just wrote a book imagining a France that converts en masse to Islam in the next 25 years. You don't have to go that far to look at Europe, an aging, stagnant and internally divided continent and see something that's less an advertisement for secularism's power and resilience than a potential vacuum waiting to be filled by something or some things.

So looking across from that global perspective, I think it's fair to say that if you don't try to understand religion, if you don't study it and recognize its influence, you're not going to understand the 21st century period. And universities that seek to prepare students to be global citizens of some kind who move easily through a networked interconnected world and so on and don't prepare them for that reality, for the reality that that globalized world is arguably a more religious world than the world of the 20th century, aren't really preparing their students for that world at all. But then that kind of preparation can come in different forms, right? And because really trying to understand religion means something more than just knowing about its existence or knowing religious facts like, well, there are x million Christians now in China and the population's growing at this rate and so on or in the Pentecostalism is flourishing in Brazil and the Sunni and Shia, they're very different, right, and so on.

Those kind of facts are an important foundation for religious understanding, but as with any form of real knowledge, you need to ultimately try to understand religious faith on its own terms as a system, a worldview, a world shaper. And that brings me to my second point, which is that theology has consequences. That is, there is not, when we talk about a more religious world or a persistently religious world, there isn't just some broad phenomenon called religion, there are religions, specific religions and traditions within those religions and so on, each offering specific visions of the world and human life and moral duty and so forth and everything else.

And while many of them have certain things in common, they also aren't nearly as interchangeable as at least some modern Americans tend to think. Buddhism and Christianity ultimately have rather different things to say about the purpose and goals of human life. Christianity and Islam, Christianity and Judaism have different things to say about the nature of the God that all three of monotheistic religions worship and the same then is true within traditions.

The theological differences between Orthodox and Reform Jews, between Anabaptists and Catholics, between Wahabi Islam and Sufi Islam, are not just some esoteric issue

that's only of interest to professional theologians, they are real and they matter and they have consequences in the lives of individual believers and in the lives of entire cultures, historical consequences, cultural consequences, geopolitical consequences, economic consequences and so on. So it's not a small thing in historical terms when one religion conquers or converts, or rival religious culture, or when a new religion rises or an old one revives or declines, any more than it's a small thing in personal terms when someone decides to convert to follow one religion or another. And it's even true that the stamp of religion on culture tends to endure even when the religion itself has grown attenuated.

It was talking earlier about Northern Europe's secularism. Well, a country like Sweden has more atheists than your average country, but they are Lutheran atheists and they're very different from say the post-communist atheist who inhabit Bulgaria or Romania or the Ukraine and so on. Now, the importance of that kind of religious stamp, you can get overstated, right? Nothing in human life is monocosselled and it's possible to be reductive in this kind of theology has consequences analysis and you get too caught up in a particular theory and you decide that the Calvinist work ethic explains everything about the development of modern capitalism or that theological issues having to do with the separation of church and state explain everything about Islam's difficult wrestle with modernity.

Or you decide that Mormonism's theological view of the family, the particular role that family plays in ideas about salvation and eternity and Mormonism explain everything about why family structure is so stable and fertility rates are higher in Utah than anywhere else in the US. Actually, I kind of think that last one is true, but we can talk about that in the Q&A. But ultimately, I think the opposite mistake, again, especially in my experience of academic life, tends to be a little more common.

A failure to fully appreciate how theological issues are constantly shaping, sometimes subtly or sometimes unconsciously, sometimes not, the behavior of believers and what we think of as sort of non theological manifestations and impacts of religious belief. I'll give you two very different examples. One, from the immediate news cycle and one from sort of the cultural and economic history of the US in the last 10 or 15 years.

The first example is the Islamic State and its sort of deliberate strategy of using sort of terrorism, obviously, but it's a step beyond that where there's sort of an attempt at constant escalation of terrorizing tactics, brutality as a strategy, basically, as a means of simultaneously attracting a certain kind of volunteer, of establishing a kind of, I think, cohesion among those volunteers, because once you've taken this kind of step beyond ordinary moral norms, if you don't sort of recognize or you don't want to recognize the thing you've just done, you're more likely to be bound to the people who you're doing it with. But then also, this attempt to sort of constantly be upping the ante in that would be Caliphate's attempt to sort of define itself against the West and particularly the United States. All that is happening in a theological context where ISIS's movements and

choices and so on are to some extent constrained by its need to find some kind of theological justification or justification within the history and traditions of Islam for what it's doing.

And those justifications are from the point of view of most mainstream Muslims, not persuasive to put it mildly, but there's clearly, and you see this with every form of brutality they undertake and then the sort of retroactive justifications they come up with, there's clearly a strategic sense among the leaders of ISIS that they need to maintain some kind of connection to the actual theological traditions of their faith if they aren't going to become completely isolated and forfeit their ability to appeal to people who haven't already taken that step of joining their movement. And ultimately, and this is sort of part of a wider picture where the struggle over the Middle East is in part a theological struggle and a struggle between, you know, we talk about it in sort of moderate and extreme terms. I don't particularly like that language as a religious believer.

I mean, when you think about within my own Catholic tradition, you could argue that Francis of Assisi is a Christian extremist, right? Extremes can mean many different things. I think it's better to just say a sort of, you know, a, the language of essentially, the thuggishness is, or barbarism is a better, better applied to ISIS than the language of extremism. But whatever kind of language you use, there is a struggle going on in the Middle East, a struggle that in certain ways non-Muslims can participate in, but also can only, to some extent, sort of watch, to define theological terms and to essentially, you know, have competing portraits of what is true Islam.

And the end game of this struggle and that this end game may not happen for decades or even centuries. If you compare what's going on in the Middle East to the wars of religion in Western Europe in the 15th and 16th century, it's not necessarily encouraging for the idea of this struggle ending anytime soon. But the end, the resolution will ultimately have some theological element as well.

It is not possible to imagine a world where ISIS is defeated if it isn't also, in some sense, theologically discredited. So that's just, that's one rip from the headlines place where theological arguments and counter arguments are playing out in ways with significant geopolitical ramifications and obviously more immediate ramifications for the lives of people caught up in those struggles. Then another example that's maybe a little bit more off the beaten track is the prosperity gospel in the United States.

And I'm thinking here not necessarily of the sort of, well, what I guess I would call the elite media cliché of the prosperity gospel, which is some preacher with crazy looking hair with a 1-800 number fleecing people, fleecing people by telling them to call in and have a miracle delivered and so on. It's the more mainstream and sophisticated version of prosperity theology that's embodied by a figure like Joel Osteen, for instance, where

the pitch is more subtle. It's not as explicit about the link between prayer and prosperity, but that link is clearly there.

Now, prosperity theology doesn't get analyzed as theology a great deal, in part because there's just a lot of elite condescension about it. It's like these preachers and they're driving their big cars and they're fleecing the rubes and so on. But actually, prosperity theology is a really interesting and in certain ways sophisticated theological vision.

And part of its appeal is that it actually tries to resolve certain real theological dilemmas, like very basic questions, like why do bad things happen to good people and so on. A lot of what Osteen and others preach is offering a solution to that problem. And the solution is very roughly speaking that bad things don't happen to good people.

They happen to people who haven't aligned themselves fully with divine purpose, who haven't prayed sufficiently, who haven't done what they need to do to get right with God, basically. And that, from the point of view, orthodox Christianity is a problematic idea. But it's an idea with a lot of appeal and a lot of understandable appeal in human life.

And it's an idea that has made prosperity theology, I think, more mainstream in American society over the last 40 years as, again, these more institutional forms of Christianity have weakened. And it's an idea that has real world practical consequences. And if you dig into sociological accounts of especially lower level prosperity based churches, and particularly among recent immigrant populations, among the white working class, among working middle class African Americans, and so on, you can see a fascinating dynamic where these theological ideas about how you think about money, the relationship between investment and financial aspiration, and prayer, and God, and so on, shapes decisions that people make about things like what houses they buy, what kind of mortgage they take out, and so on.

And obviously, there is much, much more at work in the culture of real estate in the US in the last decade than just prosperity theology, and prosperity preaching, and so on. But it's a fascinating strand to pluck out from that story of people living beyond their means and buying big houses because they were thinking in the supernatural as the language goes. And it's, again, something that is very easily missed if you aren't actually digging into the theology and the way it enters into people's thinking and the way they live their daily lives.

So those are two examples I could obviously multiply them of where theology matters, where theology has consequences in very immediate and obvious ways, and to come back to the university, if we think about religion on that level, if we take faith seriously as a system of thought, as an intellectual system of thought, rather than just treating it more superficially as some sort of nebulous feeling you have about the universe, then it doesn't just affect what a university should try and teach its students about religion and



religious belief, but in certain ways who it should try to have doing the instruction, by which I mean that you can often tell just how seriously an idea or vision is taken in an academic setting by how many teachers actually subscribe to it to take a non-theological example, right, when Marxism in all its varied forms was taken very seriously in Western life, in sort of its philosophical manifestation as an economic theory and so on, there were a lot of, you know, actual Marxists teaching in the Faculty of Major Universities, and there were many more Marxists than there are today when Marxism is seen as discredited, antique, and so on. And this is true across Marxism as sort of an extreme, a deliberately extreme case, and of course there are still some Marxists in faculties somewhere. I have a list right here, but Joseph McCarthy jokes are always the best.

They love them at the New York Times. But anyway, similarly, as with Marxism to take that extreme example, an academic environment that takes or took religion seriously would not only have a number of serious believers teaching, but also a wide range of theological views among those believers. And here I don't mean that universities need to hire a jihadi theoretician in order to teach a class on the Islamic State or to bring in Joel Osteen as a guest lecturer, but if I were taking a course or courses on radical Islam and so on, I would want the option of studying with a teacher who was an actual conservative Muslim who took the sacred text seriously as sacred texts, who could talk about problems and debates within Islam as a Muslim scholar, just as I would want to encounter any idea in theory or worldview, whether it's evolutionary psychology or rational liberalism in a context where somebody was talking about that idea and exploring it from the inside out.

And it takes nothing away from my dear liberal Protestant friends who are just possibly slightly overrepresented on the religion faculties that I've been acquainted with to say that American religion might be more fully taught and understood in the academy if the average college faculty had a few more pedicostalists or Mormons or Calvinists or even to be self-interested reactionary Catholics. And I don't think that would benefit the teaching and understanding of religion alone, because to come to, I guess what's my third point, I think that liberal arts education writ large needs the religious perspective. And then a certain part of the crisis of the humanities that people are always talking about in academia flows from a withdrawal of religion from academia writ large.

If you look at the history of American higher education since the 19th century, first in what were once Protestant schools and then lately in Catholic universities too, it's a story of pretty steady secularization in the sort of ideas and purposes animating officially or unofficially universities. And then if you look at the history of the humanities in the secularized university, especially in the last few decades, but going back some time, it's the story of repeated identity crises, growing marginalization, sort of frantic attempts to copy or imitate the sciences and the social sciences, and then of course ending in budget cuts as more useful majors and disciplines claim more dollars and attention. And I don't actually think those patterns, those two patterns, secularization and then the problems

in the humanities are unrelated.

I think that in fact the, what you might call the economic worldliness of the contemporary university is connected to its philosophical worldliness. And the potential crowding out of the artistic in the literary and the beautiful is connected to a lowering of metaphysical horizons overall. Take the motto of this university, which I looked up before I came here, arts, knowledge, truth.

That's right, right? That's not MSU. Yeah, okay. So if the human, so arts, knowledge, truth.

Well, if the human being is basically what a strict eliminative materialism holds him or her to be, then it makes a lot more sense probably to tweak that motto. Arts are fine, but they're really just entertainment with video games and Rembrandt on roughly the same level of significance. Knowledge is good so long as it's a useful knowledge, the kind that could be measured in terms of outputs and inputs and career trajectories and earning potentials and so on, the kind that will make you the happiest possible robot rather than sending you off to the wilderness or the monastery because you've been gripped by the delusion that you might have a soul.

And capital T truth, well, Pontius Pilate and the modern materialist mind both have some doubts about that one. Now, my suggestion here is not that you can't have a secular humanism. You don't need to be religious to love literature or philosophy, to pursue ideas of the good and the beautiful and the true.

But I do think that secular humanism tends to thrive in a kind of symbiosis, engagement and, yes, sometimes debate with religious humanism because the questions that both humanisms are grappling with are ones that religious thought has been grappling with for millennia. And when religious thought just gets dismissed as obscurantist or superstitious or nonsensical as just a form of private feeling with no legitimate public expressions, then over the long run secular humanism is probably going to find its interests and priorities downgraded and dismissed as well. As the founders of the Veritas Forum know my own alma mater, Harvard's motto, used to be Veritas Christo Edoclesia, truth for Christ and church.

And the reality is that when Christo Edoclesia or their more ecumenical equivalents maybe don't have a clear place at the university's table, then the pursuit of Veritas is more likely to be defined in scientific, utilitarian or political terms, which again, leaves less room and less prestige for the humanities writ large. And I think this isn't just a matter of budgets and sort of prestige. It's a matter of what people feel they can even say and teach and explore.

Because if college is just a matter, again, of inputs and outputs, the place where you pay your money and get your degree to make your way in a commercial society and you're

judging the college by the ultimate career trajectory of each of its undergraduates and so on, then it becomes easier for students, for many of you guys, to treat the humanities, which are this sort of semi-irrelevant, maybe entertaining, part of university life as a kind of consumption experience, in which in turn the students then feel comfortable objecting to material that triggers or offends them and the teachers expected to honor those objections because after all, truth isn't really the ultimate goal there because what is truth after all. And which is part of why I have a suspicion that the liberal arts as we understand them are actually likely to weather their current crisis somewhat better at religious colleges than at secular ones, precisely because religious colleges, again, so long as they remain religious, have to start with the assumption, not just the theory, the assumption that human life has meaning beyond the material and that as religious colleges they have real authority over their students and aren't just a company supplying a consumption good and this view has been put forward by some more secular observers, William D'Arisea Witch, who's a critic and longtime teacher at Yale, published a book about the modern university recently with the provocative title *Excellent Sheep*, which was then excerpted in the *New Republic* with the even more provocative title, *Don't Send Your Kid to the Ivy League* and in it he wrote the following, "Elite schools like to boast that they teach their students how to think but all they mean is that they train them in the analytic and rhetorical skills that are necessary for success in business and the professions. Everything is technocratic, the development of expertise and everything is ultimately justified in technocratic terms.

Religious colleges he goes on, even obscure regional schools that no one has ever heard of on the coasts." That's where I do most of my speaking. "Often do a much better job in that respect and what an indictment of the Ivy League and its peers that colleges four levels down on the academic totem pole and rolling students whose SAT scores are hundreds of points lower than theirs deliver a better education in the highest sense of the word." Now D'Arisea Witch, as lots of his critics pointed out, is relying on anecdote and impression and clearly there are places where the liberal arts flourish on elite campuses and there are also many religious colleges where the atmosphere really is just as stifling as a more secular student or academic would expect. But my argument here is not that every elite university in America needs to transform itself into Wheaton or Calvin or Brigham Young in order to save the humanities.

It's merely that by opening some doors to religious ideas and aspirations secular humanism might find its position on campus unexpectedly strengthened relative to where it at least feels itself to be right now. But the door that needs to be opened is not just a strictly academic one. The issue is not just as I've sort of suggested at whether religion departments or any departments are more welcoming to practicing Christians or Buddhists or Jews or whether religion is taught with a greater sense of seriousness, a greater focus on theology and so on.

The door that's opened also has to be a door for students to feel that religious practice

itself and religious exploration and religious conversion is itself an approach to knowledge that is potentially as valuable as anything that goes on in the classroom. And this I think again to be impressionistic is not the sense that modern universities in their relationship to religious groups on campus increasingly tend to have. Instead there's a sense in which at least this was my own experience and I think it's been backed up by conversations and relationships since that there's a sense in which religious groups are regarded as just a sort of form of identitarian organization, right? Where you have an identity you're a Catholic, so you're part of the Catholic students group, you're a Baptist, so you're part of the Baptist students group and so on and this is pretty much the same on the sort of the same level as being in the cello club over here and you know this ethnic organization over there.

And these groups all have a kind of religious truce with one another because obviously you can't have anybody trying to convert anybody else because that would be you know dangerous and upset some people and so on. And then the step beyond that that a number of colleges and universities have started taking is to limit the extent to which these religious groups can even organize themselves around religious belief and theological premises at all. And this has become a flashpoint in particular because of issues around homosexuality and same-sex marriage but the broader idea that a lot of universities and university systems are promoting is basically that a religious group needs to admit all comers and admit any one of any set of views to leadership positions.

And that again it's essentially supposed to behave sort of like an elk's club, I would say like a Masonic lodge but the masons have very strict rules for who can ascend and go off and so on that it is effectively, the idea is that effectively religious groups are supposed to be social clubs for people with particular religious backgrounds without any kind of theological shared core and any ability to define their own boundaries. And this is what you've seen happen system-wide in the California universities. It's happened at Vanderbilt, it's happened at it's happened at Bowdoin College in Maine and there are a large number of these cases where universities have taken the view that this this sort of extremely limited and not theologically serious approach to religious association is the only approach that they're going to allow.

And that is just not an environment that is conducive to religious practice or exploration as a pursuit of knowledge and I just and the reality is that from the religious perspective, right, I mean I've been talking in terms of theology and knowledge and systems and so forth but from the religious perspective practice itself is supposed to be the pursuit of knowledge that is the ultimate vindication of any particular religious beliefs, truth claims and it's why you know that you have in certain ways the best rebuttal to certain academic studies of religion especially from the extremely skeptical perspective is that you haven't really begun to study a particular religious tradition until you've attempted to live as a member of that religion. If you want to study Christianity you should try praying the Lord's Prayer because that is the essence of the claim that the Christians

make it that you can enter into a relationship with the divine with God through these particular practices and if you won't put that to the test you aren't really putting the religion to the test and this is there's a quote from David Bentley Hart the Eastern Orthodox theologian who says God according to all the great spiritual traditions cannot be comprehended by the finite mind but can nevertheless be known in an intimate encounter with his presence one that requires considerable discipline of the mind and will to achieve but one that's also implicit in ordinary experience and that idea is something that universities need or should if they're serious about human knowledge provide a real home for which doesn't mean that you want an academic department devoted to rigorous Eastern Orthodox prayer and meditation techniques but it means that the campus environment as a whole should be welcoming and encouraging to groups that come together with that kind of pursuit of knowledge in mind and in the absence of that you lose both that direct that possibility of direct experience and then the further intellectual experiences that follow out of it and I promise to end on a personal a personal note so I will a talk like this is a good time for someone to talk about how college shaped their own religious perspective their own religious views and the reality is that my own college experience didn't particularly shape my own religious views it did obviously in certain ways because four years of your life have a shaping effect no matter what but I came to Harvard as a undergraduate as a Catholic and I left as a Catholic and my religious practice and zeal sort of waxed and waned during those four years in the way that it does you know naturally in the college environment but that wasn't the crucible of my own religious experience the actual crucible was my childhood and the drivers of experience for me was actually my parents religious quest and particularly my mother's religious quest where basically I grew up in southern Connecticut and if you know a fairly secular upper middle class politically liberal environment and my mother had a sponge of strange chemical allergies food sensitivities basically a constellation of medical issues that medicine medicine as she experienced it didn't do anything to solve and so we went in sort of exploratory fashion looking for unorthodox cures and we spent a lot of time in health food stores and health food restaurants in an era long before Whole Foods before Tofu was cool and on every menu and you know you had to go to the health food store where the guy in the jerry garcia a t-shirt sort of comes out of the back and gets the tofu out of like a big tub of water with tongs these huge white disgusting blocks that burned on my memory but we spent so we spent a lot of time in that strange milieu and then we spent a lot of time going to healing services charismatic healing services that a friend of my mother's invited her to and in an auditorium probably sort of like this one but without so nice a ceiling the woman whose ministry it was pulled her out of the aisle and said you know you're having these symptoms in your legs this inflammation and she prayed over her and my mother had went down on the floor of the auditorium and had an intense encounter with the Holy Spirit in the language of charismatic Christianity and that changed my parents life and by extension it changed my life and it sent us on a very strange religious pilgrimage across the sort of red then scope of all the American

Christianity really I was baptized to pistol paleo and spent a long stretch in charismatic and evangelical and Pentecostless circles and then in the end again more because of my mother than my own my own doing probably we ended up converting to Catholicism when I was 17 years old so we covered a lot of territory and it was the territory of for my parents of mystical experience but then coming off of that mystical experience was all kinds of strange intellectual encounters that you that I only got because we were on this kind of spiritual quest and some of them you know there were intellectual encounters that came out of the the religious world of health food too because you know you have the health food store and the health food restaurant and then the new age bookstore with books with titles like women who run with the wolves and crystals for sale on the shelves and so on so I was getting I was getting in religious encounters beyond Christianity as well but most of the unusual and at least unusual the unusual education that I had as a kid the things I read that nobody else was reading the authors I encountered that nobody else encountered came out of that sort of experience based religious quest and there's no question in my mind that my own career as a journalist and writer has been shaped by that experience more than anything that I encountered in academia and in college and there's no question you know it takes a lot of luck and coincidence to end up as a columnist at the New York Times but I really think above all the distinctiveness of our spiritual trajectory and the intellectual experiences that came off it made more of a difference to why I ended up where I am than anything else and so when I think about academia and the university's relationship to religion religious experience and sort of the intellectual panumbras around religion it's that kind of experience that I think universities need to offer an open door to and again it's not something that you can create out of an academic program and the university that tried would be probably pretty much a disaster but the open door for faculty and students and people who want to go off in weird places and form distinctive communities around distinctive ideas should be crucial central to the university's mission. Again if it takes its vision of itself as a place for pursuing knowledge going wherever that pursuit takes you seriously so that's where I'll end my case for why you and you need to get religion.

If you like this and you want to hear more like share review and subscribe to this podcast and from all of us here at the Veritas Forum thank you.

(gentle music)