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Jordan Peterson and Christian Humanism (Esther O'Reilly)

May 28, 2020



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Esther O'Reilly joins me to discuss Christian Humanism and her work in the recent Lexham Press volume to which we both contributed a chapter, 'Myth and Meaning in Jordan Peterson': <https://lexhampress.com/product/183926/myth-and-meaning-in-jordan-peterson-a-christian-perspective>.

This video is sponsored by Lexham Press: <https://lexhampress.com/>.

Transcript

Hello and welcome. I am joined today by my friend Esther O'Reilly, and we're going to discuss a book, among other things, that we have both contributed to. It's called Myth and Meaning in Jordan Peterson.

It's just been released by Lexham Press, and we both got chapters within it. Thank you very much for joining me, Esther. Thank you very much, Alastair.

Pleasure to be here. Now, you've been following the work of Jordan Peterson for quite some time now. You're someone who is presumably very well known to many of my followers online.

You write, you engage in cultural criticism. You're someone who is all over the place online at the moment. You've appeared on Unbelievable podcast.

You've appeared in conversation with a great many different people. Perhaps the first time many people will have experienced your work is in your reflections on Jordan Peterson. What first got you involved in reading his work? So, I first became aware of him through the Kathy Newman interview just by social media osmosis, and I thought the interview was quite entertaining, but really only gave me a little taste of who Peterson was and what he was all about.

So then, just over the course of looking up a few more of his videos, I quickly realized there was a lot more to his thought and work, and just kind of sent me down the

YouTube rabbit hole. And so, I started thinking about how to formulate a Christian response, and it was through that that I got invited to join the Pathéos blogging network. And then, one of my first posts on Pathéos was an analysis of Peterson's debates with Sam Harris, which I found really fascinating because we're used to new atheist Christian apologist matchups, and this was a completely different kind of a frame for this sort of dialogue.

And then, through that, I also became familiar with other figures like Bret Weinstein, Douglas Murray, that kind of thing. So, people began to like what I write and share it about quite widely, and so that kind of put me on this train, and now I fear I'm going to have trouble getting off again, but it's been a great ride so far. So, your blog is called? My blog is called Young Fogie, and it's actually been dormant for a couple of months, but I'm about to revive it with a couple of juicy posts.

It's very good to hear. So, your essay within this book is exploring Jordan Peterson as a humanist. Now, that's a word that many people have some negative connotations with.

How would you explain what you mean by the term humanist in the context of your essay? Great question. So, part of my own bio, my own Twitter bio, is I self-identify as a Christian humanist, because I would assert that humanism is Christian when rightly understood in its essence, and so what I saw in Peterson when I engaged with his work is I saw that he was a humanist in the sense that his work embodied a deep reverence for the intrinsic dignity of the human individual, and that he was able to recognize the inescapably Christian roots of that reference even if he struggled to fully reconcile it with his own secular frame. So, in that sense, I see him as a throwback to writers like Viktor Frankl, for example, of *Man's Search for Meaning*.

I would call Frankl a humanist in that, in that same sense. So, that's the argument that I'm making in the essay is that this is something that Christians could reclaim and steal back when rightly understood, as opposed to how, you know, humanist UK or people of that tribe would use the term. So, when people think about Jordan Peterson, many who have just come across his work in the context of controversies online, in terms of the pronouns debates, in terms of the Catherine Newman interview, things like that, they may find it strange that people are talking about him in terms of humanism or any more, any framework of greater system of thought, perhaps.

They think of him very much as a cultural war figure. How is it that you find within the work of this person, something more than just culture war? Is there a place that people should look to find more about his thinking in these sorts of areas? Right. Well, obviously, there was his book, *12 Rules for Life*, which became a bestseller through the sort of publicity bump that the Newman thing gave him and also the Bill C-16 thing that you touched on, which you write on your essay here.

And so, I think I would say that those things are like the least interesting, interesting

thing about Jordan Peterson, you know. So, as far as where to look, I think already there are signs of that in 12 Rules for Life. In some sense, I mean, people have written it off as a self-help book, but I think people will quickly see if they read it with an open mind.

This is a very fertile imagination and it goes off in different directions and puts things together in unique ways. Also, he has lectures online, for example, the biblical series. Probably that would be the single most interesting lecture series I would point people to if they wanted to get a taste of the more complex work that he's done.

And some of it is drawing on his, in a sense, his magnum opus from the 90s, which was a book called Maps of Meeting. Unfortunately, that book is a tortured, tedious slog. I gave up myself after about a third of the way through, so I would not recommend people try to work through that.

But he's a far better speaker than writer. So, I would say the biblical series, which has actually been transcribed on his site. So, for people who prefer to read, I would have a look at those transcripts.

And it's not really like anything else that I've seen. It's certainly not Christian in a traditional sense, but I think it's haunted by Christianity very strongly. So, what are his influences? What are the thinkers behind him? Well, so Carl Jung is one influence, which is very strange.

It comes with some baggage and some presuppositions about how to interpret scripture and that sort of thing. Among his better influences, I would say Dostoevsky. He frequently pulls on his work.

Solzhenitsyn, huge influence. Frenkel, like I mentioned before, I think he's even named Frenkel. In general, Peterson is very haunted by, in historical perspective, the Cold War.

And just the question of how men could do evil things to each other. So, the question probing the depths of man's inhumanity to man is something that he dives into and it takes him to some very dark places, but also gives him some very penetrating insight into human nature. So, how do we bring together that concern for humanism, which can often be associated in people's mind with an overly optimistic view of human nature with his deep exploration of human evil? Yes.

Yeah, that's a great question. What's the little ditty that C.S. Lewis wrote? Lead us, science, lead us onward. Kind of mocking that enlightenment now, the Steven Pinker, the broad sunlit uplands of something, something.

Right. And you're exactly right. Peterson is this grim-faced sort of prophet of doom in a way, who comes to just smash that.

And so, I think I would say the way that Peterson embodies true humanism in response

to this, you know, the kind of shiny counterfeit humanism is that he sees mankind not as we want to see ourselves, but as we actually are, which is broken and prone to sin and prone to fail and prone to not be all that we could. And so, he says that you need to begin by acknowledging just how awful you are if you are to have any hope of getting better. And so, you could say that it's like he's rediscovered the doctrine of original sin, you know, without necessarily naming it as such.

Now, his influences, I think for many Christians, will be seen as maybe not quite singularly unpromising, but certainly unpromising. You think about Carl Jung or think about Charles Darwin, these are not the first people that you would turn to for a movement that has some sort of healthy humanism at its heart. How does he use these thinkers in a way that allows for him to have the sort of humanism that he manifests in his work? And we'll get into some of the problems later on, but... Right.

It's complicated. So, yes, and obviously, I feel silly, I should have said Darwin, obviously, Darwin is a huge influence. So, the way that Peterson tries to sort of make all of these things work within his frame is, it's very, it's hard to describe, and it's odd, it involves a certain pragmatic approach to the definition of truth.

So, the American pragmatists like William James, Charles Peirce, are people he also cites when he talks about piecing these different things together. So, you're absolutely right, Darwin is not a promising start. This is the guy who said that, you know, man in his arrogance thinks himself a being worthy of divine intervention, but it's, he should think of himself as created from animals instead.

That's not a promising start. So, the way that Peterson tries to think his way out of this is by saying that, in a sense, the most true things, or the most real things, are values as opposed to material objects. So, we have an instinctive sense that human beings are valuable.

And this is, like it or not, he'll say this is rooted in this mysterious notion that we're made in the image of God, and he'll go, you know, whatever that means in his inimitable way, because he doesn't know what it means. He goes only so far, then he stops. But he says, whatever it means, we need to hang on to it, because that's the only thing that keeps society from disintegrating, from spiraling.

So, even if, quote unquote, objectively, man is, you know, a hairy ape full of snakes, or whatever, in a sense, that doesn't really matter, because nobody acts like that. We act as if we are more than that. We act as if we are made in the image of God.

And that, that is, should be our guiding light. That should be our guiding rule going forward. And in a sense, he wants to say, well, who cares if this isn't the material reality, because what matters is how we act.

We act out what we really believe. And he seems to speak of meaning as having some truth, even if it's not clear how exactly it's founded upon any fact or reality in the world that has a more objective and foundation to it. He often speaks about the importance of myth, as again, it's a pragmatic thing, that we live in terms of stories and myths.

And the ability to act requires some sort of narrative structure within which to do so. And myths are archetypal ways in which we can act within the world. You see, there's a sort of fusion of the Jungian and the Darwinian approach at that point.

Right. And in the biblical lectures, you see him trying to make these connections and to see how the stories of the Old Testament kind of bubbled up from the, you know, mankind's collective unconscious, so to speak. And that it was like part of our evolutionary development that we developed myth.

And that we were only able to survive through story. We were only able to survive and become what we are through myth. And so, you know, he likes to say, he'll try to do a kind of a judo move and say, well, hey, if you're a really good evolutionist, then you should care about what works.

You should care about survival of the fittest, in some sense, in the realm of ideas. And so these mythic ideas are what has formed us and carried us from the beginning of time to now. And so we would be really foolish to cast them aside.

I think of G.K. Chesterton's parable of the fence. I'm not sure why this fence is here, so I think I'll tear it down. And Peterson is the man who says, you better have a really bloody good reason for tearing that fence down.

Because if you're not sure why it's there, maybe just want to leave it alone, you know. I've always found it fascinating how much attention he gives to Scripture and Scripture as a source of illumination upon the world. Now, he does not believe that it's inspired by God, at least not in any sense that we would use the term God.

But the words of Scripture are something, as you say, that have arisen from the deep of the collective unconscious. And through that, they provide us illumination to human nature, the nature of the world, archetypal structures of reality. And so he'll come to the text with a deep respect and a sense that he's going to find something there that he didn't necessarily already know, which can be quite surprising for people who aren't used to reading non-Christians and finding a sense of reverence for the text, and also a belief that it's going to tell them something that's true.

Yes, absolutely. There's something almost almost childlike or sort of innocent in the way, this sort of wide-eyed newness that Peterson brings when he comes to the text. Now, some people, you know, depending on your tribe, you might be put off by things that he'll say occasionally, when he'll say, well, now the Christian fundamentalists will try to

read it this way, and that's just not going to work, so we need to do something different.

And that's not his best side, you know, but I can forgive that and just kind of move past that and see what he is doing that is still, I think, interesting and of value and worth engaging with. More generally, I find that posture towards a thinker like Peterson is very important, that receptive yet critical approach, because I find many people are looking for a very clear decision, is he on our side or is he on the other side? And yet he's not really on either side, and he's an interesting and fruitful person to engage with as someone who will make you think about your commitments, your convictions, the reality that you're engaged in within the world, also within the world of Scripture, that this text maybe has depths that he can see that you may not have looked at before or considered. Yes, yeah, he kind of, to me, he sort of embodies the archetype of the noble pagan, so to speak, you know, he is truly seeking what, you know, the good, the true, the beautiful, and just hasn't yet recognized that these things reside in the person of Christ, on whom he has his own opinions, and that's where the unfortunate influence of Jung kind of comes in and maybe puts certain blinders on his understanding that make it sort of difficult for him to grasp the nettle of the gospel, so to speak.

I do find it fascinating the way that it's the doctrine of the resurrection where so many of these things come to a head, because at that point the myth and the reality, you can't just separate them, they demand to be either joined together or denied, and there's that joining point where it seems he is forced to come to some sort of judgment on the resurrection, but yet he's hesitating at that point and unable to go further, but he's also unable to draw back because he knows his thinking has, I think, led him to that question, a question that can't be dodged, but which requires an answer that he's not yet prepared to give. Yeah, exactly, and I think that's because he's still trapped in the iron box of naturalism, so to speak, which is a, not my own phrase, I think it was my friend Paul VanderKley who came up with that, so shout out to Paul if you're listening. He's still resolutely staying within his Darwinian frame, his naturalist frame for all of this, so it's difficult for him to break out of that and imagine a breaking in on nature of something or someone outside of nature.

You mentioned his Darwinian approach, and it seems to me that within the last decade particularly, there has been a shift in the way that evolution as a doctrine is perceived within the public discourse, whereas 10 years ago the new atheists were culturally dominant in many ways. Now that's not the case. When we think about evolution, we don't instantly think about the positive connotations of free thought and these sorts of things against fundamentalism.

What we tend to think about are things like so-called race realism, or we think about the position that would deny that trans women are women, or these sorts of controversial, politically incorrect viewpoints, which are very much socially inappropriate within the current context, and it seems that the former new atheist contingents that would

formerly have been quite orthodox in terms of social thought now find themselves in marginal groups like the intellectual dark web or arguing with the free speech crowd, other people who would be seen as very controversial, maybe holding some quite heterodox views on a number of different issues. In the course of those debates, it's been interesting to see how groups that would formerly be very much at odds with each other, Christians and people who hold to a committed understanding of evolution, actually find themselves as co-belligerents on a key set of questions. I think at the very heart of those is the idea that there is something we can talk about along the lines of a human nature.

So human beings aren't not just individuals who are all self-defining and it's all up for grabs, but rather there is something about humanity that has a shape to it and that shape to it is worthy of investigation and study and there are ways in which it will resist some of our will at certain points. Now, it seems to me that Peterson is a great example of that use of evolution in ways that might surprise people who maybe woke up after 10 years sleeping since the new atheist debates. The people who would have been following the new atheists are now following Jordan Peterson and he seemed to be using the doctrine of evolution very differently.

What happened? I think that this is best understood in the context of the fight between modernism and post-modernism. So you look at thinkers like Peterson or Eric and Brett Weinstein. Eric is a mathematician and physicist who works for Peter Thiel who sort of coined the phrase intellectual dark web and so he's kind of like the godfather so to speak.

These guys are they're modernist in their thinking and so they look at these people who are trying to say there is no gender binary, there is no essence of man or woman, these kinds of things can be whatever you make them and they want to say well wait a minute wait there's what about scientific reality what about cold hard biological fact you know you can't just pretend that these things don't exist and the post-modernist says well why not you know you you can't contradict my lived experience as a trans woman or whatever. So I think that that's where Christian modernists and atheist modernists begin to find common ground because we all agree that there is an objective fact of the matter about these things. We agree on the notion of objective truth at all as a real thing as opposed to you know a construct of western white civilization or something or however it's pitched these days.

So that's that's why in a sense you've seen the kind of the kind of cooling down or the moving on from the atheist versus Christian thing. I think you see that with like Peter Boghossian and James Lindsay for example who Boghossian in particular was quite aggressively anti-Christian before but now they've been involved in this completely different conflict with the critical theory crew and and those sorts of people. So now the question is how do Christians think through this realignment so to speak and what would

they say to the atheist modernist who is like but I don't understand isn't you know isn't truth important these things are objectively real and I think what I would say is yes I agree however in a sense these good instincts are floating in midair without the grounding of t-boss or purpose because if you're still trying to to remain in the in the naturalistic frame you're going to have a difficult time showing where you get this idea of purpose for the sexes getting you know the ought for the is so to speak.

It's like why should these things be the way they are you could say well this is what's worked okay so that's kind of a pragmatic approach but it's not quite the same thing you know. It seems that Peterson's work is informed by this understanding of a human nature in part because we can go to literature and myth and all these things from different parts of the world from different periods of history and find there something that will teach us about ourselves that conviction seems to underlie his appeal to scripture among other things that if we do not believe that there is a human nature that exists and is something that is beyond just social structures power and structures the way in which certain dominant groups in society want to frame the world unless there's something deeper than that and for Peterson there is in human nature we won't spend much time paying attention to the great myths of the past or the literature of various parts of the world we'll have a sense that these things belong to a very different world to a very different way of seeing the world and it's purely about using the tools of critical theory to deconstruct these texts to think about ways in which we could reread them in terms of our way of viewing the world and that confidence to go out and engage with other human realities understanding that what may look to be very different on the surface of things shares a fundamental common human reality in human nature that it seems is an expression of a doctrine or an understanding of human nature that drives a more general approach to the arts to literature to engaging with human beings in general yes agreed and i think this is where i think christians should recover a robust sense of natural law and appealing to the instincts of people within a secular frame to say well just observe just look at the world around you observe people observe how they how they act their essence how they interact with each other and this get you know this applies to conversations around sexuality as well so why why does the male female binary matter and you know are are prohibitions on certain kinds of sexual activity just you know bits of archaic arbitrary bronze age code that are you know it doesn't make any more sense than the commands not to mix certain kinds of fabrics or not to eat shellfish that kind of thing or are these things grounded in a natural order for the human body um and a t was for the human body so that's again where i would kind of push the modernist atheist is the question of of t vos and purpose to say very good you've you've kind of put your finger on human nature like you're saying now where is this coming from though you know how can we ground that it seems to me that on both sides of this on the sides of people who are christian and coming to someone like jordan peterson and seeing a lot of common ground and cause co-belligerency and also on the side of peterson that there are debates with their more natural camps so for many christians the

idea of natural law is something viewed with a degree of suspicion um so first of all i'd be interested to hear your thoughts on what are some of the differences among christians with regard to doctrine of or the account of natural law what difference does it actually make in practice for instance in the way that we approach the world in the way that we approach something like apologetics these sorts of things and then on the other side you see something like peterson's debate with sam harris there seem to be clear differences there as well um where are those coming from and this new alignment it seems has tensions caused on both sides of the divide it's not one that's bringing everyone together rather there are fault lines emerging within movements as a result of this can you say something about those yeah i mean i i hope i won't be too scattered in my uh my thoughts on this but with regard to um to christians and natural law i think that um so there there are hesitations both on the right and the left sides of this so among more conservative christians there can be a suspicion that you're downplaying the authority of scripture by saying that we should appeal to natural law or think about the natural light um and so to that i would say that that's that's misguided because if we believe that god is the author of nature uh that god is the author of the human form the human body the template of man and woman that uh he wants us to discover the natural order by observing nature and this in no way undermines the things that scripture reveals authoritatively that nature alone can't reveal um and so i think that then uh on the left there's uh there's a sort of resistance to that particularly when you get into political areas like sexuality homosexuality those kinds of things because um there's a need to keep those kinds of things in the realm of the arbitrary like i was saying earlier very common wine is well you eat shellfish so case closed why it why is this relevant to a 21st century person um it's it's just god kind of waking up and deciding that that this is bad so we sort of i think we we need natural law as a tool at the arsenal to explain why this is not in fact arbitrary um now as far as apologetic effectiveness i don't know if that will suddenly like win a bunch of people over to our side but what it definitely can do is it can give younger people within the church i think a more robust foundation with which to go out into the world and think through their own faith in interacting with people because that's how a lot of young people kind of drift away is uh not seeing all of these things as interrelated and uh connected together they they just see these things as arbitrary so they think well if i don't have to believe this then why would i so um those are just some some quick thoughts on christianity and natural law i found thinking about natural law it can be helpful thinking about it less as a theory and more just as a fact and what you're doing is not primarily giving people a theory that explains certain things you're just saying that we recognize that these things are built into the structure of reality and that encourages us to pay attention to reality it's one feature of biblical law that i think makes it stand out from other forms of ancient near eastern law and other forms of law in the world that is not just seen as arbitrary it's seen as something that requires the attention and the investigation and it's a training in the structure of reality for the person who reads it so there's a bleeding of the legal material you find in deuteronomy and leuiticus and exodus into what you find later on in scripture in the

wisdom literature that as you reflect upon the law you start to recognize the moral structure of the universe that these things aren't arbitrary first of all it's grounded in nature then it's given in terms of narrative that narrative and law go alongside each other so you reflect upon how they fit together then it's seen the law itself has a structure so you have these great heading commandments like um the ten commandments and underneath those particularly in the book of deuteronomy which i've just been looking through you have sections of law underneath those showing that those each one of those commandments can be refracted into far more elaborate frameworks of truth which are interrelated themselves and the more that you explore that you realize this is profoundly illuminating these are not just arbitrary laws these are windows into reality itself and then reading that alongside the narrative and in terms of its rootedness within the created structure you begin to see how this leads into the wisdom literature exactly and then sort of segwaying from that into the the peterson harris conflict harris has kind of built his brand on waving away uh the bible as this you know random collection of um bronze age uh precepts you know and that now that we are modern men we have science and we know how things really work how things really are and we're also much more moral and enlightened people of course uh we it's just time to move on why can't we just throw these things into the dustbin of history where they belong and read something like marcus aurelius instead um so what peterson was coming along and saying is he's saying sam you have no idea how deeply embedded these things actually are within your own psyche um and also you have no idea that that everyone is religious in some sense everyone has uh you know a highest a highest value so to speak um a highest cause something that you could say in some sense they worship so uh for sam to say well we're so enlightened and modern we don't believe in god anymore to that peterson says you also worship something sam because everyone worships something and it seems to me that that the movement that scripture makes from law into wisdom is one that helps us to understand why someone like jordan peterson is appealing and someone we can find a great deal of common ground with because when we explore the world and we pay attention to natural law we discover a sort of cosmopolitanism of truth that there are many other people exploring the world the same world from different perspectives and seeing many of the things that we're seeing and peterson's work has a deep wisdom like flavor to it and it's not surprising that i think many christians particularly maybe young young men have seen the appeal to that and it makes me wonder how we have maybe in a denial of natural law and a push towards a more arbitrary structure of worldview or something like that we fail to pay attention to the resources that we have within scripture itself dealing with wisdom right yeah that's a that's a tough one it would be there's so many different factors at work there it's it's difficult to to sort of untangle them um i mean within within some circles of christianity there there is an idea that unless you have already bought the christian frame uh you can't see or recognize these kinds of things that we're talking about um and i would say that that's that's fundamentally misguided and kind of ensures that you're never really going to be able that you're always going to talk past a guy like

peterson um or people who who follow peterson now when we get to peterson's use of evolution i think we can see certain problems certainly on the face of it and then as we look a bit deeper more things emerge and you've written a bit about this within your chapter in the book i'll be interested for you to say a bit about that now and what do you see within his use of evolution that causes problems for some of the other things that he's recognizing and some maybe even some of the things that the doctrine of evolution can give him in a helpful way to push him towards an understanding of human nature what are some of the impasses that he ends up running into right so i think obviously this is a fraught topic this is very you know emotions run high on both sides of this debate so it's very difficult to say anything about it without uh starting an instant flame war but um you know i i've said that i i think that the happiest humanist is a fully integrated humanist and there are deep tensions within peterson's work that i think set him at odds against himself and i think that by by trying to keep working within the evolutionary frame he's kind of undercutting uh what he wants to say about human nature uh and about the human person because he's taking it for granted that uh that our ancestry is woven together with the great apes um and ultimately with all animals by the theory of universal common descent so you know in his lectures and his writings he'll go off on these long kind of strange tangents about apes or about rats in a maze or that kind of thing or lobsters or lobsters lobsters exactly they're like why why why are we suddenly talking about lobsters i thought we were talking about human nature and this is the issue with darwinism which is that it says well ultimately it all kind of collapses and and interweaves uh into you know your your lucca your last universal common ancestor then branches out and we share a commonality with all these other animals and i think it's very difficult to make those things work together meaningfully because if if we do kind of bleed into into animals in terms of of how the human person evolved then i i think it's difficult to talk about a human nature as sharply distinct from animal nature now you use the term yeah imago de in this context the image of god yes um what do you believe is the christian contribution to the understanding of human nature that evolution just lacks so i think that the i think the christian understanding is that god created man initially um ex nihilo as as a an entirely separate creation from the animal kingdom and that body and soul were conceived and born with their their purpose their t-voss stamped on them from the beginning and there were there were no you know fuzzy blurred lines no creatures who maybe outwardly kind of resembled humans but they weren't persons exactly um and then maybe at some point there was a a switch where uh you know a child could have had an ape-like mother but then he bore the image of god i think that when when you really ask questions about what exactly you're envisioning there things get anthropologically extremely murky and i think we kind of lose we lose the the telic sense so it's telos i think telos for the mind and the body together because the human person is in essence an embodied person so i don't think that you can um that you can just solve it by saying maybe the body was a kind of a vessel in which god implanted a soul and that that's what the image of god means and that and then if you do that i think that raises all kinds of ethical uh issues as well which

peterson is one of a number of people who are wrestling with the christian heritage right and peterson is maybe taking the category of myth as a way to rehabilitate christian doctrine and its importance within a more secular evolutionary framework there are others who have seen the importance in a more historical framework think about the recent work of tom holland called dominion which is a study among other things of the christian legacy and how much of it is borrowed capital for modern society things that would be disavowed in principle and in doctrine but yet serve as things upon which we build much of our society and our ethical systems and values you've engaged a bit with the work of tom holland i'll be interested to see how you see him fitting into this larger debate yes i i definitely see tom kind of picking up the the baton and in some sense from peterson as psychologist and then putting his historical spin on it and so tom also um wants to emphasize that this whole idea of human exceptionalism which that's what i was kind of pointing to uh earlier the idea that humans are humans are exceptional they have exceptional dignity they have exceptional worth exceptional value um and that even even the the the weakest the poorest the most vulnerable human person you know perhaps even a human person who you might say has less intelligence than an ape or something like that that that person is still uniquely worthy of uh respect and reverence and protection and so holland as a historian of ancient greek and roman culture saw that it wasn't really um until well initially judaism and christianity springing from judaism that you had that idea in all these other ancient cultures you see the exact opposite you know the the well a rather darwinian picture you know you could say interestingly that the strong survive and the weak are just kind of cast off and crushed underfoot they can't keep up and so you know what how and realized is i i may not believe in god but if i call myself a humanist then in some sense i'm a christian whether i like it or not um and so with dominion he's in some sense kind of throwing down the gauntlet to other secular humanists to say you know i i dare you to look at the scope and the sweep of history and pretend that you're not just copying christianity's homework in some sense the legacy of christianity is being picked up by many people in an atheist framework as something to protect in some regard so you can have that on the side of um i mean in the most ugly forms in white nationalists and others who see it as part of the european heritage or um the way that we have to defend christendom whatever it is and then in others there is a sense of its philosophical importance the legacy of paulianism um in someone like schlabowski or um some of the other philosophers who are using that legacy to think about the radical understanding of the self that emerges from that and society but in peterson and holland i think there's a greater sense of the weight of these truths in a moral and a historical social context that without these things many of the things that we hold is absolutely integral to modern society human dignity the things that make live in a meaningful way those could not be sustained and i find it encouraging first of all to see a sense of the weight of christian doctrine emerging from these unlikely quarters and i also find there is a challenge there how do we communicate in a way that shows that just recognizing that these are useful frameworks that can maybe be cannibalized from a vehicle that has run its course that's not going to work rather you need to accept

the christian gospel and there needs to be a deeper commission commitment to this and conviction about it for it to actually make sense at all how do you bridge that gap uh well i've i've been trying i've been working on tom a little bit in in recent uh months um yeah i would say that what what you've put your finger on this is something that uh the british writer douglas murray has also written about in his book the strange death of europe um and he and i have engaged as well and he talks about this the sense that the story has run out um with europe in particular this sense of tiredness that um it's it's like we're looking back at this dying star uh and kind of surviving on the the glowing embers of what used to be christianity what do we do how do we how do we move forward um and so i think i think my response to that would be that we need to we need to encourage the the integrated mind um and to say it's not true it's simply not true that the story has run out it's not true that the story has run its course or that well now we we know as as douglas has put it we can't unlearn um all these things that we've learned that show how christianity can't be true um and that that's something that holland will will express that's something peterson will express and so whether that's uh truths about science or truths about scripture um you know what scripture actually is whether it's actually a word from god or a product of of man um i think that's where we the rubber really should kind of meet the road and and we say actually it's it's not the case that we have um that we've had these big revelations now that we that we can't unlearn those those were actually not correct those those weren't actually true um at the same time as would-be evangelists and apologists we have to recognize that um very often this is not just about rational cerebral uh objections to to the christian faith and you know showing up with with five books um and and 10 fast facts may may not actually be the way to to somebody's heart um so i think there has to be there has to be a blend of approaches and also i look frequently back to c.s lewis who i think i think embodied the fusion of these things as well as anyone that i can think of um and i still think the argument from desire is a pretty good one is to say look look within your hearts for that longing that you feel the zane zucht you know and and ask yourself what put that there and so encouraging people to move towards what what it says in the old testament that god has has set eternity in our hearts you know so i i want to i want to encourage people to reawaken the sense of eternity the human heart now you're not just someone who writes on issues of cultural commentary you're someone who's writing a novel at the moment i gather and christian the importance of the arts and how the arts have always been important in your thinking it seems to me that the original movement of humanism was very concerned with recovering literature from many different societies in the past exploring the wealth of um human human writing not just in a philosophical sense but recognizing the breadth of the human spirit and what that represents and what it tells us about ourselves now you i believe have thought quite a bit about this and it's part of your practice as well how do you see it um connecting all these things that we're talking about in a more philosophical and maybe cultural sense how do you see that fitting into your practice in writing yes so um alan jacobs read a book called the year of our lord 1943 where uh he analyzes i believe it's elliot auden and a lesser-known thinker whose

name escapes me at the moment but yes if you think about christian humanist thinkers of the past you think sometimes of poets or novelists t.s elliot being one big influence on myself so um i think my my own writing is guided by uh this this idea which i think is best articulated by joseph conrad in a beautiful essay of his on the task of the writer and he says that the task of the writer my task he says speaking of himself my task is to above all else to make you see and perhaps to give you a glimpse of that truth for which you have forgotten to ask and i think that that is what great art does um fiction at its best cinema at its best music at its best it makes us see things um without necessarily telling sometimes it could be just an image and it's like there just look at this behold here it is here's um here's the truth of what it is to be human um and so there's an example of a of a novel that i actually used to bookend the essay in uh in the peterson anthology called uh canicle for leibovitz which um very strange novel in in many ways very strange uh dystopian catholic novel written in 1959 um by a writer who was rather rather disturbed in many ways but it's as if i can put it this way kind of a grimly beautiful exploration of what it means to be human even in most desperate circumstances and i i use a scene to uh to actually open my essay where uh a priest and a scientist are looking out the window and watching a poor old peasant man walking home with his his mule in the twilight and this is at the wake of a nuclear holocaust and so people are being born who are you know their intelligence is significantly downgraded they have various deformities and whatnot so the scientist has contempt for this kind of class of humanity and he's trying to see if he can lead the world into a new enlightenment and recover uh this this supposed legendary ability that man had to fly to the moon you know it harms gravity which is now in the distant past and so he asks the priest when you look at this old man what do you see and the priest says the image of christ what what did you expect me to see so that that scene has really kind of haunted me and it kind of haunts all of my thinking and my writing on humanism in general um and then at the end of the essay i kind of bookend that with a story from peterson's experience and i will get into it people can read the essay but an encounter that he had with an old woman who like the peasant man was at the absolute bottom of the totem pole and she she had absolutely nothing and peterson was just trying to help her as a as a young psychology student and it's haunted him for decades and he tells the story a lot in different lectures and things and i think that while peterson doesn't have the vocabulary to say that he's apprehended the image of christ in this person that is in fact what he what he is seeing what he is is recognizing thank you so much for joining me this has been a very stimulating conversation i'll leave the link to the peterson anthology in the show notes and lord willing have you on again at some point esther and continue this conversation thank you so much alistair appreciate it god bless and thank you all for listening god bless