

OpenTheo

What is the Hope for Humanity? | N.T. Wright & Peter Thiel

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The Veritas Forum

Every generation must be challenged to assess whether its assumptions about God must be reexamined. Join N.T. Wright, Peter Thiel, and moderator Ross Douthat in a discussion on hope, technology, politics, and theology. Please like, share, subscribe to, and review this podcast. Thank you!

Transcript

Welcome to the Veritas Forum. This is the Veritas Forum Podcast. A place where ideas and beliefs converge.

What I'm really going to be watching is, which one has the resources in their worldview to be tolerant, respectful, and humble toward the people they disagree with? How do we know whether the lives that we're living are meaningful? If energy, light, gravity, and consciousness are a mystery, don't be surprised if you're going to get an element of this involved. In today's episode, we join public intellectual N.T. Wright, technology entrepreneur Peter Thiel, and moderator Ross Douthat of The New York Times. A forum titled, What is the Hope for Humanity? A discussion of technology, politics, and theology.

Peter is, of course, the co-founder of PayPal, one of the early investors in Facebook, a man who is involved in all kinds of activities across a range of science, technology, investment, and so on. But I would say he's here tonight in his capacity as a kind of combination futurist and social critic, if that might be a fair way of putting it. Somebody who has really interesting, fascinating things to say about the intersection of technology, economic growth, society, and religion, and theology, which connects him in a sort of fascinating web filament flung out across the United States and then across the Atlantic Ocean to N.T. Wright, who is the former bishop of Durham, which means that he was in fact a sitting member of the House of Lords, which we had a fascinating conversation about over dinner, which is why I'll be addressing him as your grace for the remainder of the evening.

No, but my lord is excellent, so my lord. But my lord Wright has the distinction, I would

say, of being probably the most serious, rigorous, searching and fascinating biblical scholar working out of a small, oh, orthodox Christian viewpoint, I'd say, of the last 30 or 40 years. And his work ranges from the popular to the scholarly, he's written many short books and many long books, he's going to be best known and remembered, I would suspect, for his long series of extremely long books, some of which I have on my bookshelf and have pretended to have read in full, which are listed in your bio, but it's essentially a series of scholarly takes on early Christianity, running from the beginnings of Christianity itself through his latest book, which is on Paul or St. Paul, as we Christians like to call him.

The best anecdote that I can come up with to capture Tom's importance is that some of you are probably familiar with the work of the late Christopher Hitchens, the great atheist scourge of Christianity, scourge of God and so on. And what you may not know about Christopher Hitchens was that in addition to being a scourge of God, he was also an incorrigible flirt where Christianity was concerned. So all kinds of my Christian friends who had had many long booze drenched evenings, drinking with Christopher, were convinced that they were just one extra conversation away from converting, converting him completely and bringing him into the fold.

And so one of my close friends had been so convinced that he had given all of your books, not, and the thick ones to Hitchens as the best possible case for the literal truth of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And he said, well, you know, of course, nothing came of that. And I didn't expect that anything would.

But the reality is that the last time that I saw Christopher Hitchens, we were at some horrible Washington party of the kind that you can only imagine where Larry Summers had cornered my poor wife in the other room, and we won't even get into what happened there. But Hitchens cornered me in the kitchen, and we had this sort of long and kind of peculiar conversation, the upshot of which was Hitchens saying to me, well, suppose that Jesus did rise from the dead, what would that prove, really? And that, I think, could possibly be chalked up either to your influence or the influence of the seven glasses of wine that he had drugged in the ten minutes previous. That's an exaggeration.

But anyway, so that hopefully gives you some further background on why this should be such a fascinating conversation. And basically, what we're going to try and talk about, I think, that the theme for the evening is going to be, in a way, complicating what I think is one of the sort of clichés and caricatures of modern life, which is an idea that sort of pits sort of an accelerating pace of technological progress on the one hand. And a sort of largely secular, technologically driven, possibly utopian vision for human society, against a kind of reactive, technophobic, technoskeptical, religious rump, on the other hand.

And I think that both Peter and Tom in different ways in their work have sort of suggested very different ways of approaching that caricature, and have suggested ways

in which it doesn't really hold up at all. And I think Peter has come at it in part from a sort of two-part point of view, one that actually contrary to popular perception, technological progress is not accelerating nearly as fast as we think it is. And actually, we might be in more of an age of stagnation than an age of radical innovation.

And secondly, that might be connected, in fact, that stagnation to precisely the loss of certain possibly even metaphysical perspectives on the world. And then Tom, I think, has come at it from the opposite direction, not the opposite direction, but in sort of looking at the way Christian and religious ideas about modernity have developed and played out, especially in the 20th century, especially maybe in reaction to Marxist utopianism and Nazi reaction. And so on.

And to say that actually part of the problem we have is that religious people have lost their sense of their sense that part of religion, and particularly part of Christianity, is a focus on this world. And not only this world in the here and now is something to be reformed, but this world is something that is actually what our ultimate destiny is involved with. That actually we're not as religious believers hoping for some immaterial after life where we're sitting on harps and sitting on clouds and playing harps, sitting on harps would be a little uncomfortable.

And that actually what we've lost is a sense that at least the Christian hope is of a bodily resurrection, a new heaven and a new earth, a new Jerusalem that looks a lot in certain ways like the world we live in now, and that that has implications for the way we live. So that's my extremely long winded and rambling introduction, and now I'm going to sort of throw it open briefly to both of you to just sort of say something brief to the audience about sort of how you come at these questions, anything in your background that you think maybe gives you a distinctive perspective on these issues. And I'll start with you, my lord.

Thank you. I come at these questions as not a technophobe, but reasonably ignorant about the details of technology, and I'm one of those who's enormously benefited from technological innovation without actually knowing very much about how or why it happens. It's just that certain things that I've had to do in my work over the last 30 years have been enormously eased, facilitated, smoothed and accelerated by stuff that other people have done.

So I've benefited from that, and have seen actually all sorts of spin off benefits to other bits of the world. But as a theologian, I come at all sorts of things from the point of view of Christian faith and of a Christian faith which inevitably in Britain as well as in America is extremely contested. So if you look back over the last 60 years, the enormous waves of modernist skepticism and then postmodern relativism have made it much harder culturally, socially to say, yes, I'm a Christian and here's why, because so many people in my world certainly assume that Christianity means checking in your brain at the door of

the church or checking in your faith at the door of your workplace.

And so any attempt to connect religion in everyday life is really contested, really difficult in my culture. Of course, in America, you all believe that since we in Britain have an established church, life is very different from how it is for you. Actually, that is not so.

It just gives us certain bits and pieces like bishops in the House of Lords, which are different. So many of the social attitudes and not least attitudes in the media and those who are forming cultural opinions, it's pretty similar in terms of an implicit split between religion and politics, religion and reality, religion and society. And certainly, I think for many people, religion and technology and religion becomes a nostalgia for a golden age in the past when all this funny, fancy stuff that's allowing people to do wicked things on the internet, etc.

That didn't exist and it was so much simpler and cleaner. So I have not reacted against that. I've just struggled to hold together what it seems to me should never have been separated.

But that's a brief miniature sketch of where some of it comes from. Well, I come from the perspective that I grew up as an evangelical Christian. I think the question of the relation of reason and revelation or faith and science or Christianity and technology are extremely important questions for us to talk about.

We don't get a chance to do it very often, so I want to thank the Veritas Forum for convening this evening and give us a chance to do it. There certainly is a sense in which the sort of materialist scientific, technological utopia seems quite at odds with a Christian, Judeo-Christian worldview. But there are some commonalities that it's worth also stressing.

One very important commonality is that both have this view that the future will look very different from the present or the past. And this is certainly the view that's presented in science fiction, it's presented in the New Jerusalem, you're not going back to the Garden of Eden. So there's sort of a sense that the future looks very different from the past.

I think that we are living in a society that I think is, people are Christian often like to complain that it's sort of vaguely anti-Christian in different ways. I would submit that it is at least as anti-scientific and anti-technological. And so if you look at the movies that Hollywood makes, it would be a hard press to come up with a single movie in which science and technology are portrayed in a positive light.

And they basically show science and technology that kills people, it doesn't work. And you have a menu of dystopias you can choose from, the future will look like Avatar or the Terminator or the Matrix or Elysium. And if you look at the Gravity movie that came out a year ago, you basically want to go back on Muddy Island and never go into outer space.

And so I think this notion that we're living this extraordinary, I think Hollywood, it sort of as it often does, it both sort of creates and reflects the popular consensus that science and technology are dangerous things that should be stopped. And so I come at it from the perspective that we have somehow lost our way, we no longer believe in a future that looks very different from the present. I think it's an interesting intellectual history question why we've lost this hope in a better future.

But I do think it's a very severe loss because there are an awful lot of problems that science and technology could help solve, but they will not be solved if we do not try to work at them. Could I just push on that because it's a very interesting way of looking at it and it was occurring to me as you were speaking that it's something about the modern world, i.e. what we call modernism starting broadly in the late 18th century with a sudden upsurge of science and technology which made people think quite rightly. We can do things that no generation of humankind has ever done before.

And then right through to the invention of plane travel in the early 20th century was making people think every few years something new is happening which is enabling us to do more. And that got bundled up I think with a notion of progress that it was sort of automatic and from the continent you get philosophers like Hegel where there is this imminent system, it's just moving forward. And actually it gets more traction because in the same movement you get rid of God, God is upstairs or out of sight and even if he exists he doesn't intervene down here.

So we can see a sort of steady progress we're making new and better machines we can do more things it's all quite extraordinary. And I suspect that part of what you describe as the loss of that could map on to what we loosely call post modernity that is to say after the war after the Holocaust after the first atom bomb etc. People say wait a minute our big stories have let us down and often those big stories were stories about political progress and people say no that's let us down and certainly those who pinned their hopes on Marxist utopias and so on that's let them down.

But maybe it's part of that same thing as a sort of cultural weariness that we thought the sky was the limit and actually literally we did all that space travel and then actually we've stopped doing that now because what's the point and isn't a waste of money and so on. And so I just wonder if you would see that as part of that same cultural shift from the modernist progress to the post modern saying well we've just got all these little stories and those big ones are just self serving power grabs anyway. Because if that's so it puts us actually on the same page because I wrestle with those issues with that cultural story in my own work as a theologian because I don't think that Christian hope has to do either with modernist progress or with this really denial of all the significant stories in post modernity.

So we both be looking for new ways of doing hope and of how that could happen which

might actually be quite a significant convergence. I don't know. Well I think you know I do look I think that I think there's the question of why why there's been this loss of hope and faith in science and technology is a complicated one.

I certainly think when you put scientists scientists were never more in charge than they were at Los Alamos and people sort of have some questions about how well that worked out. And then you know the Apollo program fizzled out in the 70s which was in some sense the successor to the Manhattan Project. There is a sense in which the optimism around science in the 17th and 18th century that it was almost limitless in what could be done gradually gave way to this idea that it was a trap or it didn't work or that it was just sort of random things that would go wrong.

That would happen. I think one intellectual history thing I would stress is the early modernity not attributed a large role of chance to science. So in the 17th and 18th century people thought it was very deterministic and you could figure out look at Francis Bacon's New Atlantis you were going to control the weather and all these sort of random things would be a chance would be sort of relegated to the margins.

There would be no accidents and you wouldn't die because nothing would happen. You could sort of get rid of all accidents in the world. And I think the 19th and 20th century sort of the role of chance became bigger and bigger.

You know Friedrich Engels could still say that dialectical materials and promised never ending progress but then in a footnote add that the second law of thermodynamics implied that eventually you'd have the heat death of this world and everybody would die but people could ignore that because it was still far in the future. And there was certainly a way in which actuarial science sort of suggested you eventually hit this probabilistic wall. And so we're now in a world that's not Marxist or Hegelian but it's more Epicurean where the dominant mode is that there are atoms and they randomly move through a void and no matter what you do you end up your projects gradually come to not.

You will hit this probabilistic wall and that's why the dominant mode in our society is not this optimistic view about the future but it's stoic. You know it's eat, drink, be merry because everything's going to sort of fall apart eventually anyway and that's not a scientific attitude. Yeah I think the eat drink and be merry is actually more Epicurean than stoic but we could we could.

Well they're stoic now for the Epicurean stoic. They're very different but they both, I think the sort of the contrasting view that's very hard to articulate is if you were to say something prophetic about the future this would be unthinkable. A political leader who portrays a picture of the future is very different from the present would never get a hearing.

So Martin Luther King I have a dream of a nation, not a divide dividing. You have a

concrete view of a very different world or the last version of this I can think it would be Reagan, Mr Gorbachev tear down that wall. And anyone who tried to give a speech like that today it would be implausible it would not pull test well people would sense you shouldn't do it because.

But how much is that because the cynicism in culture at large reflected by at least some in the media saving your presence sir, then there would be a sort of sense that actually we all know. We've tried that, we've been there done that, we had these great projects and I mean part of the problem is that people say well yeah I really like modern science when it cures me of science. When it cures me of some disease that otherwise I would have died of but the same modern science and people don't differentiate built the gas chambers and outfits and drop the atom bomb and all the rest of it.

And so people say wait a minute is that really where we're going and hence the mood of cynicism and hence if somebody actually says there is a glorious future and there are ways in which we can anticipate it here and now that's perhaps the conversation we need to get into. But perhaps let me just actually I guess push back a little bit on this thesis because I think there are sort of some complications right. Like if you look at Barack Obama's campaign for the presidency in 2007 and 2008.

Yes there was let's say a certain vagueness to the kind of promised land that he was promising people but the appeal of his candidacy was I think in certain ways a reflection of at least temporarily a kind of burst of idealism and the entire sort of yes we can shepherd fairy posters sort of this vision of a generational wheel turning of a sort of new multiracial America that Obama embodied and so on. I mean I don't think I'm wrong to see at least a temporary sort of return of at least mild utopianism there and also I guess I mean maybe this can be sort of folded into the Epicurean analysis but as an outsider to Silicon Valley and as someone who works in mass media. What strikes me is that while it may not go ultimately in sort of a utopian direction there is still a persistent valorization of your sector of innovation in a way that isn't true like an oil company executive is always going to be a bad guy right in the movies and so on.

But Steve Jobs gets not one but two I believe right there's a second one forthcoming sort of heroic biopic movies right I mean there is still that sense around the tech industry that there's something different about you guys. And so the reality is an unusual exception to this it's not the dominant ethos the first Steve Jobs movie was an unusually bad movie. And basically and basically and you know the question you had a raise it was it was just sort of like you know there were all these people read the jobs biography and they sort of thought well what are the lessons we learned and lessons are you should be really mean to your employees and the sort of and there was one manager I know sort of gave him the gift of the biogus all his employees and sort of as a warning that he was going to be less nice to them in the future.

And he's going to be more like Steve Jobs and the lesson that was not drawn was there was something inspiring about jobs about portraying a picture of the future that actually motivated his employees that's that's the real lesson of Apple that has not been conveyed which is very weird and extraordinarily mean, mercurial, crazy person that's that's the way he's portrayed. I would say you know I think on the Obama campaign one of the things if you want the Marxist critique of Obama it would be what sort of progressive has substituted the word change for the word progress and is not the substitution the word change for the word progress represent an objective decline and then you know in the course of the 2008 campaign change did not pull test well and so the slogan by the end of the campaign had been narrowed to the change we need the absolute minimum amount of change that is absolutely necessary. And so so I know all these things I think can be interpreted in quite different ways.

That's it's very British I mean the reason book a recent sociological book this is a sidebar but just to show you where it's coming from you know the revolutionaries would march and chant what do we want revolution when do we want it now and somebody said that the characteristic British thing is what we want gradual change when do we want it to be in due course which is but I mean by contrast in 1997 we were all fed up with the conservatives John Major we had our Obama moment was our Tony Blair moment and indeed one of the London one of the London column is described Obama as Tony Blair with brains and you know there's there was something to that it was the same sort of few here somebody knew maybe things are going to get better and very quickly that faded and things went wrong because politicians can't actually produce what they have to they have to make promises otherwise they get massive people would say they're hopeless what are they going to do they don't have an agenda they don't have a program but just like science and technology used to be at least they have to promise all this stuff but as you're saying Peter that they're not actually producing the utopia which people might have imagined they would and maybe it's a mistake to blame the politicians or the Hollywood movie producers because I do think it reflects this broader consensus of what can be done what's realistic what's possible but I think we're speaking into a world which still in its bones believes in the 18th century doctrine that the world has turned its key corner now that we are the enlightened ones we are the modern grown up nations we have democracy we have science and technology we can do what we want therefore we ought to be making utopia and I've often said to people and maybe this is the moment when I stop saying it that the two nations which were born in the 18th century namely America and France born in a new way both really did believe in the myth of the Enlightenment we've had our revolution we are now the new society and the reason why so many French people look miserable is they know that hasn't happened the reason why so many American people look happy is that they think they still think it has but maybe this is where maybe we British sit in the middle saying what was all that about you know but what you're saying is that that's dying of death actually there is a sort of sense of hmm hasn't really worked like that well this is what I have a

French friend who argues that that is actually literally what has happened or is happening in the United States that effectively and this is this is something I think you might be inclined to agree with that the American upper class has become more like the traditional French sort of bureaucratic managerial elite where people go to the same schools and gradually ascend into sort of expected positions of sort of corporate governmental partnerships that are supposed to manage the economy and so on and the American model of course was supposed to be and has been very different but maybe becoming less different yes it's it's always hard to know exactly where we are as a culture so I mean I you know I don't want to it's and we have to be careful not to paint too broad a brush stroke here but I do think there's a way in which things have become super tracked there's a sense a lot of these tracks don't work that well but nevertheless people don't know what else to do and so you know the push to get into the top universities in the US gets more intense every single year even though there's nothing in particular in particular people are learning there that they would apply in any particular way but so why just to continue just to just to continue playing I suppose devil's advocate on the cliches people or maybe it isn't people maybe it's just people in my profession who write about these things but there is a sense still if you went through you know a hundred media stories about technology ninety five of them would begin in this age of rapidly accelerating technological change right I think I feel like that is sort of the default internet era mode with which at least the media and I you know the media responds to popular cues so it can't just be something we're dreaming up that people respond to you know the internet the iPhone the iPad people feel like things are in flux to a much greater extent I think then certainly you think they actually are well it's there are it's always very hard to get a handle on exactly how much technological progress is taking place this is sort of an incredibly complicated debate to fully fully unpack let me just focus on one terminal logical aspect so if we define technology as that which is changing very quickly then however technology gets defined when you look at technology it will be progressive so there's something circular in the argument now today when people in 2014 use the word technology it normally refers to information technology because we are in a world where there has been a lot of progress in computers and bits there's not been a lot of progress in other things so if we use the word technology 1964 50 years ago it would have referred to aerospace and rockets and faster cars and underwater cities and turning deserts into farmland and desalination plants and nuclear power and technology had a much much broader scope so and certainly the narrative is always on the side that the only thing we have to fear is enormous and accelerating technological progress and there certainly are some things to fear about it I will not say that you know I'm worried about proliferation of nuclear weapons I'm worried about all these scenarios where things could go badly wrong but the alternatives are not neutral if you in a world without technological progress you have a zero sum society in which there has to be a loser for every winner it's not clear whether capitalism could work in that sort of society I certainly do not think democratic representative government could work because it works by having a growing pie in

which your forge compromises in which you sort of divvy up the pie and everyone gets a little bit more and they will get it as long as the pie is growing when the pie stops growing politics gets polarized and people are really angry at each other even when there are no objective differences at all between them which I think is a pretty accurate description of politics in 2014 and in my country as well which is why suddenly you get odd new parties emerging on the right because the rest of them are wriggling around for some centigrade somewhere I just am interested then in the idea of making the world a better place and how that could be conceived from within this very complexified picture of technology that you've raised you're supposed to be answered anyone can ask anything I'm just having heard what Peter just said I suppose the question for me is many Christians have imagined that whatever happens with this world one day God is going to take us away somewhere else and then it'll be way beyond the blue and we'll be sitting whether on angels or on clouds or on harps or something we may not even be sitting but it'll be different and instead of that I have come to the position as a New Testament reader that actually the New Testament isn't terribly interested in heaven in the way we've traditionally perceived it in fact not really interested at all it's interested in what Jesus said God's kingdom coming on earth as in heaven and the New Testament really does seem to think that in some strange sense that began with Jesus it isn't postponed it began with Jesus and will be climaxed at some point in the future the question then comes what can we do in the present and is technology part of that which will actually be in my shorthand kingdom work or will it just be Frankenstein work I mean the Frankenstein image is behind some of what you were saying before isn't it the sort of sense that we've invented these monsters and they're terrible and they'll take us over and it'll be horrible and so how can we tell which bits of the stuff that we find we can do now might be part of that sort of vision of God doing God's kingdom in God's way but us doing things which in some way instantiated in the present for instance in doing things which would help the poorest of the poor which was always part of the Jesus vision of the kingdom I don't know if that reframes the question helpfully but it might sort of say okay if there is to be a future how does the God dream of that and the what we do dream of that how might they work together if or can't they well and one and one thing that you Peter were saying in our conversation before the event was that you feel like you've seen a shift just over the last 30 years or so in how Christians relate to that kind of work that there's and that may be a result of sort of the focus shifting from aerospace and rockets to biotechnology that raises a different set of ethical issues or something for Christians but that there's less appetite maybe than there was 30 or 40 years ago among religious believers for precisely that idea that that sort of technology is part of sort of a cooperative progress and technology now seems more like a threat Well I think it's the dom you know I don't think I think it's not limited to people are called themselves Christians I think it's the dominant motif in our society and people will always say that they are in favor of science and technology in theory but then in practice they're against this and this and this and the things they are against they're always against me far more intense way than anything anything they are in favor of the abstract but they're all sorts

of specific things that they are very strongly they're very strongly against I would say that again I think that you know I think that the problem of poverty for example is fundamental is on some level problem of scarcity and the alternative to technological progress is the sort of the sort of Malthusian type of a prospect there was a you know there was a famous debate between Paul Ehrlich and Julian Simon in the 1980s where they had a bet on sort of a basket of commodities where they go down in price or up in price and Simon was sort of the sort of the Christian optimistic economist who accurately predicted they would go down but if you rerun that 10 year bet since 1993 Ehrlich has been winning every decade every year on a rolling decade basis and so you know in rural India people are consuming fewer calories than they were in 1970 you know in China sort of have a lot of pollution problems so we have progress but it requires coal because we can't get the nuclear power plants to work properly and even in the United States you could argue that there's a hidden sort of Malthusianism in which in which you know we have an obesity sort of perversely people aren't eating real food and sort of shows up as an obesity epidemic or in a place like San Francisco we have an extreme scarcity of real estate because we have no technologies to build taller skyscrapers or to innovate on transportation or things like that and it always gets of course this Malthusian scarcity gets dressed up in a positive way gets dressed up aesthetically it benefits urban slum lords at the expense of everyone else but it gets dressed up as we really like Victorian houses which of course is not exactly a scientific technological aesthetic but from the perspective of a lot of I think especially religious conservatives the argument that opposition to science is an incredibly powerful force I think sort of rings hollow because to a lot of Christians especially if you go back to 1970s and look at the debates over for instance what we're then called test tube babies right and we now just think of as in vitro fertilization and you read the arguments that people had over bioethics in that case the arguments made by supporters of the research were always that well of course we would not want to move to a world where people were buying and selling their eggs and you had a huge market and you know reproductive services and so on and of course in fact that's exactly the world we've moved into and then you move ahead and you talk about you know sort of abortion of genetic testing and abortion and people say well of course we're doing this but we don't want to move to a world where most fetuses with Down syndrome are aborted and in fact that's the world we moved to and so it seems like from the religious perspective a lot of the opposition that you're feeling that I think is real is rooted in a sense that nobody is actually calling a halt that the things that religious believers in particular are most concerned about just progress sort of on autopilot and you know you end up at the bottom of the world you know you end up at the bottom of the slippery slope and people say well that wasn't so bad and you know we'll do another slippery slope and so on and so that's sort of I think the root of at least some of what you're seeing don't but well I would argue the FDA has called a halt to it you know there's a there's something called earrooms law that's Moore's law backwards which is the cost of every new drug doubles every nine years and so so we're sort of getting into this thing where it's costing more

and more and you know in 1970 to use your date Nixon could still declare war on cancer and declare that we would defeat cancer by the bicentennial by 1976 now today you know 44 years later by definition we're 44 years closer to curing cancer people don't think it's far six years away so right we're sort of and it would be unthinkable for Obama to go on television and declare war on Alzheimer's even though one third of the people in this country at age 85 are suffering from some form of dementia and so I do think you know I know it always gets dressed up as we're having all this progress on how scary it is but the thing that I find scary is all the ways in which it's not happening and how there's not even a sense of outrage about the things that are not being done it seems to me that part of the problem was a failure of expectation that in again in the 18th and 19th century they thought as then still Reagan and people were thinking well Nixon was thinking things are getting better so much faster that we just have to keep on this train and we'll get to utopia remarkably quickly and I realize that that ain't necessarily so which actually is a good phrase thinking about it in terms of what people normally say to my business as in the things you're liable to read in the Bible and so on but I think the opposite of that was a Christian negativity towards progress which said yeah the world's a mess but there's nothing we can do about it till Jesus returns so we're just going to sit back say our prayers and wait for a big bang and Armageddon or whatever the Christian still take exactly that view that it's actually wrong to try to make improvements in the world it's not just that they don't like this or that or the other scientific innovation they say we shouldn't be making any improvements in the world because Jesus is going to do all that when he comes back and it would be arrogant of us to try and preempt that which is rather like the old Marxist argument that you shouldn't put up the workers wages because it'll only delay the revolution but actually let's bring it on bring on the second coming by not doing anything now and it seems to me a proper vision of Christian hope would be considerably more modest on the one hand than the optimism of the Enlightenment in other words actually the Kingdom of God has been launched but the way it happens is not by our arrogant technology but through our service to one another through our service to the poor through our medicine and that's where the two systems might actually overlap a bit through our teaching through our education and those have always been great Christian dreams and not that we can create utopia here so that's the pulling back from the arrogance of the Enlightenment to a more modest thing but to say that there is stuff we can do and for instance the people who abolished the slave trade will be forced in my country who was it in your country I just had Lincoln fellow well I'm thinking earlier than that actually early 19th century the people who campaign anyway late 18th early 19th but the key thing is they were people who were told sit down shut up God will change the world when he wants to and they were saying no actually we are going to do stuff and they campaigned and they really did make radical transformations of the world and it seems to me that if we lose hope because we're losing hope in scientific advance a lot of Christians major slide back into saying there you are told you so nothing we can do to Jesus comes back and I want to say no absolutely wrong that's not how the New Testament hope works and some elements of

the scientific advances that we have had particularly in medicine actually have been and should be seen as part of serious kingdom work which really does anticipate what Christians believe God is going to do in the end so it isn't that we can do nothing it isn't that we can do everything it's that we have to have a differently modulated sense both of the ultimate hope and of how we get there but how do you get there I guess that's the I mean this has been a sort of pessimistically drifting conversation right and so the question is where does I mean let's stipulate for the sake of argument that in some sense our culture is in a decadent phase right that has something to do with the loss of ultimate hope something to do with the loss of more immediate hope do societies break out of those ruts? Well I certainly don't think it's like an absolute thing and I spend a lot of time working in a variety of these areas so even though I find some of the larger trends to be ones of deceleration I think that there is still a lot that one can and should try to do I certainly the pro-silicon valley version would be that in a society that's generally hostile to progress it's hard to get it done on a political level because you can't convince 51% of the people but maybe you can do it on the level of a small company where you have to only convince a much smaller number of people and so that's sort of why I think there is such a role for innovation around technology businesses at this point it's certainly not the only way it theoretically should happen I mean you could have it happen in large corporations it could probably happen in a governmental context in a political way that could happen but to the extent that it's an issue with well I guess you can tell me what you think if it's is the fundamental issue more structural that we have sort of sclerotic bureaucracies and the FDA standing in people's way and all of that or is it there are more fundamental and so we're of imagination that's related to sort of where we've ended up because of how the religion and secularism dynamic has played out how the 20th century played out and so on I would say it's both I think the structure reflects the you know it's we tolerate the FDA because we don't really think we can have cure for Alzheimer's so what does it matter if the FDA stops every drug we're not going to get a cure anyway so it's okay things are both cause and effect they sort of work on on all these all these different levels you know I agree with everything that that right is said I would with one nuance I don't I think it is an open question how optimistic one one could be so I certainly think you know it is possible that that one could be a lot more optimistic and that there are sort of ways in which this is somewhat self fulfilling if you think something can't be done it won't be done if you think it can be done maybe you will help bring it about and so there's this incredible self fulfilling aspect to yes I just a nuance and it may be maybe this is the scholars nervous twitch I wouldn't myself use the word optimism because that seems to me describes an attitude that some people are optimistic and some people are pessimistic I would distinguish between optimism and hope and hope is not simply an attitude that this is how I feel hope is something that says something has happened in history which gives me hope of something else that can happen and will happen and the thing that's happened in history is to do with Jesus to do with his resurrection to do with a new world that's been launched as a result of which even when I'm feeling pessimistic I still say I actually choose to believe that there is an

ultimate hope and because we live between those two I choose to believe even if I don't feel particularly optimistic about it that there are things that I can do that we can do right now to make the world a better place to feed the hungry to deal with diseases as best we can although it's part of the deal then that part of the optimism of the ultra enlightenment sort of uber enlightenment might be have we got a cure for death itself can we actually move beyond that and that's where the enlightenment I think gets to the point of real arrogance of saying well the Christians have this myth about resurrection whatever we don't need that we're going to make us live longer and longer and possibly forever and I just it's an interesting sort of alternative longevity as an alternative to Christian this I think gets to you know one of the implicit themes of this conversation is that you could put back together in some sense the kind of scientific questing optimistic spirit and this you know or sort of rerouted in a kind of metaphysics of ultimate hope but do you think I mean I think that you know I imagine you have some some thoughts on this because of this question of life extension I don't think there's I don't think is anything compatible with indefinite life extension and and Christianity I think that I think that I think in practice the question will never get framed that way it will always be framed do you want to cure cancer you want to cure this type of disease or that sort of disease so it will it's not like you're going to take this pill and you will live forever so it's always going to be framed -- I'm pretty sure Ray Kurzweil was on my flight out here. So I don't know if -- Well, he thinks it will just happen automatically without people doing anything at all. So the singularity is near just sit back and eat the popcorn, so that's not going to happen.

But in practice, he will always get framed in terms of very specific questions. And I do think that both the hopeful and Christian and ethically correct answer is to almost always on the side of, yeah, it would be good to have a cure for cancer or this other disease and so on. And this is sort of a complicated intellectual history question.

I think this would be very hard to sort out. But I do think this sort of idea of finding radically extending people's lives was part of the very early modern science project from the 17th and 18th century onwards. I cannot help but wonder whether that was in part because of Christianity having said that that was a possibility.

And so if you lived in a world where people said, you know, death is natural, it's just what happens to everybody, then that would not have been a realistic goal. But if you -- and this was certainly not part of, say, Greek science in the 5th century BC. Nobody -- there was no Francis Bacon who wrote as though something like this was conceivable.

Yeah, it's very interesting. I'm not sure that it was ever part of a Christian agenda because the Christian agenda always was resurrection and which, if properly understood, would be resurrection not into some fluffy non-spatial temporal heaven but into actually a new world, a god making new heavens and new earth. But it seems to me if people are saying that this is something which is now possible, something which is now conceivable,

it seems to me more likely that what they're saying is we Christians have had a tradition of curing diseases as best we can and of working medically.

And of course we have to remind ourselves that until the middle of the late 19th century, the average life expectancy for a reasonably healthy adult man or woman was in the 40s or 50s rather than 60s, 70s, 80s. So that in a sense it's been already remarkably successful that a lot of people who in generations gone by would have been dead by the time they were my age mid 60s. Still, here we are, still here, living proof that something's happened.

So I don't see there's anything wrong in saying we could actually increase that but the point at which it treads into dangerous territory it seems to me would be to imagine a sort of elixir of life as a magic pill, something which sounds rather like what was in the Garden of Eden and wasn't allowed to be taken. But I guess the question would be is that a good? No, well, it strikes me that one sort of we're getting near to the point where we'll segue into questions and answers but one sort of pointed question I would put to you is in a sense does entrepreneurship, does science need religion? But as a corollary to that it seems again as an outsider sort of observing the culture of Northern California, Silicon Valley and so on from the outside there does seem to be an extent to which that narrative to the extent that anything is filling the void left by the collapse of religious belief it is a sort of quasi-religious vision of the singularity of sort of indefinite life expectancy and so on that's untethered from any metaphysic but is sort of promising something that religion used to deliver. Well, let's see, I don't want to get into it's very, I suspect very dangerous again to theological debate here but I think in the Garden of Eden if I recall there were two trees there was a tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and they weren't supposed to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Tree of life was not forbidden. But it subsequently was after the, yeah. But not in the original conception and so I think there is this question whether when things of death as simply a natural part of life and you know every myth on this planet tells us that all that lives must die to quote Hamlet's evil mother and we sort of rationalize death in one form or another and I think the notion that death is unnatural that it's this sort of fallen or flawed or very screwed up condition which we find ourselves that's not a pagan view that is a Christian view and so I don't think it was part of the agenda of science or Christian agenda to do this but I think it was not surprising that it emerged in the sort of world where people thought that that was that was possible.

But do you think that that idea unmoored from a metaphysical hope could be sufficient to sort of sustain or create a rebirth of the kind of optimism that you think American society needs and then I'll have a yeah. Yeah I'm always skeptical of metaphysics. I think the thing that is striking on the sort of transhumanist versus Christian thing is how similar they are and so I think you can you can sort of point to metaphysical differences

but the thing that sort of is always striking is you're going to have a transformed body you know there's going to be this radical transformation of the way everything works there will be no more random freak accidents that happen to kill you and so I think it's actually the similarities that are that are striking and then one shouldn't try to overlay some metaphysical difference.

And is this not because I mean a lot of early science and by early science I don't mean the Greeks or the Egyptians I mean early modern science in the 16th and 17th century grew out of a Christian celebration of the goodness of creation and the old phrase used to be that science was thinking God's thoughts after him and it wasn't science or religion it was science grew out of a Christian a Christian faith a Christian exploration but what's happened since and again particularly since the Enlightenment is and this has happened on several issues I mean the previous Pope said in a speech at the United Nations that with regard to human rights what's happened since the 18th century is that human rights which really grew out of a Christian vision of what it meant to be human how you should treat your neighbor etc. That's been cut off from its Christian roots and it's now been made into a kind of independent freestanding entity which then is getting you into all sorts of areas where every possible pressure group claims this is my right these are our rights and it's impossible to get past the shouting match between these competing rights because we've cut it off from its roots might it not be possible the same thing has happened with science that science having grown out of a faith-based exploration of the world Jewish and Christian and Muslim actually because if you're a creationist monotheist there is always this sense of delight and exploration in creation but then when science cuts itself off from that kicks God upstairs and says we now have this progress thing which is just taking us where we need to go so then you get the archetypal mad scientist or the frankenstein maker or whatever and because as with the modern confusion about rights it's been cut off from its original roots would there be if that's a is that the right analysis and b if that's so would it be healthy to explore ways of putting science and Christian faith back together again not by going back to the 17th century but by going on to a different way of conceiving it. I think look I think there is a point where people overdo science and technology I think there aren't very many people who do that in our society so I think the frankenstein novel by Mary Shelley craft was semi-autobiographical because her father was involved in a variety sorts of experiments and so it was sort of like and I have a preference for her father over the rebellious daughter who was not you know not honoring her parents and and who and you know we are living in this you know and you know I do think the you know I think yeah I think there's a lot there's something about the Faustian ambition of Goethe that's maybe a little bit screwed up but then you know the the alternative you know is I think it is better than the sort of Nietzschean alternative and I always think of Nietzsche as sort of the first environmental philosopher who rejected both Christianity and the scientific technological utopia and sort of willed a return to nature to sort of a counterfeit Eden, Baird, Red and Tooth and Claw.

Yeah yeah but Nietzsche quite wrongly I think saw Christianity as in his phrase Platonism for the masses and you know that this was a way of getting a spirituality that would leave the philosophical academic halls and be available to everyone. I think that was a radical mistake on Nietzsche's part because Christianity was never a form of Platonism because Platonism is precisely a dualistic framework which says that this present world doesn't matter that much and ideally you inhabit another world already and you will one day inhabit it completely. That's what people have done with Christianity to that extent Nietzsche I think was right but that isn't what original Christianity Jesus and Paul and so on was all about and I think the task then would be to not to say we agree with Nietzsche's critique because there were all sorts of odd things about it but to say we need to get back to a more robust holistic heaven and earth together faith and science together way of looking at the world.

One of the great commentators in Britain at the moment is the former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. I don't know if you've worked with him at all but he's an amazing man. He wrote a book called *The Great Partnership* recently about science and faith and I was thinking about that in the light of this and he says science takes things apart to see how they work.

Religion puts things together to see what they mean. So you see that's a sign of a great partnership and okay it's an oversimplification and he knows that but I think there's something enormously important there but what you're talking about is so much not science as in and maybe this is an important distinction we haven't made. Not science as in let's take it apart to see how it works.

As in let's think of something else that we might be able to do see what it would take to make that work in other words to go forward in not just exploration and description but actually innovation and development. Just to I agree that there's something very screwed up with Cartesianism and I think I'll sort of concretize this a little bit. I would say one could say that the last 40 years we've had a Cartesian economy a dualistic economy in which there was enormous progress on the level of information and bits but not on the level of matter and atoms and so and in some ways again from a sort of libertarian perspective I would argue the government did not regulate bits and it outlawed atoms and so and so this was there was a regulatory reason for this but we've had this sort of Cartesian economy in which we've had enormous progress in atom in bits not very much in atoms and and that's probably been inadequate because the reality is that we are material beings in a material world and that's why it's one of the reasons I think technology has been has been more information technology alone has not been enough to create the better world people were promised.

So we it's time now to go to questions. I would say that we've sort of walked up to especially in the foray into Nietzsche and environmentalism a sort of unaddressed issue here. Which is the impact of sort of anxieties about global warming climate change limits

to growth and so on that I think has played a role on sort of changing the conversation on both the science and religion fronts and maybe we can take that up in some form in response or sort of working off a question but maybe not I just wanted to take note of it so we're going to go to questions that are going to be read not by their authors but in a more interpretive fashion from the floor.

Thank you and all company that with a dance. Yes. What are the primary personal questions that you would encourage us to sort out before going to try to change the world and therefore making decreasing the risk that we're making the world more of a mess ourselves? I think if we wait to sort out primary personal questions we'll wait a long time and that could just be a way of putting off responsible action.

I mean I believe that humans are made in God's image and that that isn't simply reflecting God back to God but a vocation to be reflecting the wisdom of God into the world. That is always hugely costly and sometimes it results in the people who are doing it actually suffering and being broken in the process because that's what happened to Jesus we should expect it to happen to us. So if we try to put our own personal situations right first and sort ourselves out we will try for a long time we may not succeed and meanwhile the stuff we might be doing in the world won't be happening.

And in a set I mean nothing to add to that. Yeah. [Pause] Sorry we're just waiting for the next reading.

Hi Sue. Yeah here it comes. So then the next question from the audience has been "In an audience of motivated doers what are the problems worth giving our life, passion and dreams to?" You know I sort of attempted to challenge the premise of the question.

I think that I think that you should, I think it's a sort of question that it's I'm very hesitant to sort of answer in the abstract. I think that there's an interview question I always like to ask people which is tell me something that's true that very few people agree with you on. And the correct answer is you know and so any answer that question that would be conventional is probably wrong.

So you should probably work on a problem that would not otherwise get solved. The non-profit version of this is you should work on things that are unpopular not popular. So these ways I found to turn down requests for money is to ask people why their causes are unpopular and explain to them that I only support unpopular causes because the popular causes are adequately funded.

I don't think I have anything to add to that either I'm just intrigued. We've touched on belief in God in many dimensions but not on whether this potential God is objectively a reality or not. So the question was what is your personal belief in God and how does it discuss them guide your decisions? I guess I put most of my cards on the table already this evening.

The one thing to add to what I've said already is that the word God has been a question mark in contemporary culture and many people think they know if there is a God we know what he'd be like because of stuff they heard when they were young or whatever and in my own belief experience practice the word God systematically gets reformed around Jesus again and again which is difficult as it's a reforming which takes place in one's whole life and so Jesus becomes the focus and we discover who God is by looking at him but that is difficult it's a lifelong process it's not just intellect it's not just emotion it's not just bodily it's all of them and so the God project as it were is something which I think every generation has to be challenged by because every generation certainly in my culture and I suspect in America assumes starts with the assumption we know who God is and then we try and fit everything into that and then we decide whether we believe in this God or not and again and again when you look at Jesus it really does change that and change therefore how you see all the sort of practical issues that we've been discussing in the light of that yeah well I think it is it always has a sort of very Trinitarian conception and a Christian worldview where somehow it's relational and and this sort of image of God is the supreme introvert who is completely satisfied on his own and is sort of this unmoved mover of Aristotle is I think sort of a very different picture and so it's it's worth I think it's always worth contrasting the sort of a great introvert of the unmoved mover with with this idea of God who who shares in the hopes and sufferings of his creatures so the Christian God is an extrovert not a total introvert not a total introvert we don't want to be against it people are introverts but okay okay would you say that you believe in God yes although I I think it's I think it's a I think it's a I think it's a tricky question to answer because you then you then have the question of who is God and that's probably I think the question of you know who is God is is more important than does God exist I think that's fair what would you say is your biggest problem with the way the conception of God is understood either by religious believers or by the culture as a whole you can pick either one well I think I mean I think there is I think often we get mistaken conceptions when a people on opposite sides agree on things that's when you get the really mistaken conceptions and I think I think there's sort of this convergence between a fundamentalism and atheism where you view God as fundamentally a violent being a sort of a totalitarian dictator or you know some sort of demon or something like that and and I think I think the conception of God is fundamentally violent is this is this mistake that people at both extremes in the culture wars share they they disagree on sort of secondary questions like whether or not God exists they agree on the most important thing that God's really violent what is the relevance of belief to our work a lot of my work has to do with writing about the bible about God about the world and so in a sense I'm a special case because it has a kind of a double relevance to it but at the sort of meta level for me it's to do with vocation vocation is a strange thing I mean when I was working as a bishop one of the things I had to do on a very regular basis was to help people sort out vocation sometimes people in mid-career say a clergy person who'd been ordained for 20 years and really was struggling with is this what I should be doing for the next 20 years and sometimes young people thinking where is this going what is my life

about and I found again and again that that sort of work has to do with helping people discover what God is saying through their friends through their life and through their families through the bible through their praying through silence to help them then be appropriately motivated for appropriate tasks and because we're all very different that appropriate motivation those appropriate tasks will be very different but then if they don't believe in God or give up believing in God then some people will then find it you know what's the point of getting out of bed in the morning the only thing will be to earn enough money to stay alive keep the family alive it's a pretty depressing way to live actually whereas obviously there are many other motivations as well but for me the thing is I am excited continually excited by the fact that I have struggled to be obedient to a rather odd shaped vocation but at least I have a sense that it is supposed to be going somewhere and that I seem to be I actually enjoy doing much of what I do so faith and work go very closely together but it's one of those multi-level meshing which it isn't just a plus b equals c it's several dimensions which all do come together and provides an extraordinarily rich personal and social environment for for doing what I and other people do I'm always very bad at answering these sorts of questions let me try sharpening it for you then because I I'll use my I'll use my own experience because I think one I I've actually found just in practical terms that being a someone who I'm Roman Catholic my family converted to Roman Catholicism when I was a teenager before that we were involved in sort of charismatic Pentecostalist Christianity so my parents spoke in tongues on weekends and so on I've always found that to be you know in in certain ways independent of sort of the deeper and obviously more important questions about whether Catholicism is actually true to be a kind of interesting advantage in my professional life as a journalist in part just because you know journalism is supposed to cover the widest possible range of American life and journalists tend to be a fairly secular population and so I have sort of you know unique interests and connections to parts of American culture that not all my colleagues have but also because it's sort of in certain ways let's me stand sometimes a little bit outside my own profession in ways that can be helpful for writing I think and I wonder I wonder if that's you know you're someone from an evangelical background operating in an environment that again I'm an outsider to it but I think most people would characterize it as fairly secular most of your peers at probably the high the high levels are probably come from somewhat different backgrounds than you do and I wonder if you've had a similar experience that there's something distinctive and advantageous about a unusual for your context faith background yeah well there are there are definitely all sorts of contexts where one has sort of a very different perspective very different perspective on things so I think I think when one sees things as an outsider you often you know there's sort of a way in which you see a consensus that exists where everyone simply is an agreement on things and you sort of you can sort of question that a little bit more or relativize it a little bit and sort of it's is this really the truth or is this just sort of a psychosocial phenomenon at work here and and there is certainly an aspect of of Silicon Valley and I think this maybe it's true in many many areas of innovation where people

you know they they position themselves as oh you know we're very innovative and we're very brilliant we're very original and very creative but you know every you know all the fashionable people wear the same black clothes and they they're all sort of and you have all this sort of lemming-like sheep-like ape-like behavior and so I do think that sort of outsider perspective is quite is quite critical and sort of and then it's always sort of granular how you how you'd instantiate that in different different contexts but there are yeah there certainly are many questions people don't ask and and there's sort of many times when there's a consensus that's just you know that's that one is somewhat skeptical it's generally you know sort of one of my rules of thumb is when everybody agrees on something it doesn't necessarily mean they're wrong but it almost always means that nobody's thought about it yeah yeah that's that's hugely important I think hugely true and it's certainly so in my side of the Atlantic that when the sudden cultural wave that's going along and you can tell because all you have to do is to say one thing which goes against it and suddenly you feel the the fury of the either the media or whatever a horror struck looks at a at a dinner party whereas if you're just going with the flow it's very easy and I mean I think one of the problems to enlarge is just for a second is the decline of reason that we don't think properly I was talking last night with a with an atheist philosopher we were talking about the decline of reason and so on we've forgotten how to do discourse how to do reason discourse how to line up arguments and actually work from premises to conclusions and think through issues so much is done in knee jerk reactions and maybe that's necessarily a complex culture but I mean in in the world of Silicon Valley somebody has to be doing the very fine tuned sharp edged stuff otherwise the machines aren't going to work you know the bits aren't going to do what they're supposed to do it's always a very valuable discipline to do that and not to assume other people have done it for you and it is and certainly it's always a shortcut to assume other people have done it so we you know don't need to think through this issue or that that topic but I think if I had to sort of leave anything to encourage the audience it would be you know even though this is we live in a world of specialists where you're always supposed to you know something about one narrow area everything else you sort of go along with what other people think it's too takes too much effort to think things through and and actually going through that exercise is really valuable yeah i would agree in as concrete terms as possible what is the future you most want to see and what is necessary to enact that um well i i uh let's see it's uh again i i sort of would challenge the premise of the question i don't i don't think you can um i don't i don't think that uh let me try to give a non-concrete answer to it so i would i would like to see a world in which people think about the future more and which the future is an idea that has has some power against the present and so i think you know i think sort of if there's this consensus that's that's overpowering if we say that the only thing that exists is the present um you know all power is in the present the present is actual power the future is potential power and so if you say that uh there is no future that you can um contrast against the present then then you end up in this extremely uh extremely static uh world and so i would i would like to see uh a world in which there is um a great deal more hope

in the future and in which the future has an idea um gains gain some more currency and then and then you can sort of instantiate this in many many different ways yeah i it seems to be that the concrete hope in the christian vision is a new heavens and a new earth which are part of a new reality which is like the present reality only much more so that is the beauty and power and astonishing um multi-facetedness of creation as we know it it will just be enhanced it may amazingly in a way which the moment we've only got picture language for you know we don't there's no good language other than pictures to point to it and people get stuck on the pictures about streets paved with gold and so on these are these are pictures they're ways of saying it's like what we have at the moment only much more so um but since that remains an ideal which we can't bring about by our own efforts it's going to be if it's going to happen it's going to be god's work there are nevertheless in this back to something i said before there are nevertheless all sorts of things we can do to anticipate in the present for instance in the vision at the end of the bible it says god will wipe away all tears from all eyes now one of the most remarkable things that we can all do is actually bring comfort and healing and help to people in the present we will i don't think we will ever cure death in the present age i don't think we will ever prevent all diseases i don't think we will ever stop um accidents etc in the present but the bringing of comfort of healing of hope in the present i think is a real sign of what god intends to do ultimately in the future and that's why for me there is this interim this intermediate period which we're living in at the moment which so many western christians have screened right out and think that the only thing that matters is uh you either get converted or you come to faith or whatever and then one day you go to heaven i'm really very interested in what lies in between and the classic christian things to do which are signs of hope are particularly helping the poor the poorest of the poor particularly medicine particularly education those are things the church has always done from the very beginning and they're the classic things what's happened now is that the state certainly my country takes them over and says the church doesn't belong here anymore actually christians have done a done a better job often not always than than many on this so i would see the concrete signs of hope as the instantiation of communities which out of a a cheerful life of worship of the true god are actually making that sort of a difference in their communities and this isn't the utopia but it is a signpost saying one day there will be a future like this because of jesus and who he was and we can be part of it here and now what is the question that you would want to ask each other that we haven't asked yet or that the moderator has conspicuously failed one thing which we talked about before out of this room which i'm i'm really interested in is how peter sees um the whole role of the innovator the entrepreneur in our culture not just as isn't this fun we can do this and we can create new industries and we can make lots of money etc but in terms of what it means to be human is it part of the essential human condition that some of us at least should be radical thinkers out of the box innovators entrepreneurs or is this just something which we happen to be able to do in modern america which most generations before and most people on the planet today can't do because they haven't got the word with all or whatever is it just sort of accident that we

can do it or is it an essential part of being human? well i um uh again to sort of uh key off the anti-Aristotelian prime mover uh description i i don't think it's an inerand like vision of someone who just uh where everything just comes you know and i think i think what is very different about um i think there are there are certainly our professions that are very individualistic i think uh most of these successful technology ventures there there is sort of a group of people that work work together very effectively and so they are sort of these somewhat charismatic there's a charismatic aspect to it uh this is probably sort of a very unfashionable category to use but if you said what is um you know what's the political category you would use describe a founder and i think you know most founders um there's sort of like a king you know it's not it's obviously not a democracy it's not a republic um it's sort of like a king but it's kind of a weak king it was very you know it's very charismatic people believe that they sort of know what they're doing um and then eventually companies grow up and they sort of become sclerotic bureaucracies over time and so these are the you have the mock this um and i think um you know i do think there is this sort of if you had the you know the you have to be sort of careful what christian parallels to draw but you know there is sort of a sense in which you know christ was a king and um and maybe you know he shows us something about kingship as being fundamentally quite weak not not strong we have this image of kings as being strong but it's you know it's very dangerous things you know uh you need these charismatic figures but things can sort of turn against them at uh at any moment and and certainly this is the uh this is the thing that's very dangerous about these businesses because uh very often you know things of the sort uh the sort do go wrong um when the people come back they are they're very very powerful so the second coming of steve jobs was uh uh it was incredibly powerful so you know what i what i guess i guess the question you know the question that you sort of touched on a little bit that i i'd i'd ask you is uh is is there is you know is there a specific political conception that flows out of christianity so is it you know is it sort of the um is it the british welfare state is it uh you know i mean there's certainly are very different versions that people would articulate over time and do you do you have a thought on how specific that is um yeah it's very interesting because in today's world we assume with modern western democracy that what really matters is that somebody gets voted for and therefore they have a mandate to do what they think they should do in the early years of christianity when there was no question about democracy in the ancient roman world at least not as far as most people concerned roman citizens would vote but most of the christians didn't have that kind of power at all um they didn't mind very much how people got into power they did mind very much what people did once they were in power and that goes back to ancient greece as well um where you know rulers would regularly be put on trial after their term of office almost as a routine thing wouldn't that be nice um so that we could just um hold them to account now here's the thing the jewish ancient jewish and early christian vision was never we should take power and then we will do x y and z it was rather uh our task as worshipers of the true god is to hold up a mirror to those in power to speak the truth to those in power to hold them to account now what's happened in our modern world is

that the media has taken over that role sometimes quite explicitly um usurping the church out of the way to say we are the ones who hold the politicians to account because they don't seem to be very good at holding one another to account and okay i'd rather somebody who's doing it than nobody but that's actually um part of the central core task of the church in the new testament is to speak the truth to power you can see jesus doing it to ponchus pilot at the end of jon's gospel um and so the political vision isn't so much here's a set of policies which should be put in place it's rather here's a set of things which are things we should hold governments to account over and one of them is to do with the poor and another is to do with health so that this doesn't necessarily mean that the british welfare state is the best of all possible welfare states it certainly isn't but that something like a total community care for the poor and care for those in need i think is absolutely basic very interesting in the new testament already in one of the earliest documents of the christian church and the lesser to the thessalonians written within 25 years of jesus death paul is having to warn people in church leadership about the danger of freeloaders of people who realize that they can get a free lunch out of the church so they won't need to work anymore because the church is a sort of welfare system and paul says no it's got to be clear um no work no food um that you've got to um so the church in other words the church from the very beginning was a kind of what we would call a welfare system particularly for the poor and and the and the very needy um to the extent that already in the first generation that was in danger of being abused people often say today that welfare systems are bad because they can be abused and the answer is yes they can and you have to be savvy about making sure it doesn't happen but so that i i'm not saying that the british system is right it's got a lot of creaky bits and silly bits and bits that don't work or work in the wrong way but i am saying that part of what the church ought to be reminding governments to do constantly is to care about those who have no means of caring for themselves but isn't there let me just raise the possibility because just a few moments ago you've talked about the problem of having the state essentially say okay christians you had a nice run with your hospitals and charities will take it from here right and isn't there it seems to me as an american looking at the european experience it seems to me that there's a danger that what happens is that the church essentially sort of heaves a sigh of relief and says well we don't have to run the hospitals anymore that's great we can just sort of support the government politically when it when it does that and sort of say you know yes we're we're in favor of the welfare state and so on but that there's a sort of on the one hand an offloading of christian responsibility to the state and then on the other hand the sort of state takeovers that sort of push christian activism in effect to the margins yeah that's a real problem in my country we are we pride ourselves i mean field leaders in the hospice movement that's the the care of those of the immediately about to die people um that the state doesn't really want to get involved in that the church is still doing that remarkably successfully and that's actually one of the best arguments against the kind of secular push to euthanasia and so on so the church is still involved in some ways um and uh but but it it isn't quite an either all quite as easy and either all and i think many of

us in the uk and perhaps in the rest of europe i'm not sure that's not a conversation i've had are aware that maybe things have been in danger of going too far and that but but of course in education one of the things that many americans don't know is that a lot of our state-run schools in the uk are actually church schools um in america i think it's completely they're completely separate and so we do still have quite a lot of interplay and that is a cause of political and social friction but it's also the fact that most parents in the uk given the chance would rather have their children go to a church school even if they themselves aren't practicing christians and that's a paradox which we rather relish and i'm sorry that in the states you don't have the chance to relish it because you just don't do it that way but occasionally we can the chance comes up i i think i want to hold out a vision of an integrated world a heaven and earth world because our world is messy the integration will be messy but because god is good the integration is ultimately promised and can be anticipated in the present 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