

[Transcript] The Prof G Pod with Scott Galloway / No Mercy / No Malice: Losing My Religion

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play key roles in society, practical and spiritual.
Humans are meaning makers.
We're wired to imbue our actions with purpose.
We will have gods,
even if forced to make them of mortals or machines.
Religion is successful because it works.
Participation in religious services
is correlated with a reduction in mortality
by a third, depression by 25%,
and suicide rates by three to six times.
Religion motivated the construction of cathedrals,
pyramids, and temples
that, set against space travel and pocket computers,
still invoke awe.
Here in the secularizing U.S.,
religious people are three times as likely
to be active in community organizations
and twice as likely to participate in local sports leagues.
There are also 44% more likely to vote
and 44% more likely to describe themselves as very happy.
Much of religious experience has been insular,
hostile to change,
riven with corruption and abuse of power.
The previous sentence may be
the mother of all understatements.
The land of the free was born of a violent theocracy,
contrary to what you likely learned in grade school,
the earliest English settlers wasted little time
before exiling anyone who differed
on the fine points of biblical interpretation.
Eight of the original 13 colonies
had official state churches and persecuted heresy.
From 1300 to 1600,
European towns executed tens of thousands of their own people,
mostly women, on accusations of witchcraft,
over 3,000 in my ancestral Scotland.
And in the New World,
the single village of Salem executed 20 people
out of a population of just 1,400.
The ratio of positive to negative
is legitimate cause for debate,
but there's no denying religion matters.
Religion, like old actors, doesn't die.

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It's just fading away.
Churches are still operating
and people still line up to see El Papa,
but religious observance, practice, belief is down,
almost everywhere,
like ad-supported cable down.
Even where it persists,
Christianity coexists with other religions
and other passions.
In America, 75% of us believe religion
is losing influence.
We're correct.
Napoleon said religion is the only thing
that keeps the poor from murdering the rich.
As our nation prints more wealth and poverty,
and as we register a decline
in reasons to congregate, church, work, the mall,
we are witnessing a palpable increase in hostility
among Americans toward other Americans.
Exceptions distort our view of the long-term trend.
Compared to 40% of Americans generally,
59% of black Americans say religion
is very important to them.
In part, this is a legacy of the old churches
and church leaders in the civil rights movement.
But their fidelity is waning.
28% of Gen Z black people are religiously unaffiliated,
compared with just 11% of baby boomers.
Membership in the Mormon church,
once a growth engine, has also stalled.
A broad religious nationalism,
which may be more the latter than the former,
is driving political change in India,
and it remains a headline issue in the Middle East.
But even Saudi Arabia is creeping toward secularization.
Much of the rest of the world is already there.
In China, only 10% of people claim affiliation
with a religion, and only half of them attend services.
Only 11% of Western Europeans say
religion is very important in their lives,
and only 22% attend services regularly.
It's worth taking a moment to consider
the monumental nature of this shift.

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Our species hasn't known a time
when religion played such a small role in our lives.
Being religious is our natural state,
and nature abhors a vacuum.
We are finding substitutes in two realms,
the spiritual and the corporeal.
Humans need meaning.
We crave stories and reasons
and higher explanations for things.
We want someone or something
to tell us what it all means.
I believe this was a significant factor
behind the rise of Google.
Now, even more so, it's powering our fascination with AI.
Google and chat GPT are omnipresent,
all-knowing, and soon, all-powerful.
Our gods can drive cars and use credit cards,
sentient yet immortal, everywhere and nowhere.
Feels like a god worthy of worship, no?

A. No.

If we're not worshiping the tech itself,
we are treating its masters as high priests.
No group cements this more than the Elon Stan army.
Their idol is a brilliant entrepreneur,
a world-changing innovator,
and a jubating absent father of eleven or twelve.
The refusal to hold musk to the same standards
we try to live up to
defines the distinction between admiration and worship.
Tech is not our only new god, however.
Our need to follow is easily transferred from the pulpit to the stump.
I didn't plan to write about politics this week,
but it's inescapable.
Donald Trump looms over the American landscape
more myth than man,
worshipped as a savior persecuted by the sinners of the left.
There's ideological and demographic overlap
between Trump's followers and fundamentalist religion.
Christian nationalist identity is highly correlated
with political extremism and violence,
and was bound up in the events of January 6.
Equally concerning,
85% of adherents believe, or mostly believe,

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that God has called Christians to exercise dominion over all areas of American society.
Spoiler alert, they haven't succeeded.
Religion is not merely a spiritual sucker.
Religious institutions have long provided the foundation and framework of society.
Their declining relevance leaves a vacuum of more immediate and practical concern than our need for meaning.
Catholic schools enroll 1.7 million American kids.
Around 15% of parents rely on faith-based childcare.
More than half of food pantries, which people rely on heavily during economic downturns, are church-affiliated.
For decades, one of the major fault lines in American politics has been the social safety net. I, and half the country, believe the government's role is to provide it. The other half hates the notion.
It's no coincidence that my half is largely, not entirely, made up of people whose religious connection is scant.
Elong de Baton has a book about this, Religion for Atheists, in which he goes through the practical things religious institutions have provided in the past.
In our increasingly atomized society, the physical coming together of weekly church attendance is sorely missed.
Most religions provide moral guidelines that, at their heart, are simple and useful.
Don't steal, be good to your parents.
Render aid to the needy.
My father has been married and divorced four times, so my religious indoctrination has been more varied than consistent.
When I was at my dad's, I'd go with Linda, number three, to a Unitarian church.
At my mom's, we'd go intermittently to temple.
Statistics and trends only tell us so much.
The role of religion is personal.
While inconsistent, the impact of religion on my development was real.

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I remember the rabbi at Temple, Isaiah,
delivering a Dvar Torah that spanned from the conflict
in the Middle East to the role of friendship.
Afterward, over a brisket dip at Junior's Deli,
my mom and I would discuss the sermon,
and I remember thinking,
this is fun, and I'm good at it.
I asked my mom what rabbis did and how much money they made.
They educate and comfort people, and not much.
However, they command a great deal of respect.
In high school, my closest friend was Mormon.
He was part of a two-parent family who loved sports,
laughed a lot, and treated me well.
As a latchkey kid raised by a working single mother,
I was at the Jarvis household almost every day.
I went to church events, played on their sports teams,
and even went to services a few times.
I never felt any pressure to convert, sign up, etc.
My observation from spending several years in and around
Mormons and their church, the Mormon faith is strange,
and Mormons are wonderful.
My path to atheism has been downhill.
I've always been skeptical and judgmental
and consider myself a scientist.
This made it easier to dismiss believers as idiots.
As I get older, I realize my belief that all this was nothing
and then it exploded sounded no less batshit crazy
than the parables about loaves and fishes.
Regardless, my atheism is a source of strength
as it motivates me to envision my death,
the end of the road versus an off-ramp.
Imagining my death has made me less afraid of it
and more bold in my behavior preceding the event, i.e., now.
I've been more bold in my career,
but also in my emotions.
Risking embarrassment, I frequently tell people I love them
because why wouldn't I?
Those who might laugh like me face the same destination soon.
I'd also like to think that the absence of preordained truths
fosters a relentless pursuit of knowledge,
a deeper appreciation for the wonders of the universe,
and a profound respect for the inherent value
of all living beings.

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It's clear to me that every being will register joy and tragedy, and the ratio is 90% a function of when and where you're born and the chemistry you inherit.

Seneca believed religion was regarded by the poor as true, the wise as false, and the powerful as useful.

As someone who has been all of those things, however, I believe the absence of religion and opportunities to congregate with strangers leaves a void.

I'm getting older, wanting to serve in the agency of others to be part of something bigger and register comfort.

I'm left wanting.

I'm losing my religion.

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