



The Golden Age of Humanity? We're Living in It.



"EVERY GENERATION BELIEVES THAT IT STANDS AMID RUINS OF A BETTER ERA." (ALL PAINTINGS BY HIERONYMUS BOSCH VIA GETTY IMAGES)

Modernity is more meaningful and moral than medieval Christendom.

By Steven
Pinker and
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Tupy

11.24.25 Culture and
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Would we be better off living in the Middle Ages?

Astonishingly, influential voices on the American intellectual right now seem to think so. Rather than affirming the Enlightenment ideals that inspired this country's founding—reason, rights, markets, liberal democracy, and church-state separation—they are longing for, of all things, rule from the throne and altar.

Last month at Yale, the influential political blogger Curtis Yarvin, in a debate against *Free Press* contributor Jed Rubenfeld, argued that America ought to “[end the democratic experiment](#)”—and establish a monarchy. Yarvin has noted that Donald Trump is “[biologically suited](#)” to be America's monarch. The ideas may sound extreme, but they have been influential. J.D. Vance describes Yarvin as “[a friend](#),” and has cited his work. And Yarvin is part of a family of movements, known as the Dark Enlightenment, Techno-authoritarianism, and Neo-Reaction (NRx)—that reject the entire family of enlightenment values.

Meanwhile, theocracy is making a comeback, in movements known as theoconservatism, Christian Nationalism, and National Conservatism. The “National Conservatism Statement of Principles,” for example, [declares that](#) “where a Christian majority exists, public life should be rooted in Christianity and its moral vision, which should be honored by

the state and other institutions both public and private.” The list of signatories is a lookbook of influential conservatives, including Charlie Kirk, Peter Thiel, and Trump administration insiders Michael Anton and Russell Vought—as well as our fellow *Free Press* contributors Christopher Rufo and Rod Dreher.

The latter, a friend of the vice president, [has said elsewhere](#) that the West will not “recover until and unless we become re-enchanted and seek a form of Christianity, and indeed of Judaism, that is more mystical, that valorizes this direct perception of the Holy Spirit, of holiness, and of transcendence.”

These ideas are not idle philosophical ruminations. As they infiltrate the brain trust of the MAGA movement, they may serve to justify Donald Trump’s vandalism of Enlightenment innovations such as science, free trade, international institutions, and checks on executive power that have allowed this nation to flourish since the day it was born.

Of course, humanity has already tried monarchy and theocracy—during the Middle Ages—and sure enough, some of the new reactionaries are saying that those times were not so bad after all. Dreher [writes admiringly](#): “In the mind of medieval Christendom, the spirit world and the material world penetrated each other. . . . Men construed reality in a way that empowered them to harmonize everything conceptually and find meaning amid the chaos.”

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[How the West Lost Its Soul](#)

Other influential conservatives go further in justifying medieval hierarchies. On his eponymous show, Tucker Carlson [recently declared](#): “Feudalism is so much better than what we have now. Because at least in feudalism, the leader is vested in the prosperity of the people he rules.”

And *The Free Press* [recently showcased](#) a full-strength expression of pre-Enlightenment nostalgia in an essay by Paul Kingsnorth called “How the West Lost Its Soul” (an excerpt of his book *Against the Machine*).

According to Kingsnorth, Western civilization has lost the sacred story that sustained it for 1,500 years: Christianity. The story begins with the Garden of Eden, where humanity chose knowledge over communion with God, which led to exile and suffering, though with a path to salvation through belief in a grisly human sacrifice and a miraculous resurrection. For centuries, “the mythic vision of medieval Christendom” offered people meaning and morality, writes Kingsnorth. But starting with the Enlightenment, and accelerating in the 1960s, it gave way to a “partial, empty, and over-rational humanism,” leaving societies spiritually adrift. With sustaining myths gone and no shared higher purpose, Westerners now live amid “ruins.”

The *Free Press* introduction captures the contrast starkly: “Conventional wisdom insists that technology has made life better,” whereas the abandonment of the religious story has left us with “a complete lack of meaning.”

Meaning comes from reason and well-being, not scripture and salvation; from governance with the consent of the governed, not rule by kings and clergymen.

It's said that the best explanation for the good old days is a bad memory, and the historical amnesia of the romanticizers of medieval Christendom is near-complete. Among the blessings of modernity is an Everest of data about life in the past, painstakingly collected by economic historians from original sources over many decades. This quantitative scholarship circumvents fruitless back-and-forth about whether the Dark Ages were really all that dark: We can go to the numbers.

In this essay we will show how the reaction against modernity has it backward. Before the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, and the resulting "Great Enrichment," life in the West was characterized for most people not by meaning and morality but by ignorance, cruelty, and squalor. Today we are blessed not just with prosperity and its underappreciated gifts, but with a robust moral mission—one that is grounded in our best understanding of reality, and the indisputable goal of reducing suffering and improving flourishing. Meaning comes from reason and well-being, not scripture and salvation; from governance with the consent of the governed, not rule by kings and clergymen.



Knowledge Is More Meaningful Than Ignorance and Superstition

The first problem with basing morality on the "founding religious story that has sustained us for 1,500 years" is that it is just that, a story. Even many Christians do not take it literally. The historical and scientific evidence is unequivocal: There was no divine creation in six days, no Garden of Eden, no Adam and Eve, no talking snake, no forbidden fruit, no commandments handed down on Mount Sinai, no virgin birth, no resurrection, no divine providence, no miracles, no answered prayers, and no eternal life for the faithful.

Nor does accepting these (or any) parochial myths offer a sound basis for morality. Whereas objective knowledge is available to anyone who is curious to learn it, arbitrary dogmas divide the true believers from the infidels and heretics, singling them out as amoral at best and dangerous at worst.

Our current knowledge of reality, justified by a trail of reason and evidence that any rational person can follow, is vastly more uplifting than any biblical tale about magic and miracles. It includes the deep history of our universe, planet, life form, species, and civilization; a record of the stupendous diversity of galaxies, planets, species, and cultures; and the hidden workings of the physical world, including our bodies and brains and the causes of sickness and suffering. Would anyone really trade this wonderland of knowledge for a demon-haunted world of humors, miasmas, alchemy, and astrology?

This knowledge, moreover, has profound moral implications. Foremost is the realization that the universe is governed by laws that are indifferent to our well-being. The implication is that we can't look to a heavenly father for earthly salvation. If we want to improve human well-being, we have to figure out how to do it ourselves.



"IT'S SAID THAT THE BEST EXPLANATION FOR THE GOOD OLD DAYS IS A BAD MEMORY."

Fortunately, *Homo sapiens* evolved with rudimentary faculties for cognitive problem-solving and empathy for other living things. Over the course of its history, and particularly during the Enlightenment, our species developed institutions and norms that magnified their scope. Science overcame our cognitive biases to deliver ever-deepening understandings of the world. The free exchange of ideas, goods, and people expanded our circle of sympathy from clan and tribe to all of humanity.

Our moral purpose, then, is to use knowledge and sympathy to reduce suffering and enhance flourishing: health, freedom, peace, knowledge, beauty, social connection.

Yet the popular canard among theoconservatives is that religion is the only conceivable source of morality, and so a secular society must be mired in selfishness, relativism, and nihilism. Kingsnorth, for example, favorably cites the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre's diagnosis that the Enlightenment left us with a morality that, "loosed from theology," consists of "nothing more than [an] individual's personal judgment."

The dismissal is breathtaking.

The Enlightenment project of grounding morality in reason and well-being left us with a coherent fabric of arguments against the brutality and injustice that had been ubiquitous in human history. These arguments became the foundation of civilized society.

A partial list: Kant's categorical imperative and his practical prescriptions for peace. The American Founders' analyses of tyranny, democracy, and fundamental rights. Bentham's cases against cruelty to animals and the persecution of homosexuals. Astell's brief against the oppression of women. Voltaire's arguments against religious persecution.

Montesquieu's case against slavery. Beccaria's arguments against judicial torture. Rousseau's case against harsh treatment of children.

In contrast to the Enlightenment's exaltation of universal well-being, the morality of holy scriptures was dubious at best.

Crucially, these moral conclusions were based on *reasons*. As Plato pointed out 2,300 years ago, morality *can't* be grounded in divine edicts. If a commandment itself has no moral justification, why should we obey it? If it does, why not just appeal to the justification itself?

Such justification is not hard to find. All of us claim a basic right to our own well-being. If we were not alive, healthy, nourished, educated, and embedded in a community, we could not deliberate about morality (or anything else) in the first place. And because we *are* embedded in a community, where people can affect each other's well-being, we can't stop at this basic claim. None of us can coherently demand these conditions for ourselves without granting them to others. I can't say "I'm allowed to hurt you, but you're not allowed to hurt me, because I'm me and you're not," and expect to be taken seriously.

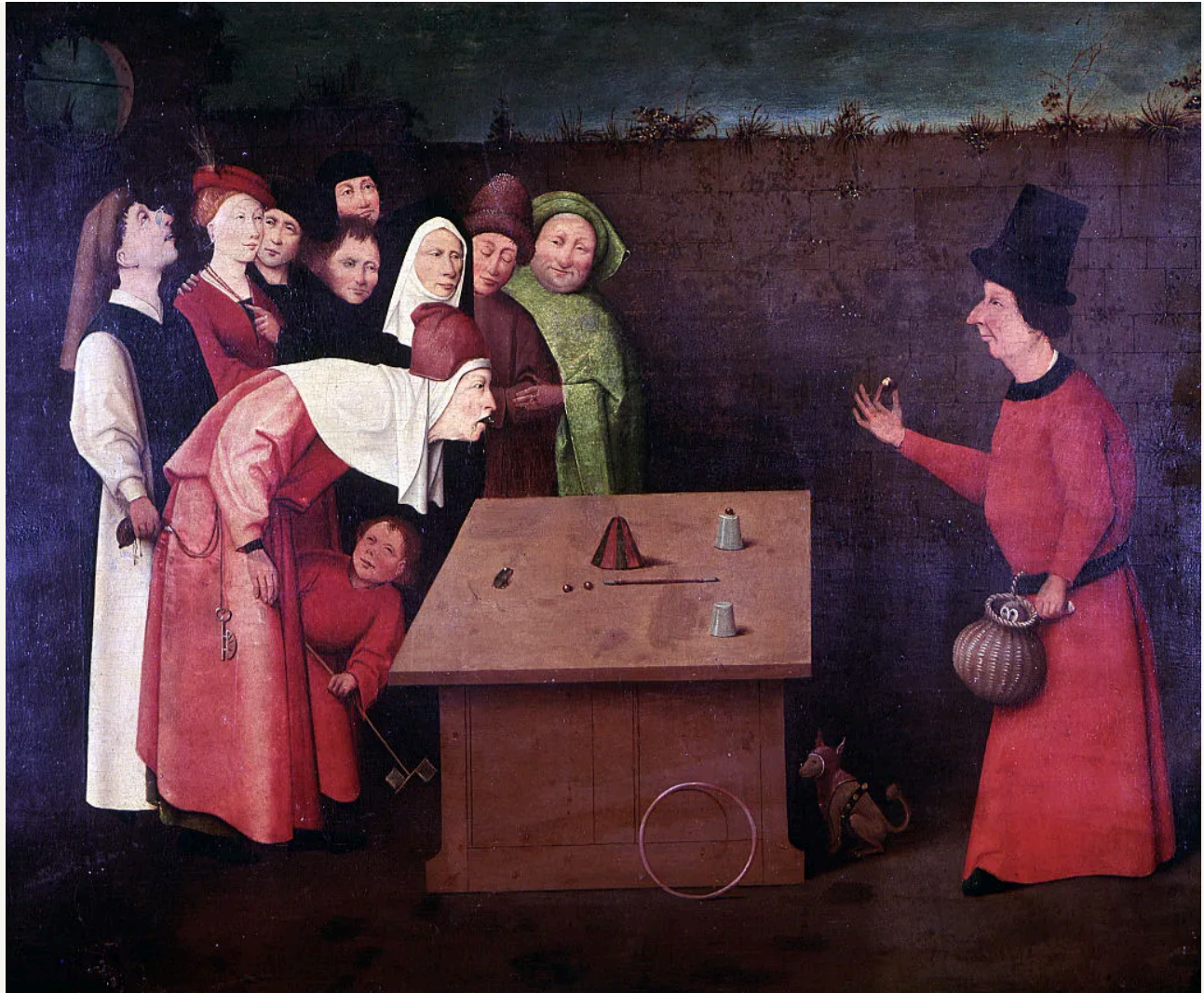
Morality, then, follows from basic self-interest combined with sociality and impartiality. It may be found in versions of the Golden Rule (treat others as you wish to be treated), which have been independently discovered by many religious and secular moral traditions. And it is captured in the philosopher Spinoza's dictum: "Those who are governed by reason desire nothing for themselves which they do not also desire for the rest of humankind."



Premodern Christendom Was Not Moral, but Barbaric

In contrast to the Enlightenment's exaltation of universal well-being, the morality of holy scriptures was dubious at best. The God of the Old Testament prescribed the death penalty for blasphemy, idolatry, homosexuality, adultery, disobedience, and working on the Sabbath, while finding nothing particularly wrong with slavery, rape, torture, mutilation, and genocide. Indeed, he commanded the Israelites to commit all of these against their enemies.

Whatever humane advances we might attribute to Jesus, his followers did not adopt them for an awfully long time. For some 1,400 years that separated Constantine's embrace of Christianity in the early 4th century to the rise of the Enlightenment in the 18th, most Christians remained untroubled by slavery, the persecution of heretics, and brutal colonial conquest.



"HUMANITY WILL ALWAYS KNOW SUFFERING. OUR BODIES ARE FRAGILE AND MORTAL. OUR IGNORANCE WILL ALWAYS OUTSTRIP OUR KNOWLEDGE. OUR MORAL FLAWS PRECLUDE PERFECT HARMONY."

The blind spots of premodern Christian morality are not incidental. A moral commitment to the salvation of immaterial souls may sound uplifting, but it is not the same as a moral commitment to the well-being of actual humans. It rationalizes earthly suffering, which is, in this view, an infinitesimal fraction of one's existence. And it incentivizes crusaders, inquisitors, and holy warriors, who are sparing people from an eternity in hell while reserving for themselves an eternity in paradise.

Nor is this just a theoretical possibility. The quantitative historian Matthew White estimates that 47 million people have been killed over religious belief. The Crusades in the Holy Land, for instance, killed 3

million; the Albigensian Crusade, a million; the Huguenot Wars, 2–4 million; and the Thirty Years' War, triggered by the Protestant Reformation, 7.5 million.

Barbarism was also carried out at smaller scales. Before the Enlightenment, the standard judicial method for fact-finding and punishment was torture. Hundreds of nonlethal crimes were punishable by death. The executions, carried out as public entertainment, were engineered to be as protracted and painful as possible, including breaking on the wheel, burning at the stake, impalement, dismemberment, and disembowelment.

Yet these orgies of sadism did not deter citizens from killing each other in large numbers. Homicide rates in 14th-century European countries averaged around 40 per 100,000 per year. Today the rates are closer to 1 per 100,000.



Health and Prosperity Are More Meaningful Than Starvation and Squalor

Westerners have been complaining about how wealth causes moral decline for millennia. Few of the complainants have reflected on how it was wealth that gave them the luxury to complain about that wealth. Their contemporaries who died in childbirth, or whose lives were wracked with hunger, pain, and disease, were not as lucky. The vanquishing of early death, propelled not by prayer but knowledge, may be humanity's greatest moral triumph.

Some numbers can shake us out of this spoiled complacency. (For sources, see our respective books [*Ten Global Trends Every Smart Person Should Know*](#) and [*Enlightenment Now*](#).) In 1800, the European life

expectancy was 33 years; today, it is 79 years—which means that we have been granted not just extra life, but *an* extra life. Much of that gift came from leaps in prosperity that spared the lives of children. Before the turn of the 20th century, a third to a half of European children perished before their 5th birthday. Today that fate befalls three-tenths of one percent. Even the poorest countries today lose a fraction of the children that Europe did until recently. If being spared the agony of losing a child is not “meaningful,” what is?

Children who survived often faced orphanhood, hunger, parasites, workhouses, and beatings. Famines, which could kill a quarter of the population, recurred around once a decade. Today, starvation in much of the world has given way to obesity. It is easy to condemn gluttony, but searching for life’s meaning is surely easier on a full stomach.

One gift of modernity is that people are not burned alive for their beliefs but allowed to hold whichever ones they find meaningful.

Though today our environmental problems are not being solved quickly enough, prior to the Industrial Revolution people lived amid filth that is difficult to fathom today: coal smoke that turned mouths black; muddy streets saturated with excrement and offal; open pits with decomposing bodies stacked high. In rural areas, people slept with their filthy and infected livestock. Malaria, tuberculosis, smallpox, and cholera were ever-present. Cures, including bloodletting, amputation without anesthesia, and purging from every orifice, were worse than the disease.



“THE VANQUISHING OF EARLY DEATH, PROPELLED NOT BY PRAYER BUT KNOWLEDGE, MAY BE HUMANITY’S GREATEST MORAL TRIUMPH.”

Human ingenuity, largely in the form of vaccines and sanitation, has decimated ancient scourges, including measles, malaria, polio, guinea worm, and rubella. Two diseases, smallpox and rinderpest, have been wiped off the face of the earth.

This secular miracle is an example of how the conquest of pestilence and squalor has not been confined to our own culture, race, or nation. Whereas at the turn of the 19th century, 90 percent of humanity lived in what we call extreme poverty, today that figure is less than 9 percent—and one of the UN Millennium Development Goals is to reduce it within a decade to zero. In that regard we are morally more ambitious than Jesus, who said “The poor you will always have with you.”

The historian Arnold Toynbee, a chronicler of human civilizations over the millennia, once remarked that our era “will be chiefly remembered in future centuries not as an age of political conflicts or technical inventions, but as an age in which human society dared to think of the welfare of the whole human race as a practical objective.”

Complete lack of meaning, indeed!



Premodern Christian Morality Enables Antisemitism

The leaders of the new theoconservative movements write of a political order that prioritizes Christianity. R. R. Reno, for example, the editor of the Christian journal *First Things*—which aims to “advance a religiously informed public philosophy for the ordering of society”—has [stated that](#) “governance by wise Christians” “ought to be uncontroversial.” Many of our current officeholders agree. The Colorado GOP Representative Lauren Boebert has [asserted that](#) “the church is supposed to direct the government,” and J.D. Vance [has said that](#) “a properly rooted Christian moral order is such an important part of the future of our country.”

Actually, “governance by wise Christians,” taken literally, *is* a wee bit controversial: It would seem to contradict the [No Religious Test Clause](#) of the Constitution, and to bar non-Christians from holding political office. Reno mitigates this by writing that “religious liberty is a distinctly Christian ideal,” and by quoting a fellow defender of Christendom, “letting other people express their errors without reprisal is a distinctly Christian ideal”—a howler, which is not exactly reassuring, given the long and bloody history of Christian religious persecution. It at best presumes that failure to accept Christian belief should be treated as a tolerable “error.”

Statements like these technically shut out all non-Christians. But it is Jews, the largest and most influential religious minority in the United States, who are conspicuous by their exclusion. The concern is not academic. After decades in which modern American conservatism had divested itself of antisemitism, antipathy for Jewry on the American right is back.

The most conspicuous example is the recent warm welcome of Holocaust denier and Hitler fan Nick Fuentes on Tucker Carlson's show, notoriously defended by Heritage Foundation president Kevin Roberts. Others include the leaked text exchanges among Young Republicans filled with cold jokes about gas chambers and crematoria, and conspiracy theories that Jews start wildfires, killed Charlie Kirk, and are dragging the United States into a world war.

The New York Times featured a [long interview](#), titled "It's Deeper Than Nick Fuentes: Understanding the Right's Antisemitic Turn," with the founder of the "national conservative" movement, Yoram Hazony. Hazony conceded that antisemitism on the American right was "pretty bad" and that the previous summer had seen an "explosion of anti-Jewish messaging." The interviewer, Ross Douthat, confronted him with a reason that the problem may be deeper than Fuentes and other rogues and trolls. "I think there's a lot of people. . . who would look at your work, your arguments, the fact that you defend nationalism. . . and they would say: Of course he has ended up with antisemites in his coalition. How could anyone have ever been surprised about that?"

Antisemitism is baked into Christian nationalism for reasons that are clear enough. If there can be no morality without acceptance of the divinity and resurrection of Jesus, where does this leave Jews? The obvious answer is that they are a people who were offered a path to salvation but knowingly rejected it. The obvious result was centuries of expulsions, forced conversions, inquisitions, and pogroms.

Hazony explicitly draws the connection between theoconservatism and the new antisemitism: "Part of this rebellion [against older, more tolerant Republicans] is also theological. Much of the nationalist right, the NatCon right, is looking for a more authentic form of Christianity."

Hazony said: “All the classical questions of: Why is the Old Testament in the Christian Bible? What are we supposed to get out of it? Do the Jews have any role in history at all, or was it just supposed to have ended?—all of those questions are on the table.” It’s notable that Kingsnorth, in his essay railing against modernity, consistently cites the *Christian*, never the “Judeo-Christian,” tradition.

America was founded on the secular Enlightenment principles of equality, rights, flourishing, and democratic governance. It’s no coincidence that Jews thrived here. Nor can it be a coincidence that a movement founded on parochial Christian theocracy would be accompanied by a recrudescence of the world’s oldest hatred.



Modernity Is Not a Ruin

Humanity will always know suffering. Our bodies are fragile and mortal. Our ignorance will always outstrip our knowledge. Our moral flaws preclude perfect harmony. Our precious freedom includes the freedom of people to mess up their lives.

Yet the 21st century, with all its woes, is a better time to live than any time before. Extreme poverty, child and maternal mortality, illiteracy, tyranny, violent crime, and war deaths are lower than in any previous century. The wealth that theoconservatives find so corrosive funds the education and leisure that allow individuals to contemplate meaning, whether it be in work, family, community, nature, science, sport, art, or yes, religion. Another gift of modernity is that people are not burned alive for their beliefs but allowed to hold whichever ones they find meaningful.

It’s sometimes claimed that for all these opportunities, people today are suffering from a new “crisis of meaning.” Here again we shouldn’t

confuse nostalgia with fact. Illiterate medieval peasants left us with no records of how meaningful they thought their lives were. As the historian Eleanor Janega [points out](#), they themselves thought they were living in a time of decline, and “they were rebelling constantly.”

When we ask people about their lives today, their own judgments belie any narrative of decadence and decay. Global surveys find that it's the richest and freest countries, not the backward theocracies, in which people express the greatest satisfaction with their lives. Pathologies like homicide, incarceration, child mortality, educational mediocrity, and premature death are more common in the more religious countries and American states than the more secular ones.

People also express their conception of a better life by voting with their feet. In 2020, of the 281 million who moved to another country, 232 million of them sought a better life in high-income, increasingly secular countries, particularly in Europe and North America. Today's reactionaries can't have it both ways, asserting that the affluent secular West is a decadent ruin while fending off the millions of people from poorer and more religious countries who risk their lives to get in.

Every generation believes that it stands amid ruins of a better era. Nostalgics have fallen for this illusion, weaving a fantasy of civilizational decline from Edenic bliss. All available evidence shows the opposite. The early stages of our civilization were stained by ignorance, superstition, sickening cruelty, grinding poverty, and early death. From those rude beginnings, the heirs of the Enlightenment deployed knowledge and sympathy to claw increments of progress from an indifferent universe. Wise people should cherish these accomplishments, and ensure that we don't squander them based on figments about a make-believe golden age.





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Alan Gore Alan Gore 1h

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Kingsnorth and his fellows face a fundamental problem: very few modern Christians actually want to return their faith to the state it was in a thousand years ago: absolute rule of clergy in secular culture, laws invented by a priesthood and enforced by beheading, a Holy Inquisition with its own force of secret police.

So instead of waiting in vain for Christianity to voluntarily revert to its medieval state, why not move to a conservative part of the Middle East and join a faith that already practices these things? In some countries you even get to have slaves.

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JJ JJ 1h

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Some things I agree with: modernity has indeed enhanced health and quality of life overall and the separation of church and state with freedom of religion have served us well. There is also so much I disagree with it's hard to know where to begin. Here's one. They talk about how both infant mortality and barbarism have declined, but ignore the prevalence and societal acceptance of abortion—barbaric and morally depraved and cancels out the improvement in infant mortality. They do not acknowledge or address the modern problem of birth rates in wealthy countries falling below replacement level. They cite the number of people killed in religious wars of pre-modern times but don't point out the number of casualties from the highly secular wars and authoritarian regimes of the 20th century. I know that it's considered old-fashioned or overly restrictive to live a chaste life for religious reasons, but there are very good secular reasons to do so and more people like Louise Perry have pointed these out in their critique of the sexual revolution and hookup culture—both results of modern secularism. I would argue the breakdown of the nuclear family in recent decades is an indication of societal decline and reason alone hasn't led to a morality that works to preserve it. Antisemitism may be growing on the Right and it is problematic, but it is arguably more widespread and institutionalized on the secular and academic Left. Bottom line for me: reason alone doesn't lead to morality. Faith alone can lead to extremism or

intolerance. I think the right balance of both is the secret sauce. The Founders seemed to thread that needle well in their day and I hope we can follow that model. That is what they

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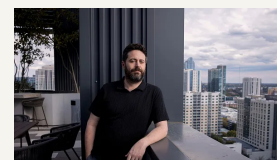
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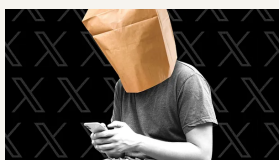


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