

TRANSCRIPT

An Undeceptions podcast.

John Dickson:

Hey, a quick note upfront to say thank you for your patience during our mid-season break and a big thank you to producer Kaley and director Mark for taking charge and plugging the gaps so beautifully. I think you'll agree that today we are back with a bang.

John Dickson:

In the future, at least as far as Star Trek is concerned, we'll all finally realize that God is an alien we haven't met yet.

Speaker 1:

You are the first to find me.

Speaker 2:

We sought only your infinite wisdom.

Speaker 1:

And how did you breach the barrier?

Speaker 2:

With a starship.

Speaker 1:

This starship, could it carry my wisdom beyond the barrier?

Speaker 2:

It could, yes.

Speaker 1:

That I shall make use of this starship?

Speaker 2:

It will be your chariot.

Speaker 3:

Excuse me.

Speaker 1:

It will carry my power to every corner of creation.

Speaker 3:

Excuse me. I'd just like to ask a question. What does God need with a starship?

Speaker 2:

He has his doubts.

Speaker 1:

You doubt me?

Speaker 3:

I seek proof.

Speaker 2:

Jim, you don't ask the almighty for his ID.

Speaker 1:

Then here is the proof you seek.

Speaker 1:

Do you doubt me?

Speaker 3:

I doubt any God who inflicts pain for his own pleasure.

John Dickson:

Captain Kirk in Star Trek: The Motion Picture feels no need for God. Society is just fine without that outmoded way of thinking and living. We humans have all we need to create an ethical, advanced society. Many in the real world, not just the sci-fi world, that director Mark lives in, would agree with captain Kirk. We can now put cultural relics like Christianity behind us and march toward a bright and Godless future. We all know Christianity thrives on ignorance, right? It sunk us into the dark ages and has resisted human rights and equality for most of its 1,500 year reign. What have the Christians ever done for us?

John Dickson:

Well, my guest today who says he's not a believing Christian reckons many of us have things completely back to front. It's Christianity, he insists, that gave us many of the secular humanitarian ideals we hold so dear. I'm John Dickson, and this is Undeceptions.

John Dickson:

Undeceptions is brought to you by Zondervan's new book, *Person of Interest* by J. Warner, Wallace. Every episode at Undeceptions, we explore some aspect of life, faith, history, culture, or ethics that's either much misunderstood or mostly forgotten. With the help of people who know what they're talking about, we'll be trying to undeceive ourselves and let the truth out.

Tom Holland:

The value of history for me is that it's fascinating. It's as simple as that. I'm interested in history. I've devoted my life to history. I write about history, simply and ultimately because I find it completely fascinating.

John Dickson:

That's Tom Holland. He's a best-selling English author who's done much to popularize ancient history in the past 20 years. In addition to working with the BBC to create a host of historical documentaries, Tom has written a shelf full of books on the Roman and Persian empires, medieval history, and the rise of Islam. He even published an English translation for Penguin Books of the ancient Greek historian, Herodotus.

John Dickson:

It was described by the *Times Literary Supplement* as, "Unquestionably the best English translation of Herodotus to have appeared in the past half century." That's quite a thing. His latest book is *Dominion: The Making of The Western Mind*. In it, he examines Christianity's pervasive influence on Western thought. The book followed a kind of epiphany he said he had, a realization that although he doesn't consciously believe in Christianity, his ethics and whole life outlook were thoroughly Christian.

John Dickson:

So I began by asking him to defend spending so much of his life, when he is not playing cricket, looking in the rear view mirror. Many are very wary of history. It can be just a tool of the culture wars on the one hand. It can just be completely biased and therefore useless on the other hand.

Tom Holland:

I guess that what I'm interested in is it helps to situate me personally and the world in which I exist in the broader context. It helps to explain where I come from, where my assumptions come from, where everything that makes the world what it is today comes from, but it also places it in a context that makes certainly me realize how contingent so much of what we might otherwise take for granted is.

Tom Holland:

I think that the appeal of history often is it's kind of akin to that of great science fiction because it can be both familiar and very strange, and it's often kind of the rubbing together of the familiar and the strange that I find most fascinating of all.

John Dickson:

Tom says it dawned on him a few years ago that the humanitarian ethic he's embraced for most of his adult life cannot have come from Greece or Rome, and was certainly present in Western culture centuries before the Renaissance or the Enlightenment. He came to believe that the ideas of love and equality for all can only have come from what he calls Jerusalem, the Jewish Christian culture that burst Westwood after Jesus Christ. Those ideas certainly didn't come from the ancient Greeks.

John Dickson:

Can you take us to say third century BC Athens? And can you tell us what are the key values of a well to do Greek, someone who's proud of the achievements of Alexander, who loves his Iliad and Odyssey, and who delights in say the emerging stoicism of his day? What are the key values for him?

Tom Holland:

Well, if you were an Athenian in the third century, BC, you were living with a consciousness that the great days of your city are gone. Athens at its greatest was a democracy and we might be tempted to equate that to what we mean today by democracy. It's not quite the same. It's a slight false friend. Demos is a kind of almost supernatural embodiment of the totality of what it is to be Athenian, spilling into the past, spilling into the future, and living under democracy, an Athenian could feel that he was autonomous.

Tom Holland:

And I say, he, because of course the Athenians had political power... It was Athenian men who had political power, but that didn't mean that women didn't either. Women were the conduits for the city to have communion with the gods, and that in a way was just as important as it was to sit in the assembly or to fight in battles. So it was the totality of men and women, the Athenians in a kind of communion. That goes with the age of Alexander because Athens and all the city states of Greece get absorbed into a vast series of empires and increasingly power moves from the famous city states of classical Greece, not just Athens, Sparta, Corinth, Argos, Thebes, and so on, and moves to great cities like Alexandria, that's the archetype.

Tom Holland:

And so rather like, I guess a kind of maybe a European in today's world, or indeed an Australian, a consciousness that you have a kind of local loyalty perhaps to your nation state, but also that inevitably you were part of something much faster, that in a sense, you're a citizen, not just of Athens, but of Cosmopolis. And therefore, there is a struggle as we see today to kind of reconcile the very local loyalties that you have with a sense that you belong to something much faster. And how do you cope with the kind of the risk of alienation that follows from that?

Tom Holland:

One solution is to turn inwards, to become almost antiquarian, to cultivate the traditions of the gods that are native to your city, reaching back centuries. The other is to embrace a future as a citizen of the world, and I guess that the philosophy that is most successful at doing that is as you suggest, stoicism, which is

founded in Athens because Athens, thanks to Socrates and Plato is the great capital of philosophy, but the Stoics are not by and large native Athenians. They're their people who go to Athens rather than the way that people from around the world might go to Harvard or Oxford.

John Dickson:

Stoicism was founded by a man named Zeno in the early third century, BC. According to Zeno, the path to eudemonia, the state of true happiness is found in mastering our passions with the intellect. There is a logos or rationality built into the universe, he reckoned, actually, lots of Greeks reckoned, and it's also in our brains, by embracing that logos, we can transcend the fleeting pains and ecstasies of life here and now, and we can live at one with the divine.

Tom Holland:

And the philosophy of the stoic is essentially that the divine is in everything. And therefore, the divine is in human beings and that spark of the divine is present in everyone, but there is also a kind of a slight chilliness to that. You essentially are divorcing yourself from the kind of any sense that the motor of what makes the universe and what makes humans functioning within the universe, that there's any kind of personal dimension to that. It's vast, it's anonymous.

John Dickson:

But the worldview dominating the Mediterranean world during the advent of Christianity is the ideology of the Roman Empire. So about AD 50, they saw themselves as the inheritors of all the great Greek treasures, but what was the particular Roman spin on the good life, on values?

Tom Holland:

Well, it's complex because the Romans also, rather like the Greeks in the age of Alexander have gone from being a people whose traditions and values are rooted in the specifics of a single city, i.e. Rome, to becoming the citizens of a vast empire. Now, the slight difference between the Athenians and the Romans is that the Athenians are subjects, whereas the Romans are the rulers. The Romans have conquered this world, but they are kind of oppressed by many of them, by a sense that they have to adjust their understanding of themselves, that it's kind of born from the antiquity, from the seed bed of their ancient past, and reconcile it with the vastness of the empire that they rule. Romans obviously have no problem with that. There's an incredible quality of unapologetic venality, kind of slight course ability to determination to make things work and to get rich on the back of it.

Tom Holland:

Rome is an incredibly militarist society. It's pretty unapologetic in extorting what it can, but there is also a kind of desire I guess, to kind of justify a Roman rule before the gods. And actually, stoicism, it becomes incredibly popular among the more intellectual of the Roman elite, because in a way, it seems to provide a kind of justification for Roman imperialism, because if the divine is in everything and therefore the divine is in Roman imperialism, therefore the Roman Empire is a manifestation of the divine, and what's not to like? But that's very much for intellectuals.

Tom Holland:

The way in which Romans propagate the idea that Roman rule, the Pax Romana is good for the world, as well as good for Romans is through the fastest growing cult of the first century AD, which is probably actually the fastest growing cult of all time when it's planted, which is the cult of Augustus Caesar. Augustus meaning someone who is basically midway between the human and the divine.

John Dickson:

A God man, no wonder the life of Octavian, otherwise known as Augustus has inspired novels, plays, and TV programs like HBO's award-winning series, Rome.

Speaker 4:

The gods smile on you, Octavian. You're a good soldier.

Speaker 5:

I'm a politician.

Speaker 4:

We don't need more politicians. It's not more speeches in the Senate that will change the world. Rome is dying.

John Dickson:

Octavian or Caesar Augustus revived Rome's prospects after the civil wars broke out, following the assassination of his adoptive father, Julius Caesar. The great myth was that Augustus had returned Rome back to the people. In truth, he became the undisputed ruler of the greatest empire the world had ever seen. He enlarged the empire's territory, restored the Roman Senate, reformed the tax system, developed a vast network of roads around the empire, and refurbished Rome itself to make it the pride of the world.

John Dickson:

Augustus established the Pax Romana, an enforced peace within the Roman territories.

Tom Holland:

He brings in a great age of peace. His father, Julius Caesar has become a god. So Augustus is Divi filius. He's a son of god. He is hailed as a Prince of Peace. The good news of the peace that he has brought the world is propagated across the empire, and when Augustus in due course dies, he ascends to heaven to sit at the right hand of his father. And this provides a kind of emotional communion, not just for Romans, but for people across the Mediterranean world, a sense that the Roman empire, if you like, is kind of working for them.

Tom Holland:

And we might be cynical about that, but it does seem to have offered quite a lot of people, including provincials, I guess a sense that they're not just subjects, they're not just conquered people, so that in a way, in a sense, they too might have a part to play in this great imperial project.

John Dickson:

Into this dominant way of viewing the world comes a new philosophy. In the middle of the first century, a small group emerges in Athens and in Rome, that challenges the way the Greeks and Romans see the world. Can you put your good Greco-Roman hat on and tell us what a Christian looks like to you, what their vision of the good life sounds like to the Roman ear?

Tom Holland:

It's a kind of nonsensical superstition. I am probably aware of it because particularly after The Great Fire of Rome, the Emperor Nero is keen to find scapegoats and he fixes on Christians, and he tortures them to death very publicly and horribly for the mass entertainment of the stunned people of Rome who've seen the center of their city burn down. But to be honest, people are not really very interested in the details of what these wackos believe.

Tom Holland:

Rome is a kind of a sync into which all kinds of Barbera superstitions come from across the empire and merge there. And so there's a constant process of anxiety on the part of the Roman elite to get these kind of deviance out of the city. And so Christians are seen as just a part of that, and people are simply not interested in learning about them really. The assumption is that they're practicing foul and disgusting rights, and essentially, you can make up what you want about them.

John Dickson:

Yes. And yet we have really interesting evidence from the dawn of the second century. I'm thinking of Pliny the Younger's letter to Trajan that Christians, according to Pliny are everywhere, in every class, in all the cities and the villages. Do you have a theory about what people found attractive in Christianity?

Tom Holland:

Okay. Well, I'll answer that by keeping my Roman hat on and say, well, suppose I investigated a little bit more attentively with a slightly more open mind. What is it that is immediately going to strike me as peculiar and distinctive about this superstition? And there's no question that what is immediately going to strike me is the paralysing weirdness of the idea that the man who is worshiped by Christians as a God, and the idea obviously of worshiping a man as a God is not peculiar because, just been talking about the cult of Augustus, this is taken for granted, but what is peculiar is the idea that the man worshiped by Christians as a God should have suffered the death of a slave, that he should have been tortured to death on a cross. Crucifixion is the paradigmatic fate of slaves and that is the most repellent idea imaginable to Romans. It's simply incomprehensible.

John Dickson:

So what proved so attractive about Christianity to the Greek and Roman mind?

Tom Holland:

Well, I think the appeal is that Christianity rather like stoicism, and rather like the sense of the divine that is articulated by the Jews, offers people in a universal empire like Rome's, a sense of an explanation for the kind of world that they're living in. And we've talked about the Stoics, but of course, the crucial influence is the Jewish one. And we might be tempted to talk of there being something called Judaism, and the Jewish God has a kind of obvious appeal to people who are not Jewish, but in a universal empire, because the Jews say that there is only this one God, and that this one God created every human being in his own image, man and woman. So that then gives to every human being an incredible dignity, unprecedented degree of dignity.

Tom Holland:

Now, there is obviously a problem because this Jewish God is the creator of the entire universe and every human being within it. He's also specifically the God of Israel. So therefore, there is a kind of... you can kind of perhaps become a Jew, but particularly if you're a man, if it involves certain sacrifices, and even if you're a woman, it involves all kinds of laws and restrictions on your behaviour that many people might not want to go through. And what Christianity effectively does is to give that God, the God who has created everyone and make him accessible, easily accessible to everyone who's not necessarily Jewish. And Paul articulates this very successfully.

John Dickson:

That's the apostle Paul, an educated Jew, a Roman citizen, and a Christian. He wrote to Christians in the cities of the Roman Empire, offering a new vision of what it means to be a human being.

Tom Holland:

And he kind of sums it up in the idea that there is no Jew or Greek, that there is no slave nor free, that there is no man or woman in Christ, and that Christ suffered on the cross so that everyone can be offered this new covenant, this new sense of a kind of treaty between humanity and this God. And there's something in it for the very wealthy, because it offers them the reassurance that if they offer charity to the poor, then they will win the favour of this God. But obviously, it also offers something to the poor themselves because it ascribes to them a dignity that is simply unprecedented.

John Dickson:

Hey, if you want more on this new dignity that Christianity offered, check out this season's religious freedom episode. Back to Tom.

Tom Holland:

And really, the only precedent really that anyway approaches it is the kind of Stoic idea that there's the spark of the divine in everyone. The Stoics have the idea that the divine is in the master and the slave as

well, but not in the way that the Christians do. And it's kind of telling that Paul, when he's reaching for the idea that the law of God, which previously had been given to Moses on Mount Sinai, written down on stone tablets, this law is now written on the heart and Paul, groping for a word to articulate what he means by this, reaches for the word *syneidesis*, which is the spark of the divine in the Stoic conception of the human, and it comes to mean what I guess we would today call conscience. The idea that you look into your heart and there, the law of God is written, and so much flows from that.

John Dickson:

I want to press you a bit on this issue because some will say, but Greeks and Romans had their benefaction, their ergotism, the Stoics had a universalism. So really, what is new in Christianity?

Tom Holland:

It offers the idea that as Christ said that, "The first shall be last and the last shall be first," that perhaps because Christ suffered the death of a slave, therefore in some strange way, the slave is closer to God than to the master. And the obligation then that is placed on those who are rich to care for the poor becomes a universal one.

Tom Holland:

So yeah, there are traditions within Greek cities and indeed Roman cities that you put up kind of flashy monuments to impress people. And in Rome itself, there is a kind of corn dole, which is again, establishes the Emperor Caesar as a kind of patron of the Roman plebs, but these are very kind of city specific. The Christian assumption that the rich have a duty of care to the poor is universal.

Tom Holland:

And so that means that across the Roman Empire, through the centuries that follow the death of Christ, essentially you start to get this kind of strange cuckoo in the nest, and that cuckoo is basically a kind of proto welfare state. You have the bishops who become highly significant figures within cities because they end up dispensing vast amounts of patronage. They're funding widows, they're funding orphans. They're helping out those who are in prison. They're helping those who fall sick. And this is seen as a kind of universal responsibility, and this is something very, very radical and new.

Tom Holland:

And perhaps the measure of it is the degree to which in pre-Christian Roman cities, the urban fabric consists of amphitheaters, arches, the kind of things that proclaim the glory of the person who is sponsoring them. After it, you start to get structures that simply had no place in the world of classical antiquity, hospitals, orphanages. The development of the hospital is absolutely an expression of the Christianisation of the empire.

Tom Holland:

Hospitals in the pre-Christian world existed in legionary camps and on the great kind of agricultural states where slaves were worked. And they existed basically to make sure that the soldiers and the slaves didn't

fall sick. So that those who were in command of them got their full monies worth. The idea that you would open up hospitals to care for those who are absolutely the bottom of society, who can't contribute is bizarre and novel.

Tom Holland:

And in this year of all years, something that we need to recognize as not a kind of natural state, the idea that we should all care for the sick and that those who are less likely to die should make sacrifices for those who are more likely to die is not in any way kind of human nature. It's culturally contingent and it's bred, certainly in the West, specifically of that Christian inheritance as it emerges in the fourth and fifth century in the fabric of the Roman Empire.

John Dickson:

At the heart of this Christian revolution in the Western world was the crucifixion of Jesus. More than some preachers I know, Tom reckons the cross changes everything.

Tom Holland:

The cross was seen as the worst death imaginable, and it's seen as the worst form of death not only because it's agonizingly painful, not only because it's protracted, but because it's public and therefore all the humiliations and agonies that you suffer as someone fixed to a cross is providing entertainment and sport to those who watch you. So as a bird pecks out your eyes, you will hear people laughing. The last thing you see will be people pointing at you, and that's why for the Romans, it's the paradigmatic fate for rebels against imperial authority, they were out in the provinces, and for slaves, and the idea that someone who suffers death on a cross is tainted both by basically being a rebel against Imperial power and by being of a servile character means that it's absolutely the last thing that you could imagine, associating someone who suffered that fate with divinity.

Tom Holland:

And I think that we have basically become immune to the shock of that. Shortly after I begun writing the book in 2016, I made a film about the Islamic state and went to Sinjar, a city in Northern Iraq where the Yazidis religious minority had been brutally targeted by Islamic state fighters. Lots of women taken into sexual slavery, lots of men massacred and crucified, and the Islamic state were basically behaving as a Roman legion would've done, enslaving and crucifying their enemies, and to stand in the rubble of this shattered city and know that people had been crucified and suffered death there, and worse, the people who'd done it were kind of a couple of miles away across flat and open terrain.

Tom Holland:

So very, very near and that they had no comprehension of what the cross means. And I think that in the modern West, even if you are not a Christian, even if you never thought about Christianity, you do have the vague sense that in a sense that the person who's tortured is privileged over the torturer, and the person who suffers in some ways is greater than the person who inflicts suffering. And I realize standing

there that, that is pretty much entirely down to the role that the crucifixion has played over the course of the centuries and the millennia in what becomes Christian civilization.

Tom Holland:

I think that it absolutely stands at the heart of it, and basically that is why the cross fittingly serves as the emblem of Christianity.

John Dickson:

That said, the cross has also been used as a symbol of power and violence, whether by Emperor Constantine in the fourth century or the Crusaders in the 11th century. Constantine took the cross or a shape like the cross and put it on his Roman standards. The Crusaders took a cross and conquered and killed in the name of that crucified one. What do you make historically about these great pivots where the cross now is a war symbol?

Tom Holland:

Okay. So there's a huge paradox that lies at the heart of the Christian message of universalism, and it's there right from the very beginning. So looking again at that famous Paul line tag, "There is no Jew or Greek," which essentially is the ideal that underpins modern multiculturalism. There's no Jew or Greek, there's no Black or White. We're all one, kind of the [inaudible 00:30:19] ideal. Who could possibly object to that? Isn't that great?

Tom Holland:

But of course, there are lots of people who object to it, chiefly Jews in Paul's day, who don't want to have their distinctiveness kind of dissolved into what they see as a universal marsh. And so to Paul's great disappointment, his fellow Jews by and large don't accept the message that he's preaching. And so, right from the beginning, you have this sense that what becomes Christian universalism is rubbing up against perhaps particularly, and most darkly, the fact that Jews do not want to be absorbed into this, and the relationship between Christianity and the Jews is I guess, the darkest strand in Christian history and the longest of those strands, but it focuses a problem that Christians face throughout the course of their history, which is basically what do you do with people who do not want to be absorbed into this universal message that is being preached?

Tom Holland:

What do you do? And it becomes more and more of a problem, the more powerful Christianity becomes, so that when Constantine legitimizes Christianity, and then over the course of the fourth century, as the emperors become more and more aggressively Christian. So it starts to become this faith which valorises those who are at the bottom of the pile, comes to occupy the commanding heights of a rather oppressive imperial structure. And that's essentially a kind of temptation and a problem for Christians that has shadowed them ever since, and it's kind of manifest in all the kind of bogie men that the people in very hostile to Christianity will always bring up, of which I guess Crusaders and inquisitors would be the archetypes.

Tom Holland:

However, I think it's important to recognize that by and large, when atheists who are opposed to Christianity mentioned the Crusades or mentioned the inquisition, they tend not to interrogate why they see these as problematic. And the answer of course, is clearly that the anxiety about military conquest is bred of the fact that it emerges from a culture that has at its heart, someone who said, "Put up your sword to his followers," and willingly went to death. And the fact that we have problems with the idea of the inquisition torturing innocent people to death is because at the heart of the Christian faith is the image of someone being an innocent person, being tortured to death.

Tom Holland:

So essentially, Christianity defines the moral assumptions by and large of those who criticize it.

John Dickson:

It's an interesting thought, isn't it? Tom thinks that Christianity provided the ethical basis for the Western world's criticisms of the church itself. It wasn't until the early 20th century that a philosophy arose in the West that actually sought to overturn the whole Christian way of looking at the world, where the first are last, and the last are first.

Tom Holland:

The French Revolution and the Russian revolution had targeted the church, but it had not targeted the fundamental teaching of Christianity that the first would be last, and the last would be first. It was indeed an attempt to kind of make that manifest on the kind of political dimension. The Nazis, however, absolutely despised the fundamental values of Christianity. They completely thought that Jew and Greek were separate, were racially separate, and they completely scorned the idea that the weak might in any way have some status of privilege over the strong.

Tom Holland:

They utterly repudiated that, and fascism was basically, as the name suggests, an attempt to resurrect the kind of the martial pre-Christian values of classical antiquity, and to fuse it with a kind of futuristic sense that had emancipated itself from that kind of sentimental concern for the weak and the poor, and indeed as they saw it, the racially inferior.

Tom Holland:

And so, in a sense, if you want a sense of what a truly post-Christian world would look like, fascism offers the best example that we have in European history. It was the most decisive attempt to exercise Christianity.

John Dickson:

We're sort of racing ahead of ourselves. What about the Middle Ages? Isn't that when Christianity used its power and authority to hinder creativity and culture, and of course sent the world into a Dark Ages? Well, I put that to Tom after the break.

John Dickson:

This Undeceptions is brought to you by Zondervan's new book, *Person of Interest: Why Jesus Still Matters in a World That Rejects The Bible*, by J. Warner Wallace. Here's an unexpected combo. J. Warner Wallace is a homicide detective, as well as a church planter and writer. He's investigated several no-body missing person cases, no crime scene, no physical evidence, no victim's body, and yet successfully identified the killers.

John Dickson:

In *Person of Interest*, J. Warner Wallace uses his extensive investigative skills to uncover the truth about the historical Jesus. He imagines a scenario in which all the New Testament documents, the gospels and everything else have been destroyed. Then he sifts through the evidence to reconstruct the identity of Jesus as the world's most important person of interest.

John Dickson:

As a student of the historical Jesus myself, I'm always interested in fresh approaches to the evidence, and what a fascinating approach to let one of America's foremost cold case detectives look at the evidence for Jesus. *Person of Interest* is available at Amazon. There's a link in the show notes, or just head to zondervan.com for more.

John Dickson:

Louisa's life has been changed by a borehole. One of her children was killed by a crocodile while trying to collect water from the river. To others, died of cholera, a waterborne disease. A borehole in her village means no longer traveling long distances to the river to collect water and it means diseases like cholera might soon be a distant memory.

John Dickson:

In Morrumbala District in Mozambique, the construction of new boreholes that bring clean water has changed lives, not just for Louisa, but for about 5,000 villages. Anglican Aid's Waterworks Campaign is making this possible. Will you please visit waterworks.org.au, that's waterworks.org.au to discover how you can help.

John Dickson:

I want to raise an author and a book that offers a completely contrary argument to your own. It's the book by Stephen Greenblatt, not sure if you've read it.

Tom Holland:

Yeah.

John Dickson:

The Swerve: How The World Became Modern, and you read his book and you'd have the impression that basically, Christianity killed everything that was good in the Roman world and sent us into a Dark Ages

until we emerged in the 13th, 14th centuries to recover ancient learning and the world became modern. And the picture he gives is that the church kept Europe in a state of superstitious ignorance, blind faith, and the abuse of human rights, until the Renaissance scholars and the Enlightenment.

Tom Holland:

Okay. First up, I just want to say, huge admirer of Stephen Greenblatt as a Shakespeare scholar. I've kind of interviewed him about Shakespeare, immense honour, hugely kind of decisively influenced how I understand Shakespeare. So with that caveat out of the way, I think *The Swerve* is by miles his worst book, because it essentially buys into a kind of 18th century myth about European history.

Tom Holland:

And essentially, the myth is that you have a period of light where Greek philosophers sit around and are on the verge of inventing steam engines, when suddenly bigoted monks turn up and ruin everything and turn the lights off, and everything becomes terrible, violent with the Renaissance, and then more particularly with the Enlightenment, as the word enlightenment suggests, the lights come back on. And so essentially, you have the whole of the Christian era is seen as a kind of Dark Age.

Tom Holland:

Now, that's a spectacular, this reading of history, but the wonderful paradox of it is that, again, it's rooted in a Christian myth of history because essentially, it's a reformation myth. The idea that there is a Middle Age between the classical world and the world of the philosophy is one that derives from the reformation's understanding of history.

Tom Holland:

The Protestants of course, are deeply militantly Christian, but they see themselves as essentially overturning idols as banishing superstition, as bringing people who walk in darkness into light. And they're casting the darkness as that of the Medieval Church, the Popish Dark Age, as they see it. And so they push the time when everything went wrong, back to the rise of the Medieval Papacy, and they cast the previous year of light as that of the early church.

Tom Holland:

So it's essentially the reformation that establishes this kind of myth, and the Enlightenment basically just kind of buys... just kind of pushes the borders back a little bit further. It's hard to ever emphasize how wrong it is because essentially, everything that makes the modern West what it is, is rooted in the fundamental Christian revolution that begins with Paul and spills out across the Mediterranean world.

Tom Holland:

But then more specifically for the West, in the distinctive course that civilization in Western Europe, Latin Europe takes, basically in the 10th, 11th, 12th centuries, and the Middle Ages far from being a period of backward superstition is Europe's first experience of revolution. It's when everything that will make Western civilization distinctive really starts to crystallize.

John Dickson:

The notion of a Dark Ages probably deserves a whole episode on its own. For now, it's worth noting that the very term Dark Ages was a piece of propaganda that bore little resemblance to the historical realities. The Middle Ages, as it's more accurately titled, was a time of significant technical, scholarly, and cultural output. This is when the heavy plow was invented, which led to a population explosion because more people could be fed. It's when hospitals and charity laws were established throughout Europe. Schools and universities were born in this so-called Dark Ages, language and writing became standardized.

John Dickson:

In fact, Times New Roman, the font that so many of us use, was actually based on the work of Alcuin of York in the eighth century, and something like 90% of all of the manuscripts we have today from ancient Rome, like Virgil, Seneca, Tacitus and so on, were actually meticulously studied and preserved, not by much later Renaissance scholars as you often hear, but by ninth and 10th century monks, and these same monks made huge strides in logic and philosophy, in astronomy and natural history. What we would go on to call science. Anyway, more another day.

John Dickson:

Moving to our very modern context, do you think we need a living Christianity in our society, thriving churches to sustain these Western ideals that you say come from Christianity?

Tom Holland:

Well, I think it's too early to say. What I do think is that we are currently living through a process of cultural and moral, and spiritual change that can only really be compared to the reformation. So I think we are living through a new reformation, and I think that the 1960s will be seen as a period transformational in the history of Christendom, analogous to the 1520s.

Tom Holland:

I think a crucial part of the process of change that the 60s really kind of kicked off is the legacy of the Nazis and the Second World War, because I think it's not a coincidence that it's the kind of dawning realization of what exactly the Holocaust had been, that you start to get kind of precipitous decline in church attendance across Western countries.

Tom Holland:

And one of the reasons for that is that basically in a sense, you don't need the Christian story anymore to be taught Christian values because the Nazis do it for you, because the Nazis are so decisively opposite to Christian teaching, that in a way they, they kind of provide an incredibly potent morality story.

Tom Holland:

So, whereas before the Second World War, people in the West would say they wanted to know what to do, what would Jesus do? And then they'd do it. Now people in the West say, "What would Hitler do?" And do the opposite. So instead of Satan, you have Hitler, and instead of the devils, you have the Nazis,

and instead of hell, you have Auschwitz. And I think that, that basically serves to kind of instill Christian values, that you should care for the unfortunate, that you should care for those who are not like you, that racism is the ultimate evil.

Tom Holland:

These are ultimately Christian values, but because they're mediated through the history of the 30s and 40s, they've taken on a kind of new incarnation. Is that sufficient to maintain Christian values as kind of living... I'm not sure. I think that the history of the past decade suggests that it's actually rather coming under strain and that we've seen again and again, that people kind of saying, "You're Nazi or you are Hitler." It's the law of diminishing returns. It becomes less and less successful.

Tom Holland:

And if in due course, people turn around and say, "Yeah, I'm a Nazi. What of it?" How then do you argue against them? The thing that Christianity provides is a sense that this is a story that is true, that it's a story that permeates the entire sweep of history, the entire sweep of the cosmos, that there is a God, and that therefore the values that Christianity has taught are not just culturally contingent, and not just bread of kind of historical happenstance, but are fundamentally true.

Tom Holland:

A post Christian society doesn't have that reassurance, and while of course, it's perfectly true that the atheists have morals, it doesn't alter the fact that those morals are basically Christian, and that if you lack the theological, the supernatural explanation for why these values should be held, where do you get them? And I think the intellectual history of the past few decades has basically been a kind of a gathering attempt to try and explain Christian values and Christian teachings in ways that do not depend upon Christianity being true, and I think it's proven to be a struggle personally.

John Dickson:

I hope I don't offend the great Tom Holland with my final question. You say these ideas, these Christian ideas are the best and beautiful ideas, these are the ideas that our culture is imbibed, but you're not sure they're based in reality. This is very similar to what Jordan Peterson will say about Christianity. Not sure there's an actual God who actually died and rose again, and the thing I've always wanted to ask you is how can these ideas be good if they're not also true?

Tom Holland:

Because I've been conditioned by the world in which I live in to see them as true and good. Suppose the Nazis had conquered Europe, suppose I'd grown up in a Nazi dominated Europe, my sense of what was good and true would be very different. I would regard Christian teachings as contemptible and weak. So my sense of what is good and true is conditioned by the world and the culture that I grow up in, and indeed basically, the end of dominion is an acknowledgement of that. That's why I write about my mother and particularly my godmother, who I now recognize I learned values from them.

Tom Holland:

But having said that, I don't reject the possibility that it's true. It's just that there are all kinds of problems I have that stopped me embracing it a 100%. So there may be moments where I do feel it's true. So a couple of days ago, I went on an enormous 30 mile walk across London, visiting various places that are kind of marked by the depth of Anglo-Saxon history. There are places that are kind of sanctified by the memory of the men and women who built churches and founded Abbey's, and preached the gospel, often in parts of London that you wouldn't see it to be particularly holy.

Tom Holland:

So there was a kind of great Abbey at Barking, which is kind of in the far east end of London, which was a kind of great center of female scholarship founded in the seventh century at a time where Christianity was a very, very fragile flower. And I could feel the power of that, the sense of the influence of the history there. It was kind of conjured up very, very vividly, but I also, because I'd walked and I was tired, that sense of being on a kind of pilgrimage made me more open to the possibility of the supernatural, that perhaps this was true. I was in the right mindset for it.

Tom Holland:

And when I look at the history of Christianity, the history of monasticism, the history of mysticism, I recognize that in a sense, it's those disciplines, in a sense, you kind of have to prepare yourself for God. You can't just kind of turn up and expect to do. Often that is the case. People can do that, but I don't think I can do that. I think in my daily life, I find it impossible to believe. It's too easy. It's too comfortable and I kind of think, what about dinosaurs? What about the icy amenities of space? What about the fact that if Christianity's true, I have a head advantage because I've been born in a Christian society. What about Muslims? What about Jews? What about Hindus? What about them? That seems unfair.

Tom Holland:

So all these kind of things crowd around me and trouble me, but if I'm on a pilgrimage going from the ruins of an Abbey to an ancient church, and then I meet a woman who is being inspired by these traditions which in turn derived from the gospels and the Bible and the great inheritance of Christian history to do something for the future, and I feel this is powerful and wonderful, and in a sense true, and I feel a sense of the mystery of it, then I feel it's true.

Tom Holland:

And I'm aware that, that's a kind of equivocal reply because I'm kind of sitting on a fence, but I am where I am. There are times where I feel it very powerfully to be true and I know we've got Holy Week coming up. I know I will feel it to be true during Holy Week. I always do.

Tom Holland:

I will go to the services and I will feel this is true. I will contemplate the story of the passion and I will contemplate the resurrection, and I will feel it as something that is true. And then perhaps a couple of weeks after, I went, gone again.

John Dickson:

"I believe, help my unbelief," said one man to Jesus. Tom Holland, bless you on your continuing journey, and thank you for all the intellectual output you've given us all over these years.

Tom Holland:

Pleasure. Thank you.

John Dickson:

If you like what we're doing at Undeceptions, can I ask you to please head to undeceptions.com and hit the ginormous donate button. Pretty much every day, I get a little alert telling me that one of you, my listeners has gifted something to the Undeceptions project. Just in the last few days, \$50, \$30, \$110, \$2,000, yikes, \$48, and so on. God bless every one of you. We haven't quite come to breaking even on the podcast, let alone all the other stuff we do, but let me tell you, with your help, we are making wonderful strides toward that. Anything you can do is hugely appreciated. Thank you.

John Dickson:

And while you're there, feel free to send us a question and I'll try and answer it in our upcoming Q&A episode in just a few weeks. And if you're interested in other good podcasts, check out Salt, conversations with the lovely Jenny Salt, part of the Eternity Podcast Network.

John Dickson:

Next episode, we're going back to ancient Egypt, and one of the Bible's most epic stories. It's got everything, plagues, pharaohs, a baby in a basket, the parting of the Red Sea, death, destruction, and salvation. We're doing a deep dive into the historicity of the Exodus. See ya.

John Dickson:

Undeceptions is hosted by me, John Dickson, produced by Kaley Payne and directed by Mark, editing by Richard Hamwi. Special thanks to our series sponsor, Zondervan for making this Undeceptions possible. Undeceptions is part of the Eternity Podcast Network, an audio collection showcasing the seriously good news of faith today.

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