



"Who's Out There? A New Testament" Episode 2: Reality as Emptiness versus Reality as Overabundance with host Chris Jordan and guest Prof Christo Lombaard

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Welcome to the 2nd season of Who's Out There, a podcast series on the individualistic quest in spiritual warfare. Theological paradigms are amongst the most progressive and most justifiably volatile sects of progressive growth within our global civilization. In season 2, aptly named A New Testament, I sit down with academics, leaders, influencers, and, well, a new era of religious journalists that share intrinsic complexities of how they are currently interpreting a shifting spiritual worldview. In this episode, I sit down with a theologian in practical theology and historical mission studies, Professor Christo Lombard, as we chat about building religious construct on what might be interpreted as sometimes somewhat broken foundations.

Episode 2

Chris Jordan

Can I go into this whole, sensation of being?

Because that's the sound almost it basically emanates reality. Right. And reality goes to being.

So let's talk about that.

Christo Lombaard

One of the things that characterize our time is that it is dominated by rationalism. I don't mean that negatively. I mean it as a characterization, and I should stress that I never want us to move away from modernity, rationality, the scientific frame of mind because it means so lot for humanity. We create so many things.

Positive. Of course, negative as well, ecological disaster, but we still hope that by rational means, we will find a solution to that. Yeah. So I'm not at all against this these aspects of modernism, rationality, the intellectual enterprise.

The enlightenment is usually the term that is used from the 1700s onwards. Yeah. And all of us are drenched in that. The moment you your first science class at school, you're drenched in that. The kind of a high experience that you have that somebody tells you, maybe in grade 3 or 4 these days, that if you hold in your hand 2 balls and the one weighs 1 kilogram and the other weighs 10 kilogram, and in all other respects, these 2 balls are the same, and you drop them at the same time Yes.

Then, of course, the expectation is 10 kilogram ball hits the ground first. Yeah. And then you see it's not wrong. So that rational enterprise is very interesting, very valuable in helping us to understand reality. Okay.

What often happens then, is that that orientation dominates to such an such an extent that it suppresses other understandings of reality.

Chris Jordan

Yeah. It's selective. It's a kind of reflex.

Christo Lombaard

Nothing evil. There's no evil intent. It's a kind of a reflex. So that if you want to understand spirituality or theology or meaning of life, you try to do it in the same terms. Of these kind of physical, analysis.

The natural scientific approach to these things. Right. We show that for instance in psychology, in the 1940s, fifties, sixties, that people try to reduce everything to numbers, to behaviors, and then, of course, you can do that. It's very valuable for some aspects of therapy. Yeah.

Doesn't help you with meaning of life crisis. It doesn't help you at all. Or if people ask questions about what is the what is existence? Is there a God? You can use rational arguments this way and that.

It doesn't solve the question.

Chris Jordan

But because is it because the limitation of our own knowledge? And so, yes, I get that a lot of people know this with, theoretic and even with a lot of the, well, I'd say a lot of the structures and whatever it may be, methodologies or scientific applications, there's a lot of holes that do exist, in natural sciences, as you said. Well, in many aspects of life, we can only get so far as human beings.

Is it a selection of saying that this works for me right now, and I'm saying in general, because we want to obviously take this back to a human being of which these things ripple down eventually too. Or is it a sense of us genuinely just not knowing enough and working with what we have? It is that too, and that's not the bad thing, that we do not know enough.

Christo Lombaard

We will always be exploring. So I don't regard that as something negative.

My problem is that if we buy into this rational frame of my mind as the only form of logic or rationality comes definitive. Of everything else. Yeah. Then we collapse everything else in its terms, in this in the terms of this rationality. Yeah.

That means your world becomes not bigger, but smaller. Sure. You can only then analyze things that you can physically test by means of an experiment or that you can count. And all the important things in life, the things that really give us meaning as human beings, cannot be counted. But the one that I love, do I say I love you ?

But yesterday, I loved you 6, so we're on the right path. What does that mean? Or I love you more than life itself. Okay. That's a nice way to fit.

But I love you more than rugby, I think that's a bad relationship. \

So what we do is we the rational frame of mind collapses the entirety of the of the experience, of the human experience to only some aspects of it. And that means we lose the fullness of life. Yeah. All these fuller perspectives.

Chris Jordan

Is that is that just a symptom of the fact that we cannot and will not, I suppose, we look at limitations of being a human being, that we cannot comprehend a lot more than what we can at any one particular point. There's many different variables that that obviously contribute to the fact that what we can and what we cannot handle as a human being, but also, at a certain point, you don't want to because it becomes too much

and becomes too as I said, it's chaotic and so can become destructive
Right. To you. Right? Can become destructive, can become too much,
certainly.

Christo Lombaard

Which is why people often the reflexes tend to turn towards simplicity
Sure. Or doing less. And then often meditation and the whole industry, is
that too strong a word, of mindfulness, which, of course, has an
important core, but lots of, spin offs that really is doesn't help people
much. All of these things are possible. There's also another way to
relate to this these many aspects of life, the chaos of life, which is
not a negative concept.

It's a positive concept. The chaos of life. It goes along with providence
as a more theological description of it. Close to where we are at the
moment lives a philosopher by the name of Danny Goosen. In 2 of his
books, he writes about the overabundance of life.

That there are just so many things that you cannot get to everything.
Right. We often experience that as a stress factor. You have 10 meetings
today, you know you can only make 3. There's not enough time.

And we often experience that as something negative, but in fact, it's
something positive. That there are so many possibilities in life, in
culture, that your body gives you, that your environment gives you, that
your culture gives you, that science gives us, that religion gives us
philosophy, art, music, everything else. And in this abundance of life,
you can lose yourself. Not lose yourself in the sense of losing touch
with reality that you require medication or therapy in order to...

Not a stimuli, but not in the overwhelming sense. It is just so great.
How great thou art? But not in the sense of of this type of speaking
about God, but about the meaning of life, which includes the experience
of God. So that so that overabundance of life is something that we should
appreciate and not allow the rational impulses to collapse that.

To collapse the appreciation of art. The experience of standing in front
of a painting and it overwhelm overwhelms you. Not to collapse it in the
to only the language of these are the hues, the colours that are used by
the artist and therefore it reflects from your lens on your lens in
certain way and creates some kind of, chemical responses inside your
mind. All of that is true.

But that is not the appreciation of art. That is not how art helps us to
see reality.

Chris Jordan

Does this lead to what you have, again, as a precursor, said is the
reality of emptiness because one road leads to...

Christo Lombaard

The experience of emptiness in life that we see comes along with that
that exclusively rationalist approach to life.

If everything is collapsed into the language or the understanding of of natural of naturalism, by which I means the scientific natural scientific understanding, logic in the way that it is usually found in mathematics and in physics. If everything is collapsed to that, then life becomes small. That, the sense of, the overabundance, we lose that, which means that the world is empty, except for those things that are measurable and manageable. I speak of the culture of management in our society. Manageable, measurable, tangible.

We reduce everything to that. So life becomes, apart from these physical aspects, quite empty. Right?

Chris Jordan

I have obviously a question which I'm sure because again, there can't be any kind of tangible, pragmatic, I don't even know if there's any academic, whatever it is, research surrounding it, but the concept of a soul, which makes one feel connected to something larger than and when we look at people, I don't know much about, atheists and etc. because I can't relate to them. I do know of them.

I know enough of them. But as you explain there, as you water it down, you like I said, you break it down, you put it to pen to paper, black and white, this, that. That loss of because you can't believe in a soul or a spirit if you are one way. Is that is that what deters someone from living a little bit more fully? And is that kind of what you're referring to or not?

Christo Lombaard

Certainly. If you mean by soul, the sense of experience that we have, that we are something special, humanity. That God relates to us in a special way. If you mean by that soul? No.

That I certainly buy into. Okay. To, and it's not that I only buy into it.

I experience it daily. Yeah. There's another understanding of so, which is a popular understanding. Probably 3 quarters of people in our civilizational stream have this understanding of soul. That is almost like a little bit little spook inside you.

Yeah. I'm going to put it in in in uncomfortable terms, but simply to make the point that it's almost as if you have the body and the body is a vessel. And inside the vessel is a spook, and that's the real you. And when you die, then the body disappears, but this little spook, this little ghost goes on and that goes to heaven or if you believe it, it goes to hell, etcetera, and all the other possibilities.

This is how most people understand it. Yeah. Because, I mean, this is not the field they're in the investigation. They don't read in the field. Or it's spread.

There are other versions of this understanding of the soul as well. Okay. But that one that I just described in, maybe too flippant terms, that simply doesn't exist.

Nor is it a confession of the churches. How does how does that If you go to church Sunday and you and you recite along with the rest of the church the confessions of your faith, it also includes, I believe in the resurrection of, not the soul, of the body. So the idea of distinguishing between something that is inside me that lives for eternity Yeah. And my physical body, my hands, my feet, etcetera. That distinction.

Is a false distinction. It takes things apart which, should not be taken apart. These things are 1.

And it's a core part of the Christian, of the Christian confession. Often when I point this out and people say, oh, she do not believe in life after death or it doesn't touch that at all. I entrust life after death completely to God. It is not something that I have in inside myself that I am so good that I have this eternal little, spook, this eternal little ghost.

That kind of hubris. So in fact, me, myself, and I, I am eternal. We should get beyond that. Entrust eternity to God because there's no other way to do it.

This idea that I described in maybe 2 flippant terms about the spook or the ghost. We know how that developed historically. It comes from the ancient Greek understanding of something of the eternity to human beings.

And became, in quite changed ways parts of our broad civilizational stream that people buy into this deep. And it's by no means it's not when they describe it this way, I don't want to call it evil or something like that. Due to the detriment of society.

It helps people cope with all kinds of things. I think we go well with it if we say we entrust my beloved who just passed away. I entrust the whole of my beloved body and soul, but soul then meant as the existence, the awareness of our existence, the relationship with God, and trust all of that to God. I don't have to trust into some kind of super part of me inside which is eternal energy.

That is often the term used. That that was energy will always go to yes.

Chris Jordan

No. I do get that because that's a nice that's a nice kind of, like, backward approach to going into something that is a broad spectrum of spirituality.

And then for me, it's noncommittal to a particular sect of religion. It's like saying, well, you know, let me just go that route and say its energy and say it's a universe and say I'm part of this bigger cosmic, like, balance. I've I'm not patronizing it. I think there should come a certain point in your life where you do decide something is something and something is not.

Christo Lombaard

And it has it helps people to cope with this.

I mean, I've spoken to a medical doctor once when she has to deal often with people dying. And she says what helps is that this is the body, but the soul continues. Now in that moment, I do not have this kind of conversation with her because this helps her to deal with the trauma of somebody who's a patient, but it's a human being. So it touches her all kinds of way. There was some time that they spent together.

So it is not as if that is something negative. But it is akin to this example that we had earlier of the 2 balls, the one kilogram, the other one 10 kilogram. We think the reflexes, the 10 kilogram ball falls faster, and it's not true.

The same thing with this concept of soul. The one that I described in 2 light terms simply to make the point, that it's okay if you if that means something to you, but it is better if you entrust your body at the moment. Yeah. In this moment and in your death and into eternity along with all aspects of you, and you can use the metaphor of the soul if you like, if you trust that to God, then you're believing in God, not believing in yourself.

Chris Jordan

How much of the human narrative is misleading people into a more comfortable state of mind of misunderstanding?

Christo Lombaard

You're completely right. Yeah. You're completely right. Here's an example.

People say, religion is for good people. Christianity is for good people, which, of course, if you know Christian theology, is exactly the opposite. Yeah. But common, sense of understanding on especially, television talk shows from the USA.

You get this idea, everybody is good. And if you live a good life, if you have values, whatever that means, of course, that is very controversial Yeah. The thing that I just said, then when you die, you go to be with your loved ones or with God or a pleasant eternity.

There are different descriptions of this. Yeah. That popular understanding simply doesn't work.

Chris Jordan

Yeah. But why?

I mean, I know I mean, I know why. Right.

Christo Lombaard

Because the core of Christian theology is not that good people go to God, but that God calls people. So in Christian terms, in, Calvinist or reformed term terms, in the salvific death and resurrection of Jesus, I have complete certainty about my salvation, about my life after this life, which will be simply be a continuation of this life with god, with

other believers, with other people, and that is the core of Christian theology. The radical part of it is that somebody that all of us may hate because of the things that they did to other people.

A murderer. Yeah. A rapist. A serial murderer. A politician who caused the death of many people.

Hitler, Napoleon Sure. Genghis Khan, etcetera. The worst kind of person that you can think of is the possibility of grace in Christ, in God. So this popular conception that Christianity or religion is for good people simply doesn't work because it's the opposite.

It is for bad people. And all of us realize, I mean, the moment you have an encounter with formulated in neutral terms in neutral terms, the moment you have an encounter with the divine, you realize how inadequate you are. If you read about the mystics, the mystical people who have these encounters and how they describe these encounters, if there's a sense of being completely lost, there's nothing left of you in the presence of this, holiness.

And you should add a lot of superlatives to the term holiness simply to describe how different it is, how overwhelming it is, but none of these superlatives help us. So, and that sense of being nothingness, that I cannot my life doesn't have meaning on my terms for my sake. But in the presence of god that you lose yourself, like you disappear. Or do you take you're taken up in in this presence of God.

There you see this idea of it can happen to anybody.

Chris Jordan

Because, again, not only again, just in terms of commentary around the world, we know we know the very obvious and kind of very stereotypical commentary we can make on a 2024, global civilization. But how does practical theology work into practical Christianity? How does that segue?

Because that almost seems, like the Mars and Venus all yeah.

Christo Lombaard

I understand. 1 of the eras of modernism, of rationalism, was the completely logical, expectation that religion would disappear from humanity as humanity becomes usually the word mature. More mature is used, but what is meant by that is becomes more rational. And that expectation was for 200 years shared amongst intellectuals, including church leaders, etcetera.

It turns out over the past decades, through simply sociological research and through demographic research, that that expectation was false. It never became true. Religion certainly changed quite a lot to such an extent that people have who have certain understandings of what religion should be do not see the religious impulses in society and individuals, but simply demographically speaking. So this is not eschatological expectation or wishful thinking or hopeful theologizing. Simply

demographically speaking, how humanity is, the world is becoming more religious and more conservatively religious.

Chris Jordan

Because that's what I was going to say, in terms of I always bring this up about customized religion and, kind of, the self-construction of what I choose to want to understand. Because we are we are given that, I think, through commercial messaging as well, where, you know, that the Bible is this old or scriptures are this old, written for a population or a culture and a race, etcetera, many years ago, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. And so encourages that that allowance for, I can make it what I want to be as long as I am talking to God, or understand who Jesus is, or, or, or, or, or because we do get I mean, when you look at the factions and say, for example, Jewish people with the Quran or whatever it is, sorry, the Torah. Right? The Torah, right?

And how that is I mean, it's a leading, obviously, religion, massive, massively so in comparison to then Christianity, which then moves a little bit further. And this is just plain old simple, where we're seeing 2 different massive monopolies, you know, being able to customize their own approaches. Doesn't but it allows it allows us to go. So I'm what I'm saying to you is, is that what you're saying?

Is that we are religious, I believe that. But someone, somewhere, and it could be false news or fake news or whatever it is; there are thousands of religions out there. Is that..

Christo Lombaard

Two answers. Yeah. Number 1, the fact that there's diversity doesn't mean that diversity doesn't prove that something doesn't exist.

Sure. In fact, it proves the opposite. It proves that something is important. None of us had furious arguments about the economy in Outer Mongolia in the 11th century.

Why not? It's unimportant. Maybe for some for 4 or 5 academics in the world, it would be important. But for the rest of us, it's unimportant. But when, for instance, Christianity, at times, has this fierce debate about baptism.

Should it be babies? Should it be, like, teenage years? Should it be adult? Should it be only 1? Should it be many times?

All this possibility. Yeah. We have these debates because it is important. So the fact that there is dissension doesn't mean that there's nothing. It, in fact, means the opposite.

It means there's something and something quite important. To take that even one step further, the fact that there are these discussions, these fierce debates, in fact, ensures the survival, simply sociologically speak, and ensures the survival of these religions. We know very clearly About the debates in the Old Testament. You can see it.

There's the Zion theological stream. There's the wisdom theological stream. There's the prophetic theological stream. There are a few others as well, and they argue against each other.

The one that dominated became the Mosaic theological stream to this day. But you can trace each, that means which regards Moses as a central figure in God's revelation and therefore the Decalogue, etcetera. Yeah.

The 10 commandments. If you read the bible text carefully as bible trained bible readers do, then you can see how these different parties in the, in this debate in ancient Israel, how they edited each other's texts, how they expanded their own texts in order to debate with one another. Yeah. Sometimes the debate was with external powers, for instance, with the with the new Babylonian or the new Assyrian, empire in trying to save their faith in the face of, for instance, the exile or in the face of some edict from Babylon or something like that. Sometimes it's internal theological debate.

Here's an example of one that carries through all centuries. That is very clear from the Old Testament text that the mosaic group so those who regarded the revelation of God to Moses as sent as central were in debate with the prophetic groups where the revelation to God to the prophets, be it Amos or Jeremiah, was primary. So where do you find God's will most directly?

Through the 10 commandments? Or through the words of the prophets which are often about social justice, but also returning to God? Where do you find it? And you can see that debate in the Old Testament on how they edit one another's text.

Which explains many of the problems, of when we read these texts, we cannot understand how it could be. It's something that doesn't make sense until you realize this process. So that is, in other words, the debate between orthodoxy, through the word, that means through the 10 commandments versus, a more charismatic approach that through the prophets, direct revelation, and then action in society. That those theological stories we see throughout all centuries to this day.

Now I'm summarizing, 27 centuries of development. So I do it very roughly. That's right. To this day, if you have people who say in much church tradition, no. Exegesis, Bible reading, sermon, this is where you hear god primarily.

The other things are not unimportant, but this is where you hear God primarily. Yeah. Or people will say no. In the charismatic experience of coming together in church and that those emotions that you experience, that is the most direct encounter of God. It's the same debate between call it orthodoxy and charismatic tradition.

Chris Jordan

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