

Overcoming Stockholm Syndrome in Christianity With Dr. John West

Featuring John West

October 21, 2025

TRANSCRIPT

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Welcome to Cornerstone University's Wisdom and Influence podcast. I'm so happy to be here today at the university's beautiful DeWitt Center for Science and Technology, a beautiful facility to educate our students in science, technology from a Christian worldview. And I'm really happy and glad to have our guest today, Dr. John West. John, thank you for being with us. John is the vice president of Discovery Institute in Seattle, Washington, also the managing director for the Center for Science and Culture. And you spent two days with us at our fall faculty retreat here at Cornerstone University. And just give us a sense of what it was like to be here for a couple of days with our faculty and staff, John.

John West: Really, it was wonderful to be here. In my past life, I was a Christian college professor, so I'm really attuned to the Christian college scene, but the focus here on biblical faithfulness and on trying to bring it to all of culture is so refreshing. Unfortunately, it's a bit unique, and it was just inspiring to be here. So I feel privileged to be able to share and interact. In all my interactions with the faculty, the staff, and the administrators, it just really hit home how honed in you are on being faithful to Christ across all of the world.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Well, John, thank you. And it's been great to have you. And one of the great things about your comments, you could sort of curate from your past experience, as a faculty member, as a nonprofit leader, as a scholar, as a researcher. And I think, just hearing our faculty and our staff, the questions they asked, the conversations they were having, they were engaged, encouraged, thrilled. So thank you for all that you do and for being here. And I should tell our listeners, Dr. West is a prolific author. He has done a number of documentaries as well, and I would encourage you to look at his work.

One of the, I think, most fascinating books, you've done a number of them, but the most recent one that you spoke about with our faculty was Stockholm Syndrome Christianity. And when I saw that book, heard of that book, and looked into that book months ago, I realized this is really a profound thing, but it's not a new thing. I mean, even though the Stockholm Syndrome is recently new in human history, I think you could look at the history of Christianity and see how Stockholm Syndrome as a thing has existed throughout. You see in the New Testament Paul writing about it, right? And you see in the Old Testament Daniel saying, "I will purpose in my heart not to defile myself with the king's meat." So it's almost like he said, "The Stockholm Syndrome, I'm not gonna let it happen to me," right?

So just tell our listeners what that is. Stockholm Syndrome, where it came from, and then in some ways how you adopted that to the book, to Christianity, and the thesis behind it, John.

John West: Sure. So the Stockholm Syndrome goes back to actually August of the early 1970s, I think 1973, in Stockholm, Sweden, hence Stockholm Syndrome. There was a bank robbery where bank robbers took some people hostage. Okay, that's happened before, but then something strange happened. After the first couple of days, the people held hostage began to identify with their hostage takers, think they were nice young men, that they felt sorry for them, they felt compassion. They felt actually a connection with them and actually sort of a hostility toward the police. And so out of this was coined the term Stockholm Syndrome. Really, it's talking about the idea that sometimes victims or people in abusive situations can end up adopting the point of view of their abuser or their victimizer, and doesn't always happen, but so how did I apply this sort of to Christianity?

Well, I was thinking and praying one day, because I think you're right to actually focus that this is not a new problem. You go, you know, how do... Are we in the world but not of the world? That really is the question. And I think today maybe sometimes we tend to be judgmental and say, well, that person, they're doing it because they're cowardly or they don't have a spine or they're just rejecting Christian faith.

But when I reflect on the people who I knew, whether it be faculty members or other Christian leaders who were going in an unhelpful direction, a lot of these people were very sincere people, and they didn't think they were being cowardly. They didn't think that they were compromising faith. They actually thought they were sticking up and standing for truth, yet they weren't. And I thought that, well, really, the Stockholm Syndrome really helps explain it, because they were adopting the point of view of the secular elites around them that maybe they studied in graduate school or in the profession they're at.

They're surrounded by people who may be personally nice people, but who really are discordant with an orthodox Christian worldview. They end up adopting those underlying assumptions. And so as Christians we're called to be salt and light to the culture, and to missionaries to the culture about Christian truth. But they sadly end up becoming more missionaries from the secularist culture to the fellow Christians, and they think they're being courageous in doing that. And so it really resonated with what I had actually seen.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: You know, you brought up a verse from the scriptures and it's the Sermon on the Mount when Christ speaks of us as salt and light. And I'd been looking at that verse in the last couple of months and doing a little bit of my own research on. There's a lot of not controversy, but debate about what kind of salt did Jesus mean, right? And I really appreciate the fact that when you spoke about to our faculty and staff yesterday, you mentioned the various uses of salt.

So there are biblical scholars who speak about that the real use he was speaking about was as fertilizer in the ground. Usually, we think about it in Christianity, I grew up, I went to a Christian college, and I was told preservation. Preservation, you preserve things with it. And it's true, and you mentioned that. But the fertilizing function of salt in the ancient world was also to bring forth good things from the ground. And, boy, that puts it in a whole different perspective. So share with us, you spoke to our faculty a lot about Stockholm Syndrome and places you're seeing it, but in general, what is it doing? Right? In our churches, in our institutions of Christian higher education, in our Christian think tanks. What is this doing to them from the perspective of salt and the ability to fertilize and bring forth fruit or not?

John West: Yeah. You know, if anyone knows anything about the history of certainly post-Christianity rising, the Christian worldview gave rise to hospitals, it gave rise to the emancipation of women, it gave rise to human rights, literacy, all sorts of things. And so that true Christianity really does fertilize and

bring forth a crop of good things. And so the trouble with Stockholm Syndrome Christianity is once you start sort of watering down true Christianity and seeing it through the lens of the secular sort of assumptions, you're watering down the truth.

You're watering down that which actually gives true and good things. And so the fruit that you get is not great. And so if we had all day, we could go through all of this, but just briefly, so in the area of science, for example, you have a lot of Christians who say, "Well, because evolution, Darwinian evolution is sort of gospel truth in science," which isn't true. There's a lot of debate there. But because it is, we need to change our theological beliefs and say, "Well, maybe God himself doesn't know the future," because evolution is an unguided process, so God himself didn't know how the history of life developed. Well, once you give away the idea of God as a sovereign God who cares for us and knows what's happening and lovingly prepares things for us to walk into, as it talks about in Ephesians, you're losing a lot of the faith.

Similarly, in the science area, if you deny a historic fall, that humans are broken and we need a savior because of that, that say we were sinful and evil to begin with, which some Christians have basically now said based on their belief in Darwinian evolution, you're really taking out a key part of the Gospel story.

And, and you're really... You know, it's interesting, the Christian creeds, like the Nicene Creed, the Apostles' Creed, don't start with Jesus. Jesus is really important, but they start with God as creator. And in fact, Irenaeus, when he was writing about this against one of the Gnostic writers, was pointing out that God as a creator is just as fundamental as Jesus as redeemer. And you have to hold them together. And of course, in John 1, you have them together. You have them both, right.

So in science, I think you see that. In science also, you have Christians who have been justifying abortion, even late term abortion, harvesting of aborted baby body parts for medical research because they don't have a genuine Christian understanding of the beginning of human beings and who humans are.

I'd say in other areas, in sexuality and family life, as in America, starting with the sexual revolution, if not before, in the 1960s and then up to today, we had sort of a breakdown of beliefs in the sanctity of family life and of marriage, and that sexuality should be part of that, and also understandings of male and female.

And a lot of Christians, sadly sometimes at Christian colleges, some of the other Christian influencers have tried to make their peace with whether it be transgender ideology or same-sex marriage or just even, I would say, in my book, a lot of conservative Christians don't like to talk about this, but it starts with the divorce culture. I mean, starting in the 1960s, the proliferation of no-fault divorce, I understand Christians have some differences of opinions of what are the biblical grounds for divorce, but all Christians should be able to agree that marriage was designed for a lifelong monogamous union, and that we should do everything possible to try to prevent that breakdown.

And yet a lot of Christians have compromised on that. And largely because, again, the surrounding cultural assumptions. And similarly, in the area of religious liberty, a lot of Christians won't defend their fellow Christians who are being persecuted, say, if they don't want to participate in a gay wedding or don't want to do something for their Christian conscience.

And then I guess the last area is sort of race and also class issues that Christianity has a strong teaching of equality, that we're all created in the image of God. But on both the left and the right, we have people who are basically pulling against that, and you have people who are adopting those secular assumptions, whether it be critical race theory sort of on the left, which demonizes whites, for example, and they're irredeemable and really can't ever be saved no matter what you do.

Well, no, we can be saved by Jesus, and Jesus can heal that. And so many Christians, many churches... I was at a church once that they had a racial justice task force where they were reading things like White Fragility that were very anti-Christian in their beliefs. There are some on the right, unfortunately I think it's still a fringe, but who are echoing some of the Darwinian racism of the past and basically saying that some people are inferior because of Darwinian evolution, and these are Christians.

And so I think that also is being influenced by these thought forms. And then maybe a final area in the area of sort of class and poverty and distress. And this often isn't talked about. Christians appropriately have a heart for the people who are hurting, and Christ had a heart for that. But how do we help them?

I think too many Christians have a materialistic mindset adopted from the surrounding culture. So I come from the Seattle area. Beautiful city, but I'm sad to say, like much of the West Coast, is now taken over by permanent homeless encampments of people who are really living tragic lives. And it's not because we haven't spent hundreds of millions of dollars.

So, see this is the thing. Many Christians have bought into, well, to be compassionate, we just need to spend more money, give people more material resources. But people's fundamental need isn't material resources. Yes, we should handle those. We should make sure that people aren't hungry. We should make sure they have shelter, but their fundamental need is actually Jesus and a relationship with God, and their relationship with each other. And so if those are broken, Christians of all people, in doing their social service efforts, should try to also deal with that. Yes, deal with the physical needs, but deal with the spiritual and social and mental needs. But I write about in my book some cases of even Christian ministries who all they do is just focus on the material.

It's as if the spiritual doesn't matter, and I think that's, again, an influence of the Stockholm Syndrome Christianity, that they're buying into sometimes subconsciously, unconsciously, sometimes consciously these secularist mindsets that are around.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: You know, you spoke yesterday to our faculty, our staff, I think it was actually to our faculty in our faculty session, about some of the challenges in, for Christian higher education. And one of them was this whole question of biblical authority. You mentioned it in your sessions. And I went to a Christian college as an undergrad. Then I went to do my doctorate at a Division I research institution. And then I went back to teach at the college from which I graduated.

And there, I think it was my second or third year, I encountered something that was really puzzling to me and I realized then how dangerous it was, and I saw the outworking of this in the most disastrous way in the lives of students, in the lives and the hearts and minds of students.

And it was when the book, Brian McLaren's book, A New Kind of Christian came out. That book, I remember, took the school at which I was teaching by storm, right? And I realized, and we came to realize that it was having a profound influence in the minds of some faculty there, and they began to hold secret chapels for students to mentor them in this New Kind of Christian life approach and all these kinds of things, and very corrosive stuff. I remember then I thought, "I need to read this book." So I remember reading the book. And I remember the first, the introduction to the book, and it was the first time I encountered this, that the Bible was not enough.

That Jesus was not enough. And I remember when Brian McLaren made the argument that we need post-modernism, that for Christianity to heal people who have been hurt through whatever you want to call it, right? Fundamentalism or denominationalism. For Christians to heal the wounds of its own, to heal the wounds of the world, to really be open to the world and help the world, you had to bring post-modernism into Christianity, because only then could you do that.

And I remember sitting there as a young faculty member thinking, "How could we do this? How could we bring the very poison, right? That will kill us all eventually, right?" But the argument was that Christianity and Christ was no longer enough, that we needed to do this. Since that time, I have heard that argument many, many, many times.

Even coming here to West Michigan in the last four years, I've heard that argument here as well from individuals in this community saying to me, "We tried the Bible." I'll never forget one who said, "We tried the Bible, but it didn't work." So now we have to do all this stuff, and it was all the contemporary progressive, what I call sort of theological progressivism kinds of stuff, because that's what the church needs, and that's what the gospel needs. So it's been going on for a very, very long, long time. Talk to us and our listeners about that issue of the Bible is not enough. That we need to adopt all these new categories and ways of thinking to remedy the ills of the Bible or to complete it because it's not enough.

John West: Yeah, that's a really good question. And in fact, in my latest book, the very first chapter is on biblical authority, because I think all the other things I just spoke about flow from rejecting that in some level. And so the challenge when people say the Bible is not enough is that in one sense, okay, that's true, the Bible isn't a textbook on absolutely everything, and God also gave us the world.

But that's not what they mean. They don't really even mean that the Bible isn't anything really. It has to be interpreted and reinterpreted in postmodern terms, so there isn't... It's not just that the Bible isn't enough in their view, the Bible isn't the Bible in their view.

And the idea that the Bible has been tried and found wanting is really preposterous for anyone who knows the sweep of history. And I mentioned before about all the positive things about human rights and human dignity that's flowed from a belief in the actual truth of the Bible, and that the biggest, I'd say...

Christians unfortunately, sadly, we're sinful, and so Christians have not always lived up to the teachings of the Bible, but that's a different thing than saying that—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: It's different. That's our failure.

John West: Yes. That's not the Bible's failure.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Agreed. Agreed.

John West: And yet, if you look at these other secular thought forms that have justified things, when people have actually followed those, not rebelled against them or twisted them, but followed those, like say Darwinism and into social Darwinism, that's where you get some of the most horrific things that have happened.

And so I think that part of this is actually, it does flow... Postmodernism flows from modernism because actually Richard Rorty, one of the big postmodernists, once wrote a line that might seem to make no sense outside of context, that we have to, for all of his postmodernism, what we have to keep faith with Darwin.

Well, what's that? Well, Darwin is sort of old line modernism, scientific materialism. How would a postmodernist say we have to keep faith with Darwin? I think it's this. You go back to Nietzsche. So sometimes people say modern philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato. I would say, well, modern philosophy is a series of footnotes to Nietzsche.

So Nietzsche thought that Darwin was, as he said, the theory of sovereign becoming, he was meaning Darwinian evolution, was true but deadly. Here's the deal. It's true, so they really bought into this modernist idea that we're just blind matter in motion. We're just like the rest of the animal kingdom.

But where Nietzsche understood is that he thought that was true, so he's convicted by that modern scientific materialism, but it's deadly to human meaning. And so if it's true, how do you get out of it? In his view, well, it's the Übermensch, where you create, your will to power.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: The will to power.

John West: Will to power, right. You create, the Übermensch creates reality for you. Now, we've democratized that, but everyone has their own Übermensch, and that's postmodernism.

And so but I think people need to... Because sometimes they say, "Well, arguments about the scientific materialism doesn't matter because we're just in postmodernism." I know you weren't saying that, but I want people to recognize one flows into the other. So if you want to get back to truth, you also have to deconstruct the scientific materialism and say that dichotomy that Nietzsche was talking about, what Darwin is true but deadly, well, it's deadly, but it's not true.

And so there is another choice. In other words, the old idea of a creator God who created us and loved us is actually still on the table more than it ever was maybe before with the findings of modern science and other things. And so the postmodern really, the postmodern impulse is a reaction of despair against modernism.

But if modernism's wrong, you don't have to go there, and it leaves you empty. You know, one of the people who was really insightful about this in a way that before the rise of post-modernism but sort of after Nietzsche was C.S. Lewis. And many people don't know this, but one of the first things he wrote, it was before he was a Christian but after he was a materialist.

So he first was sort of a materialist, then he became an idealist and thought there was something out there, and then he became a Christian. Well, in that sort of inner period between materialism and Christianity, he wrote a poem, an epic poem called *Dymer*. And virtually... Did you know that he wrote a poem called *Dymer*?

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: I did not know he wrote a poem.

John West: No, most people don't, even people who love C.S. Lewis.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: I did not know. I did not know.

John West: And actually, do you know, he wrote later a book called *The Pilgrim's Regress*. And many Christians know about that. And that tells about in a fictional form of his journey to Christianity.

But he wrote in this poem about his journey from materialism at least to idealism. He has a chapter where there is a magician who basically offers him to create the world of his dreams. It really is the post-modern sort of impulse, you can create your own reality. But the result of the chapter is it leaves him cold and empty because we yearn actually for the truth.

And at some level, we know that when we try to create reality that doesn't exist... I mean, this is, to make a really clear application for today that I know might be controversial, certainly in secular culture, but in the whole transgender issue of people who think they can will themselves or through surgeries make themselves into a man when they're a woman or a woman when they're a man. But the research on that is a lot of those people are very unhappy. That does not solve their distress because at some level they know that in fact that's not a real change. And so—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah, I tell my kids and friends, "You can't go against the universe that God has created and leave unscathed."

John West: No.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: I mean, it'll grind you down because it's been built for our good. And when you go against it, you bring nothing but destruction to yourself, right?

You know, John, I want to talk with you, ask you to talk a little more about education. We spent a lot of time here with our, in our retreat with our faculty and staff speaking about that. The retreat was Christ-centered higher education in the age of upheaval, right? And we spoke about the attitudes, expectations of students 20, 30 years ago and now, and they haven't changed. And I cited that study from UCLA on the spiritual life of college students. And the incredible proportion of students, percentage of students who are seeking answers to some of the most fundamental questions of life, about themselves, about their purpose, about their future, about life after death.

And here we are in 2025, and the numbers are still the same, and students asking the same kinds of questions. And then the great travesty, as I shared with all the faculty and staff, is you have millions of students, young people 18 to 22 years old, asking profound questions about their life, their souls, their future, God, life.

You also have millions more of what I call non-traditional adult students already in the workforce wanting to get their acquired degree, asking the same questions, but now raising families, in the workforce. And yet more than ever, as we talked about that one book on religion in American higher education, universities are more secular than they have ever been.

So you have this incredible need, I think, of the students and the profound questions they're asking about their life and their soul, and the institution that in some ways has been ordained, let me put it that way, right, to address that is not doing it. It's gone off the deep end in many areas. Doing some good things, but boy, in this era of the shepherding of the soul, it's bankrupt.

So we have a great need. If I can put it this way, the field of harvest is full and there's nothing there from an institutional standpoint of a university stepping in. We can talk about churches and so on too. Huge need, tremendous need. Talk to us about what you're seeing and the importance of Christ-centered education, and how do we ensure at Cornerstone, other Christian universities, that we really take a look at that harvest and realize the need and go after it?

John West: That's a great question. So in the history, as you know, of higher education, universities were founded largely in the Christian West, in the Christian Middle Ages, to glorify God and to actually direct people to a better understanding of a comprehensive Christian worldview.

And America's universities, like Harvard and Princeton, were founded with that in mind. They don't do that anymore. So it's true, some people might think, well, churches are there to shepherd souls, and that's true. But universities were regarded, especially for those who are going to go into leadership, into professions in business, and in other areas of life, to help them to go deeper and integrate it all.

Hence, university, it's supposed to integrate. But the modern university is nothing like this. [unclear: possibly "multiplicity"] of stuff, of discordant ideas. And so you don't... It's not fulfilling that mission. And so I think you're right that that is a gaping hole right now, and this is particularly why you need Christian universities that are not just Christian in name only, which is, well, we're all one in Christ, but not one in any of our beliefs about Christ.

Because that's not real unity. I mean, Christians have legitimate disagreements on things, but there is a core that faithful Christians have accepted from the last 2,000 years. And so if you're so over the map, then you're really mimicking what the secular institutions are doing.

So I think there is this great both need, but also it's an exalted calling for Christian universities to fill that need. And I so liked what you discussed while we were here earlier in some of the faculty sessions, and

one of the things that you started off with of describing how even in your business program, where many people who may not be coming because it's a directly Christian education—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: When they get it, it opens up their minds and hearts, and they find it so valuable.

John West: And so, those who think, "Well, this is just for people who explicitly want a Christian education," no, every human being yearns at some point for God. The Augustine quote that actually you started off with or used in your presentation about that we're restless until we rest in thee, rest in God.

That's true. So how do we actually deliver that? Well, I think that first of all, as far as I can see, you're doing this at Cornerstone, is be very clear about what you think Christian truth is. Because if you're not clear about... I think sometimes even Christians, they try this, to deal with at the process level.

So they try to, after everything's fallen apart, they say, "Well, let's all come up with a marketing slogan of being unified in Christ even though we're not, and we haven't really thought it through." But as, at least what I'm seeing at Cornerstone is you've actually done the hard thinking of, well, what is a Christian higher education?

What is a Christian worldview involving creation, the fall, redemption, our ultimate sort of consummation? And think through that, and then intentionally build it out. And how do you safeguard? Well, you have a strong statement of faith. And then really, my background, professionally, when I was a college professor, was in political science, and they had a saying in political science: people or policy.

And so the number one thing is once you have your goals and your worldview that you're clear—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Foundational commitments.

John West: Foundational commitments. Right. Then you are very intentional about hiring people who are not just... They won't just check a box, but they're enthusiastic about it, and actually can add value in new ways and new ideas of going in the same direction.

And I think too many, again, without naming names, but I think even in the Christian sphere, sometimes we settle for lowest common denominator and, well, maybe that person isn't... Maybe they don't quite trust the Bible in this, or they don't do that, but they are sincere, and they're a good professional, so we'll hire them.

But that is, to be frank, long-term, that's the death of an institution if you have too many of those people. So you want to be strong and centered about what you really want to communicate and transmit because, of course, universities originally were about new knowledge, but they were about transmitting the great—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: That's right.

John West: knowledge and truth that we have and elaborating it and deepening it. And so you want to be clear about that, and then you want to be very intentional about hiring people who are enthusiastic about doing that.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah. You know, we're here at the DeWitt Center for Science and Technology, beautiful facility you saw.

John West: Yes, it is.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: We have the word, the scriptures engraved in the stone. A beautiful place for our students in all of our science and technology programs. And one of the things that I have found

throughout my young life is the power of a white lab coat. I think you know where I'm headed with it. The power of the white lab coat. You know, the minute someone has that and they speak, it is as if God was speaking. People pay attention because a white lab coat knows. What you called it this morning, right, it's scientism. Right? And that's very different than science. And yet scientism has made significant inroads in the church, in Christian universities, in our culture, because of lots of different reasons, and it has become tremendously corrosive to the truth, to the gospel, to many other things. Share with our listeners, give them the definition of what's scientism? And how do you know when you see it? How do you call it out? How do you engage it biblically for the beautiful, the good, and the true?

John West: So scientism, sort of simply put, is the idea that the only access we have to truth about the world is through modern science.

And then so I would say there's a corollary to that. Well, if that's really true, that the only way we can know anything true and everything else is a fairy story, is just through science, then those who speak for science really should rule because they're the only ones who have access to truth.

And you're exactly right about the lab coat. I have to laugh, and I won't name the president. It was not the current president, it was a number of years ago. There was a major piece of legislation, and they had a White House ceremony on it, and they basically passed out lab coats to people because they wanted the photo op of all these medical doctors and scientists who supported this legislation.

And so you're right that it's sort of, it's interesting. Science, genuine science that was born out of a Christian worldview actually requires evidence. It requires careful, rational thought. It requires debating pro and con.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: But if I may interject, you said something really powerful today, that the important and not just assumption, presupposition, principle, that since creation, since the existing order has purpose, design, you can study it. So that's powerful. And that's something that scientism seems to neglect and reject.

John West: Yes. So I'm sorry to interrupt, but I just—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: No, no, no, no, it's such a powerful thing.

John West: It is. I mean, sometimes people think, "Well, what utility is it that God created things or a designer created things? And that stops science." No, actually it's the beginning of science and even today. Because if you are trying to, say, understand a molecular machine and try to understand how the parts fit together, your operating assumption is it was designed for a purpose and that every part matters because it's fulfilling that purpose.

You don't start looking, "Oh, that neat little molecular machine that transports things inside my cell must have been cobbled together by chance and necessity, so I don't need to know what every part is doing because it doesn't..." So even the most Darwinian materialist, even a Richard Dawkins, arch atheist at Oxford University, evolutionary biologist, when they look at and try to study and understand things to do their science, they actually have to be at least a closet intelligent design proponent in order to do their science.

So you're exactly right. And scientism usually goes along with scientific materialism, that the material universe is all there ever was and will be, and that it's completely self-explanatory, and that mind is sort of an epiphenomenon of the universe. It didn't start the universe. But I would say that the scientism issue is that when people start saying... Actually, C.S. Lewis talked about this. So in the Middle Ages, sometimes people just say, "Well, thus saith the Lord," even if God didn't say it, but they just claim that, "Well, you have to follow me because I'm... God anointed me as emperor or whatever, and so whatever I

say, God says." And then your critical thought was supposed to shut down, and you just do it. Well, now people say, "Well, science says." Well, maybe science says, maybe it doesn't. Science is actually done by scientists who are fallible human beings.

And so one of the biggest problems with scientism is it shuts down people's critical faculties to actually not even be good scientists. To ask, "So okay, it's not science says. There's no abstract science. Scientists say, 'And what's the evidence for it? And what is the scientific evidence pro and con?'"

And then we could come to that conclusion, but one of the biggest problems today is people make claims in the name of science and say, "Well, then that shuts down all discussion." To any criticism, "Oh, that's just your religious fundamentalism," or any criticism is, "You can't be right because the majority says this."

Science isn't about majority. It's about the actual evidence. And so I think when you look... And anyone who knows about the history of science, and this is actually a value of a liberal arts education, if you understand the history of science, you know that science has done many great things but it's also had a lot of bad things because humans are the ones doing it.

This isn't because science is bad, but it's just as fallible as anything else. And so when you, whether you talk about the eugenics crusade, where trying to breed the superman or tried to stop the breeding of people considered evolutionarily unfit, or you talk about actually the lobotomy craze of trying to—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Right.

John West: All these were sold as if... In fact, one of my books, I go through some of these, and at the time that they were being done, it was, "Oh, well, this is what science says, and this is wonderful, and no one can raise criticism." And then within a few years, well, it turns out it wasn't quite what the initial promoters said.

And so I think one of the biggest dangers of scientism is that people check their rational faculties at the door. Another danger is that it's not true that modern material science is the only route to any sort of reality. And in fact, it's really not qualified to speak on certain things.

And C.S. Lewis talks about this in one of his essays about the dangers of what he called technocracy or scientocracy. That science is good, but science's purview is certainly not to tell us about what's moral or not, or even what good is worth at what price. In other words, a scientist might be able to tell you, if they're a good scientist, the particular ramifications if we adopt this policy or another one.

But trying to reconcile competing goods, politics and society and culture are often about there are 100 good things you can do, but you can only do five, and they all have countervailing consequences. How do you reconcile all that? Well, that involves moral reasoning based actually on your fundamental assumptions and beliefs, so including based on your biblical beliefs.

A scientist has no right to say that. And without getting too controversial and getting specific, I just say during the whole COVID era, there were so many claims in that, "Well, science says," when in fact scientists disagree. But it wasn't just that. Say, if you're having a lockdown for a year, the scientists could say, "Well, we need to do this because it will counteract this number of deaths," or something.

But okay, but then there are also deaths from depressions not treated. There were also problems when people are put out of business and don't have a livelihood. There are a lot of countervailing costs, and it wasn't the scientists who say, "Well, how do you reconcile all that?" That's actually something for all of us as human beings.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Right. And so Lewis was very concerned about scientists speaking outside the proper purview of science also. It's great to have you on campus also because you're a fellow political scientist. So I'll just put that out there for our audience. We're both trained political scientists. Now I want to ask you a question about what I call the, sort of, the 10,000 pound gorilla in the room in Christianity right now.

Which is this issue of Christian nationalism. And it's everywhere, and oftentimes it's become sort of the dirty word in Christianity. When you don't like someone, then you throw it at them and say, "You must be one of those Christian nationalists." Or your church or your place or whatever it is.

But before we talk about that and what it means, you had two great conversations with our faculty and staff about it, so thank you for that, John. But I want to talk about the underlying issue, which is the relationship between Christianity and the nation. Right?

Which I think we need to figure that out and get that squared away. What is it? Can there be one? Should there be one? What does it look like, right? We're Christians, citizens of heaven. And then we're also citizens of Earth. I'm always mindful of the scripture where the Lord tells the Jews in exile in Babylon, "Seek the welfare of the city." Right? "Seek the welfare of the city," right? Where you, where I brought you, and your exile's there. And I also speak as an immigrant. We immigrated to this country in 1980 from Colombia, South America, and so I had that experience as an immigrant, which is different than individuals who've been born here or have come from other places.

So I'm always wrestling with that and thinking through that. We're Christians, but we're also in here, embodied here. So what do you think? Let's start there with this conversation on Christian nationalism, the relationship between Christianity, us as Christians, and the place to which God has brought us, right? Or the place in which he has allowed us to be born and bred and raised, right, and educated. How do we relate these things and talk about them? Because there seems to be no good answers to this out there now, and I'm concerned, as you've mentioned. When there's a vacuum, bad ideas get in there.

John West: Yeah. So let's talk about Christianity and the nation, and we can talk about Christian nationalism. So in the broad sweep since Christianity arose, and this even was pre-Christian, most people realize that the most important thing in life was their relationship with God. Even in pagan cultures, they had... They didn't have a correct view of God, but they had some idea. And so if that's true, a lot of people assumed, certainly post-Constantine, that, well, if God is the most important thing, we need to fuse it with state power, and the state needs to enforce it. Well, I think that we had... That, by the way, that's not the view that Jesus propounds in the Bible, in the New Testament, and it's not the view of the first few centuries of the church that had a robust idea of religious liberty, pre-Constantine. In fact, the early Constantine, the Edict of Toleration, was actually in line with that. But then you had Christians who adopted this idea of let's fuse it all in state power, and then you had fellow Christians persecute each other.

First Catholics and Protestants, then Protestants persecuting each other. So why am I saying this? That's the background to what happened in America, and I happen to think that we happen to live in a very blessed place because when America was founded in the 1700s, and of course, the earliest settlements were before then, but there was this background of this constant infighting of actually one Christian against another even.

And yet... So how do we deal with that? I mean, in America, actually, you had some places where Baptists were subjected to the death penalty for their Baptist beliefs by fellow Christians in the early colonies. So for you—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Which colony? I want to know.

John West: I think it was in Massachusetts. I mean, it was... It was, yeah, one of the New England colonies. And so people who pine today for that sort of theocracy, I think they really don't know what they're talking about because they don't know history. But here's the positive thing, that our founders, many of whom were Christians, like John Jay was the head of the American Bible Society, some of whom were not, some of whom were deists, other things, but they all sort of...

They came up with an idea that there were other sort of analogs that pushed into it, but it's a beautiful idea. You recognize that the ends of human life, yes, is our relationship with God. That's the highest thing. But that doesn't mean that needs to be the goal of government.

They propounded a view where government, the ends of government are limited. They're limited to a civil sphere, a common ground that we actually share with each other because we're all created in the image of God, and it talks about in Romans that His law is written on our hearts. And so, yes, that's defaced. I understand all that. But there is a moral common ground. And so the founders, I talked about this in my book *The Politics of Revelation and Reason*, created a system where government's aims are in the lower sphere. It's not eternal destiny. It's on the things that we share together as citizens and where we can agree, whether we're Christians or non-Christians or a different variety of Christians.

Now, that does presume a common moral law, which we've lost, so I think we have to get back to that. But that allows you to have that. And then, not because it's less important, but because it's actually more important, you have in the area who really is mostly focusing on eternal destiny of people, that is the churches and the parachurch organizations, who should be given really wide religious freedom to do that.

And so you have this bifurcation, and in a way it's a type of separation of church and state, but not in the way people think today. It doesn't limit the influence of Christians in society. In fact, I think it frees them to do more. But it does limit the use of government power for certain things, for trying to enforce going to church, or trying to penalize people, or kill those Baptists, for example. And in fact, James Madison, in some of the things he wrote, talked about how our first thing is our allegiance to the governor of the universe. So it's to God. And so we need to make sure that when we start a government, that it doesn't interfere with that. That any subsidiary commitment will be in line with that. And so the founders had this idea of these... In later terms, you had in present Dutch thinking as sphere sovereignty—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Sphere sovereignty, right.

John West: Abraham Kuyper. But that's the same idea, that you have these spheres that there is some overlap, and there's overlap, of course, in the moral sphere. And the churches have a dynamic role in pointing people, not just to Jesus, but also when it comes to the inculcation of morality and the speaking out on morality and things, but you have religious liberty for that.

And I actually think that's a great system. And it's not a perfect system. No system is, because it's done by imperfect people. And I think that's a great relationship, and it led in America for large sections of our history, especially... I was talking earlier today, as you know, about the Second Great Awakening in the early 1800s, where you had this proliferation of voluntary societies that made America more Christian than it was during the Founding.

I mean, in fact, there were relatively few people who attended church each week, according to best that we can know about from historical records, at the time of the American Revolution. But by the time of the Civil War, you had huge numbers of people attending church because of these evangelical missionary societies, Sunday school unions to teach people reading.

I mean, when Alexis de Tocqueville came here from... and wrote Democracy in America, he was overwhelmed about how much individuals in America did, particularly Christian individuals, to basically spread their views to engage in self-government. Now, this does presume some things. One really big thing that the Founders' system presumes is a moral and religious people.

In fact, John Adams said that our constitution is not gonna work without a moral and religious people. And Benjamin Franklin, who wasn't really a Christian, but he understood some basic things and understood basic things about God, is that he said that a... only a virtuous nation is capable of freedom. As men become more vicious, they have more need of masters. And so if you're not... the idea is if you're not self-controlled—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Then you have to be controlled by something else.

John West: And just a thought experiment I sometimes would give when I taught. Hollywood always says, small town America is, they're prudes, they're not intolerant, there's no freedom there. Whereas living in the big city, the urban environment, you can do whatever you want, and that's freedom. Okay, that's their character. But let's think about it. If you're in a small town where you don't lock your door, where your kids can go out even late at night because you know that your neighbors aren't gonna be pedophiles, is that less free than in an urban environment where you have maybe triple deadbolt locks, you're afraid to talk to your neighbors because you know they were just let out from prison? I mean, I think our Founders understood this, and Benjamin Franklin was exactly right. The problem today is that if you don't have self-control, then people are always pining for more government control.

Anyway, I believe, I think the Founders' system, nothing is perfect, but of creating these different spheres that do have common ground, but where government is limited, the function of government is limited. It's not... The function of our government is not to determine whether you're saved. I mean, actually, that's the function of God. But it's to engage in civil justice and peace and protect people's natural and civil rights, and then create the conditions for genuine freedom, not license or licentiousness, but freedom, to flourish.

And then the purpose of the church and the voluntary sector is to point people toward their eternal relationship with God and with Jesus. And I think that when done rightly, that is better than any other system that we know of that has been devised.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Thank you. Wonderful. It's a good backdrop to the following conversation and question about Christian nationalism. You spoke at length about how it all depends on how you define terms. There are lots of different versions of this. And obviously, in cultural conversations, sometimes in the popular sphere, become messy and muddled, and no one defines terms, and it just becomes this thing you throw as an insult or an attack or a critique.

But there's something about it, ever since I even come to West Michigan, that as I listen to how people say it and use it against people and their critics or their targets, it's almost as if, if you are a Christian and you support the US or you like the US, right, or you like July 4th or you like to wave a flag, that you must be a Christian nationalist. And that must be bad. And there's something wrong with you and what you believe or your church or your institution or your university or whatever. And so it's almost like this thing that, as a Christian, you cannot support your country or advance it or advocate it or say, "I'm..." Because if you do, then you're a Christian nationalist. You're one of those alt-right, far right, racist, white supremacist kind of person. How dare you? You're not a Christian, and we're tired of it.

And that's what I sense out there, that we don't know how to anymore, it seems, or at least some Christians don't know how to support a country, be patriotic, support the principles, those things. And so

now we just don't, because to do so is the wrong thing. That's a sense I've received. What do you think, John?

John West: No, I think you're right, and I think one leads to the other. So I think, and we can get to, but I think there is this hardcore of self-described Christian nationalists that are bad news.

But one reason it's hard to recognize is we've had so many people crying wolf all the time. And you're exactly right. Many people who've identified with Christian nationalism, all they mean is, well, you should bring biblical principles into society and government. Great. Or that our rights come from God, not from government.

And those are basic foundational principles in America, and those are good things. Or you're right, for basic... People who are basically patriotic, they say, "Oh, that's Christian nationalism," and that's crying wolf. And the bad effect of that is that there are some bad actors, I think, that are pushing things, but they're actually enabled by that. The people who are crying wolf, who then also cry about the bad actors, they need to look at themselves. They helped create the bad actors, because by crying wolf, the ordinary people are trying to figure out, what is this? And of course, I'm patriotic, so I guess that means I'm a Christian nationalist because that's what they say, and so there must be nothing bad about that.

Or, I believe rights came from God, so I must be Christian nationalism, and so they say it's bad, and it's not. You're actually misinforming people by crying wolf all the time. So I think you're exactly right.

And then you have some Christians who are sold a bill of goods that, well, religious liberty, that's something created by the liberals to oppress Christians and secularists, and they never understand because that's... Actually, secularists do misuse it that way. They don't understand the Christian case for religious liberty. That goes back to the Baptists, the Quakers, others, that gave a... In fact, goes back to the early church, people like Tertullian. The things that led to the Edict of Toleration and Constantine go back, I think ultimately go back to Jesus, where Jesus talks about the wheat and the tares.

I'd say for some Christians, if there's anyone who's listening, I hope there isn't, but there are people who are conflicted and think that religious liberty is bad, think about Jesus' teaching on the wheat and the tares, where you have the wheat, and then you have the weeds brought in, but you can't tell which is which, who they are. And so Jesus says, "You wait until the consummation of the end of the age where God is going to sort that out." So it's not the civil power's authority to try to determine who's a Christian, who's not, and who should go to hell now. I mean, it's... God knows people's hearts and knows who He's called and knows... He knows that. And so it's not calling for us to engage in the use of civil power and coercion. In fact, I don't think you can coerce someone to accept Christ. They can go through the motions, but that's a whole nother problem. If you look at places with state churches, you have loads of people who are Christian in name only who are anything but Christian, and so it actually contaminates true Christianity.

So I do think you're exactly right. There's a lot of misuse of that term, and I firmly understand, and I'm not against at all, and I affirm the people who say, think, "Well, maybe I'm a Christian nationalist because I think the American founding was good," or, "Because I think that biblical principles should be in public life," or that, "God gave me our rights."

No, that's very legitimate. And actually another brand of people who sometimes adopt Christian nationalism, they're concerned about globalism, and they want local control. I think local control is good. I think because that's how you have consent of the governed. That's actually in our Declaration of Independence.

So I affirm all of that. The challenge is there is a minority of people who have actually now embraced the term and define it in a very specific way that, unfortunately, in my view, fulfills some of the caricatures of the people who cry wolf. And so I think this whole started out with a lot of wolf crying of people crying wolf for people who were not wrong and not bad. But then you had people say, "Oh, well that term, I'm gonna embrace it, and then I'm gonna do, in fact, push what in fact the people were warning about."

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: John, another question that I have for you, and you touched on it today with our faculty and staff, and yesterday as well. I remember one of the first times I heard this play out was when my children were small and they went to public school. And then they came back with a number of sort of coloring pictures, you know? They had colored with crayons and so on, and it was about Thanksgiving, okay? And I'll never forget, I was in the front yard of our house in Virginia, and they came back and they were showing this picture to me and telling me about it.

And they said, "And we were told all these things and how bad it was." And I paused and I said, "Let me... So was there anything good that happened?" "No, nothing good happened." And it began... I remember thinking, we no longer know how to speak about good things that are done in our country or by our public figures, right? We throw everything out in some ways. We don't know how to discern, how to speak about this. It's a very serious issue because as you have mentioned, we're all fallen creatures. We're all sinful. We all fallen short of God's glory and God's grace. And He's poured his grace out to us through Christ.

But that's a very real thing. Even the individual that we love the most, the most heroic in our mind, there's something wrong. So how do we talk to our listeners? How do we help our students at Cornerstone? How do we help students in K12? How do we help our neighbors, our friends in churches speak about the good things and the bad things without throwing everything away? How do we do that?

John West: That's a good question. I think one of the things is to really emphasize, not in a cherry-picking way, because a lot of the things where we just emphasize all the bad things is sort of cherry-picking. Bad things for some people that we don't like and not for those that we do like.

Right. Is to really give people a deep appreciation that we all are sinners. And so no one short of Jesus is sinless. And so you're gonna expect to find, and even if you don't know it, there is gonna be something there. And so that they're ready when they see it, so that when you can talk about, well, yes, there were these bad things, but then there were these also selfless things that they did that actually do follow what Christ wanted.

They're already sort of attuned to the fact that they shouldn't expect someone to be perfect. And they should know that, but we sometimes forget that when we're in the heat of things. And so I think it's very important to give people both a compassionate and a rounded view of who we are as human beings, so that when they see these cases even where troubling things come out, they can also realize that, well, that doesn't cancel out the very selfless things they did.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah, and you know, I'm thinking about next year, the 250th anniversary of the United States. I come as an immigrant. My father says to me, "We're bringing you to the land of opportunity. What you and your brother do with that, it's up to you. But this is what we can do, and we're bringing you here."

And you think, and I as an immigrant look at this country and think, it's a phenomenal country. It's a great country. I love this country, right? And yet I have heard people in the last couple of months speak about the 250th as, "I'm not gonna celebrate." I hate this country. I want to... I mean, you've seen

celebrities. I want to move from this country. I'm getting citizenship in Canada or in Italy or wherever it is. I don't want... I hate it. I hate it. I hate it.

So this is a very serious question for Christians, right? And over the next 12 months as this thing is gonna happen, this huge massive celebration, right? How do we as Christians engage that very real serious cultural issue and question of the celebration of the founding? What advice would you give to us?

John West: Okay. Well, first—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: No easy questions here, John.

John West: No. These are getting into some interesting territory certainly. Well, first of all, think about the Bible. Do you uphold David as a hero of the faith? Think most people do, yet he committed adultery, and he killed someone because of it. And you can think of many of the heroes of the Bible, other than Jesus, I think most people can recognize that we're also sinners. And so that...

And so when you approach the American founding, you need to recognize that. But also, in a lot of these things with American founding, we need to make sure that we're also telling the truth, which is... So one of the big challenges, blots on American history is slavery. On the other hand, one of the big good things is that we resolved it and that there were so many people who fought against it precisely because of their Christian convictions.

And so at the time of the American founding when they proclaimed all men are created equal, people say, "Oh, well, but we had slavery." Yes, we did, and a number of the founders knew that and were troubled by that and actually worked in various ways to try to overturn that. Even some who were slave owners knew that it was wrong and did try to do some proposals.

Now, should they be faulted for not following through on them? Yes. But it's actually a story that doesn't just have the people who compromise. It has the people who actually also stood up for it. I mean, one of my, is it like great-great-great-grandfathers or something, was recruited in a Pennsylvania regiment in the Civil War, a volunteer among abolitionists.

He was white. He went to fight for that war, yes, to save the Union, to save the Union, to stop the spread of slavery. So, so yes, it was to save the Union, but slavery was part of that. He was grievously wounded for the rest of his life. Fortunately, he didn't... And there were hundreds of thousands of people who did that who were white.

It wasn't in their interest to do that, but they did that. And so part of the story of America is, yes, the travesties that happened that I don't think we should cover up, and I've done a documentary on human zoos that's on the history of scientific racism, and I talk actually in my latest book because I do think some Christians are too quick to dispose of.

Oh, well, that was long ago, so we don't need to know about it. No, you do need to know about it because there's a lot of hurting even today, and I've spent enough time in the African-American community, especially when I made that film, that I don't think a lot of whites really quite understand the depth of the tragedy, the sorrow, the anger that is there that they need to listen to. Having said that, you also have to recognize that there were many people who stood for truth because of their Christian convictions, and we should honor that. And really the question is with our founding principles, it's not because America's the greatest nation because we're all the greatest bunch of people.

No, there are a lot of bad people in America and a lot of, I could just list those things. But the principles in the Declaration of Independence that actually flow out of a Christian worldview that all men are

created equal and endowed by their creator, not by man, by their creator with inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Pursuit of happiness actually includes pursuit of eternal happiness, so pursuit of God. Those are true however untrue individuals are. And so on the one hand, I think you need to emphasize that. And this is something that we recognize. Martin Luther King, who's an interesting figure. I regard him as a hero, yet if you know about his personal life, you know he had some issues in his personal life.

I don't think that detracts. There are some white racists who try to say, "Oh, see, Martin Luther King, he was a communist, or he was this, or he was an adulterer, so therefore that cancels out all he's done." Preposterous. He was a great individual in promoting non-violent action for racial equality.

But he got it right where he said the principles of the Declaration, there was nothing wrong with those. Those are actually foundational. So the fact that some people didn't live up to them doesn't mean those principles are wrong. But then also there were a lot of people who really did even die over trying to stand up for those principles.

And I think of in the human zoos where there was this case in New York City where the Darwinists, and including they were cheered on by The New York Times at the time, basically put an African man, a man from Africa, in a monkey cage with a monkey as an evolutionary missing link.

Well, who are the people who opposed it? It wasn't the secular intelligentsia of the time. It wasn't the evolutionary zoologist at Columbia University or The New York Times. It was both white and Black ministers. In fact, the first person to speak out was a Scottish-born, I think, white minister, that this was an abomination to treat a person who's created in the image of God that way.

And then Black ministers did, too. So that's... Although I'm horrified by what happened to him, I also am very... It's something that we should at least talk about, certainly, about the people who were faithful because they are examples we can follow today. And so part of it is recognizing that the principles are right.

But then also recognize the genuinely good things that were done and not just papering those over. Because it's not a true view of history simply to focus on one aspect of the people who got things wrong.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: John, here in closing, you have such wonderful opportunity through the Discovery Institute and as you partner with universities and churches and so many in the work that you do. What sort of advice, encouragement would you give to our listeners of this podcast, at Cornerstone students, in the community at large about the future, about Christ and the Gospel and the future, and how they should take it and run with it? What advice would you give to our listeners as we think about the weeks and days ahead?

John West: Well, I think we're in a really exciting time. We've been in a very dark time, I think, for a while, but if you look at the survey data of both younger people, if you look at some public debates on issues of consequence, things are opening up where a genuinely Christian viewpoint can be heard and not just shut down. And so I think we... There's a tremendous opportunity, so people should be hopeful because of that.

But then we need to ask, "So what is God calling us to do?" And I say, if you're a parent and you have kids coming here, or if you're a young person who is coming here, what is God calling you to do?

And I think the number one thing is, God calls people to do different things, but he gives you certain talents and time, treasure, talent, and so he wants you to steward those well. And so whether it be where you're connected to church, where you're sending your kid to university or school, how you're spending

time with your kids to talk about consequential issues, how are you stewarding the things that God has given you?

So God may not be asking you to change everything out in the rest of the world. We're not like Atlas with the fate of the universe on our shoulders, but God has given us some... It may just be our kids, it may be our spouse, it may be, if you don't have kids, it could be a nephew or a niece, or it could be someone else's kids in your church that you're mentoring.

And if you're a young person, you have your whole life ahead of you, and God is, part of it is, what is God calling you to do now? It may be, if you're going to college, it should be to do the best you can now to learn and be equipped in order to serve, and to also prayerfully ask God, "What are you calling me to do?"

Because I'm a great believer that God does answer specific prayers, not always in the way we anticipate. And so I think really prayerfully thinking through and maybe doing an inventory, "Well, what has God put me in charge of or given me responsibility over? How am I stewarding that?"

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: John, thank you for being on the podcast. Thank you for being at Cornerstone. You spent two days with us. It's been a blessing. May God bless you in your work, and we look forward to talking with you again.

John West: Thank you. It's been great.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Thank you, John.

TRANSCRIPT NOTICE

This transcript was generated using automated speech-to-text technology and may contain small transcription errors, including inaccuracies in wording, punctuation, or speaker identification. While reasonable efforts have been made to ensure accuracy, the transcript should not be considered a verbatim record of the podcast. For the most accurate representation of the conversation, please refer to the original audio recording.