



Protestants: The Faith that Made the Modern World

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Detail from "Theses" by Julius Hübner. CREDIT: [Public Domain/Wikipedia](#)

Alec Ryrie, Joanne J. Myers

JOANNE MYERS: Hello, I'm Joanne Myers, director of Public Affairs programs at the Carnegie Council in New York City. It is my pleasure to welcome Alec Ryrie to this podcast.

Our guest graduated from Cambridge University with a double first in history and received a doctorate in theology from Oxford. Today he is professor of the history of Christianity at Durham University and is a licensed minister in his local church. We will be discussing his recently published book entitled [Protestants: The Faith that Made the Modern World](#).

Dr. Ryrie, welcome to this podcast.

ALEC RYRIE: It's a pleasure to be with you.

JOANNE MYERS: In writing about Protestants you take a very inclusive view. Who are the members of this religion that are part of the story you tell?

ALEC RYRIE: I think this is a huge and incredibly diverse family of different religious movements. The problem is thinking what actually ties them together, what makes them something that you can talk about using a single word meaningfully.

To me that is partly a question of dissent; all of these movements can in some way trace themselves back to that moment whose quincentenary we're marking this year, when [Martin Luther](#) began his [protest](#) against initially just the fundraising practices of some of the clergymen around him, a protest that at the beginning he had no idea was going to lead to first a Europe-wide and then a global [religious revolution](#), and now embraces something like a billion people worldwide.

I think it's tied together by more than just that history. There's a constant of experience as well, the conviction that it's possible and necessary for everybody to encounter God directly without any intermediary of priest or church or sacrament, but simply each believer standing before God, no one barring the way, no one to hide behind, simply calling on [Jesus](#) and listening to the word of God as found in the [Bible](#).

JOANNE MYERS: Does this include only Protestants? Who are the [Quakers](#), the [Unitarians](#), the [Mennonites](#)?

ALEC RYRIE: How you define the word "Protestant" is one of the things that people like to argue about. I've taken a very inclusive approach; all of the groups that you've mentioned, and many others, it seems to me, belong to that family. An attempt to exclude them just sounds to me like special pleading. They all share that inheritance; they all descend from that. More importantly, I think they all share that kind of spirituality. There is a recognizable family resemblance to them.

Incidentally, I would want to exclude [Mormonism](#) from this group because although it also comes out of a Protestant milieu, I think it's so different and has gone in such a starkly differently direction in terms of its spirituality as well as its [doctrine](#) that really you have to see that as a distinct religion in its own right.

JOANNE MYERS: Is there one thing in your view that distinguishes Protestants then from, say, Mormons or Catholics? Is it spirituality or is it something else?

ALEC RYRIE: I think it's that direct relationship between the believer and God without going through any sorts of structures or intermediaries, without priests, without deferring to other authorities on the way. Of course, the relationship between the believer and God is fundamental to any sort of Christianity, I think, to most religious cultures of any sort. What's distinctive about Protestantism is that there's no chain of command; there's no structure through which that relationship is operated—churches, priests, sacraments. It is simply the individual believer standing directly before God. That really does set it apart amongst Christian movements.

It's distinct from Mormonism, which has a very strong notion of the priesthood and the role of the Mormon Church. It's something that certainly sets it apart from the Catholic and Orthodox traditions, but it does seem to me to tie together all of these disparate Protestant movements of the kind that we see around the world.

JOANNE MYERS: You have written that "we cannot understand the modern age without understanding the dynamic history of Protestant Christianity." Why does the story of Protestantism matter to us today?

ALEC RYRIE: It matters partly because this is the story of a billion people around the world, and it's also—in particular in Europe, but especially in the United States—one of the founding religious identities and cultural identities that we're still all shaped by. Whether people as individuals are themselves Protestant believers or out of a Protestant culture or not, it's the water that we swim in. In that sense, simply it's just part of our inheritance and part

of the world.

It goes deeper than that, though. I think a lot of the structures that we think of as fundamental to the modern world—the whole notion of democratic liberalism, capitalism, limited government, free inquiry—these things fundamentally come out of the innovations that Protestantism made as it began to find its feet and work out what it meant to live out this new sort of religion from the 16th and 17th centuries onward.

I've tried to pin this down to, I think, three key elements of the modern world which derive directly from innovations that Protestantism brought to us. One of those is the emphasis on free inquiry, on intellectual openness, because this is a movement that refuses to accept anybody else's authority being imposed on its thinking, which will not accept being dictated to intellectually by anybody else. The concept of free inquiry and free speech that comes from it, I think, is fundamental to that even if not all Protestants—especially at the beginning—realized that that was where their religion was necessarily going to have to take them. So there's free inquiry.

I would also say that democracy is an inescapable consequence of Protestant values, although an awful lot of early Protestants would have kicked very hard against that. They spent a long time resisting the tug of their beliefs in that direction. But once you've emphasized the sovereignty of the individual conscience and the responsibility of each individual Christian to stand before God in their own right, it then becomes very difficult when you're faced with a government that is doing something that you disagree with simply to accept its authority.

To begin with, the early Protestants talked about this in terms not of rights but of responsibilities, that when you're faced with a godless ruler you can't simply shrug your shoulders and say, "Well, I'm only a peasant. These matters are too high for me." You had to, if necessary, take up arms in order to resist what was being done by those claiming to rule in your name. That has, I think, tugged inexorably toward a notion of participatory government with a degree initially of simply popular involvement, but pulling in the end toward a straightforward democratization. Of course, it's not the only root of that, but I think it's an indispensable one.

JOANNE MYERS: I would agree.

ALEC RYRIE: The third element is the idea of limited government, the notion not just that government has to have a degree of popular support, that there's an element of popular sovereignty, but that even so that government's powers are strictly limited, that no matter how legitimate its rule might be, its purchase over the conscience of the believer is very limited indeed, that in the end government is there to regulate and control the affairs of this world, but in the most important things—as Protestants would classically see them in the kingdom of Christ as they would distinguish it from the kingdom of this world—governments simply have no sway.

So, the very kind of contradictory notion that there should be a government of popular sovereignty whose powers are strictly limited—the idea that you should have both democracy and liberalism in the classic sense of the word—is not an obvious synthesis by any means. We all know that attempts to combine democracy and liberty—the rule of law and the rule of the people—have often proved very difficult in practice. That synthesis which feels so natural to us is, it seems to me, deeply rooted in the Protestant ethic.

JOANNE MYERS: I would agree with you, particularly at this time when we're all questioning our democratic values and why we value democracy. Religion is certainly very important. But at different times Protestants have been accused of being political revolutionaries, of supporting tyrannies and of withdrawing from politics altogether. But in modern politics do you see Protestants taking a particular side? Would it be liberal or conservative?

ALEC RYRIE: I think what makes this such a fascinating and infuriating subject is that the answer is "all of the above." Protestants have been deeply involved in political struggles on all sides. One of the things that made this such a powerful movement is its adaptability, that it has been able to shape itself to, well, to be blunt, to fulfill the needs of

the people who are professing it in any number of different political circumstances.

To be a bit more precise, there is a very conservative trend within Protestantism, which is simply wanting to work with and support existing powers. Martin Luther was very much a political conservative. He was skeptical about law. He narrowly escaped being a lawyer as a young man and never wished to go back to it. That notion of simply working with and supporting existing governments has been very strong and has continued to be strong. There have been friendly relationships, sometimes uncomfortably friendly relationships, between Protestants and right-wing authoritarian governments, right up to our own times.

On the other side, there has also been a revolutionary face to it. You've seen this most obviously in the period of the [wars of religion](#) in the 16th and 17th centuries. It was Protestant revolutionaries in my own country who ended up fighting a [war](#) against a [king](#) and cutting his head off and creating what was supposed to be a perfect, Godly republic. It didn't last very well.

So you've had a series of movements of this kind. Indeed, in the United States itself, those sorts of radical, reforming Protestant movements challenging the political consensus in the name of democracy, in the name of anti-slavery, in the name of civil rights, have been a repeated feature of American life.

The third element, which I think helps to explain how those two have been able to exist alongside other, is this apolitical element, this insistence on simply withdrawal from political involvement, which is traditionally associated with groups like the [Amish](#) and Mennonites; with movements like the [Seventh-day Adventists](#); or maybe especially the [Jehovah's Witnesses](#), who have taken that political withdrawal further than anybody else; and in modern times most importantly with [Pentecostalism](#), which has insisted simply that politics doesn't matter that much and that Christians should focus on the power of God experienced in their own lives rather than looking to governments to solve social problems.

That is as problematic as any of the other approaches. It is not a stable way of dealing with social problems, but insofar as it emphasizes the corruption and limited power of government actually to tackle social issues and focuses communities on self-help instead, it's actually turned out to be very powerful. You've seen this making waves particularly in contemporary Latin America and Africa, where dealing with often ineffective and unresponsive governments this has tended to turn these now very large communities toward patterns of self-help and self-improvement.

JOANNE MYERS: Is that the explanation for why it is expanding so rapidly right now in China, Africa, and Latin America?

ALEC RYRIE: Those are a whole set of different stories. I think fundamentally the reasons for those sorts of expansions are to do with the adaptability that Protestantism has that I mentioned a few minutes ago. It's able to work itself into different cultural shapes for different settings. All of these are societies which are changing very rapidly in some very similar ways. There is runaway urbanization, hugely disruptive economic shifts, and so old structures and habits of life are disappearing. In that setting, a religious tradition which is so adaptable and which is not dependent on existing structures of community has a particular opportunity.

Maybe the most striking example of this is China, where the [Cultural Revolution](#) between 1966 and 1976 or so supposedly swept away all old habits and customs and beliefs, and both Protestant and Catholic Christianity came as much under attack as any other. But that cultural scorched-earth policy—attempting to sweep away all of the existing customs and structures that were present in China, supposedly in order to create space for a new [Maoist](#) structure to be built—actually, like any scorched-earth policy, left space for invasive species to establish themselves on the newly cleared ground.

Because of Protestantism's sheer adaptability and also its weightlessness—this is a religion that doesn't need structures; it doesn't need material objects; it doesn't need priesthoods; it doesn't even necessarily need bibles as in the Cultural Revolution era in China they're banned. What it needs is prayers and memories of the stories and songs and the name Jesus, and it's possible for it to establish itself then and adapt itself to local circumstances with extraordinary effectiveness.

JOANNE MYERS: You've just hit upon the adaptability, its weightlessness, as its strength, but what are the weaknesses of this religion?

ALEC RYRIE: In many ways those are also its weaknesses. In terms of its ability to reach into the modern world, the fact of that adaptability and enormous variety means that there are plenty of ugly faces to this tradition, both historically and today. If you're looking for a religion which can become an opponent, then you are certain to find some face of Protestantism that you find unacceptable, no matter who you are. It is very easy to find examples which discredit it and, of course, because it's so unstructured in terms of bureaucracies there are scandals, there are charlatans, people exploiting the opportunities that this chaotic free market in religion provides to them. So there is a set of problems there.

The fact of sort of cultural weightlessness also makes it difficult for it to put down roots that endure and to really become established within a culture. One of the things that makes this such a complex story is that settled stability of religious culture over generations is something that Protestants have generally struggled to do, even in countries like Germany or Britain or the United States, where it has become central to national identity. In each of those three countries—even in the United States—it's now very much in retreat. Maintaining that sort of deep stability within a culture over generations is something that it has struggled with. It has both been able to but also had to reinvent itself for each generation.

JOANNE MYERS: For the last question, you've described this book as a history of Protestants rather than of Protestantism, and we know about Luther and [Calvin](#), but who are some of the other key people in your story?

ALEC RYRIE: I came across an awful lot of extraordinary individuals while telling this story. I do have the big-name theologians and political leaders in there because you can't really avoid them. But the ones who have really stayed with me are some of the ordinary folks who have made this movement what it is. This has always been an anti-authoritarian movement which has been reluctant to simply take the word of its leadership. I think the suspicion toward expertise that we've seen so strikingly in Western political culture in the last couple of years is something that has deep roots within the Protestant tradition.

So the people who have stood out for me are people like, for example, [Rebecca Protten](#), who was born as a slave in Antigua in the early 18th century. Once she was freed, she converted to [Moravianism](#), this sort of radical Protestant movement that was one of the first really active missionary movements; was imprisoned and threatened with being sold back into slavery for refusing to renounce her faith; was eventually freed and moved to Europe, became one of the first ordained Protestant women, and eventually married and moved to Africa. That sort of extraordinary, world-spanning story is the kind of thing that's possible in this.

Coming closer to our own times, somebody like [Pandita Ramabai](#), who was a highborn Indian woman who became a campaigner for women's rights in late 19th century India, experienced a dramatic conversion to something that we can sort of call Pentecostalism, but it's a little bit before the word was coined, but that seems to have been very much her experience. She led an extraordinary revival in the women's refuge that she ran in India.

Then there are the nameless people. Some of the materials about the churches in North Korea where, of course, any sort of Christian practice is extraordinarily dangerous, some of that material I've found very compelling. There are tales of heroism, but also simply of believers desperately trying to manage astonishingly difficult situations.

I read an account which was provided by a North Korean security individual who succeeded in escaping who talked about being invited by two of his more senior colleagues to a meeting which turned out to be a private prayer meeting. An extraordinarily dangerous thing for them to do to invite him—they were taking their lives in their hands by doing this—and explaining to him at this meeting that they were responsible for hunting down Christian communities and for bringing them into the North Korean prison camp system. They felt the need to balance their commitment to their faith by arresting some people, enough to be able to maintain their position, but using their position nevertheless to defend others, and how they navigated that sort of balance.

I find those sorts of stories of how ordinary individuals have muddled through and tried to find the best way they can of coping with appallingly difficult situations are the sorts of tales that I found the most compelling.

JOANNE MYERS: Thank you so much for providing us with such an engaging history of Protestant Christianity. It was a pleasure speaking with you.

ALEC RYRIE: Thank you very much.

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