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“ COMMENT

Why I love Great Britain

Your country granted the world a gift which stands in permanent opposition to our most appalling proclivities as individuals and societies

JORDAN PETERSON



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Of all the twists and turns that my life has taken over the last few years, one of the most truly upsetting and surreal was learning that I had been peremptorily disinvited from one of Britain's great universities.

In 2018, when I last travelled to Britain, I met with several Cambridge professors and began to discuss the possibility of arranging a seminar there, focusing on some key Biblical texts. A formal offer of a Visiting Fellowship was proffered to me in February 2019, facilitated by Dr Douglas Hedley, Professor of the Philosophy of Religion at Clare

College, and arranged through the necessary actions on the part of Cambridge and the University of Toronto.

In the autumn of 2016, I had rented a 500-seat theater (on a whim, you might say) in Toronto, Canada, and delivered fifteen 90-minute public lectures entitled [The Psychological Significance of the Biblical Stories](#). Surprisingly, all the lectures attracted a sold-out house. Furthermore, the majority of the audience consisted of young men, a notoriously difficult audience to attract to such things. The initial lecture, [Introduction to the Idea of God](#), focused on the first two sentences of the Book of Genesis. Those who came to watch and listen walked their way with me through the remainder of that great book during the remaining fourteen.

By the close of 2018, when initial arrangements were being made regarding my Fellowship, some four million people had watched the first lecture on YouTube, with a multitude more listening on my podcast. The series has now been viewed or watched forty million times. It has, in addition, attracted a widespread positive response from Christian Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox believers alike (even widespread positive critical response), as well as large swathes of the Orthodox Jewish and Islamic faithful. In a further unexpected twist, the lectures have also proved popular with those who regard themselves as explicitly atheistic.

I recount this only to explain why the initial invitation from Cambridge was proffered: it has proved increasingly difficult for those concerned about our traditional and religious heritage to propagate their message — their ideas — to the modern community, and the success of my venture generated some great curiosity.

Out of Egypt

After the success of the Genesis venture, I had the ambition to continue my investigations and discussion with the Book of Exodus. Knowing that I am an amateur in such matters (being possessed of no training in formal theology) I thought it would be prudent to test my knowledge and understanding in a setting that would challenge what I was assuming and potentially rectify my profound remaining ignorance. I therefore set out with my would-be Cambridge hosts to hear the opinions of those who had made the study of Divinity their central calling before I presumed to re-engage upon my lecture series. It was a great honour for me, and I say this most truly, to be offered this opportunity as a psychologist and an academic interloper.

My invitation raised some hackles behind the scenes, however, based on what I would call a wilfully blind “misinterpretation” of my putative political views. In consequence, the invitation was unceremoniously rescinded, on an excuse which I later learned had been manufactured post-hoc. This happened, conveniently as well as treacherously, when Dr Hedley, my sponsor, was absent conducting his affairs in India.

I discovered that I had been cancelled not as a formal notification, but accidentally, on Twitter. This, to say the least, was a shock.

Earlier this year, however, I received an invitation to return. In the aftermath of my cancelling (and other too-similar incidents), an intense battle had been waged to make the sort of gratuitous forbidding that had been applied to me impossible.

A group of Cambridge dons arose to challenge and reword a set of revisions to the university policy on free speech that would have, ironically — if that word is strong enough — made future similar cancellations both easier and more likely. Then they attempted to find twenty-five people who would affix their names to a petition that forced a full, anonymous and binding vote on the matter. This specific effort took months.

People were afraid to sign; afraid that making their support for such a change public would expose them to sanctions similar in consequence to those that befell me; afraid that they would be mobbed and cancelled. But enough people eventually did so, and the matter was duly brought forward to Regent House, Cambridge’s ultimate governing body.

And when the vote was called, an unusually large proportion of those eligible to cast their ballots turned out to make their opinions known. Almost nine out of ten of the fifteen-hundred or so who did so voted to make such cancellations impossible in the future — a larger margin of victory than any of the academics I spoke with about such issues of governance could recall. Obviously, something was transpiring of far broader significance than the mere revoking of my individual fellowship offer.

The salvation of the rapidly-corrupting modern university

And, so, to the first of many reasons why I love Great Britain. Cambridge (like Oxford, from which it is descended, much as it dislikes to admit it) has a highly decentralised college structure. Both great institutions are more a loose collection of autonomous colleges, each with their own history, tradition, architecture, peculiarities of self-government, and educational aims. This arrangement allows for maximal liberty and

creativity in thought and action at the most vitally important level — the local — while simultaneously enabling an optimal level of cross-college rivalry and cooperation.

Furthermore, and most significantly, this free and loose organisational structure makes bureaucratic capture of the entire institutions extremely difficult. This, in turn, makes the rectification of mistakes, which will inevitably be made, possible and even likely. And that might just be the salvation of the rapidly-corrupting modern university, as well as everything downstream from that culture (and that is everything).

And the rebellion at that august institution and elsewhere against the ideological forces currently threatening free discourse and inquiry in the academy is just beginning. Mark my words.

My wife and I [returned to Cambridge](#) on November 17. I attended a number of seminars there, and delivered two public lectures (as I did a week later at Oxford, where I had also been invited to meet, speak and teach). I used these opportunities to discuss and test a proposition key to the body of thought I have been developing and communicating about for many decades: that we all perceive the world not as a set of self-evident objective material facts, but as a system of meaning, and that we do so by applying a framework which when described is a narrative: a story. I proposed further that this fact has profound — even revolutionary — implications for how we understand science and theology and for how we conceptualise ourselves, existentially, in the world.

These ideas were markedly well received.

I also had the great privilege of talking for several hours while at Oxford first to Sir Roger Penrose, perhaps the world's most renowned living physicist, and then to Dr Richard Dawkins, who is rather uniquely a Fellow both of the original Royal Society (an honor bestowed upon outstanding scientists) and of the Royal Society of Literature, founded in 1820 by King George to “reward literary merit and excite literary talent.” Dr Dawkins is, as well, perhaps the world's most famous and influential atheist.

Dr Penrose and I (along with Dr Stephen Blackwood, who served as mediator) discussed his fascinating artistic proclivity for geometric tiling — an endeavour related, in my opinion, to the relationship between mapping a territory and the territory itself. I spoke with Dr Penrose mostly to inquire and to learn, as his knowledge roams far afield from mine, and was well-rewarded in my efforts, as our conversation literally spanned the micro- and macro-cosmic realms.

I spoke with Dr Dawkins (after long, tentative and increasingly amicable correspondence beforehand) to clarify my ignorance of his well-defended positions, particularly in relationship to his opposition to religious belief and behavior. Suffice it to say in the latter case that we have much more to talk about. I greatly enjoyed both opportunities and will be releasing a video recording of the former and an audio of the latter in the very near future.

I believe that these conversations went very well. I certainly found them intensely engrossing and informative. And I regard it as another great privilege and opportunity to place them online, where they will be made available to millions of avid listeners around the world. I can do that because I am a free-speaking citizen of Canada, a member of the British Commonwealth and, except for our own sporadic and inexcusable foolishness, a country shaped to the core by the English Common Law tradition.

Furthermore, I can make those discussions and all my talks and seminars at Oxbridge available on YouTube, the technologically-revolutionary platform invented by Americans who were even at the time of their revolution and are still now in some real sense sovereign British citizens, insisting on their due and intrinsic rights.

The power of free speech

And what would the world be without the recognition of those rights? A stifling web of intrigue; a system of archaic dynasties; a tribal mess of clans, steeped in nepotism, warring with one another for access to the short-term exigencies of power. I realise that there are other lights in the world, apart from the UK and its subsidiaries and once-dependents, although I would argue that even the European countries that profess respect for freedom of speech and thought (in reality, fealty to the divine word, both secular and inescapably religious) have done so in no small part because of the influence of that great land.

And the fact that Dr Dawkins and I came armed, so to speak, with radically different viewpoints and conceptions was a spur to our very productive conversation, and not an impediment. And the fact that such discussions and their dissemination are possible throughout so much of the world (rather than positively forbidden and fatally dangerous) is another one of the reasons I love Great Britain.

My talks at both Cambridge and Oxford appeared uniformly welcomed by faculty and students alike (with a single exception: a rather courageous and comic young woman, dressed in a full-body lobster suit, who popped in during my most public talk at Cambridge to shout “feminism” and dance briefly about).

Why was that reception so positive, uniform, and manifold, when I was apparently ignorant and malevolent enough to be banned from the campus only two short years ago? The students at Cambridge remained seated when I entered the hall just prior to my first talk, although they had lined up down the block for most of the day beforehand, while the Oxford crowd, anxious as they are not to be outdone, gave me a (overwhelmingly moving) standing ovation before I spoke there.

I say that not in triumph, I hope, as that would be the sort of pride that deservedly invites a fall, although I might need to confess occasionally harbouring at least a quizzical smile about such things. Such a public response seems at curious odds with the idea so invidiously insisted upon that I was and am a fundamentally malign person, characterised by literally unacceptable political opinions.

The same mode of interaction made itself evident in what were many dozens of encounters with individual students on the streets and in the colleges at Oxbridge: no fear, no disgust, no contempt, no hatred — just a series of extremely inviting, pleasant, and often surprisingly deep and intimate individual encounters with fine mostly young people, striving with all due effort upward and onward, informing me forthrightly that they were doing so.

Perhaps an inquiring and curious journalist could discuss, among other issues, the fact of my fellowship revocation, the Regent House vote, and the positive response to my presence at Cambridge with the soon-to-depart Vice Chancellor (another Canadian — we are a pesky and intrusive lot), Prof Stephen Toope, whose precipitous retirement from the glorious UK academic and cultural scene was somewhat synchronistically timed, given the aforementioned vote and my subsequent re-invitation. Or, perhaps it could all be discussed with the tiny number of individuals, still meddling madly and unrepentantly behind the scenes, who orchestrated the whole false thing in the beginning.

And the fact that a journalist could inquire about such things is yet another reason why I love Great Britain, with its profound commitment to the idea that the curious have the right to interrogate and investigate those who have been granted authority or usurped power.

The people of Great Britain have granted the world a gift

After our university sojourn — after having been granted access to the original writings of Charles Darwin and Isaac Newton, after attending the most beautiful imaginable choir-accompanied services at the magnificent chapels gracing both institutions, after walking down the hallowed historical halls of higher learning in a setting constantly

overwhelming and remarkable for a mere colonial, accustomed to history on a much more minor scale — my wife and I were privileged to tour the British Parliament, accompanied by one of the peers of the realm.

And she was great, if I might be so bold to say so: everything a hopeful outsider uncorrupted by the pervasive cynicism that corrupts our time might have wished for — kind, charitable, engaging, unpretentious, articulate, elegant, and possessed of that wonderful accent, bestowing upon its possessor the immediate impression of high intelligence.

In the Palace of Westminster I stopped for a moment at the precise centre of the heart of that remarkable building and lifted my eyes upward directly under the immense chandelier suspended under the beautiful and ornate domed octagonal ceiling. I perceived then that I was standing at the base of the realisation in stone, wood, and the air itself of the Cosmic Tree, *Yggdrasil* itself, the liana joining heaven and earth, the object of the most ancient of sacred visions and religious transports, the very lifeline between the skies that beckon forever above and the suffering and fallen ground we tread upon.

If I could have asked for something more to befall me at that moment it would have been the music of the divine to accompany that vision, perhaps Bach's great third Brandenburg Concerto, although I would have settled for the British national anthem, *God Save the Queen*. That lobby is most certainly not the untrustworthy, corrupt and damnable site of power, dominance and oppression, but the very place where the practical redemption of a great people is continually undertaken, governed by the transcendent and necessary principle of the unalienable right to express the Logos as conscience, soul and rationality itself dictate.

That lobby, enshrined in that Palace — that cardinal Castle of the Word — has been a very light unto the world, concretised and embodied there simultaneously in stone, tradition and living action. It is the very place where the sovereign voice of the people meets the voice of its representatives, to be carried forth into its eventual incarnation into the body of laws we separately and jointly accept, adopt and act out.

We are all carriers of the temptation to resentment and the desire to compel and force those who disagree with our presumptions that poses an eternal threat to the integrity of our souls and our societies. We are all possessed by the attributes of the Auschwitz capo — the Gulag trusty: the willingness to turn away and to consciously deceive, and the capacity to delight in oppression and cruelty. We are each and all of us tainted by the blood that soaks our soil.

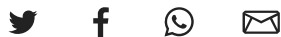
But the people of Great Britain have granted the world a gift whose power stands in permanent opposition to our most appalling proclivities as individuals and societies. That gift is the political expression of the sanctification of the word — freedom in speech, imagination and thought: freedom to engage in the very process that builds and rebuilds habitable order itself from the chaos that eternally surrounds us. And that freedom is expressed in many ways, small and great, in the British Isles: in the wit of its people, in the effectiveness of its institutions, in the beauty of its art and literature, in the political and psychological presumptions that guide private discourse and public conception and action.

And that is most particularly why I love Great Britain. And that is why, people of that realm (and not only of that realm), you should love her too, despite her sins, with your eyes lifted upward, your hope to the future, and the word of truth and faith on your tongues.

I love your country.

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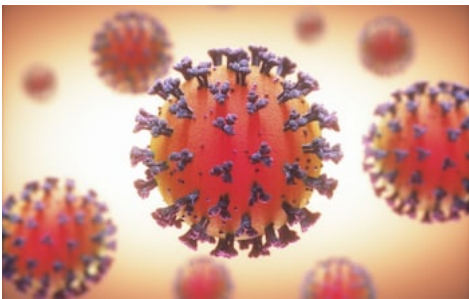
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