A conversation with David Brooks about sin and beauty

“We live differently than we say we live. There’s moral judgment all around.”

Matt Fitzgerald interviews David Brooks in the February 1, 2017 issue

David Brooks. © David Burnett.

David Brooks is a columnist for the New York Times *and a commentator on* PBS NewsHour. *He has worked as a senior editor at the* Weekly Standard *and as a*

reporter and editor at the Wall Street Journal. *His books include* Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There *and* The Road to Character.

You're known as a political columnist, but you've said that politics is no longer your primary meaning-maker. How did you reach that conclusion?

I'm a big believer in Samuel Johnson's couplet: "How small, of all that human hearts endure, that part which laws or kings can cause or cure." Most of the things that make our lives worthwhile and meaningful do not have to do with politics. They have to do with relationships or beliefs or virtues. Yes, politics can touch us catastrophically when the system completely breaks down. We're fortunate enough to live in a country where, even with a change in administration as dramatic as the current one, there are certain checks and balances on what politics can touch and what it can do.

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Right after the presidential election, Miroslav Volf said that "politics touches everything, but politics is not everything—not by a long shot."

I think that when we look back on our lives, we tend to think about our family, or our marriage, or maybe our vocation. We don't look back on this or that law that was passed. Sometimes our hysteria about politics is more damaging than what actually happens in politics. Some people see their political affiliation as a form of ethnicity. They can do violence to themselves with this identity.

Do you think that a sense of identity and loyalty to a political perspective is tied to the way religious narratives have receded?

Yes. Our public discussion is overpoliticized and undermoralized. We don't have conversations of the sort that Reinhold Niebuhr or Billy Graham or Abraham Joshua Heschel were leading—at least not in the secular conversation—and therefore we use politics as a sort of symbol for what are actually moral disagreements and moral panics. As a result, our politics turns into a war of all against all, and we can't face the underlying moral issues.

Is this because we don't have a common moral vocabulary?

We don't have common moral sources. I don't entirely understand why that is. Also, members of the clergy are much less likely to be public intellectuals than they were in the 1950s, and so we don't have their voices. We've become a more diverse society, so institutions that used to engage in moral discussions have decided that their job is to be value neutral—which more or less describes the universities. Finally, life, at least for the educated classes, has gotten more competitive, so there's a lot of time spent on the job and focusing on career.

How do readers respond when you inject moral claims into your columns in the *New York Times*?

I think it is phenomenally welcomed. Some of my more popular columns have been those about forgiveness, or the role of suffering, or what graciousness looks like. There's a widespread hunger to hear people talk about those issues.

When you touch upon those themes, I think, "I'm not the only person out there who is wrestling with these things and troubled by them or comforted by them."

A lot of what I'm doing are sermons without explicit reference to scripture. And my speeches are actually more like that than my columns. I've chosen to be and I think I've been called to be a secular writer for a secular audience. I have access to audiences that maybe clergy don't have. Among those who are faithful, there's a tendency to stay within one's group—Protestants read Protestants, Catholics read Catholics, Jews read Jews. And there are a lot of people who consider themselves spiritual and religious but don't attend church. I try to reach those people without saying that I'm speaking for and from a certain doctrine.

You say that you feel called to your work. Called in a classically Lutheran sense of having a vocation?

Very much. It's a vocation in the sense that I feel called to be a writer. And in the past last three years I have felt called to try to shift the cultural debate in the direction of more moral conversation and a sense of redemption—a sense that there is a purpose to the world, that we were put here for a reason, and that there's a better way to live than many of us have been living.

Did you look out at the culture and say, "Nobody's doing this so it might as well be me?"

I just started doing it. When you're a columnist you learn to follow your own interests and to use your writing to work out your own issues. These were concerns that had become urgent to me as a human being. I was reading about them and could only think about them by writing about them. A lot of the columns are about issues that I'm dealing with personally. I address them in an oblique way in public.

How do you go about writing a column?

I read stuff, then underline things. I can't synthesize all of it until I write it down. Right now I'm looking at Jürgen Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* again. I may photocopy some pages and organize my own thoughts, which are often an amalgam of other people's thoughts that I'm just cribbing.

Your book *The Road to Character* is a series of illustrations of people who embody the virtuous life by living out a set of universal moral principles. Some theologians offer a strong critique of any attempt to define a universalistic ethic, arguing that the religious life is unavoidably particular. What do you think?

I think I was speaking sloppily when I talked about "principles." No one I've ever met has asked, "What is virtue?" Instead, they fall in love with a person, or they fall in love with a god, or with a way of being in the world, or with some hero that they try to imitate. It's our desires that come first, and our desires are aroused not by an abstraction but by a specific story, a specific person, a specific concept of the good.

Did you begin reading theology to put another tool in your intellectual toolbox?

Reinhold Niebuhr was the first theologian I read seriously. It was the era of the cold war, and I was trying to figure out how to wield power in ways that were sometimes

morally complicated. Niebuhr explained how to do that—how not to get punctured by pride or to think you're better than you are, but to act in a way that's consistent with a sense of modesty and humility. At first I would skip over the God parts. I could do that with Niebuhr, which is why he's called the atheist's theologian. But then I got into the God parts too.

What's especially beautiful about theology is that it's a way of seeing the world that starts with a sense of modesty—not something you would say about how economists or political scientists see the world. And it accounts for the subjective very beautifully. Economists and political scientists make correlations and can catch things that are measurable in data, but they can't always capture things that are measured in the quirkiness of human behavior. And they can't measure what's personal. One of my favorite sayings is from Emerson: "Souls are not saved in bundles." They're saved one by one.

Human behavior is too complicated to be captured by any one academic discipline. But theology, at least the kind that goes out into the populous sphere, is interdisciplinary.

I found in college that theology put a claim on me. William Willimon says that the Bible doesn't want to give you information—it wants to change you. I think good theology does the same thing.

All writing should aspire to that in some sense. Theology just has stronger resources at its disposal.

A strength of theology is that it's hard to understand human behavior if you don't think people have souls; if you reduce them to evolutionary pressures or utilitarian drives, it's hard to account for how people actually behave when they're yearning for some piece of transcendence, which happens all the time when they think leading a life of meaning is more important than leading a life of money and power.

A lot of people go into professions where meaning and faithfulness are more important to them than the secular things that we think motivate behavior. If you don't have some understanding of the soul's yearning, then you're not getting reality right.

In the liberal churches, making moral judgments is often seen as categorically oppressive.

Though as a culture we object to judgmentalism, we live differently than we say we live. There's moral judgment all around. I teach at Yale, which has gone through moral crusades over race, gender, and other things. It's not that there's no moral judgment going on; it's that sometimes the judgment doesn't admit its name. Sometimes the judgment is based on shame, loyalty to the collective, radical autonomy, radical secularism, or a utilitarian belief system. It's never based on no belief system. When you watch other parents with their kids, you judge them right away. But we pretend that we're tolerant of all things.

Belief in personal sinfulness may be at an all-time low. You've suggested that until World War II, we Americans had a sense of our own sinfulness and of the fact that the self is something to be tamed. After the war, we shifted to a morally romantic climate, and our estimation of what it meant to be human became more optimistic. Instead of cultivating the good in oneself and tamping down darker impulses, one is encouraged to just let out "the golden figure" deep inside. In which of those two climates were you raised?

I was raised in the 1970s and the 1980s, when you were told to follow your passion, and that you're good inside and most of the corruptions are outside of you. Most of us go through life thinking we are reasonably good: "I'm nice to my family, I treat my kids well, and people seem to like me." It's very easy to glide through life with that sense of one's own goodness.

But to do that you have to ignore your sins of omission and settle for a sort of moral mediocrity that ultimately doesn't give you peace. At a certain age I wanted some deeper peace, deeper mission, a higher sense of joy, and contact with something eternal and purposeful. I did not want to wind up as Nietzsche's last man, profoundly dissatisfied with that life.

In your book on character, you point to how Augustine, at a time of crisis, rather than reaching out to touch the hand of God, dove inward. Looking inside himself, he found himself in a profound way.

A lot of seekers are looking for God as a sort of tanning lamp. They wander through life and think it would be nice to believe in God. They're looking for a warm glow that'll shine down on them. And maybe some people find that.

Augustine teaches us that God is within—but not in a narcissistic way. He first observed himself, his own memory and his own senses, and then I think he found love inside. Christian Wiman has a beautiful phrase: love always wants to move upward. It never sits there.

When you find the presence of love for a child, or for a man, or for yourself, it moves you upward. You discover that you're present to a lot of other loves, including God's love.

Plato talks about the ladder of beauties. When you're young and you see a beautiful face, you think, "Oh, she's so beautiful." Then you discover a higher kind of beauty, which is the love of ideas. And then you discover the love of justice and society, and that leads to a still higher kind of beauty, which is the love of the universe as a cosmos.

If you're surrounded by theological literature, or go to a church, or a synagogue, or a mosque, you discover agape, which is the love for things that are not lovable. I think agape strikes us all as a very high, pure, and beautiful form of love. Our soul has a tendency to want to chase that beauty.

To grasp the beauty of a love for things that are unlovable, you have to recognize *yourself* as unlovable. If we don't want to reckon with sin, is it possible to see grace?

I think you have to have a sense that you're loved beyond what you deserve. I think we experience grace both in this world and in a divine sense when we have messed up and don't deserve to be forgiven but are. That's when grace becomes shocking.

When I teach at the college, it's very hard to get the utilitarian vocabulary and the utilitarian logic out of students' minds. And I revert back to it myself. But moments of grace show you the paradoxical strength of surrender.

In this sense Christianity is most radical compared to the current culture. There's a Christian phrase: "We try to buy the gift that God has given us." Our instinct is to want to do something to earn it. That logic is baked into us.

You've described seeing your children playing on a beautiful summer evening and being seized by the sense of having been given more than you deserve. I think that once we begin recognizing those moments of grace,

we begin to see more of them.

Like all forms of love, it makes you softer. We all go through life carrying around a sort of everyday crust, and it takes a powerful emotional experience to pierce through the crust. Through prayer, reading, music, or literature you can make yourself more open to those moments. I think we can condition ourselves for moments of grace.

You recently noted that the 1950s aren't coming back, and that would include the mainline church of the 1950s. The mainline churches are not at the center of the culture. What does the mainline have to offer?

It has a rich theological tradition. It has beautiful buildings, where people can experience God architecturally. It has a tradition of intellectual rigor but emotional gentleness that is not always present in the evangelical conservative churches. There's validity in Mark Noll's *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. I've spent a lot of time in those churches and on those campuses, and sometimes I don't see a tradition of tough thinking.

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And one of the things young people long for is a place where they can go that will offer them a profound sense of peace from distraction, a place doesn't try to be relevant to social media but stands apart from social media, a sanctuary that leads to something deeper. Some are looking for a sabbath from their lives, and a place that won't throw its values in your face.

I find the mainline tradition very satisfying. I'm very much in the 1950s Christian theologian tradition. I feel more at home in that tradition than in a lot of the modern evangelical churches. A large percentage of the population is looking for a deeper meaning in their lives in a way that's not hostile to their way of life. The mainline churches are well poised to respond to that desire if they can have the courage of their own conviction.

I think the future of the mainline is going to depend on its ability to rearticulate sin and grace.

After the sexual revolution many Christians became dissenters because they wanted to fight a cultural war over the sexual revolution. But that war, even at places like

Liberty University, is coming to an end. Certain issues like abortion will remain contentious, but others, like gay marriage, will not. Our future moral disputes will have less to do with the sexual revolution and more to do with the actual life of Jesus, service to the poor, and attention to the marginalized. Mainline churches, which were self-marginalized during the culture war, have the possibility of becoming unmarginalized.

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