



The Most Dangerous Superstition

Guest: Larken Rose

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Larken Rose is the author of The Most Dangerous Superstition.

WOODS: You have got a dedicated fan base, I am telling you. When I told people you were going to be on, it was like Christmas and Thanksgiving and New Year's rolled into one for these people. I want to talk about your book *The Most Dangerous Superstition* because this book has gotten quite a bit of, maybe we might say, underground traction. The cool people in the Movement know about this book. So let's start off with a word about that. What is, first of all, the most dangerous superstition?

ROSE: Well, it doesn't spoil the book to say it because it gives the punch line on page two.

WOODS: Right.

ROSE: The most dangerous superstition is the belief in authority, which includes all belief in government, which is basically the belief that one person can have rights that another person doesn't, that one person can have the right to rule somebody else. And you can't have government without that concept, and people believing in that, good people believing in that, has caused way more suffering and death and misery and mayhem and injustice than all the greed and hatred and all the normal things that get blamed for it, and it's, you know, for the last however many thousands of years we've been here.

WOODS: Now that's a fairly provocative thing to say. So how do you talk to somebody who has more or less accepted the mainstream view of the world, how do you start off from where that person is and inch this person toward where you are?

ROSE: Well, it's funny because a lot of the time I look back to when I was a statist and believed in authority and believed in government and think, what could I say to the old me that would make me think about things? Different approaches work for different people. One of the most common I use is demonstrating that in their daily lives almost everybody is an anarchist. They go to a store, and they don't point a gun at the store owner and say, "I need that. You have to give it to me." They say, "I will trade you this money for that stuff." It's only in the realm of politics where they suddenly hallucinate, a complete 180 twisting of morality, where now I am not allowed to rob you myself, but if I vote for somebody to take your money legally and call it taxation and give it to me, some of that is okay. And that's moral, and it's justified because we did this bizarre ritual in between, and I didn't actually do it. I just voted for somebody else to do it. So that's all fine and dandy. The vast majority of people I know personally advocate that I be threatened with violence if I don't fund things they want. Almost none of them will feel okay doing it themselves. So just pointing that out to people, whoever I am talking to, you advocate that I be robbed and caged if I don't pay up for things that you want. Do you think that would be okay if you did it yourself? Nobody says "yes." But they think it's okay when it's done in the name of government, and that's what makes it so dangerous. It isn't being evil people. I am not scared of the Maos and Stalins and the Hitlers. I am scared of the thousands or millions of people that hallucinate them to be authority and so do their bidding and pay for their empires and carry out their orders. I don't care if there is one loony with a stupid mustache. He's not a threat if the people do not believe in authority.

WOODS: So if what you're saying is right, then the key difference in society is not between people who believe in so-called big government and people who believe in limited government. You're saying that that's really just a continuum along the same statist line.

ROSE: Right, it's just that's the spectrum of the mistake, but the solution is off that spectrum. I think one of the best illustrations of that is, the best attempt ever at a limited protector government, the U.S. Constitution, created the biggest authoritarian empire in the history of the world. Like there's a degree. It's sort of like saying, it's the difference between saying I want a nice slave master who doesn't whip me very hard, who doesn't make me work too long in the fields before he steals the fruits of my labor, and saying I own myself. I am not the property of anybody. It's a discrete degree. It's a fundamental step, which is why to me totalitarians and minarchists are pretty much on the same side on the one question that matters, which is: can there be a such thing as a legitimate ruling class?

WOODS: Well, the thing is, there are some questions it's hard to see how the free market, the free society, could answer. So in defense of people who believe in limited government, I don't think it's necessarily because--and I don't even think you think it's necessarily because--they are people of bad will. It could be that in some cases they are just people of limited imagination.

ROSE: Yeah, absolutely, and this is why I referred to it as the most dangerous superstition. I don't say everybody is evil for thinking this. What's scary is the power that the belief in authority has over good people. You are probably familiar with the Milgram experiments, Stanley Milgram.

WOODS: I am, but tell the audience.

ROSE: I talk about it all the time. I will give a really short version. It is basically a psychology test to see to what degree normal people would inflict severe pain, maybe even death, on a complete stranger simply because a perceived authority figure told them to. And the results were 67 percent of Americans will basically kill an innocent stranger if an authority figure tells them to, and it's a great illustration that the problem isn't that these people are malicious and evil. It's that they are raised by their parents, by the school, by the government, by the culture, by all the authoritarian messages built into everything, to think that obedience is a virtue. And when you raise the culture to think that, and you get one nasty psycho at the top who says, "Hey, go do bad stuff," people say, "Well, I have to follow orders. I have to obey the law. I have to do as I am told because that's a virtue," And then good people march off and do evil stuff like all of human history.

WOODS: There's an interesting wrinkle on the Milgram experiments which I only found out recently, that he also measured whether or not people would be willing to basically electrocute somebody if just one of their peers told them to do it. There is a bunch of them in a room, and they've all been instructed to do such and such. If one of them insists, hey, we have to keep doing this because that's what we've been told, people aren't as inclined to follow that person, but when the authority figure tells them to do it, you're right, that's the key thing. We're all trained to believe this. What's funny about this, of course, is that the same people who will electrocute a stranger because an authority figure tells them to, these are the same people who will laugh their rear ends off at the idea of monarchy, and how could people ever have been so foolish and superstitious to believe in monarchy—now I'm off to the Obama inauguration! You know?

ROSE: Right. I used to refer to the belief in government as analogous to a religious faith. I don't anymore. It's not an analogy. It is a religious faith. It has high priests. It's the belief in a super-human entity that has the right to issue commandments and if you disobey, it's a sin, and they have all their pseudo-religious rituals and everything with their giant temples and their bizarre rituals and rites that they perform. It really is a religion that happens to be the most destructive religion in the history of the world just in terms of body count and everything else. But because so many people still believe it, they don't see it as a belief. They think it's real.

WOODS: How did the Larken Rose of this book become the Larken Rose of this book? Were you a minarchist before? Were you something else before? And then, what was the light bulb that went off for you that converted you, so to speak?

ROSE: I was a constitutionalist, libertarian-leaning for years, and years, and years, minarchist, you know, that whole general category for years and years, and I loved to debate, and when I debate, I also love to win, and it's hard to win if you have contradictions inside your own head. So going through this process, and a lot of it was talking to my wife Tessa. We would discuss things back and forth, and it was just a matter of eliminating inconsistency, something as basic as, I could scream at the leftist, "You don't have the right to steal my money to give to the poor," but for some odd reason I have the right to steal your money by way of government to build the military because it's for your own good. And I noticed, why am I using the exact

same arguments they used and pretending it's okay when I do it? So just eliminating the inconsistencies, I fell off the statist spectrum, and realized most people, a whole lot of anarchists I know got there by deciding that society would be better without a government than it is with one. I didn't get there that way. I got there by figuring out legitimate government is logically impossible. It cannot exist. So it's sort of—I am not for abolishing Santa Claus. I am just going around saying, “Santa isn't real, and we really ought to act accordingly instead of basing our behaviors on mythology, on something that is provably false and hugely destructive.” Luckily, nobody is killing millions of people in the name of Santa. They are killing millions of people in the name of government.

WOODS: I think there are a lot of objections that somebody on the left might have to what you are saying. That person might say, well, without government the economy will be dominated by monopolies. The poor will be treated like serfs. We're sort of familiar with those. Then on the other side, with the minarchists, let's say, who would agree with you that we don't need government programs to protect us from monopoly or to help the poor, they will say we do need some kind of umpire in society. We do need some sort of law-enforcement mechanism because human beings do have an inclination to do wicked things from time to time.

ROSE: Right, and that's something I hear all the time and address constantly. My first question is, what species is this umpire going to be? Because so far I have never seen a wise aardvark run for office. Not only are they just human beings, the human beings we're supposed to be scared of and distrustful of, but they are the worst human beings around. If you ask people, are politicians better than us? Well, no, they are lying crooks. Okay, so the solution to the imperfections of man is to take some of the worst people around and give them permission to violently dominate the rest of us. That's a really bad solution. And I don't—some people assume that you must trust everybody if you don't want government. That's not at all true. I don't nearly trust everybody, but if I don't trust people to run their own lives, why on earth would I trust them to be in a position of power where they can forcibly run other people's lives?

WOODS: I saw you at one point saying that it would be nice to have a debate with a statist because it's an interesting intellectual exercise, and you can spread ideas this way, but you found that the ones who actually do debate, whether it's Facebook or wherever, are really not giving rise to the most fulfilling debates. So I thought in our remaining time I will satisfy this desire of yours. I am like Santa Claus on the Tom Woods Show here. I am the host. I am the audio engineer. I do everything. So I am going to throw some objections at you as if I am a statist, and we'll just see how it goes. Now, I am not going to give you easy ones, like what would happen to the poor? For us, that's an easy one. For most people I suppose that would be hard. That's an easy one. I want to give you a tough one. So I am going to ask you this. Right now, today, the year 2014, in the United States I enjoy, and I don't just mean me, I mean really all Americans enjoy a standard of living that the greatest kings of Europe could not have imagined.

ROSE: Correct.

WOODS: I enjoy for the most part a peaceful life. I don't have to worry about armed gangs accosting me. I don't have to worry about the sorts of things that did afflict a lot of people during the days of serfdom, and bandits would run around and the Vikings would invade. I don't have to worry about those things. So yes, it's true, the government is obnoxious, and it loots me, and it regulates and it does all kinds of terrible things, but it also has created an atmosphere in which I can live a reasonably peaceful life. Now, it's true that Larken Rose may have an improvement, but would I be willing to risk this comfortable life for the prospect of an improvement when the risk is I could lose everything I have and fall into chaos?

ROSE: Well, there are two ways to answer that. One is with the economic explanation of why more freedom equals more prosperity. I don't usually go that route just because it's easy for people to make random predictions—if we didn't have government, it's the end of the world. I prefer the other route of saying: in this relatively comfortable life where yes, you and I are richer than most of the kings in history in terms of what we can have and the comforts and the luxuries, it could be just like, you know, a house slave had it better than the other slaves and could actually have a comfortable, relatively easy life. There's the slight problem that while you're having your comfortable, easy life, you are paying for innocent people to be caged and for innocent people to be blown up and extorted and controlled and robbed by way of inflation and by way of taxation and by way of all the ways in which government initiates violence against innocent people. That's happening because you're paying for it. And every empire--and you know this full well, governments don't produce anything. They are a complete parasite. All the wealth they have, all the tanks they have, and the bombs, and the agents, and the guns—they didn't produce any of that. They taxed people who handed over

their money, and the productive people bought the tools of evil that the state uses. I don't want to be comfortable sitting around knowing I am buying the tools and paying the salaries of the fascists out there who are hurting innocent people. That's not okay with me. If my choice was to be poor and not do that, I would rather be poor and not do that than be rich. As it happens, the choices are actually be rich and not fund evil or be slightly less rich and fund evil.

WOODS: Now, of course, the common objection would be that you would get a bunch of warlords fighting all the time. You'd get defense agencies fighting with each other all the time. Of course, it is hard to anticipate how services like defense and courts and so on would be provided in the absence of government, but my next objection as a statist would be that there really are not a whole lot of examples of this in history. I mean, yeah, you could dig up medieval Iceland and societies that are so far removed from ours that they may as well not even have existed, as examples. But you're telling me I am supposed to give up my comfortable life in exchange for a system dreamed up by a philosopher somewhere?

ROSE: Actually, it's give up your comfortable life and have a more comfortable life in the name of letting go of a giant lie dreamed up by parasites. Because this isn't some new thing that people need to learn. It's one lie, one superstition they need to let go of, which is the belief in authority and government. And the thing is, when people predict all the bad things that would happen if we don't have government, most of what needs to happen is just clarifying what disappears when the belief in authority disappears. No resources disappear. No know-how disappears. People don't disappear. The stuff doesn't disappear. The technology doesn't disappear. The one thing that disappears is the belief that certain people have an exemption from morality, and that is all. That's all that disappears when authority vanishes: the idea that those people, because of elections and constitutions and legislation, are allowed to steal and call it a tax. They are allowed to initiate violence and call it legislation. So when people say, but without government, blah, blah, blah, what they are really saying is that if we don't give some people permission to commit evil, how will this and this and this work? And just understanding that that's really the question makes the question seem as insane as it is. How on earth would anything be improved by giving some people permission to commit evil? We can still organize. We can still cooperate. We can still do all of the positive, voluntary things that people should do. The only thing that disappears is the apparent legitimacy of violent coercion in the name of mythical authority. That's all that gets erased from the equation, is stop pretending some people have an exemption from right and wrong.

WOODS: But I think that the response the statist will make here is that I am willing to go with you 95 percent of the way. I think you're absolutely right about the parasitic nature of government, but on the other hand as bad as government is, governments have only used nuclear weapons twice on people. Whereas you're envisioning a world in which the proliferation of nuclear weapons would be unstoppable. Anybody could get a nuclear weapon, and yeah, maybe that person wouldn't be able to get liability insurance if he's wielding nuclear weapons, but some crazy people would be willing to take that sort of chance. I am not sure I am willing to take that sort of chance.

ROSE: Well, now we're wandering into sort of guessing what would happen. Why would anybody want to spend a gazillion dollars on a nuclear weapon when it's completely worthless in a stateless society for coercing anyone? You can kill lots of people, like you can now, and government is the one killing lots of people, but the only reason the war machines and nuclear warheads, that there's an incentive for anyone to do that is because there are these giant human livestock farms known as countries that people want control of. Well, I am going to threaten you with this, and it's basically slave masters battling over who gets to own this piece of dirt and the slaves on it. But if there isn't government and people aren't imagining that to be legitimate—first of all—the guy who says, “I have a nuclear weapon and you don't, blah, blah, blah,” he dies. There will be a bake sale to raise a bounty to blow his head off. He just threatened murder. We're going to take him out. And it's curious how that never happens, because governments have an open, standing agreement that we won't kill the guy at the top. We'll kill your pawns by the millions because that's the game we play, but us tyrants, we'll leave each other alone. Every once in a while, one will get out of line enough that they get nasty, but mostly we'll just kill the pawns. But that game doesn't work if people don't believe in authority. Even if somebody said, “I have a nuke. I can blow up North America,” people would say, well, since you just said that, we see you as an obvious threat. You just threatened mass murder, and we're going to come get you. We're not going to vote. We're not going to beg for your legislative permission to not get nuked. We're going to deal with you as what you are, which is a violent threat to us, and take you out. That's the end. I think assassination is the best form of large-scale defense against authoritarian empires. Kill the

guy at the top. Don't kill a million of his pawns.

WOODS: Let's think for a minute about somebody who commits murder on a smaller scale. Let's think about serial killer. How in your society can we go after a serial killer without the concept of authority? In other words, if I am entitled to take this dangerous person and confine him somewhere or physically remove him from society, if you're not going to call me an authority figure, then what would you call me?

ROSE: A human being. See, that's the thing. Everybody still has the right of self-defense, and each person, instead of thinking, "What can I vote for?" would think, all right, what do I personally feel justified in doing here, and whatever you did, you couldn't use the excuse of, "I am just following orders." Because there are no orders. "I am just enforcing the law." Nope, there aren't legislators. What you do—everyone sees it and everyone knows that you are responsible for it, and you know that you are responsible for it, as opposed to cops today who will kick down somebody's door and point a machine gun in their face because they have the wrong plant, and say, "Well, this wasn't my idea. I am not really doing this. A strange thing called 'the law' is doing this, and I am not to blame." So it's not a guarantee that the right thing happens every time. Nothing guarantees that. But it is a guarantee that when people act, they will be seen by everyone around them as responsible for their actions, and the discomfort of voluntarism is that it puts responsibility on people. Suppose we caught a serial killer. Suppose, for this example, everybody knows you did it. We totally found him chowing down on one of his neighbor's corpses. Okay, what do we do about it? And then we sit down and say, "What do we as just people, no badges, no legislation, we're just people—what do we feel justified in doing about this?" As scary as the uncertainty of that may be, the outcome will always be better than, let's call an authority who imagines that he has the right to do anything and bears no responsibility for his actions.

WOODS: Larken, tell everybody your website and what they can expect to find there.

ROSE: The website is LarkenRose.com, and my book *The Most Dangerous Superstition* is there and so is my novel, *The Iron Web*, and a zillion articles, and I have a YouTube channels that's just YouTube.com/LarkenRose with tons and tons of stuff there—a lot of it approaching similar concepts in different directions that people go: I never quite thought of it like that. What I am trying to do is nudge people into realizing that every single--this will be offensive to people--every single person who believes in government still has a contradiction inside his own head. It's inherent in authoritarianism, and the reason I left it is because I realized I cannot even be consistent with myself and believe in government. That's basically the message of almost everything I do.

WOODS: As I say, your followers just sing the praises of your book. I didn't know about your novel, so I will take a look at that. But to think of government as a great superstition is a very, very interesting idea. No doubt there will be listeners who say these ideas are very undeveloped. We need further information. Well, of course: that's why you wrote a book, right? You can't answer everything in a 25-minute conversation. I hope people will check out LarkenRose.com, and maybe we can talk again in the future sometime.

ROSE: That would be great. Thanks, Tom.