



**Episode 1,222: Now They're Coming for Medieval Studies**

**Guest: Rachel Fulton Brown**

**WOODS:** All right, this is going to be a lot of fun.

**FULTON BROWN:** [laughing] I'm looking forward to it.

**WOODS:** I mean, I wouldn't say we have the same enemies, like the exactly the same people, but it's the same group of losers who seem to dislike —

**FULTON BROWN:** Oh, we can make an enemies list. Should we do that?

**WOODS:** Yeah, indeed, indeed. Well, look, I can say this: you and I are on somebody else's list, that's for sure.

**FULTON BROWN:** Yep.

**WOODS:** And as I was looking over the work you do — of course, you're a medievalist and you have a new book out I just told the folks about — I thought to myself, the things I do are a little bit out of fashion in academia this year, but a medievalist focusing on Mary and piety I think is even more out of the mainstream of what people are doing these days, frankly, in medieval studies.

**FULTON BROWN:** Well, yes, I agree. I'm trying to drag it into the mainstream, because I think devotion to Mary will save Western civilization.

**WOODS:** So that's —

**FULTON BROWN:** Would you like me to elaborate?

**WOODS:** I would like to know how that — especially because — well, first of all, I can't even tell from your blog. I feel like you're a Catholic sympathizer who's not Catholic, am I right?

**FULTON BROWN:** No, I am a Catholic convert as of last year.

**WOODS:** Oh, okay, because I was looking at things from a few years ago.

**FULTON BROWN:** Right, and I actually I grew up Presbyterian —

**WOODS:** That's what it was.

**FULTON BROWN:** Right, and my journey as a Presbyterian has been very important, because Presbyterians love Scripture and love commentary on Scripture and love thinking through Scripture, so most of my work as my scholarship has been about devotion to Mary as it's expressed through commentaries on the Song of Songs, on the Psalms, through the liturgy, through her offices. But when I finished my second book, I finished writing it and revising it a couple years ago, and obviously it came out last year, then I knew it was time to finally make the step. And my very good friend — and I understand he's sometimes your friend too, Milo — gave me that last nudge that I needed. So now I'm actually in the Church.

**WOODS:** Well, how about that? I would say that's probably one of the more unlikely paths in, you know, right?

**FULTON BROWN:** Which one, Milo or Scripture?

**WOODS:** I'm going with Milo. That's not people would naturally think. Now, let me just say right off the bat, that obviously — I mean, I want to get to the controversy and people who don't like you and stuff, because that's really juicy, but —

**FULTON BROWN:** I don't know why. I don't know why they don't like.

**WOODS:** I don't know why they don't like me, either. You know, I'm about the most amiable guy you could possibly ask for, and I'm perfectly willing to make concessions to people if they just approached me without calling me a Nazi. If they could do me that courtesy, I am very conciliatory.

**FULTON BROWN:** No, we're doomed. We're doomed.

**WOODS:** But here's what I want to ask you. Bear in mind that I have an audience that a lot of them have no religious affiliation, a lot of them are Protestants, and of those Protestants, a great many will view the idea of Marian devotion as just horrific. So you're going to have to tread carefully if you're going to make that kind of claim that you say you can make.

**FULTON BROWN:** I can, I can. And I say at the outset of my book that it's sort of curious to me that, as I say, Mary chose me to do this work. Because, of course, as I said, I grew up Presbyterian. I grew up without any understanding of the medieval devotion to Mary, or any understanding of the scriptural basis for that devotion. And so I think it was an important path for me, and hopefully, it can be a path that I can help others see, not just why Mary matters to Christianity, but how with the Reformation, Western culture lost a very rich tradition of scriptural interpretation, which I think is one of the reasons that Christianity has trouble right now sometimes capturing people's imagination. In my version of things, we sort of left out the fun bits by focusing in the way that the Protestants typically have on the sort of basis of Christian understanding of the Scriptures. I can certainly go into that depth if you want me to.

**WOODS:** Well, let's, let's do that, and, again, bear in mind, I really, given the subject matter of my program, we can sort of tarry on this only for so long. But still, it's good for people to have their horizons broadened. Your book *Mary and the Art of Prayer*, at least the portion

that I was able to read goes into extraordinary depth about the history of Marian devotion, in particular, the Ave Maria and the insistence that so many Church leaders had on making sure that people knew it and were saying it and what the significance of it is, what the significance of phrases in it are. Like, "full of grace," what does that actually mean? It turns out that there isn't a wasted word in anything here. It's everything — it's like the Nicene Creed. There isn't a wasted word of the Nicene Creed. Everything serves a theological and pedagogical purpose.

**FULTON BROWN:** And that's because, in fact, Mary is the mother of the Word. And I'd say that opening, that understanding is that Mary gives birth to Christ, to God, and she is the mother of the Word. So, of course, a greeting that the angel brings to her that says, "You are going to be the mother of the Word," is going to be pregnant in every syllable. And many of the meditations that I talk about in my book are showing the way in which human language is the way in which God is trying to communicate to us, and in order for God to be communicated through human language, absolutely every —

There's a wonderful meditation that I end that that second chapter that you read from Severus Sanctus of Faenza, who's a Franciscan writing in the late 13th century in Florence. And he has this little exercises, this little grammatical exercise that he goes through saying how many letters are there in the Ave Maria, how many syllables are there, how many words, and showing how — and it's a numerological meditation, but it's also meditation on the fullness of that greeting, to say this is the way we see that the creator of all came into his creation, that that you have to understand, not just the Psalms as the way in which God speaks through David, and therefore, you know, speaks to the world through those meditations. But in fact, absolutely every creature and creation is singing the praises of Mary.

And in that book, that chapter — this is the chapter two and it's online if people would like to read — I show the way in which that greeting of the angel was used in the Middle Ages, to name Mary fully you, in fact, need to name every creature and creation, because she is the mother of the Creator and he came into the world through her; that if we want to understand what happened at the Incarnation, we have to understand what it means to — you mentioned the Creed: to say, I believe in God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, came into the world through her.

**WOODS:** Now having said all this —

**FULTON BROWN:** [laughing] Got really fast into the theology, didn't we?

**WOODS:** No, it's true; it's true. And you know what's interesting is that Martin Luther himself did apparently have rather a tender devotion to Mary, and it was hard for him to break with that. I don't believe it was something he relished. But he believed that, in light of his theology, he had to make that break. But he still, for example, defended her perpetual virginity, you know, as I'm fairly certain did — the early reformers all held a number of beliefs about her that, well, let's just say have been challenged by subsequent Protestants but certainly not by those founders.

**FULTON BROWN:** Well, it's interesting what happened with Luther's devotion to Mary, because as you say, he did have a great reverence for her. His primary sort of spiritual metaphor was as a mendicant and as a beggar. And there's a wonderful essay by one of my

colleagues, Roy Hammerling, who is in fact Lutheran but studies things like the Our Father and the prayers throughout the Middle Ages, talked about the way in which — the reason that Luther describes her as particularly humble and particularly lowly is because that to him with the most important relationship to God. He himself in his own devotion is trying to understand himself as mendicant, as beggar, as humble before God. And so he emphasized that in his description of her.

Now, subsequent Protestants take that and run with this idea that, well, she's just a housewife, she's not really the Queen of Heaven. What's lost — and I say that the scriptural understanding of Mary is lost. What's particularly lost in Protestant understandings of Mary is her role as wisdom and as mother of wisdom. And the reason that the Protestants have difficulty with this is because of the way in which they understand the canon of Scripture, is that they do not recognize as revealed or as properly part of the canon, the principal books that are used in the Marian liturgy throughout the Middle Ages. They have Proverbs and they have the Song of Songs. They don't read those in the same way medieval exegetes would.

But specifically, they lose the Book of Wisdom and the Book of Sirach or Ecclesiasticus. These two books are the primary scriptural sources for the descriptions of Mary as wisdom with God at the beginning of creation. And the reason that they lose them as is very complicated, has to do with the Hebrew tradition and the Hebrew Scriptures that they have access to in the 16th century, which are from the Masoretic tradition, which developed in the rabbinic tradition in competition with of course the Christian exegesis. It goes back to early Christianity; it goes back to the fact that Wisdom and Ecclesiasticus are both in the Septuagint, they both have great Alexandrian roots from the diaspora.

And it's that tradition of wisdom that I argue in my new book, *Mary and the Art of Prayer*, that is really taken up in Christianity as the explanation for why we have Christ at all. And the Lord needs his mother. The Lord needs his mother who anoints him, who recognizes and who crowns him, as it says in the Song of Songs, and who is the frame for his entering into the world. And that's the big argument that I make in the book, that Mary as the mother of wisdom is recognized in the Middle Ages as herself wisdom. She's the magistra who teaches the trivium. She's the mother of the three great language arts: grammar, rhetoric and logic. I'm not joking when I say Mary is the core of Western civilization, because it's this tradition of wisdom, this tradition of learning, this tradition of philosophy that, in for example, the medieval universities, metaphorically but also spiritually, she gives birth to, because she gives birth to the Word.

And the struggles that we've been having in education, in recognizing the relationship between religion and science, in understanding the proper relationship between creativity and the life of the towns and therefore capitalism, it's all there in what Henry Adams described in his *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* as the power of the Virgin to give birth to civilization. And I hinted that a little bit in my new book, *Mary and the Art of Prayer*, saying, really to understand what happened with Western civilization, we need to understand her role in it. But it grounds down in this appreciation of what it means to say Mary showed to the world the Creator whom it had not seen. That's Anselm's great prayer that he writes in the 11th century, and it's the mystery of the liturgy, but I'm trying to convey through my book.

**WOODS:** You and I would have to talk about liturgy at some point, for sure.

**FULTON BROWN:** We will.

**WOODS:** Yeah, privately because I don't want to try the patience of listeners. But —

**FULTON BROWN:** Well, I think I've already thrown so much — I mean, talking about throwing the meat at people. We need to go back to a little bit of milk and get them there more gently [laughing].

**WOODS:** Well, first of all, if you're in Chicago — which I understand is where you are?

**FULTON BROWN:** Yes.

**WOODS:** Then you then you got to go to St. John Cantius.

**FULTON BROWN:** Yes, I do.

**WOODS:** You've got to go to the old Latin Mass. I mean, just forget it. This whole liturgical reform was a complete fiasco and a disaster that has no arguments in its favor. I will hear none. *Oh, but we needed to make the Mass more accessible.* Yeah, then they would have just translated the Latin into English.

**FULTON BROWN:** Right.

**WOODS:** They didn't do that. They did all kinds of stuff to water down — it's just, it's a fiasco created by, we now know, reprehensible human beings. So I'm just — every day of my life, I'm vindicated in every belief I hold. But let me —

**FULTON BROWN:** Well, that's good, and I'll say, so for random lay persons, who are many of my friends on Facebook and I think now many of your listeners, those who — the laity actually wishes that the clergy would give us some more substance again. The core of the book, my *Mary and the Art of Prayer*, is the Book of Ours, which was the laity's liturgical practice in the later Middle Ages, and in Latin, it was also translated to the vernacular, in Dutch; there are Middle English translations, as well. But the core of the response to God, the response of wanting to stand before the throne of God and sings the Psalms was there for the laity in the later Middle Ages. And that's another of the problems that the Protestant reform brings, that the Book of Common Prayer that Cromwell writes obviously eradicates all of that understanding. So whatever happened with Vatican II, it was already obviously affected in the 16th century in English.

**WOODS:** Again, we have to have coffee at some point. There's so much to talk about with this stuff. I want to say a couple quick things before we move on. In the patristic period, I mean, really, really early, actually, there was this fondness for referring to Mary as the second Eve. And the idea here is that she's the Eve who gets things right. Rather than being disobedient, she's the one who consents to do the will of God, and so that is why we hold her in particularly high regard, because she is going to do God's will and she's going to undo what Eve had done. That's the significance of this.

The other thing I want to say is, you're talking about Mary and wisdom. And that just reminds me of the whole general caricature of the Middle Ages in general, which must be the bane of a medievalist's existence. I don't know how much time you have to spend explaining to people the reality of the situation. And then at the end of the day, no one's learned anything. The

kids on the exam are still repeating: it was dumb and backward and barbaric. You spent the whole semester telling them that this is Enlightenment nonsense that nobody should believe. So I want to ask you a little bit about that. I notice that you refer favorably to Charles Homer Haskins. And his work on the Renaissance of the 12th century helped me in my popular book *How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization*.

But at the same time, you have an essay where you kind of acknowledge that there are two sides to the Middle Ages. Yes, it's true there were parts of the Middle Ages that were barbaric, and there were parts that were more advanced, enlightened, and sophisticated than people think. So in that way, the Middle Ages are more like us than we're willing to acknowledge. It's not that, oh, thank goodness we've left that barbarism behind. We have our own — how dare you in 2018 lecture the world about the barbarism of the past? You have plenty of barbarism right here and now to be apologizing for. So yes, even today we have a mixture of enlightenment and sophistication with barbarism. That doesn't make us unlike the Middle Ages. It makes us like it.

**FULTON BROWN:** I think you're referring to my post on my Fencing Bear blog, "Make the Middle Ages Dark Again"?

**WOODS:** Oh, actually, it was "Defending the Middle Ages: "We've Been Doing It Wrong."

**FULTON BROWN:** Oh, yes. Okay, that one. There many posts. The "Make the Middle Ages Dark Again" was a satire that I did last summer when everybody was in my academic field claiming that people who would argue for things like white ethnostates and such were drawing on medieval imagery to support themselves, and I was making the joke of saying, oh well, if only people actually still believed that the Middle Ages where the Dark Ages, nobody would care about wanting to promote them. It was a joke and it seems my colleagues in academia didn't get it, but —

**WOODS:** Oh, no, your colleagues in academia are humorless? I refuse to believe that.

**FULTON BROWN:** [laughing] Yes, and the thing is, in that post I quote from Haskins *Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*, saying, look, you know, for nearly 100 years, we've been trying to convince people that the Middle Ages were in fact a period of great intellectual growth and great sophistication and wisdom. Exactly why would anybody try to believe us when nobody's listening to us before? And that being my point, that indeed, it seems ironic that right now I have colleagues in the field worrying about people appropriating the Middle Ages when what you've just said is in fact the case. We're still fighting the Enlightenment and its description of the Middle Ages as dark, and you know, Gibbon has won as far as most people are concerned, saying that Christianity was responsible for the fall of civilization, and in fact, the best hope that we have is the enlightened situation of his own day. I forgot what your question was there. What should I do —

**WOODS:** Oh, no, in general, I was just making —

**FULTON BROWN:** I mean, it's like the caricatures of the Middle Ages — I mean, the Enlightenment caricature of the Middle Ages is as hard to fight as sort of an elevated understanding of — in fact, that the last argument that I make in "Defending the Middle Ages," that indeed, it's out of the long European past, out of the period that we call the Dark Ages of

the Middle Ages that many of our great institutional structures have developed — the universities, the towns, indeed capitalism. Weber was wrong. It goes back before the Protestants. You know, the kinds of creativity and art and all of the wisdom and learning that we're trying to capture as whatever comes from the West, it has deep roots in the Middle Ages and is not really a product of antiquity so much as a product of the 10th, 11th, 12th, 13th, 14th centuries.

So it's interesting that Europe has done this to itself, right? It's Europe's own self-critique. And Milo used that as a sort of tag for the recent article that he did about my controversies with my colleagues, that the Middle Ages is the source of much of the controversies that we're still arguing precisely because Europe has always been, from the Middle Ages, engaged in this exercise of self-criticism.

**WOODS:** The issue of the Church and science I don't want to get into here, but that's where everybody thinks, well, we've got you dead to rights, because I read three pages about Galileo, so I'm an expert on this.

**FULTON BROWN:** Right.

**WOODS:** And it turns out that the real story of the Church and science is so much more interesting. And today, when you go — there was a company, they used to be called the Teaching Company; now they're called the Great Courses. And they go on site, and they record courses by top professors, and they sell them. But they sell them to a general audience, so they're not going to be pitching some weird interpretation. It's going to be — you're going to get a pulse on what the mainstream that discipline is teaching when you take a course with them.

So out of curiosity, about ten years ago, I bought their course on the history of science. And I wanted to know, are they still teaching that it was all stupidity and backwardness and then there was Isaac Newton, or has it gotten a little bit more sophisticated than that? And the professor, I don't remember his name, absolutely overturned that and said, no, it's silly to think that, and then he went through and was talking about Albert the Great and all these other figures. So okay, now, finally, at least in the profession of the history of science, they're starting to get it. The general public hasn't got a clue, but they're starting to get it. There's a huge amount of scholarship on this. So I wrote *How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization*, and the longest chapter is the one on science, because that's where you have the longest road to hoe. And Owen Benjamin — do you know the comedian Owen Benjamin?

**FULTON BROWN:** I do, yes.

**WOODS:** Okay.

**FULTON BROWN:** He's on Steven Crowder show.

**WOODS:** Okay, yeah. Well, Owen's been on with me. I'm sort of more small potatoes than Steven Crowder, but I do my best. But Owen, apparently on his show some time ago, was really going after the Church when it came to science. And then I ran into him a couple of

months ago, and he said, "You know what, Tom? I read what you wrote about the Church and science, and you changed my mind. You changed my mind on this."

**FULTON BROWN:** Very good.

**WOODS:** I thought, hey, that's what I'm here for; that's what I'm here. All right, I guess there are two things I want to do in the limited time we have left. The first thing is – well, you know what? Let's chuck the first thing. The second thing is: I want to know how somebody like you who writes these scholarly studies, how it is that you would get in a position where I think it was the National Association of Scholars felt the need to intervene on your behalf. What on earth is going on with you?

**FULTON BROWN:** [laughing] Oh, my goodness, how much time do we have? So, three years ago, I wrote a short little blog post called "Three Cheers for White Men," in which I was trying to point out that women in Western civilization have a great deal to be thankful for, my three cheers being chivalry, consensual marriage, and the right to vote with the rider of: and if you want to argue with me about these being goods, there's always freedom of speech, which is also a Western value. Thanks to that blog post, I came to the attention of a number of colleagues in my own field, medieval studies, who took this as proof that I'm a white supremacist and a neo-Nazi.

**WOODS:** Yeah, what else would it be proof of, right?

**FULTON BROWN:** Right.

**WOODS:** That's what a reasonable person would conclude.

**FULTON BROWN:** Because I, you know, make cheers saying, in fact, the ideal in Western civilization is that men do not rape women and that other men take men to task for doing that; that marriage is constituted not by a woman's family telling her she has to marry but sacramentally, particularly by saying "I do" on the part of both parties; and that obviously politically women have been granted the franchise, and since the people who had the franchise before that were men, I wouldn't be able to vote if my, you know, great grandfathers hadn't voted for it. So I had been called names for some time, but then I befriended Milo Yiannopoulos, and it's just gotten more exciting ever since.

**WOODS:** Yeah, no doubt. Now, how are you in a position where – am I remembering this right, that the NAS is basically appealing to your colleagues to come to your aid?

**FULTON BROWN:** They are. That's thanks to the long article that Milo published about two weeks ago called "Middle Rages," where he details, in fact, how this two-, three-year controversy has developed around me. I mentioned the "How to Make the Middle Ages Dark Again" post. I wrote that last summer, because many of my colleagues in medieval studies were concerned – you know, it's such a long story. It took Milo 16,000 words – concerned most immediately with what happened at Charlottesville and were calling on all those of us who work in the field and particularly medieval history to stand up in front of our classes and say, you know, I'm not a white supremacist. So I did a post in answer to the colleague who wrote that post. This is also social media and blog, blog, blog, blog, blog, right? It's like



Luther in the new print world, right? You suddenly have all this stuff flying at people so fast that they don't know how to process it.

Anyway, I wrote a post September last year called "How to Signal You Are Not a White Supremacist," in which I addressed my colleague in the field, Dorothy Kim, who had written this post saying, if you're white, you need to — basically she said that if you're white, you need to stand up in your classroom and say you're not a white supremacist. And I said, oh, how shall I do that? I study devotion to the Virgin Mary, and one of the most important antiphons is a liturgical text, a chant used in the Marion liturgy throughout the Middle Ages, is "Nigra sum, sed formosa." "I am black, but beautiful." Comes from the Song of Songs. It's the occasion of a number of commentaries on what it means for Mary to be dark, and sometimes proofs that she is, in fact, dark of eyes, dark of hair; therefore, I'm not much a white supremacist if that's who I'm studying.

More soberly, I suggested that my colleagues who are so anxious about this should do a little history. I used a colorful word and colorful words always get the Internet's attention. This produced an open letter suggesting that I had called for violence against my colleague for arguing with her.

**WOODS:** [sighs]

**FULTON BROWN:** Because I was friends with Milo, it's spiraled into, *And basically she's called for Professor Kim to be violently attacked.*

**WOODS:** Oh my gosh.

**FULTON BROWN:** Of course, over the last year, the only person who has been, you know, called for a violent attack against is me. And this is embedded in a bigger argument that the field is having, and Milo tried to lay all that out in his "Middle Rages" piece. You can find that on Dangerous.com. When Milo wrote it up in full and talked to some of my senior colleagues who said, *Yes, this has been happening. It's unfortunate that Rachel's been caught in the middle of this. It's strange that no one else has like stood up for her to say she has said nothing except to defend Christianity and Western civilization from allegations being made in the field,* the National Association of scholars put up this open letter saying, *Why has not at least her employer issued some kind of statement to say, "Look, she hasn't called for violence; she hasn't been harassing anybody. All she's been doing is disagreeing on the issues." And exactly, why is that so hard to say in the current academic climate?*

**WOODS:** Yeah, that's rather an ordeal. There are two ways I want to go, and I think I need to just have you do another episode with me at some point, because I would like to know — but I maybe I won't do that this time. I would like to know how medieval studies have been affected by the crazies, because medieval studies I thought for a while was one of these areas where it was mostly normal people. Because if you really, really hated European civilization, this is the last thing you would devote your life to [laughing].

**FULTON BROWN:** Yes.

**WOODS:** You would not study the Middle Ages. And then secondly, by studying it, you realize, hey, this is not the caricature I thought. You begin to love it, and, you know, it normalizes

you. And I'm wondering, okay, maybe yes, I am drifting into this. I'm wondering what have they done to it?

**FULTON BROWN:** Well, exactly what you just described, right? That for a long time, the people who wanted to study the Middle Ages were a little out of the mainstream, that when you and I were in graduate school, we were both at Columbia, you'll remember that. For the medievalists, we tended to be the ones that the Americanists and the modern Europeanists looked at and said, like, who are you and why are you studying that? That's so irrelevant. I think that medieval studies held out for a very long time, because the people attracted to the period tended not to be engaged in the same kind of modernist questions. As people who are interested in bringing those questions into medieval studies, you know, it gets attention. It's certainly one of the things that works in the academy if you want to make a stir, to claim — gender studies has been a feature of the field since I was in graduate school.

Of course, one of the reasons that I am under fire in quite the way that I am has nothing to do with being friends with Milo and everything to do with the fact that I studied the devotion to the Virgin in the way that I do, which is that I refuse to use gender theory as my lens through which to talk about devotion to Mary. I go back and I read the primary sources, as a good medievalist should, and I am trying to show that the way in which medieval Christians talked about Mary is richer. If you want to talk about is gender fluid, there's ways to think about it in those terms, because of course the commentaries on the Song of Songs that I started my research with are very gender fluid in their appreciation of the complexities of talking about the relationship between the human and the divine as expressed through the bride and the bridegroom in the Song of Songs.

But I've always resisted reducing this wonderful imaginative world to the categories of modern gender theory. Because, of course, the categories of modern gender theory basically say Mary was raped and that's that, and God's a patriarchal tyrant. That is of course not what I see in the devotion to Mary in the Middle Ages, and it's what I've tried to show, again, in my two books, *From Judgment to Passion* and *Mary and the Art of Prayer*.

How race studies comes into medieval studies, there has been over the last 20, 30 years, contemporary with my own work, an effort to show the way in which Christianity was, throughout the Middle Ages, in conversation with Judaism and Islam. This in the Middle Ages is not racial in the way those relationships are now characterized. It's theological. And again, I get into trouble here because I say, you know, Christianity and Judaism have a long and complicated conversation. If you want to understand that, it means that you have to take scriptural exegesis seriously. It means you have to take the claims of Christians that Jesus is Lord seriously. Obviously, that comes up against Islam, because Islam does not recognize Jesus as the Son of God. Quite the reverse, they consider it blasphemous to claim that God has any associates, as they say, and blasphemous to claim that Mary gave birth to God. Those are the terms in which it's talked about in the Middle Ages, but these are not terms that modern scholars are typically well versed in, because most modern scholars know nothing of theology.

I did a little post — if you want to know yet again why I'm in trouble with my colleagues at so many layers, one of the reasons was that I was asked back in February 2017, when Milo's talk at Berkeley was disrupted, to do a little piece for the Martin Marty Center newsletter, *Sightings*, about what I saw Milo's campus tours illustrating about religion on college campuses. And the argument I made was that we're in a religious crisis, that when

people talk about race and gender, now they're doing it basically as religious propositions, right? It's basically blasphemy to argue against the way in which gender theory or race theory has presented the issues. I say this is explosive and that's why there's such an explosion around Milo's talks, because we are inexperienced in arguing theology, we're inexperienced in arguing these basic premises. If we want to not have violence spilling out from our college campuses onto the streets, as it did in Berkeley in February 2017, we as academics need to take this seriously as a religious crisis.

And for that I was condemned by 29 of my colleagues in the divinity school at the University of Chicago. They put up a little letter —

**WOODS:** Oh, of course. The divinity school is always hopeless.

**FULTON BROWN:** They put up a little letter saying I do not represent the diversity that they do. That was the original source of many of the insults that Milo chronicles in "Middle Rages," you know, people talking about my looks, saying that I supported white supremacy, because I said we're in a religious crisis, we're in a theological crisis, and what we have at stake here are two religious systems that are at odds with each other, and we need to be able to appreciate that and see the stakes in those terms.

**WOODS:** Uh —

**FULTON BROWN:** You do not get to ask a simple question and not have this, like, turn into a problem about everything [laughing].

**WOODS:** No, I totally understand. I don't know what it would be like to be in academia these days. I left it a long time ago and I —

**FULTON BROWN:** Like this [laughing]. This is what it's like.

**WOODS:** Yeah, I just sit behind a microphone and observe at a distance at this point, and I cheer on and support people who are doing their best to fight back. Have you had any contact, by the way, with Jordan Peterson?

**FULTON BROWN:** Well, that's a long story [laughing]. In spring 2017, I emailed him in the midst of the kinds of things that were being said about me, because of course, he said some very wise things, very perceptive about Milo, although I will admit the fact that I was there first. It's in my blog. He was asked about what he thought about Milo at the end of that week in February 2017, and he said Milo was a trickster. I've been writing about Milo on my blog, Fencing Bear, as a kind of holy fool. I compared him to Jesus as a kind of holy fool. And of course, at that point, I was writing about what was happening to Milo as basically his shaming and crucifixion. In terms of his career, yes, it was. And I wrote to Jordan at that point and was very interested in the mythological level that he had been able to tap into. I did a little interview with Jordan's friend Jonathan Pageau that's on Jonathan's YouTube channel, when we talked through both my conversations with Milo and the way in which I saw what Jordan was doing was very much in sympathy with at least my desire to show people how what's been going on is happening at this very deep, mythological, symbolic level.

Jordan's star has risen since then, and I do have quarrels with him on a theological level. I've blogged a bit about that, but we haven't yet had that conversation. I'm not sure at this point whether that's the best conversation to have for either of us. So we'll just see where that goes.

**WOODS:** All right, well, I'm actually coming up on — I mean, I think probably what I should have done with you is had a Joe Rogan-style three-hour conversation. Of course, I can't trespass on your time quite that much, but if I could maybe stretch it out across another conversation, because there's so many things to talk to you about. You have opinions on so many — you're just like me. You have opinions on everything [laughing], and you've written about everything, and it's all out there in the open. And people — what's beautiful about having things out there in the open is that people of goodwill can just go back and see what you said.

**FULTON BROWN:** Right.

**WOODS:** So that, you know, when the crazies come after you, can say, all right, look, I'm not going to persuade the crazies or their supporters, but I can appeal to normal people. And I can say words have meanings, and all you have to do is look at the words that I wrote, and you'll see there's nothing wrong with any of it. I mean, maybe it's a little controversial, but it's controversial only because everyone else is crazy. It's not really that controversial.

**FULTON BROWN:** Well, as I say, I've been startled, and, you know, in retrospect, okay, maybe not that surprised. But I was startled at first with the response to my "Three Cheers" post. And I did a set of responses then back in January 2016, answering particularly the question of what I meant by chivalry, because that's a complicated tradition. It's a complicated argument. It's not so simple to say as, you know, men don't — I do not think in Western civilization we value rape in any way. I think that that's an utter misrepresentation of everything. But obviously not all men have lived up to those ideals. Not all women have lived up to the idea that chivalry would place on them to be, you know, ladies. I think I probably need to do some post on that.

And I honestly at that point thought, if I just explain all of this, maybe I won't convince Professor Kim, but surely I'll convince my other colleagues in academia. That has not happened. And you know, it's continued. I also thought I would start writing about Milo. If I could just explain clearly what I saw and how in fact he's none of the things that of course the mainstream media, has labeled him as, I will chronicle this in full — and my Milo Chronicles on the blog are quite extensive — people will read it and they will be persuaded and anything that Joe Bernstein says on BuzzFeed will be shown to be utter misrepresentation. That hasn't happened. And culturally and in the cultural moment, I find that fascinating. Why is it that when I've written at great length about all of these issues, it doesn't persuade even some of my colleagues who've known me since graduate school?

**WOODS:** Yeah. Yeah, it's a weird — and you know what's funny, is that, here we are in 2018, 2015 almost seems like a paradise compared to today. I mean, it's happening so fast, things that people feel like they can't say or if somebody else says, then they have to shun you completely. Or if you find out that somebody who runs a sandwich shop may be supporting some candidate you don't like, then you can't eat a sandwich from that place. And I mean, what a dreary life to have your whole life dominated by politics and theories of domination. What a miserable, horrible existence that must be.

**FULTON BROWN:** Well, and I say that that's because we've lost our faith, the faith that I see as — one of the courses I teach for our undergraduates is on Tolkien, and that the faith that I see, that I'm trying to help communicate through my scholarship is also the faith that Tolkien was dedicated to trying to illustrate. And it's a faith in art and creativity and joy. And I mean, obviously, the ability to stand up against the temptation to dominate others' wills. That's the point of the ring, right? That the ring gives you the power to dominate others' wills. And for Tolkien, the great mystery is our ability to make choices, the mystery of free will. And when I teach *The Lord of the Rings*, one of the major themes in the course is how Tolkien is showing us the importance of being able to make choices and the difficulty of making them well, and that we are also called on, as creatures made in the image and likeness of God, to create beauty and to exercise our role as sub-creators. That's his term. But that we're also always being tempted to try to hold on to our creations and that's the great sort of tragedy of *The Silmarillion*.

All of these truths about our existence as creatures, our abilities as human beings, our temptations as creatures with free will, I see probably the reason we're in this great political crisis is, of course, people don't have that grounding. We don't have that grounding in what we call the Judeo-Christian tradition. But it's really a grounding in the understanding of these complexities of what it means to be human in relationship to a divine that has given us these great gifts of both creativity and choice. So yes, people have no anchor to be able to navigate this freedom and what that actually entails.

**WOODS:** Yeah. Yeah, and the anchor is just the one thing in the world they won't touch with a ten-foot pole. Every passing fad, they cannot jump on fast enough, right? Every pass fad in society that maybe we will laugh at ten years from now, that they're already for, but anything more significant than that — I want to make sure and link to stuff you're doing. So certainly, we're going to link to *Mary and the Art of Prayer: The Hours of the Virgin in Medieval Life and Thought*, so we'll definitely encourage people to check out your most recent book. I'll have that linked at [TomWoods.com/1222](http://TomWoods.com/1222), which is the episode number. But I also am going to make sure and link to your blog. In fact, I've got right here — yeah, it's a BlogSpot blog, so it's [FencingBearAtPrayer.blogspot.com](http://FencingBearAtPrayer.blogspot.com). And so if you're on the road and you can get that all down, I'm going to link to it at [TomWoods.com/1222](http://TomWoods.com/1222). But I think it's pretty obvious that Rachel Fulton Brown is somebody you're going to want to get to know, and I hope I will have a further opportunity to get to know. Thanks so much for your time today.

**FULTON BROWN:** Thank you for talking.