Dale Allison of Princeton Theological Seminary was invested as a member of the American Academy of Sciences and Letters in 2025. In this video, Academy Executive Director Greg Forster interviews Prof. Allison about why reductive methodologies can't counteract narrow belief systems, who has courage in the modern academy, and the danger of surrendering to a "technological mindset" in the life of the mind.

Greg Forster, American Academy of Sciences and Letters

Hello, I'm Greg Forster, and this is our latest member interview. I'm interviewing Dale Allison of Princeton Theological Seminary. Dale, thank you so much for being with us.

Dale Allison, Princton Theological Seminary

Delighted to be here today.

Forster

Let me begin by asking you, what are some recent examples in your field of people who have shown intellectual courage?

Allison

One book in particular comes to mind. I'm a religious historian, and this is a book written by another religious historian, a man named Carlos Eire, who by the way is a member of this Academy and is a very well-known historian at Yale, a historian of the Reformation and the early post-Reformation period. He recently published a book entitled *They Flew: A History of the Impossible*. This book contextualizes some of the stories and claims that appear after the Reformation, miraculous claims, metanormal claims, such as the people who say they saw a trace of St. Teresa of Avila, or the numerous people who said they saw Joseph of Cupertino fly. It is a very learned book, he's done a lot of research, he's familiar with the original sources in multiple languages, but it dawns on the reader partway through that he's not doing the normal thing, which is either to set these claims to the side or to just trot out some reductionistic method of explaining them away. You begin to think, oh, it looks like he thinks maybe some of these outlandish, impossible things really happened. By the time you get to the end, it's clear that he does believe some of this stuff is not just legend or exaggeration or misperception. Some of these outlandish events he thinks really happened.

As Carlos was writing this book, he had to know, given the state of the academy, that lots of people would look at this and not take him seriously at all, or they would talk about him behind his back, can you believe what Eire is saying these days, he's lost his mind, that sort of thing. One review began with, this is a deeply unserious book. Deeply unserious book. I think it's a deeply serious book myself. I think it's a lot of fun. It's really important because it does, at least make me ask questions. If some of this testimony was about anything else at all that didn't involve a metanormal or supernatural claim, nobody would dismiss it. Everyone would just say, the testimony is overwhelming. So, what do you do? Carlos says we have to take some of this into account. By the way, he doesn't do this on religious or theological

grounds, even though he is a practicing Roman Catholic. He gives historical arguments, he thinks, for taking some of this seriously.

This is very brave within the academy. I was taught by example and by word of mouth that you either don't go there, you don't deal with these things or, if you do, you find the psychological or sociological explanation for them. So, it goes against the zeitgeist of the academy. It goes against what's been happening in historical circles for a long, long time. I think it's a very brave book. I'll add one caveat, though, which is that Carlos is closer to the end of his career than the beginning. That must have made it a little easier to write this book. If he had written it when he was 30, it's quite possible he wouldn't be at Yale today. But he's already made a reputation, people respect him, they know how great a scholar he is. He's a well-known public intellectual, and he's got tenure. Nobody's going to fire him for this. He can endure the fallout, given what he's done before and where he is in life. A younger scholar might get in trouble for this. In any case, it's a very brave book to write when you know that somebody is going to say, this is a deeply unserious book, right? That's the one example that comes to mind.

Forster

I'm so glad to hear you say that. Since Carlos is a member of our board here at the Academy, he is in some sense my boss. So, I want to say for the record, I had no idea that you were going to mention Carlos when I asked that question. In his defense on the subject of his being close to the end of his career, he has been demonstrating courage for quite some time. I had been working with him here at the Academy for a while before I found out that his books are banned in Cuba. That he can't go back, and they don't mess around down there. That's a brutal regime. I admire his courage very much.

Allison

He wrote a book about his early childhood in Cuba, and it is not complementary to the Castro government.

Forster

Carlos Eire showing courage from a while back. This raises methodological questions that are still unresolved in the university. What are the premises of inquiry that are permitted in different disciplines? We tend to stay in our silos and not raise these uncomfortable questions about what premises are permitted.

Allison

It's very difficult, and I've done something similar in some of my recent work, and people have said, well, what do you do now? Once you let one monster in, hundreds of them are baying at the door, and they want in too. How do you sort the true from the false? It's a very good question, but you should at least come away from Carlos's work thinking, maybe I shouldn't take my presuppositions for granted, or maybe I should be open to re-examining some things I've just been certain about my whole career. Where you go with this, that's another question, but at least he's started things.

Forster

Right, there's no one methodology that trumps all other methodologies. We have to listen well to each other and consider one another's arguments.

Let me ask you my next question. What are some underappreciated ways that the work done in your field contributes to human understanding and well-being?

Allison

Here I'm going to have to talk about "fundamentalism," and I'd like to just leave it undefined at this point. It's a difficult thing to define, but I remember a number of years ago, there was a historian at the University of Chicago, a very well-known historian of American religion named Martin Marty, and in the 80s and 90s, he was involved in something called the Fundamentalism Project, and they ended up producing five volumes on this topic. They didn't just look at Christian fundamentalism, but fundamentalism all around the world, and I remember thinking at the time, why is he wasting his time on this topic? I've learned since that he was very wise, knew what he was doing.

There is a sort of religious psychology, I'm not sure how to put it, which I guess is always with us, but I've noticed it particularly lately. I remember a couple of years ago hearing somebody talk about Christian nationalism, and I just thought, that can't be, that's just got to be overreaction to something somebody heard, but apparently it's not, and I have a number of students who came to Princeton as fundamentalists – really, really, really, really, really conservative, if that's the right word. The work I do not only presupposes, but it helps people to get out of fundamentalism. By that I mean that there are certain things we know about the Bible from the last 300 years that we didn't know before, and that religious people, Christians and Jews, need to take account of some of this knowledge. For example, we know that the book of Isaiah wasn't written at one time by one person, but that it has at least three major stages and things such as this.

I have students in my intro class, and they've never had any sense of history. It's just, here's the Bible, and then they learn that maybe not all the ideas about authorship they had were correct, and so on. Sometimes people will come up to me years later, and they will say, the intro class was really important for me. It helped me to rethink some things and revise some of my ideas and so on. I like to think that I'm part of a tradition that isn't just a tradition of pure skepticism, but we have learned some things as historians about the sacred texts and the Western tradition, and that people need to know those things. Some people, once they learn these things, will just say, well, that's not what I learned, so it's all bunk, and I'll just forget it. But most people say, okay, I need to rethink, I need to revise, I need to try to take account of what I've learned. So, as a purveyor of history or putting texts within their historical context, I'm serving the battle against uninformed, extreme fundamentalist ideas. That's something I think I do.

Forster

That's vitally important because you can study something like fundamentalism from a social science standpoint. People like Jonathan Haidt and Peter Berger have done good work explaining the sociology

and the psychology of that sort of phenomenon, but you are leaving a lot out if you don't address the truth claims on their own terms; these are not just sociological phenomena, they are claims about reality.

Allison

Yes, and you know, sometimes archaeology runs into some books that we have and some stories we have, and you have to figure out how to put them together, so I'd like to think that the guild I belong to has attempted to do that honestly and to some extent with an open mind. We can't have completely open minds, but to some extent we have tried to cultivate open minds so that not all our conclusions are dictated by something that we're starting with. We should be able to say, okay, this changes how we should think about this, that or the other thing.

I have thought about this a lot, and I like to think that my contributions to scholarship or to the guild maybe are what matter, but probably as a teacher this is the most important thing I do. I certainly have taught far more undergraduates and divinity students, master students, than I have PhD students. You get to deal with a small number of PhD students, so I suppose my influence for good or bad or whatever it is, is primarily through these large classes with non-PhD students.

Forster

That's a vitally important part of what we do.

Let me ask you my last question. What do you see as the one or two most important challenges right now to maintaining high intellectual standards in your field?

Allison

The first answer to that is obvious, and it's what everybody's talking about right now. I am worried about AI. I bet that every single college and university in the country right now has a committee on what to do about AI. It has destroyed the take-home test. It's just not going to be anymore. It's in the process of destroying essays, which is really problematic for me. That's always been the most important thing in my master's and PhD classes. They have to write final papers for me. I know that more and more students are using AI, and I have talked to students who tell me there's nothing wrong with it, and I'm just old-fashioned. There's something wrong with me because I'm not keeping up with the times, right?

I spoke with the editor of an academic journal in my field recently. This is an academic journal that three years ago had – I'm not going to get the numbers exact –about 300 submissions a year. The editor and half a dozen others look through these things, and they toss some out, and then they read some. That number has gone up to 3,000. It's not because there are that many more scholars in the field. It is because people are using AI to write their papers. Now, the editor told me that he still thinks it's possible in most cases to spend a couple of minutes and say, I think this is AI generated. But AI is getting better and better, and that's going to be harder and harder to do. And what is an academic journal going to do with 3,000 submissions if you can't just look and say, no good, no good, no good? Are you going to have to have 50 people looking at it?

So that's terrible. It's not just terrible for the journals, but it's terrible in terms of what this is doing to younger scholars who think this substitutes for research. The internet is great for some things. I'm really happy that I don't have to go to Oxford to see some things, now I can just get them online. That's great. But once you start using AI, it's doing your research, and once something is doing your research, you're not thinking like you used to be. I'm really big on paper and doing things yourself. I think we still need libraries. I don't want everything online. I want people to go and look for themselves.

This is related then to a second concern I have, and this isn't AI, although I guess it's related. It has to do with a mindset, with a technological mindset. Young people today, in my experience, have all grown up with cell phones. We're now at generation, what, 17 for the iPhone? And the advertising is that every generation is better and does more things than before. Everything that is new is improved, which, by the way, is all over our advertising. You just soak this in, "new and improved," which means new *is* improved. This bleeds over because it becomes a worldview or psychological outlook, which is that the latest is best. In my field, that just isn't true. You have to try to keep up with recent publications, but as a senior scholar, I'm still going back to 19th-century books and journals and articles. I'm still wrestling with Albert Schweitzer and people who have been dead for a long, long time, because there are certain seminal figures, certain geniuses, and the only way to get certain things is by dealing with them directly.

I worry that as we have more and more publications, and as we have this ideology that new is best, people are just going to read the latest thing. That's a disaster for the field. AI is really bad, but this technological mindset is bad. It's also abetted by our modern publishing capabilities. Whatever your field is, there are way more books published every year than 20 years ago, and way more journal articles than 20 years ago. Nobody can keep up with the latest thing. If you're trying to keep up with the latest thing, you're certainly not going to have time left over for going back and reading an article from 40 years ago or 100 years ago, or a book from 80 years ago. You're just not going to do that. We're losing that.

I'm already seeing things replay that were played out a century ago. People don't know they're reinventing the wheel. In my field, because of the internet, about 20 years ago, it became big to wonder whether Jesus of Nazareth was a historical person. Maybe he was just purely fictional, right? There were books pro and con and articles pro and con and so on. Well, I happen to know the history of my field, and I know this was a thesis at the end of the 19th century, and I know that it was dispatched at the beginning of the 20th century. It was dealt with in detail. It was dispatched. The arguments that have come up now, for the most part, are not appreciably different from what they were over 100 years ago.

Forster

A lot of people put a lot of work into this already.

Allison

If you know it, okay, let's go on to something else. That one we've been through. We don't need to do this. But that's one in particular that the internet brought to life. The so-called atheistic community started promoting this, and it became big. Then people started fretting. Then a few mainstream scholars

said, I guess we've got to go back and address this. But they are not saying anything that was not said 100 years ago. I know the books that were written 100 years ago.

Forster

Those internal feedback loops, where people only speak to someone who knows the same thing they do. Both of the things that you've mentioned involve disengagement of our critical faculties, to some extent. It strikes me that that compounds over time. The argument gets made, it's okay if I use AI to write this, because I'll check it, and I'll make sure that it's okay. Maybe for now I can do that, because I learned without AI. Therefore, I can read the AI product and check it. But if I start using it, eventually, I won't know how to check it, and people who've never done anything else won't know how to check it.

Allison

Somebody like me, who's asked AI a few questions, knows how bad it is. If I ask it a question on something I'm an expert in, I say, that is a rotten answer. But people who aren't already experts aren't going to know that, so they're going to be taking it from this thing. I'm really discouraged. I think AI is probably horrific for military application; it's probably going to help destroy us. It's wonderful for medicine, I guess. I don't know yet what the great application is to my field. It just seems all negative so far. Maybe I've missed something, but I don't see anything it does that Google couldn't do better so far.

Forster

At least Google from 20 years ago, before Google got AI. But that's another conversation. The good news is you're far from the only person raising these concerns. So hopefully, that'll be an ongoing conversation.

Dale, thank you so much for being with us. We really appreciate it.

Allison

Appreciate talking to you, Greg.