Informed-Perspectives: Religion and the Race for the White House

[00:00:00] **Evan Sandsmark** Welcome, everyone. Thank you for joining "Informed Perspectives: Religion in the Race for the White House" with esteemed guests Elizabeth Bruenig and Charles Mathewes. Today's webinar is hosted by the Religion, Race & Democracy Lab at the University of Virginia. This is the second program in our Informed Perspective series which brings journalists, documentarians and humanities scholars into conversation about issues concerning religion, race and politics. I'm Evan Sandsmark a Ph.D. candidate in religious studies at the University of Virginia, a member of the lab and one of the program managers, along with Jessica Marroquin for the Informed Perspective series. I'd like to thank the Luce/ACLS Program in Religion, Journalism and International Affairs for so generously sponsoring this event.

There will be more of these webinars in the future and you can find information about all of our upcoming events on the labs website, religionlab.virginia.edu. Also on the website, you will find recordings of past events, including our first Informed Perspective event on religion, migration and democracy. Today's event is also being recorded and will be available later this week on our website. If you enjoy programs like this, we invite you to listen to the lab's signature podcast, Sacred & Profane, about religion in everyday in unexpected places available wherever you find podcasts that you listen to.

Before I introduce our speakers, a few notes to our audience who I want to encourage to raise questions throughout the event. To do so, please use the Q&A function at the bottom of your screens. The chat and raise hands functions have been disabled. Please note that all attendees have the ability to upvote each other's questions. There will be time at the end of the event to field some of your questions.

And now it is my pleasure to introduce our two speakers, Charles Mathewes is the Carolyn M. Barbour Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Virginia, specializing in Christian theology and religious ethics. He's also interested in issues around religion, society, culture and politics. He is co-director of The Religion and Its Publics Project at UVA, as well as the author of several books, including "Evil and the Augustinian Tradition," "A Theology of Public Life" and the "Republic of Grace: Augustinian Thoughts in Dark Times." His newest book, "A Future for Political Theology," is forthcoming.

Elizabeth Bruenig is an opinion writer at The New York Times, where she writes on Christianity, politics and morality in public life. Previously, she was an opinion writer at The Washington Post, where she published a Pulitzer-nominated investigation of an unprosecuted sexual assault in her Texas hometown. She has worked as an editor in The Post's Outlook section and as a staff writer at The New Republic and prior to her work in journalism received her received her Masters of Philosophy and Christian theology at the University of Cambridge as a Marshall scholar. She lives with her husband and daughters in New England.

Thank you both, Chuck and Liz, for being here today. I've been personally looking forward this event for many weeks. So let's continue onto the reason why we are all here today. Chuck, if you'd like to start us off, that would be great. I'll hand it over to you.

[00:03:11] **Charles Mathewes** All right. Hi, everybody. It's great to be here and thank you, Evan, for setting us up. And thank you, Liz, for preparing your own remarks. And it's good to good to have this chance to talk. The question I wanted to talk about today for a few minutes is, is there and if not, can there be a religious left? So let me say a few things in

preparation for that and then I'll get into it. For a long time now, a narrative has developed in American politics of the kind of red state versus blue state divide. My favorite version of this actually emerged in 2004 right after the election with a map that organized the states into two distinct areas, one called the United States of Canada and the other called Jesus Land. Now, over the past 10 years, a more sophisticated version of this is - what I think is more sophisticated - has emerged involving not just religion, but also race in these issues and noting the way that the whiteness of the Christianity that is mobilized often in American politics is an important factor about it. These days, and I think growing over the last decade or so, maybe longer, is this question, though, about whether this religiosity of American politics, which seems heavily accented to the right, could also become something on the left? Here there are really two basic questions for it - we won't be talking about them evenly today, but I think they'll both be emerging in our comments. The first one is about the right, about whether this GOP white Christianity is stable and likely to endure. Now, I suspect that in the short term, maybe the next decade or so, it is possible. But it seems to me very hard to see how the demographics alone would not challenge it as we see the browning and the immigrantizing of American Christianity, both Protestant and Catholic. This is all a very interesting issue. It's not really my question. And I think Liz will be talking about that a little bit. The second is whether this divide can be confronted from the opposite direction by a rival form of political Christianity or an alliance across multiple religious traditions that we might call the religious left. My answer is just to give you the headline first, it is not likely to have a legible effect in this election. But, with the right intellectual moves combined and this is really important, it seems to me, with a strong and flexible institutional organization which it currently lacks, a future religious left is possible. Possible, however, and here I speak more as a theologian, whether that is wise is a further question indeed. And I will raise it.

[00:05:58] **Charles Mathewes** So first, let me just lay out some facts here. Probably know some of these. Why do people think of religious left is both possible and potentially desirable. The first claim is that historically the religious left or something like it has been a powerful force in American public life and civil society. You can make this argument going back at least to abolitionism, to the social gospel, to the progressive movement and the New Deal and most famously in the 20th century in civil rights. I'm not going to address all of these except to say this: there is a tension between being a participant in civil society and being a curator or a referee or guardian of the public square. And it seems to me most of the time the churches were seen as a functional structuring force of civil society. And that's the way that they've been read from Alexis de Tocqueville through someone like Robert Putnam. But when they acted within civil society, however, they drew on their currency, their cultural capital, as legitimating forces. And it's possible that in the 1960s, especially in that moment of the civil rights, that the increasing changes in the structure of public life, combined with the serious exertions of the churches as advocates for a number of causes, especially civil rights, but also in different ways of the anti-Vietnam movement, movement to women's liberation and even in the early 1970s, early movements towards gay liberation.

[00:07:27] **Charles Mathewes** It's possible that these forces actually broke the power of the religious moderate, the religious guardians, as it were. Delegitimated them enough to make it impossible for them to regain their audiences in their own constituencies. That's one thing. The other thing is that public life now, as opposed to the 1960s and before, is very different. Churches are positioned much more weakly, often as special interest groups rather than Olympian guardians. So history may be less relevant as a sign of hope than someone would think. Second claim here about why people think that a religious left is possible and desirable is that currently there are in fact, a great number of politically

leftist religious people. This is very, very true. America is still a very religious country, and while citizens under 40 seem significantly less committed to religion, some of that is agent stage effect. And anyway, they are less likely to be voters than people above 40 in the first place. But here, too, there are some problems. First of all, more religious believers are on the right, and the path for decades of religious right activism has really stigmatized the idea of religious politics for many on the left, both leftist religious people and leftist non religious people. So many people, both religious and leftist, are not wanting to be religious leftists. Right. In other words, you can be religious and you can be on the left, but you don't want to operationalize those two things together. Second, the Democratic Party's religiosity is much more diverse and cacophonous than the GOP is. It is more diverse in terms of the variety of religious traditions that are embedded in that, even within Christianity, but beyond Christianity as well. Also now fully a third of Democrats are more or less overtly not religious and sometimes often anti-religious. How to deal with this pluralism? That's a puzzle that the Democratic Party would have to face. The left, the religious left would have to face. Now, there's an interesting question here. This is a large narrative about the Democrats. Did the Democrats over the last few decades lose faith or was it rather that they gained unbelievers in their coalition? In other words, is the rising presence of non-religious people in the Democratic Party a sign of secularism or a sign of sorting?

[00:10:02] **Charles Mathewes** I suspect it's a bit of both. But I would I would suspect that actually, starting with this. So there's two big arguments about why the religious left is possible and some worries about them. Right. The first one that historically they've been possible and important, but maybe less so now. And the second that there seemed to be a lot of people and I suggest a couple worries about that. One last worry about why religious left may be hard to construct today. And that is the simple fact that religious values do not fit any simple partisan platform perfectly. So on both sides, religious leaders and party leaders must be some ideological, there must be some ideological rationalization, an ordering of ideas. On the right, the ideological power of pro-life politics and for a while, family politics - although you'll notice that's dropped off, probably because of the Trump family thing - were an important amplifier and organizer for religious actors, which did not threaten the larger anti-tax strategy of the overall GOP. Also, the constituencies could be held together for a while by white grievance policy and a kind of anti-elitism as well.

[00:11:20] **Charles Mathewes** But what causes or goals could mobilize actors on the left to do this in the same way? And what oppositions will effectively polarize them to accept the inevitable compromises with a political movement much more diverse in all possible ways than the GOP? It's currently hard to see because to be frank - and this is one of my first issues about the idea of the religious left - there seems to be no discipline in the religious left that would order and prioritize its aims. So on this issue of whether a religious left is possible, whether it could exist, it's possible. But there are significant challenges that lie before it. First, the constituency doesn't really see religion as driving their politics. And second, no institutions or ordering forces exist, which are dedicated to changing these facts, right, the religious left has inspirational leaders, but few followers. There's charisma and they vary in terms, but there's very little in the way of bureaucracy. Now, compare all this to the religious right, the religious right has organized top down with an intentional strategy, widely communicated both to its adherents and to others, and also intelligent tactics and employees related to messaging. Now it has media institutions as well that are over the short and long term, amplify its message to the mass and beyond. It is coherent because it is disciplined. It is disciplined because it is organized. It preaches hierarchy and obedience. And it practices what it preaches. And it accepts more than anything else - and this is very important - it accepts compromise with other parts of the conservative movement in the service of very material political aims.

[00:13:07] **Charles Mathewes** What does it essentially do? What is at its core, its core effects? I would say in terms of two things - and this is why if you want to have a left movement, you have to think about whether you want these things as well - it engages voice and it mobilizes vote. Right. Now, as regards to voice and vote, the religious left seems to face challenges on both. As regards voice first, there seems to be no attempt to generate a coherent and straightforward message over the long term. No institutional home for powerful and durable messages messaging over decades. Look, by the end of the 1970s, the religious right had its core moral message, right? It wasn't about the Moral Majority per say. It was pro-life that moved into the center more firmly in the 80s, but it was already there by the late 70s, it was anti-abortion and that has stuck with it through thick and thin. Lots of religious left voters would agree, vociferously with different parts of the left agenda, but it's not clear that there's any particular thing that is distinctly visible and legible as the thing that the religious left is promoting. Until there is, there is no clear profile for the religious left. Secondly, vote. There seems to be no structural effort by the religious left to speak outside of their core constituency, which is people who aren't religious and also people who are leftists. Right. So they do not attempt to speak to other religious people, nor do they attempt to speak to leftists who are not religious. They only preach, that is, to the converted. That makes it a doubly narrow agenda. And why is this?

[00:14:51] **Charles Mathewes** There are two causes, I think. One structural. One rhetorical. Let me call this up here. Structurally, the religious left seems to me to be divided actually between two large movements. One slightly larger, I think, than the other. On the one hand, there are common good religious leftists. On the other hand, there are prophetic religious leftists. My intuition is that these are two quite distinct communities, quite distinct constituencies. And while there may be many more common, good religious leftists, it seems to me that the prophetic religious leftists are better at capturing PR. So they seem to be more equitable in size, even though they probably aren't actually. These are very different groups and they differ not only in their ideologies, they differ also in some ways in their generational makeup and even in their affect, the way that they present themselves. And I think there's a fight between these groups that needs to happen here. Rhetorically, however, there's an interesting problem, too behind this. The common good religious lefties seem capable of collaborating. The prophetic religious leftists seem really good at confronting. But neither group seems to try very hard to convert or even to convince. That is, there's a basic befuddlement about what to do about the fact that given this pluralism in American public culture, both of these groups move in more expressivist directions, rather than trying to tell you that what they say as religious leftists is the truth. That's a very interesting thing because it suggests that there's a deep befuddlement that the religious left may be facing, that the religious right has basically denied. The religious right has decided not to engage with the problem of pluralism at all. It has doubled down on an older version of kind of reestablishing a certain form of Christian triumphalism. The religious left at least recognizes there's a problem, even if they haven't been able to get beyond the recognition itself.

[00:16:58] **Charles Mathewes** And that means that in a way, you'll notice an interesting rhetorical and stylistic asymmetry in the way that public life goes in both the religious left - the prophetic religious left and the common good religious left - there seems to be no attempt at what I would call broadly apologetics or catechesis. There's no attempt that is in apologetics, in trying to defend your views and explain to others why they should share your views. And there's no attempt and catechesis that is in teaching people who are latently already of your view that they ought to be more explicitly of your view, mobilizing them, bringing them into the movement. This is interesting because there are apologetics

and catechesis about all sorts of other things in American politics right? How to be anti-racist, how to be a good environmental activist, how to be a good person engaged in gender equity, how to be someone who's concerned properly about immigration, and the coming, increasing diversification of America - all sorts of ways in which people are being taught how to be these things. I don't think there's much in the way of a sincere effort at trying to convince people to be religious leftists, either who are latently already because they're religious and on the left or because they might be religious but wanted that should be left or that they're leftists but they should understand that religion is the way to go.

[00:18:13] **Charles Mathewes** It's an interesting emphasis. So there's a couple of problems there about the future of religion and the left, but behind all of that, there is this deeper theological question. Do you want a religious left at all? At least, do you want a religious left that is the sort of thing that would be symmetrical to the religious right? And I actually don't know what I think about this, but I think it's an interesting and important question. Has the religious right been a model for a successful religious movement? Tactically, that seems unquestionable. But in other ways, maybe not. Much depends on the criteria that you look at to judge what success is. But if you look at the demographics, it's hard to argue that the religious right has given a good witness in the public sphere to the faith that it professes to support. And now, in the last four years, with the overt obedience to Trump, who is so manifestly not part of the values of that coalition, perhaps their faith has become in some important ways, spiritually poisonous as well as politically ludicrous. So that's an open question. All right. And at that, I will leave it alone and I will hand it over to Elizabeth, who will take it from here.

[00:19:39] **Elizabeth Bruenig** Thanks so much, Chuck, and thanks, everybody who just joined us. I think Chuck gave a really excellent introduction to the problems of thinking about religion and politics, not only in this particular election, but in the last several years and going forward. So Chuck sort of tackled the religious left side of things and I'm going to try to talk a little bit about some things that are happening on the religious right. One of the things that I find a little bit funny about our era is that if you think back to as recently as the presidency of George W. Bush, we didn't have to look very far for a kind of Christian nationalist boogey man. People complained very forthrightly about George W. Bush willingly occupying that type of position. When 9/11 happened and radical Islam was framed as the greatest threat to the United States, it was even easier to see a kind of muscular, neo-conservative Christianity emerging on the religious right and being very ascendant in the GOP. They were an incredible force to be reckoned with. Culturally, they were a force to be reckoned with. And it really did look like some kind of Christian triumphalist story was going to be the future of the Republican Party and possibly the United States going forward. It's part of the reason there was such a vigorous new atheist movement in that same period led by people like Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris. They played a role in pushing back against this Republican politics that was mainly animated by a triumphalist style of evangelical white Christianity. These days, sort of without any fanfare, all of that seems to have changed. Right now, the boogey man that's used to, I think, exemplify all of the problems with a white Christian nationalism comes from a novel that was written in the nineties, "The Handmaid's Tale" by Margaret Atwood. The television version of "The Handmaid's Tale" aired on Hulu right around the time that 2016 was really taking shape. And I think that metaphor has settled in as the one that is going to dictate how we think about Christian nationalism, at least for the duration of this election cycle. It certainly has done so over the last several years. I think there are a lot of reasons for that. I think that it's very evocative imagery. And obviously Atwood was thinking about highly organized, highly militant, charismatic Christian groups when she came up with her fictional theocracy. On the other hand, as protesters have begun

dressing up as handmaids and protesting around the country and mainly laws related to abortion and reproductive rights. Amy Coney Barrett has emerged as a potential Supreme Court justice to take the place of Ruth Bader Ginsburg. She was nominated by Trump and she was involved in a Catholic charismatic lay group called People of Praise in which women life coaches, essentially women leaders, were known as handmaids. That made her a perfect candidate to fit into this "Handmaid's Tale" framework. And I think it's the strangest thing I've ever seen. The reason is there is no part of the Christian right in America at the moment that actually seems to be even dreaming about, much less headed towards the establishment of a Christian triumphalist society that is fully immersed in Christian culture and thought that has a kind of great awakening style about it, where people are edged into, nudged into Christianity or at least Christian behavior via policy, through this saturation of right Christian thought in society. That does not seem to be the direction that things are going in and there are several reasons for that. One of them has to do with demography. So a few interesting polls here that are recent from Pew. They've come out in the last couple of years. There have been broad based declines in share of Americans who say they are Christian in almost every age and demographic group. So overall, men who say they're Christian between 2009 and 2018, 19, when this survey was conducted down 12 percentage points, women, 11 percentage points. The silent generation - these are people born between 1928 and 1945 - two percentage point drop in those who identify as Christian. Baby boomers - between 1946 and '64 - six percentage point drop. Gen x, eight percentage point drop and Millennials, a 16 percentage point drop among all whites. That is a twelve percentage point drop in identifying as Christian. Non Hispanic black people, that is an 11 percentage point drop. And Hispanics, a 10 percentage point drop. Less than college education, eleven percentage point drop. A college graduate, thirteen percentage point drop. And in every region of the United States, there have been major declines in Christian identification. This goes for Republicans and Democrats as well. The decline in the Democratic Party has been more precipitous, a 17 percentage point drop. But in the Republican Party, that's still a seven percentage point drop. Now, white evangelicals remain the single largest religious bloc inside the Republican Party, and therefore they wield a significant amount of power. They get to set priorities. That's a major role that they play for them. Priorities of the past have been same-sex marriage, pornography, censorship in media - you can remember a little bit of that happening in the 90s - and foreign policy - especially when it comes to policy regarding Israel - and then, of course, abortion.

[00:26:20] **Elizabeth Bruenig** Right now, evangelicals still serve a prioritizing role inside the Republican Party, but they have had to prioritize their own priorities. They realize their capital is somewhat limited. What they're interested in now are issues around abortion and religious liberty. Religious liberty has taken the place, I think, of prior white evangelical attempts from the right to establish a sort of nationwide Christian culture and politics. What religious liberty means to them is carving out enclaves where they can, in certain parts of the country through conservative judges being on the bench and conservative state and city legislators being in power, they can manage their own affairs and essentially exist in a small, contained Christian culture where the laws are favorable to the types of things they want to do. So if you look at the major court cases that have fired up evangelicals over the past few years, the Masterpiece Cake Shop, right, that has to do with whether or not businesses are obligated to serve all clients or if a business qualifies as a type of expression and therefore, even though it is commerce taking place in the public sphere, can they make decisions based on their religious beliefs as to what they will or will not participate in in the market? That sort of case is the type of case that Evangelicals are most concerned about, what they can do in their businesses, in their places of work, whether or not they can choose who to hire, who to serve, who to fire, et cetera. And this

goes not only for white Evangelicals, but also for conservative Catholics who have also gone to court many times in the last several years for similar reasons. Who can they let go from Catholic institutions, schools, hospitals, et cetera, based on their religious beliefs? And what they are most concerned about is that they are going to be forced via legislature or decisions on the Supreme Court to participate in different activities in the public sphere via their institutions that are contrary to their religious beliefs. Instead of trying to affect a nationwide conversion that would sort of forfend those kinds of challenges being made, which they have no expectation of, they are interested in trying to elect leaders who are sympathetic to their desire to form these sorts of enclaves, which are geographical, but they're also demographic, where they will not be hassled in their thought by the sort of problems presented by pluralism. So what that looks like. I spoke to Robert Jeffress about this in the run up to '16 - He is one of Trump's most prominent evangelical advisors, he is the pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, which is an enormous megachurch that wields quite a bit of influence in the area - and what Jeffress said was interesting, which was he didn't see anything getting better for Evangelicals. I asked him if he thought Trump winning in '20 or even in '16 was going to improve the fortunes of Evangelicals in America. He said, "no, I don't think so. I don't see us winning this." He doesn't see victory as a possible outcome for white Evangelicals in America. They're not going to win the war of ideas. Obviously, culture has become increasingly dismissive of the kind of beliefs that Evangelicals advance, and this is true even within Christian circles. If you look at polls of Christians, non-evangelical Christians have become increasingly more accepting of things like same-sex marriage, sex outside of marriage and so on and so forth. Even abortion seems to have wobbled a little bit, though it's a generally stable issue in terms of polling. And I think Jeffress and other evangelicals who are highly involved in Republican politics really do believe what they're saying in terms of not having a Christian triumphalist vision. And I think Trump fits very nicely into that. If you look at what Evangelicals talk about when they talk about voting. This is a recent poll from 2019 people were asked, "Is it important that a president personally lives a moral and ethical life?" and all U.S. adults, right, Evangelicals included, said 63 percent said that's very important. That's the same number of Evangelicals who made that judgment. Where Evangelicals vastly differ from the US population in general is with this question: "Is it important to have a president who stands up for people with your religious beliefs?" 38 percent of all U.S. adults said that's very important. 67 percent of evangelicals said that's very important. This is the biggest disparity between evangelicals and the United States in general that this poll tracked and it is the most important issue for Evangelicals that this poll tracked. It was more important than the president personally living a moral and ethical life. It was much more important than the president having strong religious beliefs, even if they differed from their own. Only 34 percent of evangelicals said that was important. And it was much more important than a president sharing your religious beliefs. Again, just 34 percent of evangelicals said that was very important. So we've really come a long way from the days of George W. Bush, who was able to speak to evangelicals in their language to be one of their own. We've even come a long way from the candidacy of Mitt Romney. Romney, of course, was a perfectly down the middle Republican candidate, except for he was a Mormon. Billy Graham had on his ministry's website pretty strong condemnations of Romney ahead of the election. And those condemnations are not of Romney's specifically, but of the Church of Latter-Day Saints, of Mormonism. And all of that was scrubbed right before the election, but it was pretty clear, especially in the primaries, that Evangelicals were not thrilled about having a president in the running who was not going to share their beliefs and, in fact, was from a Christian sect that they're very suspicious of. So compare that to today, where Evangelicals are not as approving of Trump as they were in '16. Those numbers have slipped somewhat, but still 8 in 10 say they're going to vote for Trump, which was about the number that voted for him in '16. And what emerges is this picture of the religious right

that is increasingly interested in protecting itself with laws that pertain to religious liberty and in retreating somewhat from the kind of Christian triumphalist conversion ethic that seemed to dominate the religious right for the years prior to Trump. So I think we've seen a sea change here. I think the thing that's going to keep the GOP together going forward isn't really based on religion. It might be based in Christian culture, but is not so much based in Christian goals. And I think you're going to see a decline in the influence Evangelicals have inside the Republican Party. This is true of white conservative Catholics as well. And I think that is going to give rise to a right wing that is much more nationalist than Christian nationalists, even though that will remain an important constituency in the Republican Party. And that's all I have to say, so I will kick it back to our moderator, Evan. And we'll take some questions, I think.

[00:35:08] **Evan Sandsmark** Great. Thank you. Yes. Thanks to both of our presenters, I think we're gonna be all put on the screen now to have a sort of approximation of a discussion. We're getting tons of questions from different angles. Some e-mails, some of the Q&A I just wanted to start, Liz, by following up on something you were saying, because it also relates to what I believe is your most recent column on which was occasioned by the Supreme Court nomination, Amy Coney Barrett. So you're talking about these enclaves of sort of conservatives and these are created by religious exemptions. And I wonder if these are successful and enclave can sort of be a sort of, you know, practice their preferred way of life, if that then just takes religious issues out of the sort of national debate or away from national elections. And then I guess my more specific question is, is that going to be enough for either side? Because you can see on the liberal or secular side of people saying, well, wait a second, like we can't have these people are denying people certain rights, for example. And then on the conservative side, I do worry a little bit. And this actually relates to one of the questions about somebody who actually brought up renewal. And the Integralists, about them wanting a sort of more robust takeover of the state. So I wonder if if that's actually really a solution or if that's just going to be a sort of temporary status quo. You can go ahead and comment on that to the extent that you want.

[00:36:41] **Elizabeth Bruenig** Yeah, I mean, I think that the religious exemption laws, these religious liberty laws that would kind of give a little more autonomy to say institutions, businesses, these things operate in the public sphere and are sort of unquestionably public and in lots of legal codes, I think make that very clear. So, you know, businesses being public is a big point that comes up in the civil rights legislation. For example, they are privately owned, but they have a sort of public capacity and because of that, I don't really see these laws as actually fixing anything, as you're saying, they're not stable because so long as these are public institutions, there are going to continue to be confrontations between sort of people who hold increasingly rare sort of conservative orthodox in their thinking, religious beliefs, and people who come from an increasingly secular or at least non dogmatic spiritual society. And so I absolutely think it's a point. It's the point that's available right now. And it might be stable for some time, but it certainly doesn't solve this basic problem of pluralism that Chuck pointed out. Right. It's this very basic befuddlement in how to deal with pluralism. This is one answer to that question. You know, sort of institute laws that sort of do away with the befuddlement by giving us right of way in our areas, but that's not going to last forever. You can you can look at, again, demographics and see it. That's not going to be a permanent solution.

[00:38:28] **Evan Sandsmark** Chuck, do you want to add anything to that? I don't know if you have thoughts on this as well.

[00:38:34] **Charles Mathewes** I mean, I think the I think has got to be right about what fundamental strategic shift has happened. And that's really interesting. On the right, in terms of the change from, you know, an era where it was unselfconsciously framed as "we are the Moral Majority" to now this context of an enclave. And as I said, I tried to say as well, even the modes of conservative religion in America because of the need of immigrants to keep replenishing the pews and the mode of conservative religiosity, I think is likely to change in ways that will pry apart conservative politics and conservative religiosity in in some in some possible ways to some degree. And then looming behind it, I'm just listening to Liz thinking about this, that, you know, there are these really important moments in the mid century in America, both and more globally. So the Vatican too, you've got Nostro Aetate, you've got a number of efforts that are trying to think through the relationship of this faith community to other radically - some quite different - faith communities and to the larger secular world. And you've got a lot of Protestants trying to do this as well. And you've got a lot of other religious traditions and thinkers trying to do this as well. And I'm just thinking now as a as a kind of more or less fully paid up religious intellectual, it feels like since basically the 60s or maybe the 70s, we haven't really made any significant theoretical advances on helping these communities think hard and constructively about how to deal with otherness. And it feels like if there's a - you know, as an academic, I'm always looking for ways to feel bad about myself in ways that also make me compliment myself as having some meaning in the world. And here's one. I mean, it feels like the academics have failed in some ways. The scholars and the theologians and the religious intellectuals have failed to figure out a way to talk about having their convictions, having their commitments. I'm unapologetically laid out. And yet also recognizing the need to have, to reckon, to admit and face up to the fact that not everybody shares these convictions. And I know both. Listen, having that, you both know that we a lot of academics think about this all the time, but it strikes me as a real failure that somehow it hasn't settled down and instead, we're getting this much more kind of anodyne "well, that's just my opinion, bro" kind of view out there in the in the in the pews. That's right.

[00:41:13] **Elizabeth Bruenig** I think that's right and I'm not, you know, as this is happening, as there is a decline of Christianity in the United States and as different forms of forms of Christian politics that seemed available, say, under Bush now seem less likely. I think that's why we are getting these different theories of Christian politics that are sort of maximalist the integralist theory of Christian politics, where there's going to be an integration of church and state and the church as an institution is going to wield significant power, and that's not something that the church as an institution is even seeking. If you read Pope Francis's latest encyclical, it appears to be, among other things - and I'm writing an essay about this now for Common Wheel - it's an attempt to kind of repair and hold together liberalism, you know, by inculcating certain virtues that make liberalism more stable. It is, it's a warning against these kind of off ramps from liberalism that can lead to, you know, far right versions of governance that the church historically has disagreed with and far left versions of governance that churches historically disagreed with. So I think that those those types of movements are signals. They tell us that things are shifting in society in such a way that these ideas that are a little bit fantastical start to seem appealing because they're sort of simple answers that would be very stable, that don't have this kind of unstable punk quality that the religious liberty laws do. And on the other hand, I think you see them because of things that are going on in the church. Right. So integralism also has the effect of imagining the Catholic Church that is stable, which is also something that I think is a little bit up for debate in a way that it hasn't been before, partially because we have a pope emeritus, partially because there is such widespread spread discontent with the Pope in the United States and because the church has been embattled for the last 20

years, roughly, with these extremely demoralizing, discrediting and financially draining sex abuse cases. So for all those reasons, I think you're going to see these kinds of thoughts pop up, but I don't see them as having a whole lot of contemporary political purchase.

[00:43:47] **Charles Mathewes** It's one addition to what Liz was saying - that sounds like a great essay and I'm looking forward to reading it in part because I too am a footnote nerd on encyclicals. And I love the fact that Francis actually cites the Bavli, the Babylonian Talmud in this one, which I thought was pretty cool. I've read a couple pieces lately about what's happening in Europe that might be different in some ways than the US. If the problem of Christianity's prominence in America is around the right in a fascinating way, it seems like Christianity's prominence in Europe is in the center left in this or maybe center right. And this idea of Christian democracy and a number of political scientists are now wondering, you know, what really destroyed this. And it's interesting because in a lot of these countries now, the Christian Democrats have really fallen off the kind of political radar screen. And I wonder if Francis is actually thinking also about that, about not so much the American context, as in some ways a little more proximate to him now, the European context, what do you what do you think about that, Liz?

[00:44:53] **Elizabeth Bruenig** Yeah, I mean, I think it's entirely possible. I think that Francis, in his remarks over the past several years, has had these sort of two basic concerns when it comes to politics. One is the rise in nationalism in Europe, and also in the United States, but Europe mainly, that has accompanied the surge of migrants from the Middle East as there have been significant conflicts that have pushed migrants and refugees into Europe. That's created all kinds of political turmoil in Europe and has led to the rise of some parties and figures that I think Pope Francis finds very troubling, especially as somebody as he is from the global south and does the same kinds of politics in the United States based on, again, people coming up from the southern border, and so that's been a concern of his. And then I think, you know, quite generally, inequality and the sort of rapacious what he calls throwaway economy. But, you know, rapacious capitalism basically, or consumerism, if you want to put it more gently, also seems to be a high political concern of his. And I think that also lines up with what he feels has been a sort of decline in virtues that allowed that kind of economic activity to exist without becoming, you know, sort of hyper supercharged version of itself. So that's what I think he's up to, you know, trying to stabilize what he considers to be right, a kind of buffer against those two extremes.

[00:46:38] **Evan Sandsmark** Let me jump in here real quick since we got lots of questions, you have actually incidentally, touched on a number of different questions. Some people were raising concerns about, you know, public accommodations, Civil Rights Act, things of that, which is kind of what I was hinting at when I said that it's not entirely clear that everybody's gonna be okay with this sort of enclave idea, which is an idea that I think is gaining some traction. David French, his new book, I think is going to be sort of pushing a vision like this. In any case, I wanted to switch a little bit to the religious left. And here's here's a good, kind of concise question: so what would the goals of a religious life be? And are there goals that might bring together the prosthetic and the common good sides? Socialism, perhaps. And Chuck, if you want to take that first and maybe just touch on, again, the distinction between prophetic and common good as you address that larger question, if you would.

[00:47:32] **Charles Mathewes** Jerry, let me go with that first. That distinction is really one that I haven't really laid out conceptually in my mind very clearly, but the idea seems to be that there are some people who are mobilizing their religious convictions in some ways.

David Brooks has talked about this as the reweavers, people who are trying to work at generating institutional structures which can bear the weight of the new cultural pluralism both negatively and positively, both in terms of sustaining itself against stress and also enabling groups to become who they are and individuals to become who they are. And I think that that idea of the common good people who seek for that are one mode of thinking about the religious left. There is another mode that strikes me as often more visible today, often more urgent and often much more impatient for many good reasons. That suggests that effectively we've had moderation for many decades and it doesn't matter. Power never cedes to anything without a demand. And therefore, we need to actually have some explicit demands. I think that's the structural difference. Is there a vision for a religious left? I mean, I'm an individual. I have my own views on that. I think something around reweaving the idea of a social common good, which is local to the United States, but then extends beyond that in concentric circles or something, could be pretty adaptable to multiple theological idioms, at least across Christianity. I think also there are multiple ways to do that in Judaism and also in Islam. And I think that that's a possibility for some resources there. But again, I think the issue is just that there needs to be - effectively there needs to be some institutional forms that kind of organize somewhere between 40 and 60 percent of what get could get categorized of the religious left. If you get something of a large plurality, not even a majority, but just a large plurality of people organized, then the rest of the people who might be in the religious left are going to have to constantly put themselves around that, and then you have the possibility of setting an agenda. Right. So it's not just a matter of coming up with the right software and downloading that into people's brains. It's that you have to have some sort of institutional structure where a bunch of people commit individually, but also maybe through there as institutional representatives to pursuing a kind of core set of convictions. And honestly, I would say less and more slender ideologically than a larger. In other words, we don't need eighteen point statements that professors would produce. We need one simple thing. In the past few decades, one of the dangers of the religious left has been, unlike the religious right, it has been ideologically more centered in the academy. The academy is less responsive to movement politics, and the academy has powerful institutional incentives to reward its own people for the work they do in important ways. And if you think about the kinds of insights that people in the academy have produced right about, say, deconstructions of gender, the extent of human engagement with the environment in complicated ways, that we're not necessarily as visible and then conceptions of intermovement, political agency like intersectionality. These are all things that I think emerged out of the academy. Those are all really powerful and insightful and important. None of them have anything like the power of things like the Green New Deal, Black Lives Matter, or various modes of transport, same sex marriage equality. Those last three all emerged. I think really outside of an academic context. And because of that, you can see the difference between people doing deep research, right, on intersectionality or environmental change, whatever, and then not being able to weaponize that deep research for a political agenda. So part of the difficulty of the religious left is that it has to generate some institutional spaces where people can think more nimbly and less in a way that's captive to the academy. And I don't think that's there right now. Does that help?

[00:52:02] **Evan Sandsmark** Yeah, definitely. Liz, do you want to jump in as a sort of religious person on the on the left? If you would be comfortable with that characterization?

[00:52:11] **Elizabeth Bruenig** No. Yeah. No, I'm I'm very comfortable with that characterization. I mean, I'm a Christian socialist. Many such cases, just not in the United States. Yeah. I mean. What always comes to mind when when I think about organizing a religious left, and I think Chuck's exactly right about all the institutional barriers, there are

also major cultural barriers. So to organize a religious left, you have to be able to answer the question, you know, what is important about us that knits us together as a bloc and we have to do that in order to wield any kind of political power. The thing about the religious right, as we characterize it, is it is a bloc. It is basically white Evangelicals and white Catholics. Not to say that there's nobody else on the religious right, but those are the overwhelming demographic majorities in the religious right. And so, the white Catholics also, it's worth saying, who are involved in the religious right have been, you know, some people say "evangelicalized." So these are folks like Paul Ryan, Rick Santorum and so forth, who you wouldn't even necessarily know they're Catholic, certainly politically. They're not distinct from white Evangelicals. And so, when you think of the kind of sort of blurring that's had to go on there to assemble that bloc, imagine the level that's going to have to happen on the left where there is a much more diverse, and as Chuck put it, a cacophonous, right - a loud and vibrantly diverse religious landscape. How do you get all of those different people to agree on a set of priorities in an era where identities of difference are taking center stage? So the type of discourse that's taking place now, the way that we're given to think about who we are and how we fit into the world now is by thinking about the ways in which we're different from one another and how different people have different experiences and what we can all do to try to achieve something like equality and freedom in light of those differences. People call this identity politics. I think that's often used kind of dismissively. I wouldn't use it dismissively, but that is the type of politics that is ascendant right now on the right and the left. And that makes it difficult to organize, I think, a bloc where the method of getting to bloc status is to blur in some ways or accommodate difference toward focusing on a sort of unifying vision. And I think that's very difficult on the left.

[00:55:13] **Evan Sandsmark** OK, great. And just to reflect the democratic spirit of the moment, I want to just quickly ask for comments on what is the most upvoted question. So real quick, I would like to hear more about the quick assertion that the religious right is practicing what it preaches. I think this is to you, Chuck, valuing life, but defending the death penalty and abandoning the woman's lives with unwanted children, preaching abstinence and at times being adulterous or abusing children. The religious right has certainly been coherent and calculating, but hypocritical now. You want to comment on that, Chuck as we round things out or close things up?

[00:55:44] **Charles Mathewes** Yeah. I'm sorry, I maybe I didn't make myself clear what I was saying in that sentence when I said that was they preached the values of hierarchy and obedience and they practice what they preach vis-a-vis those values. I think part of the damage that has been self-inflicted by the religious right has been the manifest hypocrisy of the religious right from many decades, right, and just as human beings, we're all hypocrites for many decades. But then in the last four years, the damage to people in conservative communities, I would say as a theologian, the spiritual damage, especially to people under 40, has been palpable and any of us who know people who are members of these religious communities know they feel the pain that they are trying to hold together these convictions. So I don't think the religious right in that sense, as my view practices what they preach in terms of their overall normative vision. It's just that, as Liz was pointing out, there is a ruthless singularity to the way that their movement has been put together. There's a kind of first order - if we can borrow another image - a first order unity to that. And I think that the difficulty on the religious left is how how do you construct any kind of unity that would be even remotely similar? And I think it's possible. I just don't know how to do it. And I think it's the task ahead of anyone who wants to organize a religious left.

[00:57:15] **Evan Sandsmark** OK, great. So we have exactly two minutes left. Do either of you want to offer your just quick thoughts on where you think this election is going? And if you think it's going to have - what's going to happen? Can I coax a prediction out of either one of you?

[00:57:32] **Charles Mathewes** I really, really want to hear Elizabeth on this.

[00:57:36] **Elizabeth Bruenig** I think I think predicting this election is tempting the Lord. I would, you know, pay close attention to polls. I think pollsters have learned something from the polling era of '16, paid close attention to swing states and the Electoral College. I hope that everything proceeds normally and that cooler heads prevail. But I at times doubt that will happen.

[00:58:10] **Evan Sandsmark** OK, wonderful. Thank you for indulging us. So I think that pretty much brings us to the end, so I just want to thank you both, Elizabeth Bruenig and Charles Matthewes. Great presentations. Thanks for the dialog. Thanks for answering as many questions as you could. I'm sorry to the audience that we couldn't get to more. It is always so. As a reminder, the recording today will be available on the Religion Lab Web site, which is religionlab.virginia.edu. It should be sometime later this week. So, yeah. Thank you again to everybody who's here. We hope to see you again at future events. Thank you very much.