

**“Re-Imagining Religion in a Secular Age”**

Dr. James K.A. Smith  
Calvin College

March 2016

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** In introducing our speaker, I would simply say that Jamie Smith is one of the most important philosophers you may never have heard of, but after this morning you will.

He is the author of numerous theological and philosophical books. His most recent book, for those of you who know the work of Charles Taylor, the Canadian philosopher, Jamie’s written a book called “How Not to Be Secular,” and the subtitle is “Reading Charles Taylor.”

Charles Taylor has a book, it’s like 900 pages, called “The Secular Age,” and Jamie, for the rest of us who didn’t have the time to get to the 800 or 900-page book by Taylor, has written a 100-page summary of what you need to know about Charles Taylor, and taught a course at Calvin College on Taylor, and it became this book.

He has a new book coming out in April, called “You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit.”

Jamie is a Professor of Philosophy at Calvin College, and as I said, the author of many books, which are listed in the bio. He did his Ph.D. in Philosophy at Villanova University, and we are delighted to have Jamie Smith to begin our conversation on “Re-imagining Religion in a Secular Age.”

Jamie, thank you, for joining us.

**JAMIE SMITH:** Thank you.  
(Applause)

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**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** I’ve never had anyone applaud after my introduction. That must have been have been a really great introduction.

*(Laughter)*

**JAMIE SMITH:** I’m trying to think of having something so interesting to say that I have to say “this is off the record.” I can’t imagine what that would be. I sort of started my adult life as a preacher, so I’m struggling to sit and talk. I usually stand, and roam, and talk. So we’ll see how this goes. I brought an outline with me, just to help. This is very, sort of didactic, but just to give us a framework for a conversation, and something for you to doodle on.

The question I want to think about with you this morning — thank you again for having me, this is just a fantastic pleasure and opportunity and honor — and I want to think with you about what it means to say that “we live in a secular society.” And I think that is a much more amorphous term than we sometimes realize. Is it a description? Is it a prescription? What exactly is being claimed? What are the implications of that for a shared common life in the public square? And also, what are the implications of that for understanding religion and spirituality? So I think my goal this morning, is in a way, to kind of unpack some of the ambiguity that I think is folded into the terms “secularism, secularity, and the secular,” with two goals in mind. I would like to spend a few moments thinking about how that might change the way we think about religion in public life, and politics.

So part of it is, I want to think about the sort of social, political, public square implications, of how we think about the secular. And one of the things I want to try to tease out there is why I think not all critiques of secularism are equal. That is, I think sometimes people get nervous when people are critical of secularism, as if that’s sort of a stalking horse for theocracy. And I just want to introduce some nuance where I think, no, there could be other things going on in that.

I want to introduce why we might want to distinguish “secularism” from “secularity.” That’ll be part of the project. Then the second half, I want to try to unpack why I think this changes how we think about religion and spirituality. And why, in particular, I think Charles Taylor gives us a frame to do that. And I might even hazard some prognostications

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about the future of religion in light of this. So let me start with, what I’m going to call, “taxonomy of the secular.” And here, again, I’m very much sort of leaning, floating in the wake of Charles Taylor’s really groundbreaking work.

Let’s distinguish three different ways of understanding the term “secular.” The first, we’ll just call “secular one,” is in a way, the most ancient use of the word, in which the secular simply refers to the temporal, the earthly, the worldly; this sort of the mundane material existence of creaturely temporal life. So for someone like St. Augustine, the 5th-Century North African Bishop, the “saeculum” is actually an era. It’s a time; it’s not a space. The “saeculum” is this time in which we find ourselves between the Fall and the Second Coming for Augustine. And that means it’s a contested place, you sort of expect difference, but it also just refers to kind of mundane earthly life. So priests and nuns are sacred; butchers, bakers, and candlestick makers are secular; it’s that sort of earthly level of existence.

That meaning, however, shifts significantly, and is changed, starting in the late Middle Ages, and then into the Protestant Reformation and afterwards. And that’s partly because as Taylor points out, what happened, is you got a little bit of a kind of two-tiered version of Christianity that came out of that in the West. So if you have the sacred secular distinction and then there are sort of sacred vocations, and then there are secular things. Somebody’s got to have kids, right? So those, sort of secular endeavors it’s like okay somebody’s got to do that, but it’s a bit of a second-class citizenship within the spiritual realm. And so that creates this two-tiered picture that actually creates all kinds of problems and tensions. And what happens in the reform movements of the Late Middle Ages and early Protestant Reformation is actually the obliteration and leveling of that distinction.

So that for someone like John Calvin — one of the real upshots of the Reformation is this sanctification of ordinary life. So someone like John Calvin comes along and says, “Wait, wait, wait, the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker also have sacred vocations;” that their work, their mundane, temporal ‘secular work’ is also carried out in the face of God. So you level this distinction. And now, actually everything is sacred in some sense. You lose the two-tiered picture of the universe and picture of the spiritual. So

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what does that do to the word “secular”? This is the second piece that I think becomes significant.

In modernity, the “secular” now is going to — and this is the way I think we usually use the term “secular” now — is going to refer to a sort of nonsectarian, neutral, unbiased, areligious space or standpoint. So the secular is this perspective or space that is neutral, unbiased, ‘objective,’ and usually likes to congratulate itself on being “capital R” Rational.

So if we want spaces and perspectives that are secular, what you’re going to have to rule out is all the contingencies of traditions, authorities, beliefs, and perhaps, above all, religion. You carve out this space. Now, it’s that notion of the secular that is then assumed by the secularization thesis, which we’ll talk about for a moment, and secularism, as a kind of, what would you say, a prescriptive dogmatic project for the public square.

So in the secularization thesis, secularization theory was a very sort of confident expectation that as Western societies, to start, experienced modernization and technological advancement, all of the supposedly divisive forces of religious belief and participation would wither away, and modernity’s disenchantment would gradually sort of gobble up the rest of society. And you expect the end of religion on the basis of the secularization thesis, because everybody is going to become objective, rational, scientific, and so on. So secularization theory is always “secular two” theory. Does that make sense in this taxonomy?

Furthermore, the kind of prescriptive program for the public square that also lays out an agenda, an expectation that our political spaces, our public spaces, our university spaces will be purified of contingency, particularity, and the irrationality of religious belief, that also is a “secular two” meaning of the word secular. So secularism, if we could call that agenda secularism, that also is a “secular two” understanding of the secular. So what’s interesting I think, the time in which we find ourselves, now, is the secularization thesis has fallen on hard times. It is not an account that has survived well, mostly because it has not accounted for the phenomena that we keep bumping into, both in the West and globally. So the secularization thesis, which was informed by this pre-theoretical

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commitment to this dogmatic secularism, has not been illuminating in a way you could challenge it, just because it doesn't work very well as an explanatory account.

And I was saying to someone last night — I was at NYU last week, and they have, just as a little taste of how the world did not go the way 1970 sociologists expected, is at New York University, at the heart of Washington Square, is a university-built and funded center called “The Center for Global Spirituality.” The New York University realizes that there needed to be room for robust, particular expressions and discussion of religion at the heart of the University. That is not something you ever would have guessed if you were an ardent devotee of the secularization thesis 30 years ago.

So there's interesting phenomena that are exceptions that sort of push back on the secularization paradigm. I would also say that this notion of the neutral, unbiased, objective, ‘purely rational’ actor/perceiver has also come under ardent philosophical critique over the last generation, from a number of different places, and not even from just religiously motivated criticisms. In this sense actually, it's very interesting to note the overlap between feminist critiques of philosophy and what we call epistemology, philosophies of knowledge, and religious interests in that respect. So feminist critiques of that ideal of rationality come along and they say, “You know it's striking. It seems like this allegedly neutral, unbiased, objective, rational actor in the so-called ‘naked public square,’ looks a lot like a German white guy.

So there's this suspicion that “wait a second, you're kind of, you're selling us a line on this neutrality.” And so they undercut the myth of neutrality that really underwrote the secularist project. And so this is where you get interesting alliances between — surprisingly, you can see interesting alliances between, say, religious critics of secularism and feminists and even queer theory criticisms of the same, and George Marsden's work, “The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship,” actually draws out that parallel. So I have undoubtedly bitten off way more than we can chew in 40 minutes. So I'm going to mush on here a little bit.

This leads to the introduction by Charles Taylor of a third way of understanding the secular. And this is what we want to sort of hone in on this morning. For Taylor, a society

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is secular not because it is unreligious or areligious or antireligious. A society is secular insofar as religious belief or belief in God is understood to be one option among others.

So the society is secular insofar as religious belief and, actually any belief, is contestable. That’s what has changed. Is that nobody can take their belief system to be axiomatic or the default for a society. So everyone has the sense of the contestability of belief.

Taylor often formulates the question this way. He says — and Taylor is very careful to say that he’s telling a story about the West. He thinks there’s a lot more work to be done, to think about how this works outside of ‘the West.’

But his question is something like this: “Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God, in say 1500; and yet in the year 2000, in some sectors of Western society, it is virtually impossible to believe in God?” So how is it that in 1500, something like atheism is pretty much intellectually unimaginable; whereas, if you live in probably most of the sorts of spheres that we run in this room, it’s virtually impossible to imagine believing in God in the year 2000.

Now, 500 years is a fairly long time. And there’s a long story to be told about how that shift — it’s a story of what Taylor calls the “disenchantment of the world.” This sense that the world becomes this sort of “encased immanent frame” as he calls it.

We could talk about the history because I do think it’s interesting and important, but what I’m interested in then, is the way he defines this “third sense of the secular” as a “move from a society where a belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, pretty unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others.”

In this sense we live in a secular age, by the way, even if religious participation remains very high because one of the things that is one of the challenges for the secularization thesis — and it was sort of trotted out in the ‘60s-’70s — is it seemed to work fantastically for England, but it didn’t make much sense of the United States. Where you had a lot of the same galloping forces of technological advancement, consumer capitalism, and so on, and you could still have this really high religious participation.

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For Taylor, the United States is still a deeply secular society, but not because it is unreligious, but because it is still a society in which everybody realizes that their beliefs are contested and contestable. That’s what it would mean to live in a “secular” age. It’s not a prediction about the withering of religion. It’s less a matter of whether people are going to believe and it’s more, how they are going to believe and that’s the change. He’ll draw on Peter Berger’s notion of plausibility conditions: “What, has changed here” he would say “is not necessarily beliefs, but the conditions of belief.” This sort of the water that people swim in while they believe.

So let’s then, with that taxonomy in mind, and if you just keep in mind that this third sense of the secular is mostly what we’re interested in, let me try to unpack in five simple thesis, what really amounts to a non-secularist account of the secular. I should say Taylor himself is Roman Catholic, is actually fairly forthright, especially in follow-up work about his own religious motivations, but it’s not in a sort of agenda axe-to-grind sense, but in the sense that he’s being honest about the commitments that he brings to this perspective. And in a way, I sometimes read Taylor as the most sophisticated of Christian apologists’ working today, only in the sense that he’s being very honest about that and he’s floating this thesis, which says “Try this on, as an account, as a theory, to make sense of the world that we live in, and my bet” Taylor would say “is that this works better to account for the complexity of our secular age.” So we’ll see if that works.

Here’s the five themes that I want to try to summarize. So first of all, I do think it’s important that secularity here is not synonymous with unbelief. So a secular age is not an unbelieving age, it’s certainly not an atheistic age. It is an age in which you experience the contestability of belief, for both believers and “unbelievers” would be part of the implication of that. Secondly, and this one’s a little trickier. “The secular” as Taylor puts it “is an accomplishment. It’s not what’s merely left over when we subtract transcendence.”

So let me try to make sense of this. Most secularization theorists tell, what Taylor calls a “subtraction story.” It’s a kind of whiggish, confident, progressivist story, which goes something like this: In times past, many, many years ago, human beings had these fantastical beliefs in gods and God. They believed in an enchanted universe, they believed that there were spirits active, they believed that there was more than the natural and



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that even the natural in a sense was suspended in and sort of nourished by the supernatural.

So they lived in this fantastical world. But along came Immanuel Kant, or pick Isaac Newton, or some sort of turning point of enlightenment. And what happens at this turning point of enlightenment is humanity wakes up to the disenchantment of the world that the natural is all that there is. And eventually what happens, is we realize that this supernatural addendum that we kept adding to our account of the cosmos, is extraneous and unnecessary and we sort of settle for the natural. We sort of wake up and settle for a naturalized world without any reference to God, or the gods, or eternity, or transcendence.

And what's left over after you subtract all of those fantastical religious beliefs, is cold hard rationality, the sort of courage to look in the face of how hard things are. There's often a rational maturation story that goes with this. We sort of grow up and we see that this is the way things really are.

And now what's left after you subtract all that, is 'the secular.' Taylor says that's not the way it happened and that wouldn't even be possible. That's not sufficient, because actually what humanity had to come up with is this third piece.

It wasn't enough to just subtract the religious for lack of a better term, and be left with the natural, the secular. What also had to happen for this to become plausible, for something like non-theism to be a live option, a belief, is you had to come up with alternative accounts of significance and meaning. And this to me, is the most interesting; although, in some ways the most intricate part of the account.

That when we are left in this immanent frame, this kind of enclosed universe in which we find ourselves, the only way that will really be a viable space to inhabit meaningfully is, if we can generate an alternative account of significance. And Taylor calls this alternative account, "exclusive humanism." What he means is that in modernity we found ways to generate projects, meaning, pursuits, even longings that could plausibly be satisfied without reference to transcendence, and without reference to eternity.



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And Taylor, the Christian, stands back and looks at this accomplishment and says, “Bravo that was unthinkable in the West for millennia.” He doesn’t believe it, but he stands back and he says, “This is an incredible cultural accomplishment to have actually managed to come up with a vision of human significance that didn’t appeal to transcendence or eternity” that’s what he means by “exclusive humanism.”

I don’t know how far into the philosophical weeds we want to go, but I’ll just plant this little flag. There is a long story to be told here, about how much that vision of exclusive humanism in the long march of history — Taylor is kind of a Hegelian — actually depends on having come through the religions of the West and sort of formalizing them or secularizing them, so that you couldn’t have the modern moral order, if people hadn’t first learned that they were supposed to love their neighbors. And now, what you do is you get an alternative account of what it is to love your neighbor. I think there’s an interesting conversation to be had there. Maybe we’ll have it.

The fourth theme: This immanent frame in which we find ourselves in a secular age, is not cross-pressured. Everybody who believes anything, which by the way is everybody, finds themselves in this immanent frame, but not happily confident and oblivious to the challenges, right? In other words, the immanent frame, no matter what you believe, is a cross-pressured space. I’ve tried to give you this little lame diagram. This is what I can do in MS Word’s “Draw” function.

Because for Taylor, what happens is — this is really significant for everybody, so let me give you an example: If I’m a “believer” in some sort of traditional religious perspective, in a secular age, in this immanent frame, I’m going to experience the cross-pressures, as the cross-pressures of disenchantment, and I’m going to have to even if I believe, I’m going to have to realize that I believe in the face of neighbors, and colleagues, and friends who believe something radically different, which means that doubt is the natural accompaniment of faith, in a secular age.

Now, one could argue that in fact, has always been the case, which is why we have Psalms of Lament, for example, as people struggling to say “How could this be?” But it’s intensified in modernity. And I do think this is one of the things, when I’m out speaking to religious communities, Christian communities in particular, one of the things I’m

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emphasizing is: Folks, you need to give, especially young people, permission to name and articulate these doubts because it is just the water in which they swim. They live in this cross-pressured space. And unfortunately too many religious communities still feel like doubt is the enemy of faith, rather than a companion. And I think there's just a different way to think about that, but notice the cross-pressure works on everyone. So if the believer is tempted to doubt, the unbeliever can also be tempted to believe. There remains a kind of haunting and pressure that is the sort of pull and lure, and haunting of that eternity and transcendence. So nobody gets to encase themselves or ensconce themselves, or insulate themselves from cross-pressure. I think I'm going to come back to that in a moment.

So finally, fifth: What that means then is secularity does not end belief. Instead, the cross-pressures generate a nova effect, that's what I'm going for with the exploding sort of arrow lines, here. Taylor calls this “nova effect of many modes of believing otherwise.” So a secular age is not an age of unbelief, it's actually this really messy, complicated, crazy world in which we find ourselves, in which because people are experiencing all of these multiple cross-pressures it's almost like the pressure builds up and it explodes, and what you get are all kinds of ways of believing. And you get sort of “Eat, Pray, Love” ways of believing. You get in many ways, a sort of Oprah-significance. There are all kinds of different ways of people pursuing now, a spiritual life. This is where I think something like Taylor's account is the great alternative to the sort of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris' of the world. It's just a much more nuanced account of what we'll see.

So what will be some of the implications of this? Let me, first of all say just a little bit about the public square, and then religion. I do think one of the important public or political upshots of Taylor's analysis, is that the problem with doctrinaire secularism that is secular two-ism as a kind of agenda for the public square, is that it is not sufficiently secular three. In other words, secularism as a doctrinaire agenda, I would say does not own up to the contestability of its own beliefs. So it's insufficiently secular three. In that sense, what this analysis does is it levels the playing field. To deploy one of Taylor's distinctions, what you could say is “Dogmatic secularism offers a spin on the world rather than a take on the world.” He has this interesting sort of — I like this — he says “Spin is

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sort of closed off. Spin are the stories we tell, in which we try to protect ourselves and stick our heads in the sand about the cross-pressure.”

So you can have — I’ve given you a little quadrant here — you can have religious versions of spin that basically try to protect themselves, and insulate themselves from the cross pressure of the alternatives and that gets you various fundamentalisms. But you can also have secularist two versions of spin, which equally ensconce themselves and insulate themselves from the cross pressure of haunting.

In contrast, what interested Taylor, and what interests me, is this space of people not offering spins, but takes on the world. A religious take on the world that is open and honest enough to realize — when I talk to my students — I teach at a Christian liberal arts college. And I think part of teaching them well, is getting them to actually feel the power of an ultimately reductionistic, evolutionary, psychological account of being human.

Do you know what I mean? Like it’s an unbelievably powerful story that gives you all kinds of insights into human nature. And if you don’t take that seriously, you will never understand why people find that persuasive, not just as a kind of penultimate account, but as an ultimate account.

So offering takes on the world, is preferable to these kinds of spin doctors of either the religious or secularist version. So what that means, and this is where I wonder if it would change how we hear some of what’s said in the public sphere. One could be a trenchant critic of secular two-ism, if that makes sense. I need these little tricks here. And yet have a deeper appreciation for secularity, than the secularist. In other words, you could offer a trenchant critique of secularism, as a dogmatic agenda and actually have a better appreciation for secularity, as the contestability of belief in the contemporary world. That’s part of what I’m trying to work on.

So how would we feel this difference? What would change? Now, I do think this is where our societal sequestration you could say, is evident. In other words, you know Charles Murray’s book *Coming Apart* which is diagnosing the sort of almost, like the postal codes of inequality right, the zip code localization of two totally different populations, which I think we’re feeling this year. I think that there is a religious version of that as well, which is, people who basically sequester themselves in a kind of secularist zip code, so to speak,

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who literally don't know what to do with people who believe. They're like “What?” Not from any of you, but some religion reporting is a little bit like, “We went to Mars and we found these people in Colorado Springs and you won't believe what they think.” It has a little bit of that sort of dynamic to it. And it's partly because they inhabit, they're coming from this tight plausibility structure in which they don't bump into people who think otherwise.

Now, there is totally a religious version on the other side of that right? The similar sequestration into these insulated enclaves. And I think that's part of what we need to work through. And I don't know exactly how that maps onto the presidential campaign this year, but I'm sure it has something to do with it.

One other theme, to just highlight here before I move on, is it's important that this account of secularity three — there's no turning back the clock. Do you know what I mean? You can't un-know what you know now right? And it's as simple as this: Once you've lived on a street where people don't believe what you believe, you can't go back into the world, in which everybody was homogenous and monolithic again, right?

So this is another reason why some critiques of secularism are not at all tainted with some nostalgia for a world, in which we were all “Christians in America” or something like that right? The mythology of that, the best accounts appreciate that there's no turning back the clock.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Some are trying.

**JAMIE SMITH:** Some are trying, indeed. Absolutely. And that's why someone like me, who — I would be a critic of “secular two”-ism — would be equally a critic of some of this nostalgic just resentment of secularity. So there's a lot of nuance that we need in this account.

Finally, let me say a bit about why I think this might change how we see religion in our secular age. The first is, it should make us newly interested in all the enduring phenomena of spiritual longing. That if you just bought a secularization thesis, probably mostly what you're going to do is look for things that confirm that thesis, which ultimately, I think are a pretty small sample of say U.S. society.

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And in fact, if you zoom out to this wider sense of the secular, what becomes interesting is how many enduring expressions of longing for something ultimate, something divine, something other, some sense of fullness that can't be reduced to the natural, are all over the place. That's this nova effect, this explosion of ways of believing.

I won't bore you with too much of this, but you can see this in popular culture, in all kinds of different ways. For me, one of the places to hear this is in music. By the way, there's a great British novelist, Julian Barnes, who I still think does not get enough attention over here.

So he wrote “Sense of an Ending.” It was probably his most recent book that got some awards over on this side of the pond. A really interesting character, in that, he's kind of like the quintessential person, of a generation who grew up in England with no religious formation whatsoever. He's very honest about that. But in 2008, he wrote a memoir called “Nothing to Be Frightened Of,” which is a very, very powerful — and in many ways I think, was a kind of oblique response to Richard Dawkins. And at one point in “Nothing to Be Frightened Of,” Julian Barnes says this: “I don't believe in God, but I miss Him.”

It's fascinating, right? That, to me, encapsulates so much of our age: “I don't believe in God, but I miss Him.”

He's a great devotee of the arts, both music and painting. And what's interesting is, when you follow him, to say Venice or Northern Italy, and he's going to see all the paintings that he loves, and he's haunted because at one point he pauses and he has to ask the question: “What must it be like if you think this is true?” And he realizes that in fact, the world view that generated all of these works of art, that he so treasures is one that is almost completely implausible to his contemporaries. So it's an interesting dynamic. “I don't believe in God, but I miss Him.”

And I think if you start looking for those sorts of phenomenon in our culture — one that came to mind, is a song by The Postal Service. I'm dating myself by this. Listen to these lyrics from a song called “Clark Gable”

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“I want so badly to believe that  
There is truth and love is real  
And I want life in every word  
To the extent that it’s absurd  
And I’m looking through the glass  
Where the light bends at the cracks  
And I’m screaming at the top of my lungs  
Pretending the echoes belong to someone  
Someone I used to know”

We become interested in the sort of hauntings of a longing for something lost, right? That’s all over the culture. Steve Jobs. Steve Jobs to me, is a fascinating icon of someone who does not fit the secularization thesis, right? Because you’ve got somebody at the heart of Silicon Valley, the heart of innovation culture, the heart of tech, the heart of design. And what’s interesting, is he’s cross-pressured. In Isaacson’s biography, there’s this fantastic episode right near the end of his life, such a tragic early death, and the hubris that in a way led to that. And yet, listen to this one encounter.

“One sunny afternoon when he wasn’t feeling very well, Jobs sat in the garden behind his house and reflected on death. He talked about his experiences in India almost four decades earlier, his study of Buddhism and his views on reincarnation and spiritual transcendence.”

“‘About 50/50, I’m believing in God,’ he said.”

So here’s the thing. If you’re in that sort of resentment mode, you’re like, “Oh see?” What it used to be, everybody believed in God. Whereas, I’m thinking you’re in the middle of the Bay Area, and somebody tells you they’re 50/50 on believing in God? I’m like, I’ll take that bet. That’s a pretty interesting phenomenon. You know he’s in the shadow of Stanford. He’s 50/50 in believing in God. I’ll take it.

“He said, ‘For most of my life, I felt that there must be more to our existence than meets the eye.’”

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“He admitted that as he faced death, he might be over estimating the odds out of a desire to believe in an afterlife.”

“‘I’d like to think that something survives after you die,’ he said, ‘it’s strange to think that you accumulate all this experience, and maybe a little wisdom and it just goes away. So I really want to believe that something survives, that maybe your consciousness endures.’”

“He fell silent for a very long time.”

“‘But on the other hand, perhaps it’s like an on/off switch: click, and you’re gone.’”

“Then he paused again, and he smiled slightly.”

“‘Maybe that’s why I never liked to put on/off switches on Apple devices.’”

*(Laughter)*

To me that’s a great story of this kind of cross-pressured person, who is haunted and pulled by sort of competing longings and worries.

The last example I’ll give, because we don’t have time to talk about Terrence Malick, but I’m so excited about “Knight of Cups,” I have to tell you. But there’s an HBO documentary called “God is the Bigger Elvis.” Has anybody seen this? It’s like 30 minutes long. It’s available free on YouTube now.

It follows the story of a Hollywood starlet from the ’50s and early ’60s named Dolores Hart. Dolores Hart is kind of living the Hollywood dream, she’s starring alongside leading men, like well, Elvis, Warren Beatty. So you have some sense of the world that she was living in, right?

And she was engaged to be married. But she went home to New York one weekend, and she ended up on a retreat at a convent, at an abbey in Connecticut. And it sort of like lodged this burr in her side that she couldn’t quite shake. She went back to Hollywood and pursuing her career, but what she couldn’t shake was the sense of this call back to Regina Laudis Abbey in Connecticut. And in fact, eventually she left her career, she broke her engagement, and if I recall correctly, she wears her wedding dress into her induction into the Abbey, where she is now Mother Prioress and has lived since, I think, 1963.



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And by the way, the man that she was engaged to comes to see her every single week. And they hold hands, and kiss on the cheek, and love each other dearly. I mean it's a very, very powerful story.

Aside from the story itself, here's what interests me. This was on HBO. Why would this be on HBO? This is, like Game of Thrones channel, right?

And by the way the story, the portrayal is I would say, a mix of respectful awe and puzzled mesmerization. Why would somebody give up freedom, to literally cloister themselves by celibacy and poverty? And yet this is broadcast on HBO, which to me, again, is an interesting phenomenon, of I wonder if people are already feeling the cracks in libertinism. I'm starting to think, is there already a kind of openness to imagining the world otherwise?

Terrence Malick did “Tree of Life.” He's got a new film coming out with Christian Bale, called “Knight of Cups.” He's actually a philosopher by training. He translated some of the work of Martin Heidegger, but has gone on to be this really remarkable filmmaker who, Tree of Life people have said, is a kind of replay of Augustine's Confessions. And his latest work, Knight of Cups is just suffused with very oblique and yet pretty overpowering religious themes.

And he's well respected by critics and audiences alike. To me it's just another example that the secular age is much more like the films of Terrence Malick than the stories told by Sam Harris. There's an alternative way to deal with where we find ourselves.

So what might this mean for religion, going forward? Let me hazard a few hypotheses.

First, I do think that Taylor helps us make sense of the spiritual, but not religious, phenomenon in new ways. It's intriguing. You hardly ever run into somebody who says, “I'm an ardent naturalist. I'm completely devoted to calculating rationality and I have no interest in transcendence, whatsoever.”

No. You meet people who say “I'm spiritual, but I'm not religious,” which means they can't quite shake this something more-ness that is calling, though admittedly, they probably kind of want in on their own terms. Often the religion that has been rejected by

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the “spiritual, but not religious” — well, it’s sometimes a religion well-lost you know? It was some sort of civic deism or whatever it might be. And in some ways, I actually think the “spiritual, but not religious” could be a better portal to people coming into more authentic, thick religious communities, than the sort of vague, civil religion that we had for so many years.

What I’m interested in is thinking about the future of religion. In a way Protestantism has to grapple with the fact that it kind of generated the “spiritual, but not religious” phenomenon. I say this as a Protestant for this reason: One of the things that happens in Protestantism is a kind of desacramentalization, a disenchantment of a sort of enchanted world and worship.

And so what happens in Protestantism, is in some ways Christianity gets reduced to a message that is preached and absorbed by intellectual receptacles. And that’s not entirely fair, but it’s sort of how the snowball gets going. And so the version of religion that comes out of that is a very sort of intellectualist’s — I know it’ll sound odd to say that Evangelicals are intellectuals for some of you, but it is. There’s a rendition of Christianity here that is primarily a set of beliefs that you affirm. And what you get is what Taylor calls a “dynamic of ex-carnation.” So incarnation is a dynamic of things becoming embodied. “Ex-carnation” is Christianity becomes increasingly abstracted and disembodied. That sort of has a Frankensteinish effect in the sense that it kind of unleashes consequences that were never, ever intended, but are nevertheless unwillingly realized. So I think that’s part of what we need to realize, which however now creates — and by the way, the spirituality of the “spiritual, but not religious” also tends to be kind of “message-ish.”

For me, part of, the Ted talks are part of the secular spirituality. Do you know what I mean? Clearly, they are the sermons of a secular age right? They’re the place we go looking for the “message” to sort of improve ourselves, or whatever it might be. The “sermon-ization” of Christianity and Protestantism, kind of set us up for that. And again, I’m going to say I’m a Protestant. This is internal critique all right?

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** It’s okay.

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**JAMIE SMITH:** Okay, good. I don’t want Michael mad at me.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** We do internal critiques at the Faith Angle Forum.

**JAMIE SMITH:** Good. Now, that said, here’s the other pieces I’m interested in:

At the end of “A Secular Age,” this humongous book, of which 3 pages, are kind of a contemporary analysis. Taylor says this: He closes, this is page 770, “This heavy concentration of the atmosphere of immanence” this kind of claustrophobia, of living in the immanent frame “will intensify a sense of living in a wasteland for subsequent generations, and many young people will begin to explore beyond the boundaries.”

So his one little bit of prognostication is that yes, we find ourselves in the immanent frame. People inhabit the world as if that were the case, but what’s going to happen, is that world is going to start sort of closing in, and it’s going to be experienced as a kind of arid wasteland.

The allusion to T.S. Eliot is not accidental here.

And so he says, “What you’re going to see happen” — his hypothesis — “is that you’re actually going to see people who find the paucity of that, is so thin, that in fact, they start actually looking beyond the boundaries of the immanent frame again.” There becomes a new openness.

The pressures of transcendence that can’t be explained away are going to generate new, sort of third ways of spiritual expression and longing. They’ll be more open to “takes” on the world, and in fact, they might, like God is the Bigger Elvis start to wonder if renunciation isn’t actually the way to freedom. So there’s a sort of mutual haunting of the secular.

I’ve also been thinking over the last couple of months, for reasons that will be obvious, I wonder if another possibility, however on the other side of that arid wasteland, is a desire for the strong man, so that if in that world, the state is all that’s left, if everybody shifts and in a way foists so many expectations on the state, which I do think is part of a feature of a certain kind of modern moral order, then what happens, is there will be people who are not experiencing the benefits of that, who are experiencing the wasteland in very

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tangible ways, who will also be looking for a savior who pulls the levers of the state for them.

I don't know. This is my armchair quarterbacking of Republican Presidential —

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** You can leave that alone.

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know.

*(Laughter)*

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yes. It's just I wonder, because part of what we could talk about too, is how is secularization felt differently in different classes? How is secularization felt in the working class, as opposed to elite educated classes?

Finally then, I do think you can imagine two futures for — and here, I'll just speak to Christianity, since that's the tradition that I know — but I would love to learn more, and hear how other traditions think about this. As I look at Protestant/Evangelicalism for example, you can see two possibilities: One is a trajectory where you see Evangelical's basically racing to become mainline liberal Protestants. Not that there's anything wrong with that. Well, I do think there's something wrong with that, but in other words what happens, is they basically — what they'll say, is “We want to kind of tack to what we think is plausible within the modern moral order.”

So you get a certain new rendition of Protestant/Evangelicalism that looks to me, like a very predictable trajectory. And we are also seeing, is actually what you might almost call a “Catholic retrieval of incarnational sacramental spirituality.” In other words, what you'll also see, is Christian communities and Evangelical communities who are reacting to that disenchantment and desacramentalization of the world. The ex-carnation. And are therefore drawn to more incarnate-embodied, communal, sacramental expressions of the faith.

I'm seeing that amongst young people in the college I teach at. By the way, that doesn't all mean that they swim the Tiber, cross the Bosphorus, and go to the Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, though that's also happening. Some just sort of make their way to Canterbury. What I would say as somebody who is out and about, what's most

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fascinating to me, is how much nondenominational Evangelical congregations are waking up to this dynamic and retrieving very ancient ways of being Christian, that in a way aren't indigenous to their piety, but in fact they realize they need some sort of anchor like that. I think that's part of the story, to look at.

And my hunch, is also, that on the other side of that wasteland, as Taylor puts it, the sort of do-it-yourself spirituality of the “spiritual, but religious,” — when it fails, if it fails, it often fails in the face of crisis. And it seems to me, that only if religious communities actually have a truly robust alternative, not just the kind of “Jesusified version of spiritual but not religious” would it really be seen as a welcome alternative to that. And so part of what I'm watching for, is how much these kind of robust, almost kind of ancient retrievals of faith become live options again, even though we're within a “secular society.” I'll stop there.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Thank you, JAMIE SMITH. Thank you very much.  
(Applause)

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Well, I've already got eight people on the list. Thank you. Will Saletan.

**WILL SALETAN, *Slate*:** Okay. Jamie, that was wonderful. This critical theory from the right, we need more of it. I love the Charles Taylor. I love what you've added to it.

**JAMIE SMITH:** Thank you.

**WILL SALETAN:** We need more of it in the public square. I have a couple of questions for you, and you can answer whichever one you like. So one is about our past: At one point, you said, that getting to the point we are at in this modern secular morality or secularism, the morality that we have in the secular age, depended on having come through the religions of the West. And your example was the Golden Rule, I think.

Now, my question to you is: Do you think that was contingent? That if we hadn't, that there was something about this particular religion that we came through that allowed us to develop these foundations of our secular morality, or is there something in the nature

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of things, and the nature of society, people, for example, that we couldn't have achieved what we've achieved if we hadn't had a religion that happens to promote that idea or be based on that idea, so that the religion of the time is just another product, as is our time, of that foundation?

Another way of asking it or this is possibly related: You said at one point, “In 1500, atheism was intellectually unimaginable.” And I wonder, whether that's actually true. I wonder, whether there's a little bit of the German white guy problem with that. That perhaps there was more atheism than we can see, through the historical records that we tend to look at, and maybe what was there, was more of a golden rule inside, or outside of religion.

The other question I have for you is about, whether where we are, is progress. You said at one point that “You can't turn back secularity-three. That once you've lived on a street where other people don't believe what you believe, you can't go back to a world where everybody was homogenous and monolithic.”

Isn't that a good empirical way to test, to verify, and therefore, to define growing up? That inability to go back intellectually means that where we are is wiser than where we were.

**JAMIE SMITH:** Great questions — so, on the first one:

One of the things, that I think I've so appreciated about Taylor's account is that he actually takes contingency really seriously. So it's not just a straight progress narrative. And he does. He thinks. He talks about what he calls a “zigzag approach to history.” It's like things could have gone differently.

And on this particular point, all he means to show is that if you trace the particular contingent genealogy of how you get to this sort of modern, moral order of universal concern, it comes through a remarkable detribalization of concern that happens in the universalism of Christianity: that every other is my neighbor. And that unleashes a moral imagination that couldn't have been thought before, and therefore we become indebted to that in some way.

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Now, he’s not saying it reduces to it, but he does take that seriously. Now, I don’t know, is there evidence that there were more atheists before, because Taylor’s account is, it’s actually a deeply communitarian account. So what he says is “Look in this enchanted world. The self was also characterized by porosity.” Like you had the sense that the self is porous and is open to forces, and the community is a community of these porous selves, who all hang together in a very communitarian collective way, and therefore, the unbeliever is in a way a threat to the whole, but also the individual unbeliever, because she or he inhabits this enchanted world, doesn’t think, they just have the safe re-doubt to say, “Well, I don’t think this thing out there exists.”

To refuse this thing, would have been to open your-self up and expose your-self to these other things; the demonic or whatever it might be. And so that’s why there’s this kind of package that makes atheistic belief rather implausible.

What do you think? Does that help? I don’t know. That’s his account at least. I know that he’s been pushed back on some. It would be very hard to find data, right, given — well, first of all, history is told by winners, but it’s very hard.

It’s at least a plausible account, because then, what he thinks happens in modernity, is now once you sort of disenchant the world, the self is what he calls “buffered.” So the self, you get this kind of Cartesian self, this you know Cartesian ego, the Kantian ego, who’s this sort of self-sufficient entity, who in a way, now, has the option of whether or not to believe x, y, or z, but is really sort of insulated and buffered from any threats that come with that.

I find it a plausible way to make sense of some dynamics, but I’m not a historian, so I don’t want to over claim that. On the last, the growing up dynamic, is that — so what you’re saying, is could we see the arrival at secular-three as a maturation? Is that the idea?

**WILL SALETAN:** Yeah, but it’s because we can’t go back.

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yes.

**WILL SALETAN:** That’s an empirical statement.



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**JAMIE SMITH:** Yes.

**WILL SALETAN:** Okay.

**JAMIE SMITH:** And I think, I just want to be careful about this because secular-two, also has a growing up narrative. Secular-two-ism says “I grew up when I stopped believing.” Now, I just you know sort of see the way things are rationally. Secular-three would have a grown up narrative, which is “We’ve grown up and realized that actually belief is contestable, and others believe differently than I do.” I think what’s interesting is, for someone working internal to a religious tradition like Christianity, I would also say that is kind of waking up to a reality that Christianity should affirm, which is what Augustine says, “We find ourselves in the saeculum. So don’t pretend otherwise.” Don’t immunize the eschaton, as Voegelin would put it. Don’t confuse where you are. Realize where you are, and expect that kind of thing.

**WILL SALETAN:** But if I hear you correctly, so the story that we’ve grown up, doesn’t distinguish secular-two from secular-three, but the phenomenon of “can’t go back” does. Is that right?

**JAMIE SMITH:** And what you think that entails; right? So in secular-three, you can’t go back to a world in which one belief system is going to be taken to be axiomatic, and the default for a society. In secular-two, you’ve grown up because you’ve learned to not believe.

First of all, I just don’t believe that. What that means is you’ve believed something that you get to call rational, objective, neutral, and unbiased; right? It’s like there’s an Emperor’s Clothes story to be told here about secular-two, whereas secular-three is, we all find ourselves in this space where we are owning up to the fact that we believe something. We believe something ultimate, but we also realize that we can’t expect that to just be the default axiomatic belief for a shared territory, or something like that.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE** Carl Cannon.

**CARL CANNON, RealClearPolitics.com:** Professor, you quoted someone I didn’t get who said, “I don’t believe in God, but I miss him.”

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**JAMIE SMITH:** Julian Barnes.

**CARL CANNON:** Julian Barnes? That reminded me of a similar quote, and I don’t want to be like one of these Washington people, who says, “As I said, on Meet the Press,” quoting myself, but I actually don’t —

*(Laughter)*

**CARL CANNON:** I don’t know who said this. Cromartie and I have had a debate over it for several years. Maybe someone in this room said it. If you did, please raise your hand, but it was in Key West after a long several hours of drinking, and one of the participants in the drinking and the conversation was Christopher Hitchens, and when he left, someone said, maybe me, we don’t know, that Hitchens philosophy seemed to be “God doesn’t exist and I’m really pissed off at him.”

But in the more serious thing, if you take this period of time from 1500 to 2000, it seems that one explanation, the obvious explanation for it, the secular explanation, if you will, is that there’s been this inextricable discovery of scientific phenomena, mostly, but other truths. That the source was unknown before, and they were thought to be un-knowable and they were attributed to God. And what a person, a nonbeliever would say, is “This is sort of a steady — it’s progress, and it’s a steady and inextricable march of history, and that these polls we’re seeing about these millennials, a lot of them are spiritual, but not religious, but that is a trend that we’re never going back. That this is the march of western progress, or I don’t know if it’s progress, but that’s the way things are going.”

You seem to, without directly taking issue with that, maybe challenge that view. And I would ask you to explain a little more on that. This marketplace of ideas thing is kind of fun — you know “We are journalists that’s cool” — but is that just a temporary thing? And it’s the road to, you know, Europe?

**JAMIE SMITH:** So I’m a great fan of air conditioning and indoor plumbing, and without question, there is a certain kind of progress story to be told in modernity, and I don’t think any of this has to discount that. What’s interesting is if you start asking questions of what counts as progress for humanity, now you’re burying down into what Taylor calls the “basement levels of commitments” about what you think counts as flourishing, for example, and so on.

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And I think that’s where things get a little bit more contestable. I actually — I’ve loved Christopher Hitchens for years, right up until the point that he started talking about religion. He’s so much better about literature and politics than he is about religion, because then I would say he devolves into spin rather than a take for some reason.

What you can’t tell, is just some sort of simplistic, dichotomous, binary option here, between the religious and scientific progress, since in many ways we know that what unleashed the scientific endeavor itself, were religious communities that were invested in that; both Muslim and Christian, I would say. And so I don’t think we have to feel tension between those two things. What I’m contesting is a maturation story that equates maturity with unbelief, disbelief. “Wake up and smell the disenchantment” kinds of stories, right, and again, this is where I feel like there are just a lot of interesting exceptions to the rule. I didn’t build it in here, but there’s a fantastic short story by David Foster Wallace that was published posthumously in *The New Yorker* simply called “All That” in which there is this older adult narrator talking about a younger self, who believes in magic. And what’s interesting, is he doesn’t look back at his younger self, and discount it. He says, “I look back and see birthed there, a religious reverence that characterized my whole life,” and that “even atheism is its own form of worship.”

He has this really interesting analysis, where he refuses the maturation story. And again, what intrigues me is, and it gets published in *The New Yorker*, right? Interesting little exception to the rule that you would expect of kind of, trenchant secularization. Does that help?

**CARL CANNON:** Yes.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Naomi Schaefer Riley.

**NAOMI SCHAEFER RILEY, *New York Post*:** I wanted to ask, I wanted to dig a little deeper into this sequestration question that I’m sure a lot of people are interested in for political reasons. I guess if we were having this conversation about 10 or 15 years ago, the sequestration would have been a matter of the elites not believing and the people on the ground in fly-over country believing.

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I think a lot of the work that has come out in the last decade or so, has suggested that is an incomplete and maybe inaccurate picture of what’s going on in America today. That is that a lot of the religious belief in the country is now among the middle and upper classes, and it’s the working class and people who are living in poverty who have the least amount of religion in their lives. So I guess what I’m curious about, is how are we to think about the sequestration now?

And the second kind of part to that I’ve been thinking more about is the Peter Berger question. So if, as he suggested, we are, or we were at some point, a nation of Indians run by the Swedes, if we’re now a nation of Swedes run by the Indians, maybe, does that mean that the elite belief in religion is going to start to trickle back down?

I guess one question is, whether the elites have a sway, whether their churchgoing or more frequent churchgoing habits are going to be able to trickle back down. And I don’t know whether there is a political answer to all this, but I’m sort of curious about the overall picture here, how we should think about our zip codes these days.

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yes. And I would be fascinated just to hear others work on this. This is very much sort of off the cuff reflections on my part. I guess I’m not convinced we do know that sort of religious participation seems to be more highly represented in sort of educated elites than we might have expected, and that there has been a kind of secularization of poor and working classes in ways that we might not have guessed.

I don’t know that at all translates into a confidence that those elites who are religiously active, now constitute a majority of the elite, though, right? That’s not true. So I think you can still safely say — I mean in many ways, it confirms James Hunter’s work — but in this sense that I think people inhabit intellectual milieus and environments that are significantly dominated by one sort of set of beliefs and expectations that make it increasingly difficult for people to imagine the alternative.

I guess maybe, probably I would say one of the most intense examples of that today, is the university; right? So if you think of it, the last bastion of the most confident modernity and secularism-two is, in many ways, still a university. Now, even though there’s all kinds of exceptions to the rule on the margins of that. There’s still the default unwritten, scripted orthodoxy of the university, is confidently expecting the secularization story.

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And insofar as those are still the incubators of then cultural influencers, I guess I don't see the sample representation of those elites who are practicing religious folk, being significant enough yet, to have sort of cascaded and shaped, what's happening in Hollywood studios, or newsrooms. I'll let you guys tell me about that, but there's something.

Now, are you asking a demographic question, too, about whether you could imagine us getting to that point?

**NAOMI SCHAEFER RILEY:** Well, I guess if religious belief is increasingly being concentrated in these upper classes, even if it's not yet concentrating in the majority, I mean isn't that kind of belief then going to have more of an affect that's going to be characterizing more of the way we practice religion than I think what have in mind?

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yes. And I would say, too, my hunch though is that let's say those religious folk, who find themselves in those sectors are also probably well aware of the realities of secular three, and therefore the way they will engage those public conversations and seek to persuade is going to be very different than the kind of slash and burn apologetics that usually happens in other sectors, which have no chance of having any sort of success in shaping cultural or changing the cultural conversation I think.

The one piece I think that I also just don't know enough about is the real shifts that have taken place in sort of working class and poor religiosity. And it strikes me that one of the things that has gone away is what we might call, for the lack of a better term, “catechesis.” There's just a certain failure of catechesis in the churches, and therefore people don't even feel the tensions that they ought to feel sometimes about that. But again, I admittedly am, as a complete amateur, trying to understand the Trump phenomenon a little bit.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Paul Edwards, you are next. One of the reasons we're doing this session with JAMIE SMITH, by the way, is I have lunch twice a year with eight of your colleagues and we talk about what are the topics that we want to talk about at the next Faith Angle. And Carl Cannon, after the killings in San Bernardino, wanted to do a session on that, which we'll do tomorrow morning. But also, Carl reminded us, soon after that I

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think Naomi — was it *The New York Post*’s, big headline “Keep God out of It.” Do you remember that? Was it yours, or the Daily News?

**NAOMI SCHAEFER RILEY:** It was the Daily News.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** It was the Daily News, and Carl made the point, this is a little unusual. I remember, Carl, you said, you knew this newsroom is secular but the idea that you would just do a headline, “Please Don’t Bring God into the Discussion,” was something new, and that’s why we actually came up with this topic. Paul Edwards.

**PAUL EDWARDS, *Desert News*:** Jamie, I’m guessing you’re familiar with the “Benedict Option.” Does this mean something to you?

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yes.

**PAUL EDWARDS:** And I was wondering how that fits into what you’re thinking about here. So if you might? I can talk about it, but maybe you could explain a little bit about the “Benedict Option” that’s being discussed, and how it fits into a particular retreat from secularization.

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yeah. So at least we found something I can say off the record. Only because —

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** You want this off the record?

**JAMIE SMITH:** — Rod Dreher is a friend. Yeah, I think so. Can we just talk about it, out loud for a sec?

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Yes.

**JAMIE SMITH:** So the “Benedict Option,” how many have heard this phrase? I’d just be curious. Oh, wow. Good, all right.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Do you want this off the record? He can handle it.

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**JAMIE SMITH:** All right, fine. Okay. On the record I think.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** I want to quote you.

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yes. So the “Benedict Option” is a certain response of religious conservatives who are sort of, I would say waking up to the fact that American culture, generally is not going to form them in faith. Apparently this is a revelation. And therefore, and by the way, it seems so clearly catalyzed by the Supreme Court gay marriage decision, which to me is one of the reasons why I feel like it’s suspect.

I’m not deciding either way on that. I’m just saying that there is a, certain reactionariness about it that I find narrow and uninteresting. And so what they advocate is — it comes of course from the Benedictine tradition of monastic life. It really is an illusion to the final sentence of Alasdair MacIntyre’s famous work “After Virtue,” in which he says, “We are waiting now for another Benedict to come along and give us a society that actually forms virtue and character,” and so on and so forth.

And so the “Benedict Option,” as I understand it—I do think it’s misunderstood often—is about prioritizing an intentionality within Christian communities, in this case, to be much more intentional about formation and so on, and less confident that they will be able to steer, shape, and probably dominate wider cultural conversation — so it’s actually a refusal of the culture wars as well. What I just find a bit frustrating about it, is again, the particular reactionary point about marriage that I do think is the live option. It also comes off as alarmist and despairing in ways that I find completely unhelpful.

After the break, I’m going to give you a copy of the Fall 2013 issue of *Comment* magazine. I got to interview Charles Taylor a couple years ago, and one of the things that just struck me is that hope is his dominant posture. And I think that’s really important. I think if you actually have the long game in perspective here, if you have the long history in perspective — I spend most of my time reading St. Augustine in the 5th Century, and nothing surprises me, like nothing surprises me today, and so I don’t feel, like oh, “my goodness, the sky is falling because the Supreme Court decision,” or something like that. There’s a different set of expectations about that.

Finally, I would say what Rod is advocating as this new thing that we should be doing, just sounds like what the Church was always supposed to be doing. It comes off as a little bit



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like here’s the next great thing, and it turns out it’s only because we’ve failed to do what we were supposed to be doing. Again, Rod’s a friend, and what’s odd for me, is how much he sort of draws on my own work, to sort of articulate this, and yet, I, myself feel a certain distance from it because it comes with a grumpy alarmist despair that I don’t really want to be associated with.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** I’m so delighted that was on the record. There was nothing controversial.

*(Laughter)*

**JAMIE SMITH:** Well, that will be one book blurb I’m not writing.

*(Laughter)*

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** That was very helpful, because I’m giving a talk next month, and I discuss the Benedict Option. I will now quote you.

**JAMIE SMITH:** Oh, great.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** To affirm my own point.

Miranda Kennedy, and then to James Hunter.

**MIRANDA KENNEDY, NPR:** So I was fascinated by your description of having to convince your students of how seductive the, like rationalist Darwinistic version of history is. Did I get that right?

**JAMIE SMITH:** So notice, I’m working with a certain student population, so you know I teach at Calvin College. In many ways, the windows are wide open, you know, we’re sort of engaged, but many of these students, you know a significant percentage of students are coming out of K to 12 Christian education as well, and without being at all reactionary — so in Grand Rapids, Michigan, we sometimes call G-R-usalem, because there’s still pretty thick plausibility structures in the region, where you could get away with it.

So for me, it’s like some days I wish Calvin College was a college at the University of Michigan, so that we could inhabit both of those spaces and feel the cross-pressure a little more intensely. So in that context, I’m trying to foster an intellectual honesty, where they

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realize (a) this is saying a lot of true things about beings and human origins, but to also just feel the compelling-ness of this; right, like it’s a very adequate story to explain a lot. And so I want them to feel that precisely so they’re not then sent out living in some sort of oblivious bubble—

**MIRANDA KENNEDY:** Right. Because they haven’t like chosen the Benedict Option themselves, yet; they’re just —

**JAMIE SMITH:** Exactly.

**MIRANDA KENNEDY:** I’m so interested because having grown up with that particular narrative — the one that you have to convince them is seductive — you know, now seeing inside a Christian world, how totally opposite the world views are, I can understand why perhaps we are where we are. You know politically, and all kinds of other divisions, and I wonder if you think about ways that we could break down some of those divisions better in our lives, I mean just inside American culture.

**JAMIE SMITH:** So in some ways, it does come down to the how, rather than just the —

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** You discuss that in your book.

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yeah, right, which is also why it’s kind of called, “How (Not) to be Secular,” with the parenthesis, because I mean I actually think there’s ways in which all of us need to learn how to be secular. Right? But then I’m saying, as for Christian communities, religious communities, there are also ways that you want to learn to not be that. To me, breaking that down is exactly the space I want to live in.

I had a fantastic experience a week ago, tonight. I was in a conversation in New York, with Kwame Anthony Appiah, is that a name that some of you know? A Ghanaian English philosopher at NYU, an ethicist in the law school, advocate of what he calls, “Cosmopolitanism,” a really significant book that the people were talking about a few years ago, identifies as an atheist. And we had a public conversation about — well, so here’s the thing. They frame it as a debate about pluralism toleration and the common good between the Christian and the atheist. I’m not interested in a debate. I’m much

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more interested in first of all, showing how much we have in common, and in many ways, trying to deconstruct the caricatures that I think a lot of those folks would have had about Christianity, to say, no, absolutely, here’s why I affirm the goods of toleration, here’s why I affirm pluralism, here’s why I affirm the common good, here’s all the ways that we overlap and share concerns.

And then getting to a point where I could push him, and it was actually, it was a blast. I loved it, because on the one hand he articulates this vision of this cosmopolitanism, which is a perfect expression of the modern moral order. And then if you start asking him about the moral sources that would really fund that basically, what he starts talking about is being raised as a Methodist in Ghana.

And the sort of, the intuitions and sort of spiritual inclinations that he absorbed, which by the way is the replaying of the kind of Western story in some ways. So it was co-sponsored by Christian groups on campus, the secularist group on campus, the humanist society, a Muslim student society, and I think some of the kind of atheist secularists and Christian groups were looking for these fireworks, right, that’s why you bill it as a debate.

We completely disappointed them because we absolutely had a blast, I actually just was completely in awe that I was on the stage with him, and modeled, I hope, a mode of ad hoc collaboration without pretending we didn’t have ultimate differences, and I just feel like there’s a lot of room and hunger for that. I have for all the stories you might tell about the University, I’ve actually only had mostly great experiences of that kind of thing. And I do feel like you all steward spaces that could do the same, and are doing the same in some ways. Does that speak to your –?

**MIRANDA KENNEDY:** I guess. I’m not sure I entirely agree that we are consistently doing it –

**JAMIE SMITH:** Sure.

**MIRANDA KENNEDY:** –but I’m interested that you think that there’s a hunger, because I do think there’s a very strong hunger for debate, like he said. The people want the

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clashes. And it’s boring when you hear people who are supposed to be on opposite sides, kind of coming together.

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yeah.

**MIRANDA KENNEDY:** And it’s not necessarily about agreeing. It’s also just about — I was asking more about hearing one another’s viewpoints, because that I feel —

**JAMIE SMITH:** Oh. So you’re not sequestered? So you actually bump into it.

**MIRANDA KENNEDY:** Yeah. The sequestration happens in so many levels of society —

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yes.

**MIRANDA KENNEDY:** I just for so long did not know what, for instance, like Christian Evangelicals actually believed — in you know, in their hearts, in their minds, at home. I just had a politicized version of that, that got you know transmuted into the public square.

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yeah. Do you remember that Molly Worthen piece a few weeks ago, in the Times on Sunday? About The Veritas Forum and the Augustine Collective, these movements on Ivy League campuses, which I think their goal is to just make sure that the intellectual tradition of Christianity is heard in those elite university spaces. But I agree. Who was the sociologist who wrote “The Big Sort,” right? That we keep sifting ourselves out, and to overcome that I think is a huge challenge, yeah.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Bill Bishop.

**JAMIE SMITH:** Bill Bishop, yes.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Quickly, on this point, Paul Edwards?

**PAUL EDWARDS:** Just on the Appiah. I’ve heard him talk about Paul as a cosmopolitan.

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**JAMIE SMITH:** Oh, yeah absolutely.

**PAUL EDWARDS:** You know, and so he’s —

**JAMIE SMITH:** Absolutely, the apostle, Paul.

**PAUL EDWARDS:** The apostle Paul, very strong in his thinking, so —

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yeah. Galatians 2: “There is neither Jew nor Greek; neither slave nor free; neither male nor woman,” yeah.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** James Hunter you’re up next.

**JAMES HUNTER, University of Virginia:** Thank you. Jamie, thank you for a terrific lecture; I want to push back, though, on Taylor.

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yeah, great.

**JAMES HUNTER:** I mean, who is anyone to take on Charles Taylor? But I think that at certain important points, he needs to be pushed back against. His strength is as a phenomenologist.

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yes.

**JAMES HUNTER:** In talking about religious experience and religious belief, and the super nova he describes, I think is a fair description of what happens in the late modern world, in the private sphere. In personal experience. But culture and this is really important here, culture is not reducible to individual belief.

Culture is not the sum total of individual belief. Culture is a powerful symbolic order, independent of what people believe or don’t believe, and to always imbed it in the

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powerful institution, and this speaks to Will’s question earlier, about atheists in the 1500s. Are there more, were there more atheists back in the 1500s than we think?

Well, it’s an interesting empirical question, but at some level, it doesn’t matter because the symbolic order and the dominant institutions back then, were infused with a religious imagery, with religious signifiers, powerful symbols. There may have been more atheists, but they probably wouldn’t have gathered much, and they weren’t politicized. And again, there may have been, but probably not much of that.

So in the public sphere, however, the world of finance, say, or medical research, or of political campaigning, whatever, this is not a sphere or a culture of contested — well, certainly it’s contested — but in terms of the mechanics, the logic of running a campaign or of doing medical research, whatever someone’s personal beliefs may be, the frameworks of understanding, the frameworks of action, the rules by which people operate are defined by a technical rationality that is disenchanted, that is secular, and it’s not really, as I say, contested. An airline pilot, who is a Pentecostal snake handler, can hold his or her beliefs, as long as they don’t bring them into the cockpit.

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yeah, and his snakes.

**JAMES HUNTER:** Okay. There’s a movie about this.

**JAMIE SMITH:** Snakes on the Plane.

*(Laughter)*

**JAMES HUNTER:** There is a movie about that.

And so the culture of the public sphere, which again, disenchanted, oriented toward a kind of technical, functional rationality, it is totalizing. It operates within a latent epistemology that is positivist, an ethics that is utilitarian, a teleology that is problem-oriented, but with no serious hyper goods that anyone could agree upon. And this provides a plausibility structure for a kind of exclusive secularism.

So the question is, given this — I mean again, I think what Taylor describes is accurate insofar as it bears on private life, personal experience, individual belief, and so on. I don’t

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think it extends into the symbolic order and institutional realities of the public sphere. And part of the political dilemma of our global politics and our, even national politics is the pushback against that totalizing secular ethos. Is that a fair critique of Taylor? You seem to be an enthusiast of his, and I don't want to make you a proxy for him, but I would love to hear your views of that.

**JAMIE SMITH:** No. I think you're on to something. A couple things come to mind. One is I mean you want your pilot to work that way, right? So it seems like there is a certain kind of, I hate the term, but there's a certain kind of compartmentalization that would be welcome it seems to me, right? Because I don't know if I want the dynamics that get the plane up and going, I kind of, I want us to stay within that logic when we're doing that. On the other hand, I guess I've always thought that Taylor feels the extent to which the wider symbolic universe has been dominated by the disenchantment. At least I can feel that. But again, I think he thinks that's more localized. I mean you're interested in the particularly influential sort of elite culture shaping centers, in which this would be much more true to, right?

And I think it's interesting, when I interviewed Taylor, he says, he started thinking about a secular age in the '60s when he was at Oxford. He knew he was already going to write a secular age in the '60s at Oxford, because it was his experience of the University, in which he found himself in this university, and he says, “Why is what I believe so unbelievable to everybody else that's around me?”

So I think you could actually grant a lot of the account — and by the way, this would also become a way to assess the degree of assimilation of religious communities to that technical rationality, utilitarianism, right? That in a way, because we simply play along with the logic of the market, or whatever it might be, we unwittingly get sucked into seeing that as the overall logic that society is a market, or something like that.

And I think that's right. We've underestimated the extent to which disenchantment — but we all are disenchanted now, in that sense. It is true. I think, probably Taylor is best when he's trying to — sometimes he says what he's trying to do, is describe what it feels like, right. And that's a very individual sort of subjective experience. What does it feel like



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to believe in this age? What does it feel like to not believe in this age? But yeah, no, I welcome the conversation. I need to think more about that. That's great.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** And before we go on the break, Andrew Miller, you'll take us into the break.

**ANDREW MILLER, *The Economist*:** Yeah, I just, I enjoyed your talk very much. And I just thought it was important, I wanted to offer, I guess a defense of secularism.

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yeah, yeah.

**ANDREW MILLER:** And briefly, and or at least a critique of your critique of secularism, because I think although you hurried through it, you kind of lighted things a little bit. Of course and for the reasons you say, as an account of history, or the end of history, you know, it hasn't turned out to be very prophetic. And as an aggressive sort of you know program, you'll do it, at least possibly as advisory right now, but as a sort of pope, or as a, you know a long term agenda. I guess a lot of could-have-been secularists would say that on the contrary, the events of the last 20 years have made it all the more urgent as a creed.

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yeah, no, and this is the conversation we need to have, because what I would say in reply, is I think one of the things we are feeling in this country right now, is actually the effects of a secularization, which has eroded the sorts of institutions that used to actually foster civic camaraderie and life, in ways that we've lost.

So for all the sort of you know “religion is a source of evil” kinds of arguments, I just want to meet them with an account of how much religious institutions were responsible for the formation of — well, character habits, dispositions and inclinations that actually also made us better citizens. And so if secularization entails the erosion of those kinds of institutions, what we will get is the paucity of our civic life, as we're currently experiencing it.

Now, I would say remember though, even as someone coming from a religious tradition, I can actually be a pretty ardent advocate of secularity three as a healthy realization. In fact, I've been spending a lot of time with British theologian and ethicist, Oliver

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O’Donovan. Fascinating work on this history, but at one point he says, “The society which is most Christian, will be most secular because it will actually be the one that is most attentive to how penultimate our reality is, and so it will be least inclined to sort of invest the penultimate with ultimate sort of significance.”

I feel like one of the things that’s happening — Jody Bottum’s work has, I think, diagnosed this, is precisely when you lose the transcendent and eternal, now what has to happen, is everybody has to turn the penultimate into the ultimate. And so now our political identities, our political allegiances are characterized by a kind of religious fervor, that almost makes it impossible for us to do collaboration in that space.

**ANDREW MILLER:** I guess if you’re a secularist, you’d say about this question, it was sort of post-religious morality, you know in the absence of the, you know ghosts of religion and God. That like the French Revolutionist it’s too early to say, and it’s much too early to say. You know this moment has only, really existed for a very short space in human history.

**JAMIE SMITH:** Sure. One last thing though. This is totally the conversation I want to have for the next five years, because I think what has struck me is in secularistic accounts of morality, they also still tend to imagine morality as primarily a set of beliefs and expectations. And what’s missing, this is actually the perfect segue to this afternoon. What I think is missing in secular accounts of morality, is precisely an account of habit. And in order to talk about habits of disposition, you need communities of character. This is James Hunter’s book. Now, maybe the secularist has an account of where those communities are, and what they’re doing, but I feel like we haven’t had that conversation yet. Yeah it’s a great point.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Okay. When we come back from the break, Tom, you’re first.

*BREAK*

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** While we’re waiting for the others to come, I would mention that Jamie’s new book is out next month. It’s called “You are What You Love.”

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**JAMIE SMITH:** You’re a good agent.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** We like to promote books here. And his book on Charles Taylor, again, is called “How (Not) to be Secular.” But this is coming out next month. But Tom, you’re up first.

**TOM GJELTEN, NPR:** Okay. So right before the break, Jamie, you categorized yourself as a healthy advocate of “secularization three.” So when you say you’re an advocate for a certain type of secularity that kind of obligates you to pronounce on issues of public and even political debate, right?

**JAMIE SMITH:** I hereby retract that.  
(Laughter)

**TOM GJELTEN:** So a huge issue is the meaning of religious liberty, and how to interpret the First Amendment, you know, mandating that Congress not establish a religion or limit the exercise thereof. I was just reading this interview with Charles Taylor, in which he talks about open secularism versus closed secularism, and he says that closed secularism, “instead of being the regime that defends everyone’s freedom of conscience, whether religious or nonreligious, it becomes secularism wary of religion and always ready to set limits to it. Non-religion becomes the common principle, although you tolerate religion if it stays in its place.”

That sounds very much like what Potter Stewart argued in 1960, saying that if the government takes too strict a view of the separation of Church and State, it actually elevates secularism to the level of a rival religion, and therefore you know neutrality, as far as the role of the government in this issue, is you know more complicated than it might at first appear. So what implication’s does the fact that we live in this era of contested belief, mean for the neutrality of the State, when it comes to expressions of religion?

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yeah. So I’m trying to think of another court decision, but I’m not going to be able to retrieve that on the top of my head. Taylor, in that same interview, advocates then what he calls an open secularism, right. So it is a form of

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disestablishment, but it's not one that asks people to leave their religious identities at the door of this proverbial naked public square.

You make room for people to bring who they are, in their fullness, into the public square. And that's what I'm envisioning. And the State then, the State's responsibility is to be fair, not neutral.

Now, that can be a weasel word, obviously, and we'll fight a lot about what fairness looks like. But I think it's the difference between — Jerry and I were talking about *Laïcité* in France, which is a very, very live option in Quebec, as well, where Taylor's working from. What's interesting is it's precisely in societies in which religion had such a totalizing institutional expression in the Church, sort of, running things that you also then get the alternative of laicity, which is this ardent secularism endorsed by the State, basically.

And I think religious liberty that's imagined in the kind of secular three middle, is one that obviously does not establish a church. It does not establish a particular religion, but is making space for people to come with the thickness of their religious commitments. It does then have to be a truly pluralist space.

So I think another way to frame the tension here, is between secularism, as actually a very homogenizing agenda versus a secularity three that makes room for a genuine pluralism. The other piece that comes to mind is the limits of the freedom of conscience model, is that it entirely envisions religious belief as this individual phenomenon, right, of what I believe.

What I think we are wrestling through right now, over the last few years, is what we might call “institutional” religious freedom, right. Do bodies have a kind of freedom? Do you know Stanley Carlson-Thies?

**TOM GJELTEN:** Sure.

**JAMIE SMITH:** The institutional religious freedom alliance is saying, we can't just think about religious freedom as your permission in private, to believe what you want on weekends. If religion is a way of life that is shared by communal bodies, we also have to find healthy ways to make room for those bodies to live out that. And that's what I'm imagining as a good thing.

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I feel like I’m not answering your question though.

**TOM GJELTEN:** No. You’re beginning to answer it. You’re just not taking it to the degree that I wanted you to take it.

**JAMIE SMITH:** Okay. Yeah.

**TOM GJELTEN:** Which is to pronounce on the, you know the religious liberty. I mean Ted Cruz has said that this is a religious liberty election. He’s the one that has made this argument most forcefully that the State has to allow people to pray in school, you know, and to know interfere with religious beliefs in the public square, as well as in the private square. And I’m wondering if you know does that jive with —?

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yeah. That’s messy isn’t it, because there, I feel like what I’m trying to think through is, if that’s what they mean by religious liberty, what they actually mean, there’s still quite allied to the State craft as the expression of this. Whereas, I think if you had, I’m not pronouncing on this, but if you take, say, a Catholic social teaching about subsidiarity, which means that there are all kinds of layers and levels and spheres of culture beyond the State that are significant for society as a whole, then I would say that what’s crucial is to secure the religious liberty for those institutional expressions to be who they are.

I guess I’m less inclined to imagine that religious liberty means repristinating the public schools to do what they used to do when we thought everybody was a Christian. I hope this is not getting me in trouble somewhere, but yeah, it just doesn’t seem... Again, this is why O’Donovan, when he says, “The most Christian state is the most secular,” is actually, it recognizes the contested nature of the saeculum. On the other hand, his wife Joan Lockwood O’Donovan, who is also a Christian legal scholar, has written a fascinating paper on why the establishment of the Church of England was actually — has been the best thing for religious minorities.

So it’s very messy, in how we want to think of it. If the good is making room for communities to pursue their faith in ways that are meaningful, but also allow them to

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contribute to the public sphere that’s what I’m sort of looking for. I feel, I guess I do think there is a, certain legitimacy.

People could feel like some decisions and policies over the last few years have impinged on the religious liberty of institutions in particular. But that’s different than sort of prayer in schools kind of dynamic. I should tell you, I’m Canadian. So you have to take all of this with a grain of salt, and your fights are a little bit different than my fights in a way.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Okay. Mort Kondracke.

**MORT KONDRACKE, *Roll Call*:** So you tossed off this reference to the strong man as something that was in our future, and I fear that it is in our immediate future, and I wanted you to expand on that a little bit, but my theory about this is the big sort. That what’s happened in America, is that religious people have gone off into their sphere. They go to their churches, they go to their — they watch FOX News or they vote Republican. They avoid the elites, they oppose same sex marriage strongly, they shout about it. Whereas the seculars inhabit the city, and the university for sure, and say things like “Well, those poor people. All they do is they cling to their guns and their religion.” President Obama, he would be you know one of the elites, although he claimed — never mind.

So what I see is not this, what you call “no turning back.” I see an attempt to turn back, a division in the society, a polarization politically and religiously. And in this confusion, and in the sort of expressions of rage, which are constantly being drummed along by activist groups and radio talk show hosts, and cable channels and stuff like that a war going on.

And into this war steps somebody saying, “Follow me. I can solve it all. I’ll fix it. I’ll make America great again.” And I think that there’s actually a kind of a strange religious component to this, of I’ll make it all the way it was back in the ’50s.

And we’re going to call it “Merry Christmas again,” right?

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yeah.

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**MORT KONDRACK:** That’s a message that I think differs from what you’re hopefully saying about the sort of the acceptance of secularity.

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yes. And I don’t want to pretend. I’m not a political commentator.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Oh, go ahead.  
(Laughter.)

**JAMIE SMITH:** So I guess part of what, and even the conversations with you today, I mean this is such a learning experience for me. Part of what I now wish I knew more about, were the dynamics of what we could call the secularization of the working class. Because now all of a sudden I’m really really interested in that.

My hunch is that actually the engine of secularization here is more Walmart than NYU. And by that I mean that the sort of force of cultural liturgies of consumerism and consumption and finding meaning in a kind of economic expression, which has been powerfully I think formative over the last generation or two. Not because the mall convinced us of anything, but because it subtly co-opted us by its liturgies.

If then people effectively are secularized insofar as they’ve given themselves to the realities of the market and consumption is the way that they’re going to be happy, then you are going to experience the failures of the market to deliver in ways that have almost a kind of religious crisis about them. Right. And so now, what you’re looking for is somebody to pull the levers to make that system generate what it promised for you. Now, I think there are all kinds of just sheer straight up xenophobia that’s at work here.

The other thing that struck me, and this is totally now me, as an amateur pundit. I wonder to what extent this dynamic is the reality of people, who find themselves just a million miles from political power and the machinations of political power. So government has always just been some sort of distant magic.

And so now, you’re just looking for your magician. Do you know what I mean? You’re just looking for the guy who promises to make that magic work for you. I think that itself, is a sign of a disenfranchisement and disenchantment.



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I don't have any answers. I'm just totally thinking alongside with you. I could see how clearly some are capitalizing on this campaign on an attempt to rollback secularism three.

To me, that is just unconstructive resentment, but apparently it works, so that's disturbing — and that's why I'm trying to think through, is there almost, is the way to understand this, to tap into it as a kind of religious dynamic, right? A kind of religious response. I'm not sure, you know.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Quickly on this point, Naomi, and then, David Brooks, is next.

**NAOMI SCHAFER RILEY:** No, I just, I wonder whether there is a connection here, I mean the economic horses didn't pop up suddenly, but what we have seen is the moving away of these institutions. I mean that used to connect people to those centers of power, whether it was political parties, or churches and all of that —

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yes.

**NAOMI SCHAFER RILEY:** — just connection is working at the same time and forcing maybe people — making people feel like their hands have been forced into this.

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yes. So a sort of Robert Putnam analysis, alongside this, right? Yeah, very good. Very helpful.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** David Brooks, and then Napp.

**DAVID BROOKS, *New York Times*:** So you mentioned that Taylor's praises secularism last 500 years for creating, its great achievement is to create a purely humanistic account of what a meaningful life looks like. And then you went on to describe the super nova, the cross-pressured individual. And then you described some beautiful examples of this person.

And whether Julian Barnes, or David Foster Wallace, or Terrence Malick, or Steve Jobs, or even Trump supporters, I guess. They don't seem complete. They don't seem to have an

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example of a purely humanistic account of a meaningful life. And so do you have any good examples of people who have achieved this?

(Laughter.)

**JAMIE SMITH:** Well, they would be saints, right?

**DAVID BROOKS:** But they’re haunted by God-ism in almost every case, whether it’s Jobs’s 50/50, or Barnes, or Wallace.

**JAMIE SMITH:** How about Dorothy Day? I’m just going through chapters in your book now, right?

(Laughter.)

**JAMIE SMITH:** But wouldn’t Dorothy Day be just a fantastic illustration of somebody who clearly inhabited the cross-pressured space? So it’s not like she was living in some naïve la-la land where she was protected from that. I mean I think of actually Elie’s book of the four of them, right, O’Connor, Percy, Day, and Merton, right?

**DAVID BROOKS:** Yes.

**JAMIE SMITH:** To me, all four of those are just such compelling stories of —

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** What’s the title of that book again?

**JAMIE SMITH:** Paul Elie, *The Life You Save May be Your Own*. And it’s sort of like these four biographies of catholic artists, novelists, and so on, and to me, yeah, I guess I keep looking at examples like that of people who have felt the cross pressure, walked through it. Taylor actually thinks Gerard Manley Hopkins is another example. Ivan Illich, you know these folks who have felt honestly, and traumatically, even, the failures of sort of modern promises, but haven’t then just retreated in repristinating ways, but have sort of forged new paths.

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That’s why he ends *A Secular Age* by saying, look it’s the poets that are sort of — it’s working at the level of the imagination that helps us see a future.

**DAVID BROOKS:** I was going to say if we’ve moved from 500 years of secularism and if we wound up at Dorothy Day, we haven’t moved very far.

**JAMIE SMITH:** In the sense that it’s a recovery, you mean, or —?

**DAVID BROOKS:** I mean most secular people would not say Dorothy Day is a secular person.

**JAMIE SMITH:** Ah. Well, but she’s secular in the third sense, right?

**DAVID BROOKS:** I get what you’re thinking.

**JAMIE SMITH:** It’s interesting. Nancey Murphy, who taught for a long time at Fuller Seminary, she used to talk about what she called the “omega shape” of history, which was you had this sort of ancient medieval kind of world view plausibility structures. You have some of the revolutions of modernity that set us out on this detour.

And then what it turns out, is in post-modernity, you come back to a place that actually has a remarkable amount of continuity with what had gone before. And this turns out to be this sort of detour that we went through. You can’t forget it, but you’re in a different space.

I think that’s — there’s always going to be something strange, right. It’s not — there’s always going to be an element of memory, I guess, to this. And sometimes I like it when Taylor says, “Tell me what you think about Saint Francis, and I will tell you what you’re sort of basement assumptions are.”

“If you think Saint Francis basically chose to live a deformed life, I already know what you believe, but if you think Saint Francis is an icon of flourishing, then you’ve got a totally different account of what it is to flourish.” I think it’s always going to be that competition between the two.

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**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Excellent. Napp Nazworth?

**NAPP NAZWORTH, *The Christian Post*:** I want to talk about Evangelicals. So you were talking about the two trajectories, and for the second trajectory, the non-mainline Protestant one, you said “nondenominational congregations are retrieving ancient ways of being Christian.” So I have three questions about that.

Can you give us some specific examples of how they’re doing that? And how does that tie into secular three? And then also, is there — are these congregations that you’re talking about, is it related to any other things like urban versus rural, small church, big church, mega church; multiracial, multiethnic churches versus mostly white churches, what are you seeing?

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yeah. Great questions. So I should probably flag this by saying, I’m probably seeing a self-selecting sample, because this is people who are inviting me places. In some ways I would say, I’m a Protestant Evangelical who sees his mission as to remind Evangelicals that they’re Catholic.

In the sense that I think the only small “c” catholic. I want to say big “C” Catholic, but not necessarily Roman. Okay? I believe in the Holy Catholic Church. And what I mean by that, is helping — it seems to me, the viability of faith communities in a secular three age, are directly indexed to their ability to draw on wells that are older than modernity. Right?

So that in fact, it’s not just a nostalgic retrieval, but it is basically finding ways of being faithful in the present that draw on and are tied to ancient and medieval ways that the Spirit has led throughout the ages. That’s kind of what I mean by “catholicity.” And I just see a remarkable and surprising openness to this in places that you would never expect.

I have another book called “Desiring the Kingdom,” which is a kind of the academic version of “You are What You Love,” which is kind of making this case. And I get calls from places like Dallas Theological Seminary. Do any of you know Dallas Seminary? It’s kind of like the heart of dispensationalist Evangelicalism, and they’re reading this stuff, which is talking about ancient liturgies and Saint Augustine, and all these kinds of things. So two congregations come to mind. One is Christ Community Church in De Moines, Iowa, which started as a plant of a massive Baptist megachurch in the city, and sort of went out into this very intentional, liturgical, sacramental, catholic, almost monastic expression.

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Ironically, when they then looked around and realized, if we were really consistent with this, we shouldn't be independent, right. We should be woven into the web of some sort of body and community. They actually ended up joining the Mennonite Church. So they're kind of sacramental Mennonites, which is basically a Stanley Hauerwas congregation.

And so that's in Des Moines. How do you want to characterize that? It's urban, but it also has a kind of — you know, it's definitely a Midwestern sort of thing. We could talk about a bunch of congregations in Brooklyn that are associated with the Presbyterian Church in America, the Resurrection Network of Churches that also are sort of tapping into this liturgical, ancient, sacramental heritage.

In a way, you could say it's a re-enchanted Christianity. And then a place, like Sojourn, which is a nondenominational church in Louisville, Kentucky. What's going on here, is everybody, I would say, is waking up to the dynamics that David and James are going to talk about, which is the dynamics of formation and character. And they're realizing that worship is sort of the incubator for the formation of Christian character.

And so they have to become more intentional about what worship looks like and that looks like retrieving ancient forms. So there's an interesting — I think it's consistent with this secular three reality. Maybe it actually comes back to Benedict Option, kind of stuff, because it's saying well, you know what, we sort of — we have underestimated the power of formation of cultural liturgies, and we need — we've left the treasures of cultural formation in our religious tradition off the table.

In fact, what we did was we took the cultural liturgies and we thought we could make church cool, because we would make it like the mall or the rock concert, or the coffee shop, and then that turns out to be the dynamics of assimilation. The ethnic piece of that, I'm not sure I would have any confident assessment of that.

I would say, like a place like Sojourn, I know it is not just an elite educated class kind of dynamic that's quite a working class congregation. I'd have to do more digging around to know that.

**UNIDENTIFIED PERSON:** How are they changing their worship service?

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**JAMIE SMITH:** How are they changing their worship service? Basically, they’re going from what I call the sort of “talking head brain on a stick model,” where you walk in, sing 30 minutes of very emotive songs, and then sit down for a 45-minute lecture; to what I think most people would feel, like is a kind of catholic rhythm, right, they see worship as this narrative performance from beginning to end, and they’re sort of walking through the dynamics of you know, confession, absolution.

Here’s an untold story, I think. I don’t know what counts for journalists, but to me, it’s fascinating how many Presbyterian Churches now observe weekly Eucharist or Communion. So to me that’s always just a little signal. Whenever you run into evangelical churches that are practicing weekly communion or Lord’s Supper, what’s happened is they have effectively appropriated a catholic cadence, right.

And they’re often, they have to be very intentional about it because everybody’s like, “Oh, we’re not supposed to do it every week. It won’t be special anymore,” or whatever. And there’s just a lot of — and that’s both kind of evangelical denominational realities, like these Presbyterian Churches, I mentioned, but also a bunch of these nondenominational churches.

So does that feel like something interesting? I don’t know. I just think it’s an interesting bellwether of actually, kind of contemporary congregations looking for the resources of ancient formative practices that’s the way I would narrate it.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Okay. Abdullah, and then Jessica Stern.

**ABDULLAH ANTEPLI, Duke University:** Thank you, James. A fascinating compilation. Two questions: If one can simplistically talk, there are two schools of thought in secularism, and I feel you are — two Anglo-Saxon schools of secularism centric, and there’s a French secularism, which I grew up in Turkey with.

It’s not disbelief, but it’s grudgingly accepting religion it’s not going to disappear, but we have to control it. We have to, almost treating religion like herpes. It’s not going to go away.

*(Laughter)*

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**JAMIE SMITH:** Prophylactic.

**ABDULLAH ANTEPLI:** Yes, exactly. To me, most people are in different proportions, both. There’s a hybrid secularism that some people are Anglo-Saxon-type seculars unto their own faith tradition towards, but towards other faith traditions, they become immediately French type of secularism.

Ted Cruz, when he’s advocating for people to pray, and when people ask, “Can Muslims pray? Can Jews pray? Can Hindus pray?” He becomes incredibly French secularist says that’s absolutely not the case.

So there is so much hybrid people are not one kind. Even like many Christians who are secular Anglo-Saxon types, they are comfortable with it, if their religion is remaining within the four walls of the Church. Especially Episcopalians, they don’t know what to do if that goes beyond the four walls of Church, etc. So I feel your conversations are too Anglo-Saxon type centric.

The second. Also, as you beautifully discussed, the social manifestation of these intellectual and religious, sort of shifts and patterns in our society, it’s again, too liberal Protestant centric. What do those conversations and patterns that you discuss means in the face of this major demographic changes happening in American society? What do those conversations mean for practicing Catholics, Muslims; Jews who are not really like that?

**JAMIE SMITH:** That’s great. The first analysis is brilliant. So in what way my account is too Anglo-Saxon in the sense that I’m too comfortable with — can you just say a little bit more about that so I know how to engage? You defined the French very, very well.

**ABDULLAH ANTEPLI:** In the four —

**JAMIE SMITH:** I’m never going to forget “religion as herpes.”  
(Laughter)

**JAMIE SMITH:** What characterizes the Anglo-Saxon as you’re describing it?



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**ABDULLAH ANTEPLI:** Anglo-Saxon secularism, it divides the religion as a separation of Church and State, but it respects religion. There is no innate hostility towards religion. It respects religion, which I believe is, like John Adams type secularism. It’s what America mainly built upon, but in their personal life, but French secularism is innate and hostile towards religion.

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yes, yes.

**ABDULLAH ANTEPLI:** You get sort of — considers religion, again, something to be afraid of and to be limited.

**JAMIE SMITH:** And do you, would you say, I just think that’s very helpful. Would you say, is there a legitimate worry that certain kind of elite sectors in the United States tend towards the French?

**ABDULLAH ANTEPLI:** Yes.

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yes. And which then also breeds its own resentment —

**ABDULLAH ANTEPLI:** Absolutely.

**JAMIE SMITH:** — from those religious communities?

**ABDULLAH ANTEPLI:** Absolutely, yeah.

**JAMIE SMITH:** That’s a great point. I mean I don’t have anything to really add to that than others saying, I guess the way I would push back on the French sort of Revolutionary model, is to point out something like Tom was saying, that actually then what happens is you actually make secularism its own kind of religion — it’s religion-like at least, right? That’s where then I want to sort of unleash the epistemological dogs and call into question what underwrites that kind of confidence. It’s really helpful. The liberal Protestant concern—well, that’s really that’s me trying to stick to what I know, right?

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So I would want to hear more about how other religious traditions see themselves navigating, like, for example: Could Muslim communities accept something like this secularity three analysis? In other words, is something like the analysis available more broadly, but then we would have to think differently about the resources. I would love to hear more.

**ABDULLAH ANTEPLI:** The Anglo-Saxon type of secularism is the ideal model. Most Muslims coming to United States, they come with incredible attraction and appeal to Anglo-Saxon secularism because many of them are suffering with French type secularism. Many countries like Tunis, Turkey, they learned from the French teachers and they even mastered further in the understanding.

Despite post-911 realities, many American Muslims feel they practice their religion more comfortably in America than anywhere else. But those parameters have not been developed yet.

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yeah, no, that’s very helpful. I mean it does strike me that then there’s probably an interesting conversation to be had about U.S. history in that regard, given early commerce between France and the United States in some of the ideology of this, as opposed to again, this work by Joan Lockwood O’Donovan on England and the way in which actually the establishment of the Church was good for religious minorities, and actually religious minorities, non-Christian minorities have been some of the strongest opponents of the disestablishment of the Church. That would be an illustration of this Anglo-Saxon model. Yeah that’s really helpful. That’s great. Thank you.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Okay. Jessica Stern is up next.

**JESSICA STERN:** Thank you so much. As I said to you, I think this is both educational and incredibly moving, and I’m really grateful to you.

**JAMIE SMITH:** Thank you.

**JESSICA STERN, Boston University:** I am wondering whether the pressure for secularity three results in part from the declining percentage of Christians in the United States and Canada. And I was looking at the Pew polls — you know we keep talking about what’s

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happening in the United States, who’s less religious, who’s more. The latest Pew poll shows that between 2007 and 2014, religiously affiliated persons went down somewhat, from 83 percent to 77 percent so there’s a slight decline. Not that it’s secularism, but there is nonetheless a slight decline.

And the group most responsible for the decline, at least according to this poll, is millennials. It’s not working class, although I’ve seen that some sociologists claim that working class people are leaving the Church. And that brings me to a question that of course is related to my own obsessions, but it just kept coming up for me, while I heard you speaking.

The universalist impulse in religion versus the particularist. How do you encourage a thick version of secularity three while perhaps discouraging that particularist impulse, such that it doesn’t become a majoritarian rule, such that only Christians feel at home?

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yes. That was a great — I’ve been learning so much. This is so helpful.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** While you think of your answer, let me — I heard the other day a wonderful comment. Somebody said, “The problem with theocracy is everybody wants to be Theo.”

(Laughter.)

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yes. I mean on the first point, I think what’s interesting is the sort of Pew demographic snapshot, I would say, is not a sign that we are arriving at secularity three. It is a set of shifts taking place within secularity three that has been a reality for a long time, right.

Now, you could grant that the speed with which secularity three seeps into the social imaginary of a society, as Taylor puts it, has been slower in the United States than in Continental Europe or the United Kingdom, or something like that. I think that’s probably true. But what’s interesting is the demographic story is, it’s hard to know cause or affect, right, or whether it’s — I think it’s more symptomatic of things that have already taken place.

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I do think the reality of immigration is precisely what is ramping up the learning curve for U.S. society, in appreciating this, right, and in Canada, too, because — and it’s interesting. Taylor talks about one of the features of belief in a secular age, when you feel this cross pressure, is he talks about it as the fragilization of belief, right. And that’s this sense in which, in a way, you can’t just naively and confidently assume your way of seeing the world is the only way of seeing the world.

And I think the realities of immigration bring the world’s religions and beliefs home, or here, and so people are obviously — it’s just like their education ramps up exponentially in appreciating that dynamic, which is then also, I think you get some of the resentment kind of movements, and you can get steam behind the kind of reprimination dynamics.

The universalist particularist that’s really interesting. Do you think, I’ve been wondering lately, so generally I’m suspicious of talking about religion. Do you know what I mean? I’m not sure that there’s — I understand it works as a, certain shorthand to get at some phenomena, but I think usually all we ever have are religions.

And it seems to me, some religions — oh, gosh, I’m just going to say, it seems to me, some expressions of religions have internal to them, an account of, why believers ought to be universalist that is not universal across all of those religions, right? So I don’t want to have to pick between universalism versus particularism, right. I think you could make a case that in some ways fostering — again, this might be a kind of Benedict Option logic, but fostering a deep catechesis in a particular religion is precisely how you foster people, who make room for a pluralistic public sphere. I don’t know.

Does that make sense? I don’t know. It’s a great thing to think about.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Okay. Kathleen Parker, and then Daniel.

**KATHLEEN PARKER, *Washington Post*:** First of all, I apologize for dragging the conversation from the sublime to the mundane, but and this question may have come up. You may have discussed this in my absence, so please just stop me if that’s the case. I was just wondering if, I would just be interested in your thoughts about the Evangelical support for Donald Trump.

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You know I’m sure there are other issues, you know, Evangelicals aren’t only Evangelicals, but there — and other issues may be more important than their religious beliefs. But you know when Donald Trump says he’s a Christian, who doesn’t need forgiveness, and he’s otherwise, as unchristian-like as anyone we’ve ever seen.

Do you have any theories on what they are attracted to, or some other explanation for this odd support?

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yeah. So I have two. And again, I’m not a sociologist; I’m a philosopher. I’m just a poor country philosopher.

Two things. One is a spectacular failure of catechesis. Do you know what I mean? Because either way — I will say on Super Tuesday, as I was watching some data come in, it turned out that there was also, I think 35 percent of Catholics also voted for Trump. So I felt at least a little bit of relief. This guy is not only our problem.

But it strikes me that what we’re dealing with here, and this is something Tom’s story on NPR covered, is the extent to which Evangelical has just been an identifier, like a descriptor that people put on themselves. A label that they wear. And insofar as that’s coupled with a spectacular failure of catechesis, by that I mean, like actual instruction in the faith, people can almost fill that descriptor with whatever they think is a certain badge.

And so when you ask them, “Are you X?” Yes, I’m an Evangelical. Do you support Donald Trump? Yes, I do. There’s not much experienced tension between those —

**KATHLEEN PARKER:** Well, then we’ll just make it Christians across the board, rather than Evangelical, as some special —

**JAMIE SMITH:** And would that change the data, though?

**KATHLEEN PARKER:** No.

**JAMIE SMITH:** I wonder. See because I feel like the other piece that I’m interested in, is it relates to this theme of ex-carnation that I was talking about. And this is a more volatile

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hypothesis, but my sense is, my hunch is that Evangelicalism, as a form of Protestantism, is susceptible to turning Christianity into a web of beliefs to which you assent.

Which then, doesn't necessarily have to come with a ton of connection to a way of life that you practice, so you get this — really, this was never supposed to happen, but you get nominal Evangelicals.

Whereas, most people became Evangelicals because they were nominal Lutherans or whatever. Do you know what I mean? But this is something weird. And particularly in regions like the South and so on, this works.

This is why I think if our polling, or our social science could be much more fine-grained, and not just ask the self-descriptor question, but if as again, Tom's story, if you dig down to the level of practice and participation, I think you see very different numbers about Trump, for example. I think that probably also explains that Massachusetts number, because if you're Irish in South Boston, you're Catholic, of course you are, even though you've never been to church in years, right?

So there's affiliation as opposed to practice, I think is really crucial.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** And there is data on that, Jamie.

When you hold for people who go to church at least once a week. Maybe twice, but once, the numbers for Trump go way down. And I always thought, and I've said this to John Green, who's been here before, who's a political scientist and demographer that I thought that was a description of Evangelical, a person who actually goes to church a lot —

**JAMIE SMITH:** Right.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** — and says that to be an Evangelical means to be a faithful participant in, not only church, but Wednesday night Bible studies. And so then, therefore when I've had calls on this question, the word “Evangelical” has become so flimsily described that in South Carolina, if somebody says, “Well, you must be an Evangelical.” “Yeah, I think so. I go to church once a year during Easter.”

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yeah.

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**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Well that’s not an Evangelical.

**KATHLEEN PARKER:** In South Carolina, they say there are more Evangelicals than people.  
(Laughter)

**JAMIE SMITH:** I would also add one, related to something we were talking about earlier, in response to Napp. So one of the other things that intrigues me, is when Evangelical Protestants start kind of embracing this catholicity account. I would say baked into the DNA of that expression and formation of Christianity, is something that weds you to a people, that’s transnational and ancient.

So it undercuts nationalism, whereas the other is sort of intellectualized Christianity for brains on a stick, I think is also the most susceptible to being just co-opted by nationalisms. And so that might also explain some of the Trump phenomena, and maybe a little bit of the Ted Cruz phenomena, too.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Just on this point, Jessica, and then Daniel, you’re up next.

**JESSICA STERN:** I wonder, whether your concept of the “liturgy of the mall” helps to explain that and maybe if there’s time, I think you are brilliant on that topic. I hope you’ll get to it.

**JAMIE SMITH:** Oh. Yeah. I don’t know if we will. I do this in “You are What You Love.” In other words, one of the things that I’ve been trying to push — in a way, this is a different way of thinking about religion, not as a constellation of beliefs, doctrines, and ideas, but actually as a formative way of life. It’s something that’s practiced. The primacy of practice.

But once you start looking at religion in that way, what you’ll also realize is that the competing religions aren’t just the things that call themselves religions. It’s actually the liturgies of consumerism and the cathedrals of consumerism, the mall or whatever it might be, are as powerfully co-optive as rival gospels or messages, or religions.

And I think, to me, a lot of the explanatory dynamic for say Protestant Evangelical assimilation to wider cultural dynamics is not that somebody changed their mind. It’s that somebody trained their hearts. And they were co-opted by these rival liturgies, which



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then is what catalyzes new intentionality about Christian liturgical formation as a counter measure to that.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Okay. Daniel, and then Wajahat.

**DANIEL LIPPMAN, *Politico*:** Thank you so much. I had a two-part question. How would you address the, responsibility of Evangelicals or just you know Christians in general, Protestants or Catholics, for I guess secularists have — kind of split themselves away from people who are religious in America, where they think Oh, those people are crazy. We don’t associate. You know it’s the big sort theory.

What’s the responsibility of Evangelicals for doing their own splitting, where they feel like those city slickers they don’t feel an attachment — it’s like two different countries, and how do you think that’s going to continue?

And the second part of my question is, you’ve talked about how secularism has hurt the country a little bit in that it, you know just in all the ways you talked about that. What can be done to keep America a democracy, but dial back some of the secularism so that people have — you know, what’s the practical thing that can be done to address this, but still keep — not return back to where religion is everything?

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yes, that’s great. Thank you. On the first point, I mean to be perfectly honest, I think it is way harder, and almost impossible for religious people to insulate themselves from secularism in this society, than it is for “secular elites” to ensconce themselves without ever having to bump into religious people, because for reasons like James was mentioning.

In a way, the symbolic universes, the cultural systems are kind of hooked up to — so I mean as soon as you have cable, fundamentalism is dead. Do you know what I mean? Like there’s just — there’s not — where went our resistance, and I think the story —

**DANIEL LIPPMAN:** They don’t look down on —

**JAMIE SMITH:** No, you’re right. Absolutely, and, but in some ways — I’m not condoning it, I’m just saying you can also understand some of the feelings of stuff kind of being

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crammed down throats. Do you know what I mean? For us, raising four kids, you're working on all of these kinds of intentional measures, not to cocoon them, but to be intentional about their formation, and there's just all this kind of competition.

So you can see how they feel, like it's not a fair game. That Goliath gets to pull the strings of society. The second question I think is really interesting. Academics are the worst, because I keep thinking of these books that are not popular, but Jeffrey Stout at Princeton is somebody — actually, he'd be a fascinating figure to bring here. He's in the Religion Department at Princeton University. He wrote a book called "Democracy and Tradition."

So Stout takes himself to be an Emersonian. He has no kind of, traditional religious affiliation at all, but is an ardent critic of secularism in the way that I've been describing it. And I think at the end of it, and yet he's also critical of people like Stanly Hauerwas and Benedict Option people because he thinks it sounds like he's giving them license to no longer participate in the public sphere and the common good.

He says, "No, we need religious folks to participate in our democracy for the good of our democracy." I would say the one move that I find interesting here, is to stop focusing on federal politics. And so what's interesting, is he frames this as, what does it look like for religious folk, let's say, to get involved and engaged in municipal politics, neighborhood politics, state politics?"

Like taking seriously, in some ways, the layers of the republic, because by the time you get to federal politics, it's just a train wreck, a gridlock. Whereas, there's meaningful — you know, what a mayor and city council can do, can be pretty powerful in shaping the way people live lives in a city. And so encouraging that lower level of democratic participation.

This is another reason why, though, I'm really interested in the work of Oliver O'Donovan, because he basically shows how and why Christians, for example, should be invested in democracy, because in some ways it owes its legacy to these religious traditions. So there's a genealogy story to tell, where we shouldn't have to choose between the two, I think.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Okay. Wajahat?

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**WAJAHAT ALI, Al Jazeera America:** Good morning everyone. I was unable to meet most of you last night. I’m here as the unofficial ambassador of moderate Muslims everywhere. Myself, and Abdullah, are the last moderate Muslims on earth.

*(Laughter)*

**WAJAHAT ALI:** So we’re unicorns. That’s on the record, by the way.

*(Laughter)*

**WAJAHAT ALI:** Thank you for understanding that joke. Hip crowd.

Speaking about religious minorities, I know we touched upon it, and using the definitions we’ve discussed about secularities, secularism, and to even, a type of fundamentalism, either religious fundamentalism, or even the type of personality. I think (inaudible) was describing. I think he’d say the “Trump voter” that has emerged that wants things to go back to the way they were: black and white television, where things were simple, and people like me didn’t exist, with these difficult names. These multi-hyphenated names. You know, two skin colors; not caramel mocha.

You know, I’m sitting here thinking about this modern America. The existence of religious minorities. Now, we can talk about Muslims because they seem to animating most of this discussion. We could talk about Jews, Hindus.

Is the existence of religious minorities in America, not just the existence, but if you will, the swagger, the prominence, the emergence of religious minorities in America, ironically, fueling not only secularism, as manifested by the New Atheists, but also secularity. And also religious fundamentalism.

And if it is, then what does that say about the role and place of religious minorities for the future of America? And I want to hear thoughts on that.

**JAMIE SMITH:** So I’m immediately going to Abdullah’s frame in that it would fuel secularism if the secularism was of this kind of French model, and it first of all, probably doesn’t have any grain of nuance in what it thinks its seeing in religious communities.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Repeat again what the French model is.

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**JAMIE SMITH:** Religion as herpes. How can you forget that?

*(Laughter)*

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** I just wanted to hear it again.

*(Laughter)*

**JAMIE SMITH:** So yeah, I could see that. It would absolutely contribute to secularity three, as well. Although, what I would say, is contribute to an awareness of it, like it's sort of like wake up and smell secularity three, because obviously we live in a more contested and diverse space.

Now, for somebody who sees secularity three as actually a healthy environment for religious communities to be who they are called to be, I welcome that. Like that seems like a good. But I can clearly see why it also then becomes this catalyst for resentment.

And by resentment, I also mean kind of a retrenchment back to this myth. And that's the turning back the clock thing, which I just think is characterized by a kind of, I was going to say, ignorance, but do you see?

**UNIDENTIFIED PERSON:** Naïveté.

**JAMIE SMITH:** Naïveté. Yes, yes, it's naïveté, but —

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** It's a nice way of saying ignorance.

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yeah. I guess what's worrisome though, is how much energy that seems to be able to generate. Like there's still — that's still tapping into something here. Go ahead.

**WAJAHAT ALI:** And specifically, the one community then that I don't think we discussed, is when you look at religious communities, like Evangelical communities, for example, whether or not they're real Evangelicals who go to church, or the ones who are just by virtue of checking on the box, like the Trump voter. I'm being simplistic now. I'm really curious because if you see the communities themselves, the traditions, the values are very similar, oftentimes, which might be seen as an (inaudible) to some people.

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What? Muslims have similar values to Evangelicals?

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yeah, yeah.

**WAJAHAT ALI:** I went to an, all-boys Jesuit Catholic High School, where I dominated every semester when it came to religious studies, by the way.

*(Laughter)*

**WAJAHAT ALI:** Which made my priest weep every day.

*(Laughter)*

**WAJAHAT ALI:** — but the stories were very same.

It was like, you know, we studied the Bible’s literature, traditional values, and what’s interesting to me, is I agree with you, then the secularism aspect of it and the secularity aspect of it. But the position, then of the religious minority with the swagger, let’s say Muslims or Jews with Catholics, when it comes to the Evangelical Christians who feel like the emergence of this religious minority in America, is forcing them to retrench instead of embrace secularity three. Can you talk about that?

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yes. It’s interesting because we’ve also had Muslim students come to Calvin College, which is a Christian liberal arts college, precisely because they see it as an ethos that is more hospitable to how they would want to live out their faith than Michigan State, or something like that.

So the analysis I want to give, is of those Evangelicals who are responding the way you do, the way you’re noting, there is something going on there, in which something other than their Evangelical identity is trumping their political interests at that point. Do you know what I mean? I want to say their religious identity is a stalking horse or code for something else, which again to me, is why we need a diagnosis of how and why Protestant Evangelicalism seems to susceptible to being co-opted by forces other than it.

And yet, you could still wear it, like so to what extent can Evangelicalism be something you wear to really cover your American nationalism, or something like that. It seems very susceptible to that in the United States, in the ways that it’s not in other places. And so this is where you almost need, now — we almost have to get down to the level of theological correction within the Christian community.

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This is why I keep bringing up catechesis, like do people really understand what they should be doing? Actually, Tom and I had a fascinating conversation last night, where we were saying, what was the stat? Seventy percent of Muslims voted for George W. Bush in the 2000 Election, precisely because of social values, right?

Obviously that radically changes after 9-11, and yet, if I’m a Christian who’s interested in public life and the common good, I see, as some of my significant compatriots in that endeavor, Muslim and Jews, who actually share a lot of these concerns. And I feel like I have resources internal to the Christian tradition, to narrate exactly why I ought to do that. I feel like I’m not answering your question though. Does that help?

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** You know, we’re about to break for lunch. Okay. Clare Duffy, you’re going to take us into lunch with a clear and concise question.

**CLARE DUFFY, NBC Nightly News:** With a really short question, I promise. This is sort of random. When did the impression of libertinism attach to secularity? You said, at one point cracks appeared in the libertinism of —

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yes.

**CLARE DUFFY:** When did that impression attach, and why?

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** We need dates.

**JAMIE SMITH:** So okay. So I may have spoken too hastily. I guess it depends on the story you want to tell about the 1960s. And I wasn’t here, but allegedly. So insofar as — maybe what we could say, is at the heart of a secularist outlook and therefore even [sic] a lot of secular spiritualities, is this valorization of autonomy as the ultimate good.

**CLARE DUFFY:** Hm.

**JAMIE SMITH:** I would say it’s also woven into the American Declaration of Independence, but anyway that’s a different theme. So that then gets realized in

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different ways, and it seems to me that one of those, is it's realization in the sexual revolution of the '60s which I just think we're already at an interesting phase in which — I don't know. I'm a total square. I don't know how these things go.

But I do feel like there's a certain reassessment of that going on. At least, I'm of the generation, of sort of kids whose parents were divorced multiple times over. And so we're asking ourselves questions about certain sexual mores that were taken for granted in John Updike novels, that don't get replayed in the novels of David Foster Wallace.

It's a fascinating — you know, it's just two totally different worlds, so that association of libertinism, I am just tying to, this trenchant fixation on autonomy, as really the only good that could be affirmed, and wondering whether people are already feeling the effects of that. That said, I was married at 19, so who am I to say?

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** I'd like to give another commercial. If you want to get a less-than 3-minute summary of the life and thought of Saint Augustine, Google “Jamie Smith and Augustine” on YouTube. And Jamie, I guess it's in anticipation of this book, isn't it?

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yeah, and another big book I'm working on.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Well what's that book called?

**JAMIE SMITH:** “On the Road with Augustine,” which is why I think Augustine is our great — this is somewhat ripping off David, but I think Augustine is the great postmodern saint, because he actually lived a certain kind of cross pressure himself. You know, we have “The Wolf of Wall Street,” Augustine was the Lupin de Milan, he was the “Wolf of Milan.” He lived Leo's life.

But then sort of realized and found fullness and wholeness in a different story. So I'm playing on Kerouac's “On the Road,” and that's the next project.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** And so the title again, is?

**JAMIE SMITH:** “On the Road with Augustine.”



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**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** And when is that coming out?

**JAMIE SMITH:** But “You are What you Love” is also very much Augustinian in its (inaudible) —

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** But when is that one coming?

**JAMIE SMITH:** Well, it still needs to be written, so 2018.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Oh, I see. It hasn’t been written yet.

**JAMIE SMITH:** No, no, no.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Okay. But if you do a YouTube of Jamie and Augustine and Laity Lodge, that little two-and-a-half, two minutes and forty seconds overview he gives of why Augustine’s important today, it’s really really valuable. So we aim to promote our speakers, their books, and now their YouTube, and their CD’s, and their music, whatever. *(Laughter)*

**JAMIE SMITH:** You’re taking me back to my preacher days, when the preacher brought tapes in the back, and —

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Yes, exactly. Join me in thanking our speaker this morning.

**JAMIE SMITH:** Thank you very much. Thanks for a great conversation.

♦ END ♦

The Faith Angle Forum is a program of the Ethics and Public Policy Center.

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