

**"Chosen Nation: Christianity, Politics, and American Destiny"**

Dr. Catherine Brekus  
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May 2017

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Now let me just say, I will introduce our speaker. You've read her entire bio. I will not then read it back to you, simply to say that Professor Brekus, you may not know, was named the Harvard Divinity School Outstanding Teacher of the Year in 2014 and '15. She did her Ph.D. at Yale. Her undergrad was at Harvard, and on this topic some of you have never been here before.

What we do is four months out, I meet with E.J. and Will and Karen and Andy Ferguson and others. We have a discussion about what should we be talking about at the next Faith Angle at the intersection of religion and public life, and I believe it was Will who said we really need to talk about religion and nationalism.

One of our speakers at last Faith Angle, Grant Wacker, said the best person on this subject is our speaker today, and not only is she good on it, but she's writing a new book on it called *Chosen Nation: Christianity and Politics in American Destiny*. So when will your book be out?

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** This is a wonderful opportunity for me, because I am going on sabbatical next year to work on this book. I have taught two courses about this and have written a little bit, but there is no publication date.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** But this is the trial run?

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** This is a trial run. I'm really looking forward to hearing comments and questions, because it will definitely help me.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Well, this is a great group to do a trial run. So thank you Professor for joining us. When she finishes, then we'll have our Q and A. Thank you for coming to the Faith Angle.

Dr. Catherine Brekus

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** Thank you so much for inviting me. This really is a wonderful opportunity for me at maybe not the beginning of a project, but close to the beginning of a project. This is a book that I have been thinking about for a few years, and I have been teaching about it. So next year when I'm on sabbatical, most of my time will be spent working on this.

I'm really fascinated by the way that Americans from the colonial period to the present have imagined the nation in religious terms, so you're going to hear some of those terms today. America has been

# THE FAITH ANGLE FORUM

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imagined as a new Israel, a redeemer nation, a promised land. I'm interested in asking about the historical roots of this language, how the understanding of American chosenness has changed over time, and also what the ethical and religious implications of this belief are. So there are really two sides to this question.

How has Christian language influenced American politics—and that's mostly what I'm going to talk about today—but I'm also interested in how the belief in American chosenness has influenced American Christianity. I think there's been a dialectic here, and so I can say more about that in the Q and A.

If this were a class at Harvard Divinity School, you would be interrupting me all the time. I never really lecture all the way through.

I just want to let you know there are a lot of slides I'm going to be showing you. Some of what I'm talking about is really best conveyed through images, and we can go back to any of these in the Q and A, because I suspect you're going to have some questions about some of them.

Let me start at the beginning.

In 1630, John Winthrop, one of the founders of Massachusetts Bay, wrote a lay sermon that he called "A Model of Christian Charity." This is—you're seeing the manuscript behind me—a sermon that he may have delivered aboard the *Arbella*, the ship that brought the Puritans across the sea to New England.

There are many mysteries about this sermon. Winthrop's descendants claimed that he wrote it during his journey to Massachusetts Bay, but it's also possible that he may have delivered it before the *Arbella* departed England. We're not even certain that Winthrop ever preached it. He may have written it and just put it aside.

But one thing is clear. Winthrop's words reflected the Puritans' understanding of themselves as a chosen people in covenant with God. Borrowing an image from the gospel of Matthew, Winthrop portrayed New England as a "city on a hill."

(Referring to the slide) Here's Winthrop. "For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill," he preached, "the eyes of all people are upon us. Winthrop suggested that the Puritans, like the biblical Israelites, had been given a special commission as God's covenant people. They were his chosen. Yet instead of sounding triumphalist, Winthrop claimed that the Puritans' covenant with God was a burden as well as a blessing. To be a city on a hill was to be called to practice a radical form of Christian love.

Echoing the Apostle Paul's evocative language of Christians as the body of Christ, Winthrop told the company of immigrants that they must put aside their individual interests in the service of a common good. "We must be knit together in this work as one man," he preached. "We must entertain each other in brotherly affection. We must be willing to abridge ourselves of superfluities, for the supply of others' necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality. We must delight in each other, make other's conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn

together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work as members of the same body."

Since Winthrop worried that the Puritans would face economic hardship as they tried to build a new community in the wilderness, he urged them to remember that their wealth ultimately belonged to God. In ordinary times, families were required to give only out of their abundance, but in extraordinary times they were called to share their wealth with those who are suffering.

He urged the Puritans to be merciful to one another, lending to the poor without expectation of being paid back. "If thy brother be in want and thou canst help him, thou needs not make doubt what thou shouldst do. If thou lovest God, thou must help him." Quoting from the gospel of Matthew, he preached "Weigh not up for yourselves treasures upon earth."

Winthrop explained that if the Puritans could live up to this demanding vision of Christian charity, God would shower them with his grace. "The Lord will be our God and delight to dwell among us as his own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways."

But if they were sinful or disobedient, they would be punished just as the biblical Israelites had been. Because of his close reading of the Hebrew bible, Winthrop believed that chosenness including suffering, punishment and sacrifice. Instead of predicting a glorious destiny for God's new city on a hill, he ended his sermon with words of warning.

"So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword through the world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God, and all professors for God's sake. We shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us, til we be consumed out of the good land where we are going."

Winthrop's vision of Massachusetts Bay was both sobering and inspiring. Urging Puritan women, men and children to see themselves as a collective, he promised that they would share one another's blessings and burdens. Yet his inspiring vision of unity had limits. Though Winthrop never explicitly mentioned Native Americans, he implied that not everyone was worthy of Christian charity. Emphasizing the importance of obedience to God, he mentioned that when Saul failed to obey every part of God's commission to destroy the nation of Amalek—Saul was supposed to kill every man, woman, child and animal—he lost his kingdom.

In Winthrop's version of the "city on a hill," the same God who demanded self-sacrificing love could also call his chosen people to exterminate the Native inhabitants of the land.

(Referring to a slide.) This is a slide of a drawing by Captain John Underhill of the Pequot War of 1637, which Winthrop sanctioned. Puritans and their Narragansett allies surrounded a Pequot village in Mystic, Connecticut and burned it and killed between 400 and 700 Native Americans who were trapped inside the village.

What you can see in this circle is how both the Puritans and their Native American allies surrounded this village. The Native Americans who survived were either taken captive by the Narragansets or sold into slavery in the West Indies. So this is the other side of the Puritans' city on a hill. From the very beginning, their faith in American chosenness was intertwined with violence.

When Winthrop and the Puritans declared that Massachusetts Bay was a city on a hill, they never dreamed that their language would some day be invoked to describe a new nation. But 140 years later, a new understanding of American sacred destiny was forged in the crucible of the American Revolution.

During the Revolutionary period, colonial Americans fused Christianity with a new spirit of nationalism to make an astonishing claim: God had chosen the colonies to become a beacon of democracy to the rest of the world. The city on a hill had become the "new Israel," a nation—not just a religious community—in covenant with God.

Since there was nothing inevitable about the transformation of the Puritan language of chosenness into a defense of republican government, it is worth asking how this happened. The answer is that political and religious leaders drew on America's central text, the Bible, to argue that scripture pointed toward America's special destiny. The Bible was the best-selling book in early America, and its influence was inescapable. Children learned how to read using the Bible, legal codes were based on biblical law, and even those who were not particularly religious knew its stories by heart.

Revolutionary leaders, both ministers and politicians, rewrote the Exodus narrative of the Hebrew Bible as a story about American destiny. They retold the biblical story of Pharaoh, who had enslaved and oppressed the Israelites until Moses led them to freedom, as a foreshadowing of the American Revolution.

(Referring to a slide.) Here we have the Reverend Nicholas Street's sermon *The American States Acting Over the Part of the Children of Israel in the Wilderness*. Street placed America within biblical history by describing King George III as Pharaoh and the colonists as the oppressed Israelites. Street explained to his congregation that "The British tyrant is only acting over the same wicked and cruel part that Pharaoh, King of Egypt, acted toward the children of Israel about 3,000 years ago."

Even Benjamin Franklin, who might be best described as a Deist, conflated the story of the Revolution with Exodus. In 1774, when Congress considered creating a new seal for the United States, Franklin suggested that it should be an image of "Moses lifting up his wand and dividing the Red Sea, and Pharaoh in his chariot overwhelmed with waters."

(Referring to a slide.) Here you can see the proposed seal of the United States. He wanted the seal to include the motto "Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God."

In addition to describing America as the new Israel, political and religious leaders also overcame long-standing suspicions of democracy to argue that the Bible revealed the superiority of a republican form of

government—and here I mean republican with a small R. This was really a startling and remarkable development.

When I teach about early America to students and they're reading sermons and other kinds of documents from the 17th century, they're always surprised by how hostile Puritans were to the whole idea of democracy, which they associated with mobocracy or anarchy. But during the Revolution, Puritans changed their minds. They claimed not only that God had chosen American to be a new Israel, but also that God wanted the nation to be a beacon of democracy for the rest of the world.

Since the Bible is full of affirmative statements about monarchy, including Peter's words "Fear God, honor the King," Revolutionary ministers struggled to turn scripture into a defense of liberty. They were especially troubled by Paul's injunction to the Romans. "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers, for there is no power but of God. The powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power resisteth the ordinance of God, and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation."

This is a powerful text. But by comparing Paul's letter to the Romans to his letter to the Galatians, patriotic ministers argued that Paul had been misunderstood. Transforming him into an apostle of liberty, they argued that the central meaning of his writings was the importance of freedom.

(Referring to a slide of a biblical text.) Here you have Galatians: "Stand fast therefore in the liberty where with Christ have made us free."

Since there are relatively few biblical texts that include the words "freedom or liberty," Paul's words became a crucial defense for the legitimacy of the Revolution and, more broadly, for American democracy. Revolutionary ministers not only linked Christianity to democracy, but also to commercial success, predicting that God's new Israel would stand at the vanguard of commerce and technological innovation.

I want to emphasize this because many of my students assume that this sort of commercial language was a result of industrial capitalism. But actually we can find the idea that prosperity was linked to American destiny all the way back in the Revolutionary period.

(Referring to a slide.) Here we have Ezra Stiles, the very benign-looking president of Yale. In 1783 Ezra Stiles, who was also a Congregationalist minister, delivered a sermon asserting that "The new United States was God's new Israel, a beacon of Christian virtue, political freedom and prosperity."

(Referring to a slide.) Here is his sermon, *The United States Elevated to Glory and Honor*. In that sermon, he said, "We shall have a communication with all nations in commerce, manners and science, beyond anything heretofore known in the world."

The pride of these early Americans is astonishing, because it was not at all clear that this little backwater of 13 colonies was going to become a major world power in 1776.

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Stiles' language was explicitly Christian, but his faith in America's sacred destiny was shared even by those who were skeptical of institutional religion. Thomas Paine, for example, described the Revolution as "the birthday of a new world."

(Referring to a slide.) Here's Thomas Jefferson, who in his first inaugural in 1801 described the United States as "the world's best hope."

As these examples show, the roots of the belief in America's chosenness lie in the Revolutionary era, when both leaders and ordinary people claimed that God has destined the United States to stand as a beacon of Christian virtue, democracy, capitalism and technological success.

Besides imagining the U.S. as a new Israel, patriots saw the nation's founders as the fulfillment of biblical types. Ezra Stiles called George Washington "this American Joshua," referring to the biblical Joshua who had led the Israelites into the land of Canaan. And after Washington's death in 1799, many Americans imagined him as a prophet or even as Jesus, a savior who had led the nation toward its sacred destiny.

(Referring to a slide.) Behind me you see David Edwin's *Apotheosis of Washington*, an engraving from 1800. You can see the two figures in the background. These are two of his Revolutionary generals who were waiting to welcome him into heaven.

(Referring to a slide.) This is John James Barralet's *The Apotheosis of Washington or The Commemoration of Washington* from 1802, which was reproduced in many forms. You can find this image on painted glass and on creamware. I think it's an extraordinary image. You can see that Father Time is lifting up Washington to take him to heaven. We have three women on the side. These are Faith, Hope and Charity, who are grieving.

I think one of the most remarkable parts of this picture is the image of the Native American in the front, who is slumped over grieving. For those of you who know anything about Native American history, the Revolution was a disaster for them. They had maintained a certain degree of autonomy by playing the French and the British against each other, and with the Revolution they were put in a perilous political situation, so there were not too many Native Americans who were grieving over Washington's death. But this is part of the mythology of America.

The identification of the United States as a chosen nation only grew stronger during the 19th century. In 1845, for example, John O'Sullivan, a journalist, published an influential article arguing that God had destined the nation to expand across the entire North American continent to encompass both Mexico and Canada.

(Looking at Kate Bowler.) Kate, we were coming for you.

Coining the term "Manifest Destiny," he argued that there was no doubt of the "Manifest Destiny of Providence in regard to the occupation of this continent." God wanted Americans to spread both Christianity and democracy across the continent and eventually the globe. When John Gast, an artist,

displayed his painting *American Progress* in 1872, he suggested that American expansion was part of God's plan. The nation's progress, whether in terms of education, technology or civilization—as understood in the 19th century—was inevitable.

This is a remarkable painting with American Progress symbolized as a woman. (Referring to a slide of the painting.) I don't know how her gown is staying on, but you should notice that she's holding two things. She's holding a schoolbook in one hand, which is a symbol of spreading education, and she also has a telegraph line in her hand, which is representing technological progress. We can see the railroad coming. We see farmers cultivating the land, and you can see that Native Americans are fleeing as progress is coming across the land.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the faith in American chosenness was used to justify not only westward expansion but also military intervention in places like the Philippines, Puerto Rico and Cuba. In 1900, for example, Albert Beveridge, a Republican Senator from Indiana, delivered a speech entitled "The Star of Empire" that described the United States as "the master nation of the world."

Everybody should read this text. It's really remarkable.

According to Beveridge, God had ordained the United States to spread democracy across the globe, and it was futile to resist God's will. "This is a destiny neither vague nor undesirable," he proclaimed. "It is definite, splendid and holy." "The American republic," he wrote, "will preside as the most powerful of powers and the most righteous of judges."

Though Beveridge was known for his zeal in pursuing social reform, including the abolition of child labor, he perpetuated stereotypes of Filipinos, Cubans and Puerto Ricans as ignorant, dark-skinned savages who are incapable of governing themselves.

(Referring to a slide) This is a cartoon from the 1898 *Minneapolis Journal*. Like John Gast, who depicted Indians fleeing from progress, Beveridge identified the nation's chosenness with the spread of white Christian civilization. He argued that Anglo Saxons represented the pinnacle of evolutionary progress.

If racist understandings of America's special relationship to God were used to justify intervention abroad, they proved especially powerful when turned against African-Americans at home. Today, the Ku Klux Klan tends to be portrayed as a fringe movement, but in 1924 the Klan numbered more than four million members, and they identified themselves as "the defenders of God's special relationship with the United States." Choosing a fiery cross as their symbol and limiting membership to white Protestant men, the Klan argued that they had been called to save the nation from blacks, Catholics and Jews.

(Referring to a slide.) This is an AP photo from 1925. This image shows a ceremony in which 800 new members were accepted into the Klan. Notice the cross with the flag on it. I particularly chose this image because it's from Los Angeles. I think people tend to assume that images like this come from, I don't know, Alabama or somewhere. But no, this is from Los Angeles in 1925.

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When new members were initiated into the order, they placed their hands on a Bible that lay on top of an American flag. The United States was God's chosen nation—and according to the Klan, God wanted the nation to be white and Protestant—not Christian, but Protestant.

If I've emphasized the close relationship between imperialism, racism and the belief in American chosenness, it is because this part of our nation's history has sometimes been suppressed. Americans do not like to remember that John Winthrop wondered whether the city on a hill would ever be called to genocide.

Yet this has been only a part of the history of American chosenness. Many Americans, especially those committed to greater rights for indigenous peoples, African-Americans, immigrants and women of all races, have used the idea of American chosenness to demand greater inclusion and justice.

In the late 18th century, for example, Phyllis Wheatley, an enslaved woman, mocked Americans for portraying themselves as God's chosen nation. On the contrary, she argued, Revolutionary patriots were modern Egyptians who had enslaved innocent Africans just as Pharaoh had enslaved the Israelites.

Nevertheless, Wheatley clung to her faith that God had destined the United States for something better than slaveholding. Describing America as *Columbia*, she wrote in 1784,

Auspicious Heaven shall fill with fav'ring Gales,

Where e'er *Columbia* spreads her swelling Sails:

To every Realm shall *Peace* her Charms display,

And Heavenly *Freedom* spread her gold Ray.

According to Wheatley, God had chosen America to spread both Christianity and the spirit of liberty.

For those of you might never have met Phyllis Wheatley (so to speak) before, she was the first African-American woman to be published as a poet. Her story is extraordinary. She arrived from Africa as a slave at the age of either seven or eight. She arrived on a boat called the *Phyllis*, and she was bought by the Wheatley family, a wealthy family in Boston who decided to call her after the boat on which she came. They quickly discovered that she was a very smart person and allowed one of their daughters to educate her.

Her poetry is extraordinary for the depth of its classical allusions. She knew Latin and Greek mythology. (Referring to a slide of Wheatley's book.) This book was published in London because the Wheatley family could not find an American publisher who was willing to publish the words of a slave.

If you turn over the page, if you ever see an original copy of this, on the frontispiece there is a testimonial signed by 18 of the most distinguished men in Boston, swearing that she herself had written these poems, because nobody really believed it. The signatories included John Hancock.

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(Referring to the portrait of Wheatley on the frontispiece.) You can see the way that she presented herself. This engraving was done by another slave and, she is, I think, the antithesis of the way that Americans imagined black women in the late 18th century. Black women were sexually exploited on plantations; they were often described as sort of oversexed or naturally licentious, and here is Phyllis Wheatley looking very modest with a pen in her hand and a bible at her elbow.

I think she's an extraordinary example of both a critique of the idea of American chosenness and the way it could get refashioned to serve the ends of freedom from slavery.

In 1832, Maria Stewart, a free black woman in Boston and abolitionist, was scathing in her denunciation of the United States, which she described not as a city on a hill but as "the great City of Babylon."

"O America," she lamented in a speech, "America foul and indelible is thy stain. Dark and dismal is the cloud that hangs over thee, for thy cruel wrongs and injuries to the fallen sons of Africa. The blood of her murdered ones cries to heaven for vengeance against thee, valor to almost become drunken with the blood of her slain. Thou hast enriched thyself through her toils and labors."

The biblically literate here among you will recognize Stewart's comparison of the United States to the whore of Babylon.

Like John Winthrop, Stewart warned that sinners who failed to keep God's commandments would be punished. Yet Stewart did not simply prophesize destruction. She believed that God had destined African-Americans to teach the United States the true meaning of freedom.

Like Wheatley, she believed that the United States was God's chosen nation, but she identified blacks, not whites, as the chosen people who were destined to turn America into an example for the rest of the world.

Perhaps more than anyone else in American history, Martin Luther King, Jr. revealed the revolutionary potential of the belief in American chosenness. Arguing against the Ku Klux Klan, who argued that God wanted America to be a white nation, King insisted that God had chosen America to be a model of racial reconciliation and equality.

(Referring to a slide.) This is a picture of King kneeling in prayer in Birmingham in 1963 before going to jail.

When King protested against segregation, he clothed his radical vision in the familiar, reassuring garb of America's sacred destiny. In his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," he testified, "I hope the church as a whole will meet the challenge of this decisive hour. But even if the church does not come to the aid of justice, I have no despair about the future. I have no fear about the outcome of our struggle in Birmingham, even if our motives are presently misunderstood. We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom. Abused and scorned

though we may be, our destiny is tied up with the destiny of America. We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands."

The motto of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was "to redeem the soul of America."

The similarities between King's language and the language of the Ku Klux Klan reveals that the belief in American chosenness has been widely shared by Americans with competing visions of the nation. Imagining America as a city on a hill, a new Israel, or a redeemer nation has been part of a tradition of consensus.

On one hand, this consensus may have served to stifle dissent. There have been relatively few Malcolm X's in American history who have condemned Americans for their belief in their special relationship to God. On the other hand, the consensus about American chosenness also seems to have helped to mediate change, holding the nation together as Americans have embraced revolutionary movements like feminism and civil rights.

This is the dynamic that fascinates me. I think that reformers have been able to create change by appealing to a shared language of chosenness. The poet Audre Lorde famously argued that "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change."

Though I understand her despair, I hope that ultimately she is wrong. Abolitionists, feminists and civil rights leaders may not have been completely successful in using the master's tools to dismantle the master's house, but they have indeed brought about genuine change, building a better nation around a commitment to American freedom.

Since the 1980s, the language of American chosenness has been associated most closely with the political right, especially Ronald Reagan and the Christian conservatives who supported him. Though Reagan was not a church goer, he often spoke about his Christian beliefs, and he cherished John Winthrop's image of America as a city on a hill.

The image wasn't quite enough for him. He changed it to a "shining city on a hill."

In 1974, during a riveting speech at the Conservative Political Action Conference, Reagan argued that the United States stood as a beacon of freedom and prosperity to the rest of the world. "You can call it mysticism if you want to," he explained, "but I have always believed that there was some divine plan that placed this great continent between two oceans to be sought out by those who were possessed of an abiding love of freedom and a special kind of courage." Quoting John Winthrop's words, he urged Americans to imagine themselves as a city on a hill, a model for the rest of the world.

After his election as President, Reagan frequently described the United States as a city on a hill. It was one of his favorite images. During his farewell presidential address in 1998, he reminded Americans that they lived in a free, prosperous nation that had been specially blessed by God.

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I'm going to show you a little clip of his speech. I want to make it clear ahead of time that since I'm not very technologically sophisticated, I gave the link to someone at Harvard Divinity School in the tech department to download it, and I had not listened to the whole length and did not realize it contains music. So the swelling music in the background is not something that I added. Just so you know.

[VIDEO PLAYS:

The past few days when I've been at that window upstairs, I've thought a bit of the 'shining city upon a hill.' The phrase comes from John Winthrop, who wrote it to describe the America he imagined. What he imagined was important because he was an early Pilgrim, an early freedom man. He journeyed here on what today we'd call a little wooden boat; and like the other Pilgrims, he was looking for a home that would be free. I've spoken of the shining city all my political life, but I don't know if I ever quite communicated what I saw when I said it. But in my mind it was a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, windswept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace; a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity. And if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That's how I saw it, and see it still.]

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** I'll stop there. This is really an extraordinary clip. In some ways, Reagan's language harked back to early America, but his understanding of God's will focused particularly on capitalism and free trade.

The city on a hill was a city of immigrants, a city of commerce, open doors and free ports, a city without walls. When I went to find this clip, I had forgotten his comments about "without walls," and it shocked me. So there's your hashtag.

If Reagan's vision of American chosenness focused mostly on commerce, his evangelical and fundamentalist supporters were more committed to portraying the United States as an explicitly Christian nation, and today Christian conservatives continue to argue that the nation enjoys a special relationship with God.

For example, consider the *American Patriot's Bible*, a version of the Bible published in 2009 by Thomas Nelson, an evangelical publishing house. Edited by Richard Lee, an evangelical pastor and a trustee of Liberty University, the *American Patriot's Bible* reprints the full text of the Bible with glossy inserts celebrating the history of American freedom.

(Referring to a slide of the *American Patriot's Bible*). There are boxes inside of the text about the United States. As an advertisement explains, the *Patriot's Bible* "shows how a light from above shaped our nation." This is what the page from the beginning of Genesis looks like: you can see some images of American soldiers; here is either the *Arbella* or the *Mayflower*; these are juxtaposed to the account of creation.

So we have the creation of the nation and the creation of the world. The impact when you see the entire text is that America becomes part of sacred writ.

Like the Revolutionary-era ministers who rewrote the Bible as a story about the United States, Lee highlights the parallels between the Book of Exodus and American history. For example, he explains that the flight of the Pilgrims "mirrored a much earlier Exodus, when God led the children of Israel out of the bondage and oppression of Egypt and into a land he had promised their forefather Abraham." He also identifies George Washington as the American Moses.

According to Lee, God directly inspired the founders when they wrote the Constitution, which means that the Constitution, like the Bible, should be understood as sacred writ. Blessed by God, the United States is destined to bring freedom to the rest of the world.

(Referring to a slide) This is the page that describes the selling of Joseph into slavery, and you can see there's a little box about freedom. The account is juxtaposed to a quote from Dick Cheney.

Many Christians have objected to the *American Patriot's Bible* because of its exaltation of nationalism and violence. A reviewer in *Christianity Today*, an evangelical magazine, describes the book as "idolatrous" because of its insistence that "God is uniquely invested and involved in America." One of the most striking things about the *American Patriot's Bible* is its triumphalism. Unlike John Winthrop, who warned the Puritans about the perils of being a chosen people, the *Patriot's Bible* has little to say about God's punishment of those who fail to uphold the common good. It has reportedly sold more than 125,000 copies, rising as high as number five on Amazon's Best Seller List.

The popularity of the *American Patriot's Bible* reveals that large numbers of Americans continue to hold a Christian vision of American destiny, but in recent decades, as church membership rates have declined, the faith in American chosenness has begun to drift away from its Christian moorings. Today, most Americans seem less invested in defending the identity of the United States as an explicitly Christian nation than in asserting the nation's moral, political and economic distinctiveness.

Rather than describing America in religious language as a city on a hill, a new Israel, a promised land, a redeemer nation, or in Abraham Lincoln's famous words, "an almost chosen people," many Americans now describe the United States in less religious terms as "exceptional," a term that seems designed to appeal to a religiously diverse population. Though Democrats and Republicans disagree on many things, most share a common faith in American exceptionalism.

(Referring to two slides.) Here we have Sarah Palin praising *Breitbart News* for defending American exceptionalism, and here we have Hillary Clinton last summer, in late August 2016, speaking at the American Legion's annual convention, where she defended the idea of American exceptionalism. She was speaking particularly against Donald Trump in that speech, and criticizing his vision of the nation.

This brings us to Donald Trump. There were many surprises about Trump's election, but for me one of the greatest was that Christian conservatives supported him despite his rejection of American exceptionalism.

The 2016 Republican Party platform declared that "Our country holds a unique place in human history." But when Trump was asked in 2015 at a gathering of Texas Republicans how he planned to "grow American exceptionalism," he responded that he didn't "like the term." At that meeting, Trump argued that it's insulting to other countries to see the United States as superior to the rest of the world, and he also claimed that the nation's greatness had declined.

This wasn't a new position for him. In 2013, when Vladimir Putin published an Op/Ed in the *New York Times* objecting to Barack Obama's description of the United States as exceptional, Trump strongly agreed with Putin.

It's not clear to me whether Trump, who seems to have little religious grounding, knew what he was rejecting, but his Christian supporters have ignored his words.

Many Christian conservatives argue that Trump, despite his own personal sinfulness, was chosen by God to further the nation's mission. They often compare him to David in the Bible, who committed adultery. Like the Klan during the 1920s, they fear that God's chosen nation is endangered by outsiders, in this case Mexicans and Muslims.

I suspect that those of you around the table today have many different attitudes toward the idea of America as a chosen nation. Personally, I'm troubled by the hubris of imagining that the United States is specially chosen by God. There's only one Israel in the Bible. But I also admire the many abolitionists, women's right activists and civil rights leaders who demanded that the United States live up to its destiny.

I can only hope that in the future, we will find ways to move beyond the troubling parts of American exceptionalism while still preserving the most inspiring parts of John Winthrop's vision of a city on a hill. So I'm going to give him the last word.

After describing the Puritans as "ligaments of one body," he wrote, "All the parts of the body being thus united are made so contiguous in a special relation as they must needs partake of each other's strength and infirmity, joy and sorrow, weal and woe. If one member suffers, all suffer with it. If one be in honor, all rejoice with it. This sensibleness and sympathy with each other's conditions will necessarily infuse into each part a native desire and endeavor to strengthen, defend, preserve and comfort the other."

This is what it meant to be chosen. "We must love one another with a pure heart fervently," he wrote. "We must bear one another's burdens." Thank you.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Thank you. Thank you very much.

(Applause.)

## Question and Answer Part I

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Well, I already have eight names on the list. E.J., you're first then Andrew, Andy Ferguson and then Will and Karen and Adelle and Elizabeth and Miranda and Doyle and Mollie. Anyway, you're up first.

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** Let me just say that I have some other slides, and I thought I would leave you with this one. This is a redo of the George Washington *Apotheosis* with Lincoln. And let me just show you one more. This is one of my favorites.

(Laughter.)

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** This is from 1865. This was a postcard. Apparently Washington was ready to greet Lincoln when Lincoln came into heaven, so we can be happy about that. Yes, E.J.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Okay E.J., you're up first.

**E.J. DIONNE, *The Washington Post*:** Thank you so much. I was hoping you'd have John Winthrop speaking with music behind him. That was fantastic. Sort of several overlapping questions. The first question which I'd love you to deal with is how much of this is entirely opportunistic?

It is so striking that everybody uses this imagery for their own purpose. For example, when the Puritans changed their minds about democracy, was there any consciousness or admission that they were actually changing significantly from what their forebears had said, or did they just pluck these ideas out because they served the moment?

Second question, Denny Lacorne, whom I find this very interesting French observer of religion in America, argues that from the beginning of our country, we've had this split between those who saw the founding as religious, tending to go back to John Winthrop and others who have seen the founding as primarily an enlightenment project, given that many founders themselves were Deists and were deeply influenced by the founding. I'd love to see you grapple with that.

And just the last point, which relates to the first, the Exodus story is a universally used story about liberation from bondage. You know Walzer's great book. Is there anything peculiar about our usage of it, or are we just in a sort of a long, global tradition in seeing Exodus the way we want to see it at a given time, given the struggles we're engaged in. But thank you for the talk and thanks especially for those images.

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** So let me start with the last one first. I think that there's something unique about the way that Americans have used the Exodus narrative. If we could go to that slide of Benjamin Franklin's proposed seal for the nation, I think that the nation's identity was wrapped up with the idea that America was recapitulating the narrative of the Israelites fleeing from bondage to freedom.

Which then of course somebody like Maria Stewart or Phyllis Wheatley turned upside down, and said: no, in fact, it's the white colonists who are the Egyptians and the slaves who are the Israelites in bondage. But I think that our understanding of the nation has been influenced by this idea of Americans as kind of an Exodus people.

Every nation has its own sense of what makes it special, but I think that this is in the DNA of American history.

On the first question about whether this is opportunistic, of course there have to be people who are using it in an opportunistic way. But I do believe that there was a lot of sincerity about this, and that there continues to be sincerity about this.

I occasionally—not that often, teaching at a place like Harvard Divinity School and before that at the University of Chicago—I occasionally have students who come from very conservative religious backgrounds, who have been raised with an understanding of America as specially chosen. They can be a little bit shaken up when they start to understand more of the history of the Puritans, for example, because they see Puritans as a kind of biblical people from whom the nation sprung.

So it's clear that there are leaders who use this in an opportunistic way, but I think that there have been many people in American history who have sincerely believed it.

For the Puritans, who are reinventing their identity in the 18th century, biblical reinterpretation is happening all the time. We as a country did this in the 19th century when, as a nation, we decided that the Bible does not sanction slavery.

I think this kind of reinvention is common, and Puritans did a lot of biblical work to make that happen. There was a lot of close textual analysis. I find some of the close readings sort of funny because they're strained, but I think that they were sincere.

In terms of the founding, this is a complicated question and in some ways I would want to distinguish between the founders, who I think were much more influenced by the Enlightenment, and the mass of ordinary people, many of whom held very strong Christian convictions.

I think that the American republic was founded at a unique moment in American history, when Enlightenment ideas were quite influential and strong. I am not one of those people—I meet them occasionally—who want to turn Jefferson into a devout Christian. He clearly was not. He was very skeptical.

But I do think that founders like Washington and Jefferson and Madison, even though they had an understanding of the republic as a place for the free exercise of religion, saw Christianity as politically useful, because they thought that it inculcated morality.

So even though they had their own doubts, they were careful about what they said publicly because their fear was that the American republic would not survive. And what was going to hold it together? People needed to be moral, and so Christianity was held up as kind of the moral glue of the republic.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Andy Ferguson.

**ANDY FERGUSON, *The Weekly Standard*:** That amazing graphic you had of the slaughter of the Indians, I can't remember what the battle was.

You had said that Winthrop thought that Indians were outside of the circle of people who could be saved. But you had also said that they had Indian allies who were part of this battle, and obviously through the centuries there's been fervent missionary activities among the Indians.

So did they distinguish between good Indians, bad Indians, Indians who were capable of being saved and Indians who weren't?

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** This is really a tragic story. Puritans did try to evangelize Native Americans, and they had some success. John Elliott was linguistically gifted and learned the Indian language. At Harvard Library, you can see his translation of the Bible, where he was trying to evangelize Indians.

The Puritan relationship to Indians was complicated, in the sense that even the seal of Massachusetts Bay has a picture of an Indian saying, "Come over and help us." There was this idea that they were going to try to evangelize Indians, but there were immediately conflicts over land and territory. Puritans made some allies with Native Americans, but they also remained suspicious.

There's a wonderful text that John Elliott and some other ministers published. It was published under the title *Tears of Repentance*, where there were a number of Native Americans who were converting to Christianity, and so they were supposed to give testimonials to their conversion. When you read the testimonials, if you've read Puritan conversion narratives, they sound pretty much exactly the same to me. I mean, the Native Americans have really mastered the language of what it means to be Christian. But the observers there are highly skeptical and they keep insisting that things be repeated. The Indians faced a lot of questions.

There's a kind of skepticism about whether they can really be converted. And where I think we see this most dramatically is in King Phillip's War in 1675-1676, which, in terms of the number of people who died, was the bloodiest war in American history. There is a huge percentage of the colonial population that was killed in that war.

There were Native American allies who were on the side of Puritans, but Puritans didn't trust them. So they actually interned them in Boston Harbor on Deer Island, and did not take very good care of them there. They were close to starvation. Even Native Americans who were so-called "praying Indians" and who had settled in villages were seen as a potential threat, and there was a fear that they would sort of go back to their "Indianness" and attack whites. So they were interned.

Puritans were suspicious about some of them being spies. Those Native Americans were sold into slavery into the West Indies. So it's a complicated and tragic history.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Did David Brainerd have a better reputation?

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** David Brainerd was in the 1740's. So this is 50 years later, and by then, Native Americans were in a much weaker political position and military position, and I think Native Americans were even more interested in creating alliances with the colonists. Brainerd definitely had a better reputation among Native Americans, and so did Jonathan Edwards.

But by then, certainly Native American resistance had not been crushed. This would not happen until the American Revolution and, really, not even until after that outside of New England.

It was during King Phillip's War that white colonists gained the advantage over Native Americans in New England.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Okay. As moderator, I can jump the queue every now and then. Will Saletan and then Karen.

**WILL SALETAN, *Slate*:** (off mic) talk filled full of so many interesting, so much interesting information and insights. I wanted to follow up on E.J.'s question about opportunism, which I think a lot of us felt. There was such a survey of people appropriating this imagery and these ideas.

I was trying to think of how to put some meat on that question, and I guess there are two themes that run through your talk that go together. One is chosenness and one is covenant, and the chosenness is easy, right. The chosenness is the opportunistic part. Whatever we did is chosen, we are chosen. You're claiming God's authority for whatever you do, and covenant is the hard part. It's things you have to do, things that constrain your behavior.

Can you give an example of a time or a moment when there was perhaps a debate where the covenantal part of this, where say scripture was invoked to constrain what people wanted to do, even when they wanted to do it in the name of God. Or say perhaps when a movement changed its mind. I mean, emancipation would be the obvious example, but where people actually had to turn around or were stopped by other people, using the power of religious belief and not just the belief that one was authorized to do whatever one wanted to do, but belief that one must not do something that was being advocated at the time.

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** There are a lot of examples of this that come from reformers. Women's rights activists in the 19th century who wanted to expand women's political rights used this kind of language and scriptural defenses for women's rights.

This also happens around anti-slavery and abolitionism. What does it mean to be in covenant with God? What does scripture teach us? Now, there were huge debates about what the Bible said about slavery. There were people arguing on both sides of this issue—you know, what is God's will for the nation?

But yeah, there definitely are many episodes where chosenness comes with responsibility and sacrifice, as well as a kind of celebration of we can do whatever we want to do.

I think you can especially see this during the Civil War. I decided not to talk about Lincoln because he could take up the entire talk. But there were many ministers during the Civil War arguing about slavery and also about the legitimacy of killing other Americans who were using these kinds of ideas about what it means to be God's covenant people.

**WILL SALETAN:** Are there any leaders, prominent people who changed their mind based on scriptural or theological argument?

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** That's a good question. I hope that many religious leaders changed their minds about slavery in the 19th century. There were certainly Protestants with more conservative leanings in the late 19th century—someone like Dwight Moody, for example—who became convinced that women's rights were God's will, based on scriptural arguments made by people like Frances Willard.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Karen, you're up next. Then Adelle.

**KAREN TUMULTY, *The Washington Post*:** And again, thank you so much. This was extraordinary. You describe Winthrop as laying out this basically communitarian collectivist vision, labor and suffer together, members of the same body. But by 200 years later, you have de Tocqueville describing this as a country where the central driving principle is individualism and self-interest, and I think the earliest way of describing American exceptionalism was that what made us different from Europe.

So how does that sort of evolution take place from this country being sort of founded on collectivism to being driven by individualism and self-interest, and that in fact being the very basic definition of freedom in the American sense?

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** This is a very big question. The book that I hope to write after this book is about Christianity and capitalism, and I think part of the answer lies there. The Puritans had a very communal vision. They set prices and wages in the early years of their settlement. A merchant couldn't charge whatever he wanted to charge. They decided what was a fair price.

I think that part of the impetus for the rise of a kind of distinctive American individualism does come from market developments. It comes from people pursuing their own economic interest.

You can see this even in the Puritan era where there's a famous trial of somebody named Robert Keayne, who was a member of the First Church of Boston, who was accused of charging too much for his goods and he was brought in front of the church and he was excommunicated, and he sort of shrugged and said I'm going to do what I want to do. I'm not bound by this discipline anymore.

So I think part of the answer for this comes from market conditions. But when looking for the roots of American individualism, you would have to look not only at the market but at the influence of Enlightenment ideas about the autonomous individual being the most important entity. You would have

to look at the rise of democratic or small "R" republican ideas about politics, in which each person has a vote. This is a confluence of political, economic and religious factors as well.

There's a kind of individualistic strain even in Puritanism, in terms of people claiming that maybe they can have direct revelations from God, and that puts spiritual authority in the individual and not in the community. This was considered heretical at the time, but it gained greater acceptance.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Adelle. Then Elizabeth.

**ADELLE BANKS, *Religion News Service*:** Two completely different questions. One is about the images with Washington going to heaven, this woman in the flowing gown and whether there's sort of tracks of that age, where it's about the country and how wonderful the country is or its leaders as opposed to the gospel.

I'm just wondering how much weight those images had, and then I also wondered about what you said about Phyllis Wheatley and Maria Stewart, and whether those voices were influential in any way, how that compared to King's words. The other thing it made me think of was Frederick Douglass, who questioned July 4th celebrations.

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** Right, right. So these images were really very popular. You can find them in so many different places, including on plates and mugs. (Referring to another slide of Washington's image.) Here's the other one. I do think these ideas were popular. It's not just a matter of the elite. If you go to the Capital and look up at the dome, you'll see—this was during the Civil War—you'll see this frightening image of Washington where he looks almost like a Moses figure.

This idea that the founders were somehow divinely inspired or were doing God's will was fairly widespread, and I think this idea has become even more influential today with some people like David Barton. I don't know if any of you are familiar with him.

I have to say that there are a lot of historical inaccuracies in the work of David Barton—and, I think, deliberate misrepresentations. But the suggestion has been that when the founders were writing the Constitution, they were directly inspired by the Holy Spirit. There's a story that often gets told in evangelical home schooling books that the founders were deadlocked; they had been trying to write the Constitution; and then Benjamin Franklin stood up and said, "I think what we need to do is to start every day with prayer."

It turns out that this part is true. It's very odd. Franklin was old at the time, and it was sort of an odd request for him to make, but he did.

What the evangelical home schooling books don't tell you is that the Continental Congress decided to table his motion, and nothing happened with it. But usually the way the story gets told in these conservative texts is that Franklin made this plea and then all of a sudden the Constitution almost wrote itself—that everybody could agree.

And so I think this is a more extreme version of what you're seeing in this image, where there are Christians who think not only that the Bible was inspired by God, but the Constitution was inspired by God. And this, I think, explains some of the focus on originalism for Christian conservatives.

On the question of somebody like Phyllis Wheatley and Maria Stewart, their voices were certainly not as influential as the voices of white Americans at the time that they wrote. But I think what we can see through them is a kind of minority report on a way to understand American chosenness that was held within black churches.

Black churches began organizing in secret even in the late 18th century, and certainly into the 19th century. I think these ideas were prevalent within black religious spaces. And so when you get to Civil Rights, you're actually hearing a long strain of black Christian thinking about what the republic meant.

Phyllis Wheatley and Maria Stewart were kind of curiosities at the time, but their ideas were influential among black Americans.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** We had Dr. Albert Raboteau here making those very points, about a year and a half ago. It was terrific. I call your attention to that transcript. That was one of the most powerful presentations we've ever had. Let me just quickly say about David Barton. You know, to their credit you'll maybe not know this, that the evangelical publisher Thomas Nelson pulled his book.

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** Yes, I know.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** At the critique of the evangelical historian at Baylor, of his view of Jefferson, and then Nelson pulled Barton's potentially bestselling book. It created quite a little firestorm. Anyway, just an anecdote to the side there. Elizabeth, you're up next.

**ELIZABETH DIAS, TIME:** Thank you so much. It's really helpful in the middle of this national moment to just stop and think about history, so thank you. I'm curious about when you mentioned the similarity in language between the KKK and Martin Luther King, and I think okay, that photo was 1925, and then 30-40 years later, the Civil Rights Movement and Martin Luther King's different but yet similar use of that language.

Then almost 30 years later, you mentioned the religious right has been the most effective in using this language of chosenness now. It sort of swings back the other way.

So we're about 30 years since then, and I'm curious where are you seeing use of chosenness language now—is it on the left? Where did you see that during Barack Obama's presidency and you flicked at it very quickly with the Hillary Clinton slide.

But what touchstones are you looking at now in evaluating are we going to swing or is there a groundswell of that in other places?

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** Barack Obama definitely used this language. It was when he was talking about Syria. I'm trying to remember what year this was, that he described America as being exceptional and having a responsibility on the world stage.

To be honest, I'm really not sure where this language is going now. I don't know whether Trump will change his mind and decide that he wants to embrace this language himself. Well, we know he will change his mind.

(Shows a slide of Paula White at Trump's inauguration with her words, "'Let your favor be upon this one nation under God. Let these United States of America be that beacon of hope to all people and nations under your dominion, a true hope for humankind.'") At his inauguration, Paula White used this kind of language, even though he himself did not. I think there's a potential for him to decide to reclaim this, but it also exists on the left, and the question is whether they will decide that they really want to try to revitalize this tradition or not.

Historians are really bad at predicting the future, but I do find it still on both sides. I think that since Ronald Reagan, it has been more the property of the Right, even though before Reagan used this image at CPAC in 1974, John F. Kennedy had used this image of America as a city on a hill in a speech that he gave in Massachusetts shortly before his inauguration. For whatever reason, his use of the language didn't seem to take off in the way that Reagan's did. Reagan somehow used it more effectively. But Kennedy, too, was attracted to this image.

I think it's consensus language: it is used by both sides, and that's part of the reason it's so powerful. But it has been employed more successfully on the right in recent years than on the left.

Do you have any thoughts about this?

**ELIZABETH DIAS:** I'm more curious to hear yours at this point. I'd just be curious if there's any other ways, how do you mark the efficacy of Obama's use of that language? And I mean, it seemed like it was maybe going to be effective in this new kind of way, but it would have to follow different broadening of the term. It's hard to know now how effective that's going to be.

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** I'm not sure that Obama used it so effectively that he stole it back for the left, if that's your question. I think that there was still the sense that his commitment to the United States was not genuine—that he was not as patriotic. So I don't think that he effectively swung it in a different direction.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Miranda, you're up next. But let me just say, leave the Paula White. We're going to be dealing with her tomorrow morning with Kate, who has written an entire book about what Paula White believes.

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** This slide was for Kate. I added it at the end.

**MIRANDA KENNEDY, NPR:** Well, this is related to Elizabeth's thoughts, but I was wondering how you see the language of Christian identity playing out in today's kind of new movements on the Right? With the kind of traditional Christian Right losing some of its power in our politics, I wonder do you see that in the alt right at all or those similar movements?

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** So when you're saying Christian identity, are you talking broadly or are you talking about the movement known as Christian Identity, which is a kind of white nationalism?

**MIRANDA KENNEDY:** No, I'm talking broadly. How do you see the idea of America's identity as a Christian identity playing out in the new movements on the Right?

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** I think that if we look more broadly across American culture that we have this new language of American exceptionalism, which seems to me like a repackaging of Christian ideas in a language that's more accessible to the NONES, the N-O-N-E-S, and to people who are not Christian.

But Christian conservatives are still very invested in this more explicitly Christian understanding of the nation, and I think that Donald Trump is being pressured by some of those conservatives to turn the United States into a more explicitly Christian place.

For a long time there have been Christian conservatives who wanted a Constitutional amendment saying that the United States is a Christian nation. I would not be at all surprised to see that emerge again. That has had a recurring history ever since the end of the Civil War. There were Christians after the Civil War who believed that the Civil War was the result of God being angry with them.

And why was God angry? God was not angry about slavery. God was angry that Christianity was not in the Constitution, and so they wanted a Constitutional amendment.

I think that Christian conservatives today are still invested in this idea that America is a Christian nation, and they feel as if they've been robbed of something, that Christianity has been taken out of the public sphere, and that America is no longer the United States of the 1950's under President Eisenhower, who added the words "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance. They want that back. They really feel bereft.

**MIRANDA KENNEDY:** When you say "Christian conservatives," who do you mean? I wonder who these people are. I don't see them like in the public eye the way they were in past generations, as much as leading our politics.

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** That's interesting. Maybe because I'm looking at them, because I'm paying attention to them, I feel as if they are still very active. I would say places like Liberty University. I think Focus on the Family is still a force to be reckoned with. I think there are a number of influential Christian ministers, including somebody like Rick Warren, who spoke at Barack Obama's inauguration, who have strong political convictions about what the nation should be.

But I think the term "Christian conservative" is a very broad term that could be divided up into a lot of different ways, and I know that Kate will talk about this more. Where do the prosperity gospel preachers fall in relationship to, for example, the Southern Baptist Convention?

So this is not a singular category by any means, but I do think it's still a potent category. I think there's something else that's happening, though, as well. Which is that when I was reading about the election, and there was a lot of polling done about who was going to vote for whom, there are some political conservatives now who have started identifying themselves as evangelicals who are not very seriously Christian.

I think when people have gone out and done polling and said, "who are you going to vote for"? and "how do you identify yourself religiously"?, there has been such a synergy between political and religious conservatism that political conservatives tend to identify themselves as evangelicals, even if the sort of marker that I would use as a scholar for what makes an evangelical doesn't apply—like biblical literalism, for example, or even frequent church-going.

There was a really odd survey of evangelicals who were going to be voting for Trump, and some of them went to church once a year, and I'm thinking, that's not an evangelical.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** We're going to take a ten minute break. Thank you.

(Whereupon, a short recess was taken.)

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Doyle's up and then Molly and Sarah and Tom and Clare and a whole bunch of people. Doyle, you're up and then Molly you'll be after that.

**DOYLE McMANUS, *LA Times*:** (off mic) was terrific. As you pointed out, it's not fair to ask a historian to speculate about the future.

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** But you're going to do it anyway.

**DOYLE McMANUS:** I will cloak my question as a question about the 28 years now since Reagan's farewell speech, so the modern context. What I really want to ask you to do is connect what you've been talking about to some of the recent demographics, the writing based on demographics that, for example, Robert P. George did in *The End of White Christian America*, I'm sorry, Robert Jones. It's hard to keep them apart, and Bob Putnam and David Campbell's demographic work.

The context of most of the history you were talking about was an America that was not just majority Christian but majority white Protestant until, in Jones' figures, around 1993. We're still a country that by the stats is about 70 percent Christian, including all races and ethnic groups.

But as you pointed out, the NONES are growing. The large question is how sustainable, how powerful, how adaptable is a national myth in a less Christian, less biblically literate nation? And then a slightly more granular question that I think really follows on Elizabeth's question about the exceptionalism.

Is there an important distinction to be made between a religiously-based version of the idea of American exceptionalism, and what you might call the secular exceptionalism that would have been talked about by Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton? Are they the same? Are they really the same argument?

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** So on the first question about the end of White Christian America. We're not there yet. I feel as if Christianity was so deeply woven into the fabric of the nation as it was created that there are certain kinds of ideas that people don't even realize have Christian roots.

Christianity is still a very important influence on American culture, even if it's invisible. I co-edited a book called *American Christianities: A History of Dominance and Diversity* with a former colleague at University of Chicago, W. Clark Gilpin, and he had a wonderful image of the way that Christianity is like a lightning bolt. It's definitely there—it sort of flashes and you see it—but then it's gone. But there are a lot of Christian understandings that are really a part of the way that we think about our lives.

There's a psychologist at Northwestern, Dan McAdams, who's written a book called *The Redemptive Self*. When you read that book, it seems like when people have told the stories of their lives, whether they realize it or not, they have put it in a Christian framework around redemption.

I think there are scripts that are still there. How sustainable is this understanding of America as a chosen nation? I think it is in the process of being transformed into an understanding of American exceptionalism.

And I'll be honest here. I'm speaking not as a scholar but as an American: American exceptionalism worries me because even if people have used the language of "chosen nation" in ways that are exploitative, there is a religious check on some of that—that if people are serious about Christianity, that there are understandings of humility and sacrifice that go with that language. I think when you start talking about American exceptionalism, that part drops out completely and all that you get is an understanding that America is somehow unique and special.

Reinhold Niebuhr, the great theologian who was alive during World War II, argued *at that moment* that America was chosen. But he argued that America wasn't chosen for all time and for all history. Rather, at that particular moment, God had a task for America to do. He wanted to distinguish between America as *a* chosen nation versus *the* chosen nation. It seems to me that American exceptionalism gets rid of some of that humility, or at least it could. So it's a language that worries me.

I'm not sure that when Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton used the language that it was entirely secular. I think it's possible that it's coming out of their religious visions as well, and I heard some of that especially in Obama's language of the common good.

But you know, whether this language can really be maintained in a nation that's becoming less identified with at least institutional Christianity is definitely a question. But if this idea is going to survive in any form, I would rather have it survive in a Christian form than in a purely secular one.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Okay, Molly. And then Sarah.

Molly Ball and I wrote down Mollie Hemingway, and it's Molly Ball and then it's Mollie Hemingway. Molly Ball right here, you're up.

**MOLLY BALL, *The Atlantic*:** You talk about this remarkable very early moment when the colonists go from distrusting democracy to rather awkwardly using the Bible to justify democracy. How and why does that shift happen? And then the second question, what's been the relationship of this strain of thinking to Judaism?

It seems like you go from the Klan, obviously no friend to the Jews, to today, when you often hear politicians couching this as a Judeo-Christian nation, and explicitly bringing the Jews into the fold and obviously invoking Israel.

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** Let me answer the second question first. (Referring to a slide) Here's a piece of sheet music that's a celebration of American Jews, of the opportunities in America. This understanding of America as a chosen nation has Protestant roots, but both Catholics and Jews adopted this as their own in the 19th century during their immigrant experiences.

For Catholics, we have the so-called Americanist Controversy, where there are American priests and bishops who have gotten into trouble with Rome because they say that the church should become more American.

For Judaism in particular, Jews tend to see America as exceptional because they're not persecuted in the way that they were in Russia or in Germany. Reform Jews in particular begin describing the United States as the Promised Land in the late 19th century. This is before 1917—this is before Zionism seems like it could become a reality, that there might be a homeland for Jews—but Reform Jews in America in the late 19th century said we are no longer in a diaspora. This is our promised land.

They really helped to propagate this idea. It's sort of ironic, having this conversation, that some of the roots of the idea that the Bible sanctioned democracy come from Rabbinic texts that were being studied by Protestant scholars in the wake of the Protestant Reformation. There were prominent Jewish rabbis who were trying to argue against monarchy using the Bible, and this commentary was rediscovered by Protestant theologians in the 1600s. They began to build the case for a republican system of government.

In some ways, the question—about how or why did Puritans want to rewrite the Bible this way—is really about what caused the American Revolution. There have been political interpretations of this and economic interpretations. There certainly was a religious dimension. It's clear that in the 1700s, there were a number of Protestant ministers in particular who were using the radical Reformation understanding of a republican system of government to argue for democracy.

But it takes time, and those strands get put together by ministers who start thinking more systematically about: Does the Bible provide any kind of guidance for a system of government that's not a monarchy?

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Sarah Bailey

**SARAH PULLIAM BAILEY, *The Washington Post*:** Kind of connected to this, I was curious whether the language of this American exceptionalism, city on a hill, shifted when the modern nation of Israel was formed? Was there any backing away of that language applied to the U.S. once Israel was formed? How can there be two chosen nations, from conservative Christians specifically?

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** There certainly is a change for Jews. Even Reform Jews toned down their language about America, and they're very interested in raising money for Israel. For conservative Christians, it depends on which Christians we're talking about. So some of you may know something about fundamentalists who are premillennial dispensationalists, who read the Bible in a particular way in which there are different dispensations of history, and there will literally be a rapture at the end of time.

This is the hallmark of premillennial dispensationalism. Those fundamentalist Christians argue from their reading of the prophetic books of the Bible that Jesus is literally going to come back as a king, and he will be the literal king of Israel. And so the apocalypse and the key events are going to happen in Israel for them.

But for other Christians who are not reading the Bible through this premillennial dispensationalist lens, America is still very important as a place that's chosen. One group that I haven't spoken about at all that I will definitely need to write about in my book is the Mormons, who believe that Jesus after his resurrection came to America. And so in their theology, America really is sacred land because Jesus appeared there. They're expecting America to be the center of the most crucial part of the revelation.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Mollie Hemingway and then Tom, you're after Mollie.

**MOLLIE ZIEGLER HEMINGWAY, *The Federalist*:** Yes. This has mostly been covered by Elizabeth, Miranda and Doyle's questions, but I'm still trying to understand the current state of exceptionalism rhetoric and thought, and you did a really great job of showing us how, almost from the very beginning, there were people who spoke in religious terms, perhaps understanding the exceptionalism as based on the religious liberty that they had, as opposed to where they came from, or more secularists who didn't fight that language but found the exceptionalism based in self-government and the uniqueness of the American project.

You can see those carry through to the present moment, but I'm still trying to figure out how they're understood now on left and right. You mentioned Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton had spoken about American exceptionalism and you definitely hear that. I also remember something like President Obama saying of course America is exceptional in the same way France views itself as exceptional, and other countries view themselves as exceptional.

I'm wondering what's the basis for describing America as unique from other nations unless it's just that, like every country for itself.

And then on the Right, it seems like there is this change into a nationalist approach, and you see the Right become like American first party. I'm curious how that is different in this conversation on exceptionalism from the other nationalist movements you're seeing in Europe, or if they're part and parcel of this.

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** I was talking to someone on the break about Europe, and I feel as if I can't answer that question because I would have to do a lot more research. It would be very interesting to compare the sort of language that's being used here to there, and to think about common religious roots coming out of the radical Reformation. I'm sure that some of that is there, but I don't know the context well enough.

I was hoping that journalists would help me with the contemporary moment.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Well, they will.

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** I'm eager to hear where all of you are hearing it in your interviews and when you're out and about. At one point Obama sounded as if he was rejecting American exceptionalism, and then it sounded as if he was embracing it more.

In some ways, you'd want to get him into this room and say, "what is it that you really think, and how would you define this, and how religious is this for you"? I think for people today, the idea of American chosenness is wrapped up not only with religious identity but with capitalism, with technological success, with democracy, definitely. I think this is a highly political understanding.

I think where Donald Trump differs from Obama, and maybe where we see some of Obama's exceptionalism, is that Obama clearly felt as if America had a responsibility to the rest of the world, and that democracy was a gift given to the American people that needed to be spread around the world.

I don't hear Trump saying that at all. For Trump, what he cares about is what's at home and not what's abroad. For somebody like Clinton or someone like Obama, I don't feel as if I could say what their religious investment in this is, but it's clear that they have a very strong *political* investment in thinking that democracy is in fact the last best hope.

To go back to Thomas Jefferson, I think you could trace that sort of Jeffersonian idea through various political figures. For him it was about the importance of democracy as a political system. But again, I want to distinguish in some ways between the left and the right, because it seems to me that they have different understandings of what this means. I think for people on the left, there's more of an emphasis on, if America is chosen, then there should be a concern for the common good, whereas for some of the people on the right, the fact that America is chosen means that individuals have the opportunity to express themselves here.

I think there are these kinds of differences, but I'm struck by the fact that they're arguing over the same concept or the same language.

I mean, you're asking about the current context of it, Mollie.

**MOLLIE ZIEGLER HEMINGWAY:** Isn't the current context that, at least for the first time I can think of, American exceptionalism got weaponized and used? This stumble on Obama's part then becomes a talking point of every single Republican candidate in the 2012 cycle. And, a lot of people saw in it this undercurrent of he's the other. He's somehow not fully American. That is where in the political context I think is different now than it had been before.

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** What you mean by that is that people are much more self-conscious about using it, and their arguments about who is using this language and why, whereas in previous generations it was there but it wasn't really at the surface.

I think that's absolutely true, and it's very interesting, because I think some of your questions about how expedient are people when they use this are coming partially out of our contemporary environment, where people are very self-conscious about how they're using this language. Obama was told that he should be using this language. It wasn't coming naturally.

And that suggests that we probably are in sight of some changes here because this is no longer a taken for granted concept, but political football.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Okay Tom, you're up and then Clare and Emma and David and Michelle and everybody.

**TOM HALLMAN, JR., *The Oregonian*:** You mentioned that Trump had great support with conservative Christians, who ignore his words and compared him to David who committed adultery. In my blue liberal Oregon, that would be seen as another ignorant Christian. I'm struck by the historical perspective and intellectualism here, which is a bubble, compared to real world where people say I believe what I want to believe.

I wonder what you think about this lack of common language to speak about Christianity and history and education, and what problem does that present and what's the solution?

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** you think people in Oregon would say that saying that Trump is like the biblical David is a sort of ignorant thing to do?

**TOM HALLMAN, JR.:** There would not be discussion. People would say you've got to be kidding me, and people will say well that's what I believe, and they'd quote a Bible passage. This divide starts. I can't think of any discussion I've had in the last ten years that's like today here, historical. People become in opposition to each other. There's no common discussion, and I wonder in our schools and our communities how do we have these kind of conversations, where someone can explain what they mean?

If somebody says getting a pass because he's like David, they'd say that's like a get out of a jail free card. It makes no sense. I'm wondering what problem does that present and how do we solve it?

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** Clearly, clearly, this is a problem. I would recommend that people go look at the Religious Literacy Project at Harvard Divinity School. Some of you were at a conference at Harvard Divinity School in December—I know Adelle was—run by my colleague Diane Moore, who has made it her mission to try to create the conversation that you want to have happen.

She wants to provide the tools to educate people about religion and to create a context where people can speak in a way that isn't immediately polarizing. I don't think there are that many opportunities to do that.

Personally I don't think that Donald Trump and the biblical David have a lot in common. But when you speak to someone like that, they actually have done their biblical reading. Now, there are other issues around David that they ignore. But I think it's really important to be able to listen to them and to take them seriously without immediately saying—you're just trying to make an excuse for a vote that you shouldn't have cast.

Because I do think that there are a lot of people who are still seeing the world in these religious categories in a very serious way. So we have a lot more work to do. I'm so glad that all of you are here, because I think it means that there are journalists who really do want to understand people's religious motivations and people's religiosity in more depth, instead of just reducing people's religiosity to some sort of political or self-interest, which I think is what tends to happen.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Clare Duffy and then Emma.

**CLARE DUFFY, NBC News:** I have two questions. I was fascinated by the discussion about Phyllis Wheatley and Maria Stewart, two people whose work I was unfamiliar with, and I wanted to know how their work was viewed at the time. Was it seen as—well, this is interesting, an interesting voice based on gender and race. But what about the ideas? Was voicing, for lack of a better word, skepticism in, the Americans' chosenness, was it shouted down in the public sphere?

Was there such unanimity of thought that that was just kind of dismissed out of hand? How vigorous was this debate—and if I had a better reading of history at that time I would know the answer.

My other question's a little more contemporary. Based on what Mollie Ziegler was talking about with America First, could America First be seen as almost a rejection of John Winthrop's burden? Is there something about that that it's like: "You know what? We can't worry about being an example to the world anymore. This has become a burden as he said it would." Is it sort of walking back from that? I'm curious. I know those are two unrelated things.

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** On the first one, here's Phyllis Wheatley again. (Refers to a slide of Wheatley.) I think she was seen as a curiosity. A lot of people wrote about her because they were just astonished

that an African-American woman could be this intelligent. I think that the publication of this book was so important as a symbol of black women's intelligence and their gifts.

But I would say that this text was very threatening to some people. Thomas Jefferson writes about it in *Notes on the State of Virginia* very briefly, where he says, "Phyllis Wheatley's poetry is below the dignity of criticism."

I would recommend you go and read her poetry. She was out of fashion, I think, in the 1970s and 1980s when African-American Studies was growing. She was almost too classical. She seemed almost too "white" because she was so well-versed in the Bible and in classical literature.

But it's because she's so intelligent that she seems threatening and needs to be dismissed. Jefferson is so cutting and says we can't even talk about this.

There are a few examples that we have from the archives of slaves trying to make the argument that white colonists were actually Pharaoh, and they were seen as being very dangerous.

I wish I could remember where this happened—I could look it up—but there was a slave, we only know his first name, David, who gave a lay sermon and some whites overheard it. He made a comparison of colonists to Egyptians, and he almost was lynched. There was a white man who bought him to save him and then sent him out of the colonies. I think he was sold into the West Indies, because this was such a dangerous thing for a black person to say.

The late 18th century is the beginning of the abolitionist movement or antislavery movement, which is a story in and of itself. All of a sudden in the 1770s you have the first significant mass movement opposing slavery.

There were ministers—for example, a minister named Samuel Hopkins who was in Newport, Rhode Island—who made this comparison also, and who pointed out the hypocrisy of colonial Americans demanding their freedom from England and describing themselves as slaves, which they often did. They said they were enslaved by the British at the time that they themselves were holding slaves. So this language existed, but it was a radical language that most Americans resisted at the time.

On the other question about America First, and are we saying that John Winthrop's burden is just too heavy to bear? There's an old book about ideas of America as a redeemer nation by Ernest Tuveson called *Redeemer Nation*, in which he argues that the idea of American chosenness has come basically in two flavors.

One, America is Eden and America is the place that needs to be protected from the serpent—that is, kind of an enclosed garden, a sort of paradise. And two, America as the new Israel that is expanding outward. So that these internal impulses have always been there, but I do hear the language that you're describing.

I feel as if there are many Americans who say— I'm tired of sending troops overseas; I'm tired of feeling as if America is the world's police officer who's supposed to fix everything else. They're focused on America—still, I think, as being chosen—but looking inward and only focusing on one another rather than the rest of the world.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** EMMA GREEN.

**EMMA GREEN, *The Atlantic*:** I've been curious in listening to your narrative of domestic religious nationalism, how that affects attitudes towards our role overseas. I've been particularly curious about this in the current context contrasting George W. Bush and Trump, the way that they use rhetoric about intervention abroad, our obligation to defend human rights overseas.

I think we're probably too early into the Trump presidency to any distinctive or at least consistent narrative or outlook or philosophy. I think that's still in evolution and understandably so. But I'm curious about the way that this vision of American exceptionalism can have radically different outcomes and orientations when it comes to foreign policy, and particularly intervene on behalf of people who are besieged overseas.

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** I think since World War II in particular, this sort of language has gone along with the idea that the United States, as a chosen nation, is supposed to have a major influence on the rest of the world. It's very interesting, though. I mean, this has been somewhat contested. In John F. Kennedy's inaugural speech, he referred to the United Nations as being chosen—the United Nations was supposed to be the beacon to the rest of the world. By the time you get to Reagan, it's no longer United Nations. It's just the United States on its own.

But even going back into the 19th century, I mentioned Albert Beveridge, the Senator from Indiana, who used this idea of American chosenness to justify intervention in the Philippines in Cuba. I think this language has always had the potential to be used in imperialist ways. It also has had the potential to be used in humanitarian ways, and of course these things are not always opposed: sometimes these things go hand in hand. I think that this language is crucial to understanding foreign policy and understanding people's motivations.

I think this was especially true for George W. Bush, who did not intend at the beginning of his presidency to be involved globally. But I think he felt as if his faith really called him to it.

**EMMA GREEN:** To follow up and clarify, are there antecedents that come to mind to think about the opposite outcome, which is the conclusion that America should be less involved overseas, that our first obligation is to our citizens here and that sort an interventionist policy is wrong-headed and does not fit with the notion of American exceptionalism?

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** Certainly Woodrow Wilson falls into this category, where Wilson was very reluctant to become involved in World War I. He used a lot of this language of American exceptionalism. He was trying to pull things back, but eventually decided that America was called to take a global role.

There are also a number of very interesting cases of missionaries who have been working abroad—and missionaries I think, get a bad rap, they're seen as the agents of imperialism—but often missionaries on the ground are arguing that Americans should not be involved in the foreign policy of these countries, or that the good of the people suggests humanitarian aid but not military intervention.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** It's too bad our friend and colleague Michael Gerson, who usually attends these, is at another meeting in Dallas and couldn't be here, because it seems to me that a lot of what you've been saying—a lot of speech writers for presidents need to know this topic, because we keep citing Obama and Hillary and George W. and Ronald Reagan.

Clearly the speech writers know this language and have to tell their President we need to use this language, or you're using it too much or you're not using it enough. I would love to have Michael here to comment on the discussions they would have had about that.

David Rennie you're up, and then Michelle Cottle and Sally and A.B. and E.J. and Jordana and everyone. David Rennie.

**DAVID RENNIE, *The Economist*:** Can I ask you a historical question about expertise? It seems to me that if you're trying to parse out why the Right has for some years owned the idea of inherent truths in either the Bible or in the Constitution, that whole kind of Tea Party idea of there are a set of kind of founding principles, and when you talked about originalism and how that blurs across the idea of suspicion of progressive arguments that these things are living texts.

At what point in American history did that suspicion, that Protestant idea of the plain man sitting on the porch reading the Bible, kind of extracting imminent truths from it. And then I think you can see that with the Tea Party's reverence for the Constitution as a very similar psychological experience there.

And you can see why, to get to E.J.'s point about opportunism, it's very useful for a reactionary political movement to then bind that up with suspicion of elites and suspicion of expertise, and particularly elites and experts, who are seen as kind of progressives. If you buy any of that kind of theory of mine, tell us about the history of that. Does that pop up quite early?

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** You're interested in a sort of plain, common sense reading of the Bible and its political implications. You see this immediately after the American Revolution. The Revolution, I think, acted as a kind of solvent that dissolved a lot of understandings about tradition and hierarchy.

There are a series of revivals that historians call the Second Great Awakening that begin immediately after the Revolution, as early as the 1790s on the frontier, stretching into the 1820s, 1830s, 1840s, when, in the atmosphere of new religious freedom created by the First Amendment and created by disestablishment, new Protestant sects begin popping up.

Remember that before the American Revolution most of the colonies had established churches, and that meant that whether or not you attended the church, you had to pay taxes to support the church. After

the First Amendment, and after states disestablished their churches—because the First Amendment was originally not binding on states, just the national government—as that happened, you get all this competition.

It's a kind of free market of religion in the early 1800s. The Methodists, which had been founded in England and had started to make a few inroads before the American Revolution, really explode. There are new groups that probably you would not have heard of before—the Christian Connection, the Free Will Baptists—who become very, very popular and who are competing with old established churches, the Congregationalists and the Anglicans.

And in these new religious movements, you have a very strong anti-hierarchical tendency, and you have people preaching who have never been to college, and those religious groups are proud of that. They say the Holy Spirit can inspire anyone to preach. So here we have a farmer who was directly inspired by the Holy Spirit, who is reading the Bible for himself and using his common sense—and this idea comes from the Enlightenment, partially.

He's using his common sense and he's seeing things in the Bible that were obscured by more complicated allegorical or metaphorical readings. You have some really fascinating, I would call religious populists in the early 19th century, who are reading the Bible literally and coming up with new meanings.

There's a wonderful character named Lorenzo Dow who had never gone to college. He apparently was a very powerful preacher, very theatrical, and would go from camp meeting to camp meeting attracting thousands of people, and arguing on behalf of not only democracy but Christianity.

He was trying to spread the gospel, but he definitely saw the nation as specially chosen. So this language has very deep roots in American culture that go all the way to the post-Revolutionary period—and that language has always been entangled with populist movements.

What tends to happen is-- let me just take the Methodists as an example. The Methodists were seen as counter-cultural in the late 18th century. Most of their ministers were not well educated. They had not started building seminaries. As they began to grow, they started building schools, building seminaries. Their ministers became educated, and they became somewhat embarrassed by their history.

And as they become more respectable, there are then a group within the Methodists who think they had become too respectable, and they become Holiness preachers and start the cycle again. Then when Holiness becomes too respectable, out of Holiness comes the Pentecostal movement, and we could keep going.

I think this is a powerful dynamic that has very old roots, and the idea that you could just open a Bible and read it like a novel and be able to understand it just with a grade school education is a very old one in the United States. It's very appealing in some ways because it is very democratic.

I think you can also, though, trace that kind of biblical reading to some of the tragedies in American history, including slavery—where, if you read the Hebrew Bible literally, you can come up with a pretty good defense of slavery. And pro-slavery theologians in the 1830s did exactly that.

The people arguing against slavery had to talk about the spirit of the Bible and the fact that Jesus never explicitly sanctioned slavery, and that the Sermon on the Mount was meant to abolish slavery, even though slavery was never explicitly mentioned.

I hope that answers your question about the roots of this kind of language.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** The best book on this, you would agree, is Nathan Hatch's book *The Democratization of American Christianity*, which covers everything you just said and much more.

In fact, it's even there that the preacher Lorenzo Dow, didn't he show up at the White House with like a 2,000 pound thing of cheese?

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** No, that was not Lorenzo Dow. I'm trying to remember who that was.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** It's in Hatch's book and it was very odd. He was protesting something and he brought like a thousand pound thing of cheese to make a point.

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** And I'll think of it. He's a southern minister. I'll think of who it is. It wasn't Dow. It was someone else.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** We'll look that up. Anyway, Nathan Hatch is an American religious historian now president of Wake Forest University. But he wrote this book *The Democratization of American Christianity*. It won all these awards, history prizes, and so I call that to your attention and reference. We like to promote books here.

Michelle Cottle, you're up next, and then Sally.

**MICHELLE COTTLE, The Atlantic:** referring back to Doyle's line of questioning, in terms of how sustainable is this idea in a different kind of religious America. You mentioned that the Right does a much better job of employing this language politically, domestically.

To what degree do you think that that kind of boils down to the—even if not the specific leaders like Obama or Hillary Clinton—the left itself is a much more secular group, and so you can't point to the God and country strain that you have that runs deep in right wing grassroots politics. So you are having to look for another way to make it resonate on some level.

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** I think that's absolutely a true observation. Something that I will be wrestling with in this book that I have only begun to wrestle with is looking at the way that feminists in the 1970s tried to use this language—or failed to use this language.

So you can definitely find this understanding of American chosenness in the work of somebody like Frances Willard, who was in the Woman's Christian Temperance Union. The WCTU was a major factor in the passage of women's suffrage.

And it seems to me that those early women's rights activists—the mainstream ones, not Elizabeth Cady Stanton who was very anti-Christian, but the Frances Willards and the other women of the WCTU—used this kind of understanding of American chosenness to sanction women's rights. I think they did that very successfully.

Civil Rights activists in the 1950s and 1960s also used this very successfully, because there was a long tradition in black churches of thinking about how to make the United States more racially egalitarian in a Christian way.

Women's rights activists in the 1970s were really split about religion. If you read the founding statement of NOW, it reads kind of flat. It's like a programmatic “this is what we want,” versus reading some of the Civil Rights pamphlets, which I think did a wonderful job of putting Civil Rights in a transcendent context—that this is more than just “we want better jobs.” This is about God's will.

The reason I'm bringing this up in response to your question is I think that the religious divisiveness in second wave feminism made it very difficult for them to claim that language as their own and to use it as successfully as Civil Rights activists did.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Sally.

**SALLY QUINN, *The Washington Post* and *OnFaith*:** I'm interested in what Karen had said about the evolution between the Winthrop communalism idea and de Tocqueville's individualism and the evolution of religion/politics in this country, starting with the idea of the Puritans, and then going to the deists.

That's a pretty big leap from Puritanism to deism to Thomas Jefferson's Bible, and then moving on to the evangelicals, which are as pretty far removed from the deists.

I was interested in what you were saying about the teachers teaching, the home schoolers teaching the children that the deists actually had put in the Constitution that the Bible was important to read. But here we are today, and what we've got is we've got evangelicalism, and as you I think rightly point out, a lot of the evangelicals aren't really evangelical. In fact, a lot of them aren't even serious Christians.

We have probably 25 percent of the people in this country, if not more, are NONES. Atheism and agnosticism are much more accepted today than they ever were before, and certainly the evangelical vote for Donald Trump, his campaign I think was probably the antitheism of Christian behavior.

I wonder where you think we're going? We started out very Puritan. We're at a stage now where even the really religious people aren't that religious and so many other people are taking sort of different paths. Do you think that it's possible that we would end up with an atheist president?

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** No.

**SALLY QUINN:** And why not? I'm really curious to know, because we're in this stage now where it seems that religion, people have to mouth it. You can't get elected now being an atheist, and even Obama sort of got religion at some point. When he did his sojourner speech, it was really one of the first major speeches the President gave about religion, where he talked about believers and non-believers. So he sort of introduced that idea nine years or ten years ago.

But so where are we going? How do you get from being a Puritan to a deist, and then to this sort of hodgepodge of a lot of, I hate to use the word, hypocritical religion, and people sort of saying I don't buy it. I'm spiritual but I don't buy this traditional religion.

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** I would say first that I would be careful about suggesting that a sort of Puritan communal vision has completely disappeared. I think it's still there. I think there are poles: there is a sort of individualistic religion, but there certainly is also a religion that focuses more on the common good. I think when Pope Francis came to visit, that was really electrifying, because that was the kind of language that he was using.

I don't think that American religion has become purely individualistic. It's a mixture of things. I do think there's a very strong strain of individualism within Protestant conservatism, but I don't think that that's the only story.

I would also be careful—I made this point earlier—that there had been polls in which there were people identifying themselves as evangelicals who I don't think are really evangelicals. They think of it as a political category.

But I would not say that all evangelicals are hypocrites. I think that there are people with genuinely felt beliefs.

**SALLY QUINN:** I didn't mean to imply that. But I mean I was picking up from what you said and which it seems pretty obvious in the polls that show that so many of these people who claim to be evangelicals don't go to church.

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** Right. But I think there are evangelicals who do go to church and who are very serious about this. I think we're at a moment where American religion is in flux. This is partly generational. I see this among my students at Harvard Divinity School.

I have to say that before teaching at Harvard, I was rather skeptical about this whole idea of spiritual but not religious, which I thought was just an empty category. But I am meeting people who seem really very sincere in terms of their desire for spiritual understanding at the same time that they're very suspicious of institutional religion.

I think that phrase "spiritual but not religious" is really reflecting a collapse of faith more broadly in American institutions, but also in American churches and synagogues. There's a generation—and also

people my age—who see religion as personally fulfilling but don't trust any institution. So they've really been sort of cut adrift.

It's really hard for me to imagine someone being elected who was an atheist for a number of reasons. As a historian, I know that even after disestablishment, even after the First Amendment, which did not apply to the states originally, there were states that had rules on the books, laws on the books that said that you could not be a governor or an elected official unless you believed in a future state of reward and punishment, which I think is fascinating.

**SALLY QUINN:** That's still on the books?

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** I'm sure it still is, but it's not invoked anymore. I don't know if all of these laws have been repealed, although I think I remember now there was some story about someplace where that hadn't been actually repealed, and someone was trying to make a claim that whoever had been elected did not believe in a future state of reward or punishment.

I think that even for the founders who were deists, they did see that religion was important sociologically as a source of morality, and I think there was a lot of anxiety that if you elected someone to be a leader who didn't believe that they were going to be held accountable in the next life, that there would be no restraint on them.

That kind of idea is still floating around in American culture. Even if people don't want, or don't care, exactly, specifically, what someone is, they want a sense that the leader has a moral compass.

**SALLY QUINN:** So how do you explain Trump?

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** I think that there were religious conservatives who did a lot of work trying to suggest that he did—and does, in fact—have a moral compass. I mean, personally I don't find that believable, but people did find that believable, and there were ministers who did a lot of work, saying, “okay, let's look at people who are chosen in the Bible.”

It's true that the Bible is full of sinful people who are chosen by God to do great things. That is the way that they tried to package Trump, and apparently it was successful. I was very surprised. I did not think it would be successful. There's a whole other story here, which I'd love to hear the rest of you on because I think you know more about it.

I think evangelicals were so hostile to Hillary Clinton. I mean, I think it's not only pro-Trump. I think it was incredible suspicion of Clinton. If someone else had been running against him, I think it might have been a different story. This is kind of a perfect storm.

Another factor—she's also the first woman presidential candidate. I think there was a lot of hidden anxiety about that, especially among evangelicals who have this understanding of headship—that women are supposed to be subordinate to men's authority.

But even with all that, I think that there were evangelical ministers who were very busy trying to turn Trump into some kind of figure who could be understood through all these stories of biblical figures who sinned and yet God chose them anyway.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Let me just quickly mention that every four years the Pew Research Center does a survey and asks Americans: "Do you want your president to be a person of faith?"

Every four years it's at least 75 to 80 percent of Americans say they want them to be a person of faith, even with the rise of the NONES that's happening. I just wanted to throw that data point in there.

A.B., you're up next. Then E.J. is after her.

**A.B. STODDARD, RealClearPolitics:** Thank you so much. It's really been incredibly fascinating. I want to go back, since I'm the 25th questioner my question overlaps with everyone else's, but picking up on what Will was talking about hours ago about the covenant and the burden of the blessing, where do you see the arc of that compact going in our history? How much of the making, bearing one's burdens, making others' conditions our own remains tied to our chosenness?

I don't think today people have touched on the politics, which I don't think it's solely the commitment of the religious non-secular left to take care of their neighbor as thyself and be called to servitude. I don't think that's a fair assessment. But where has the covenant gone in the commitment to exceptionalism, and belief in chosenness?

There's always been carveout for the Other, so it was Native Americans, Indians, African-Americans, women. It was we'll take care of people like ourselves, but we have a debate waging in this country about Others. I don't think it's just liberal religious Americans who believe we need to take care of others.

I'm just interested in because you studied this, where what's happened to the covenant and if it's gone with the Puritans.

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** I would say that there's a debate in this country about how to take care of others. I think there are different political strategies for taking care of others: we could go back to George Bush and his compassionate conservatism and 1,000 Points of Light. I mean, I think he genuinely wanted to help others, and he thought that was the way to do it.

I think this kind of covenant language is alive and well, and you hear it in surprising places. I was so touched by the woman who stood up at—I forget whose town meeting it was, what representative—but there was a woman who stood up to talk about health care, and she said, the way that health care has worked is that the well pay for the sick. The well lift up the sick. We have a responsibility to others.

You could trace this all the way back to John Winthrop. I have no idea what political party she belonged to, but it seemed to me that she was talking about a sort of covenant obligation. Who are we as a

people and how do we care for one another? I think that idea is still there, and that's why I want to say that individualism hasn't completely eclipsed a sense of the common good.

I think that when we look at our political parties, Republicans and Democrats argue about the best way to help others and what that means. But I will take seriously that both parties want to help others.

**A.B. STODDARD:** I'm getting at whether or not it's been severed from the concept of our exceptionalism and our chosenness, because we could easily argue that the parties are differing over how to take care of each other. We could actually make the point that many who are America First are also now wanting to take care of people through this health care debate in ways they would never have admitted to or even thought they would admit to or imagine four years ago.

But in terms of our identity as exceptional, is the covenant part separate from our identity as a nation, out of many one. We have to always bear each other's burdens. Has that sort of broken away?

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** It's a really provocative question. It's possible that some of that has been broken. I guess I'm an optimist, and I do still see that it's there. I mean, I even hear it in the language of "what is it that makes America great"? You know, there's something about the American identity—what America is supposed to be—that lies behind these arguments.

But I suppose we'll come back to this room in ten years and see what we think about whether this language has survived, or whether, to go back to Karen's point, which is really interesting, if the surfacing of it and the self-consciousness about it means that it's just going to be used more and more in a kind of expedient way, in which you're never sure whether someone actually believes in it or not.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Yes. By the way, I just wanted to mention on your point about evangelicals having an anti-Hillary vote more than a pro-Trump vote. A well known Southern Baptist leader, who will remain nameless, said to me after the election, "Out of the 16 candidates, Michael, Donald Trump was my 17th choice. I did not want Hillary Clinton to win the election."

I know a lot of people that were that way. They did not like Trump, but really didn't like her more. I just thought I'd throw that anecdote in there, and only privately will I tell you who said that, but not on the record.

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** This will sound extreme, I know, but I do teach about Salem witchcraft and the witchcraft trials, and I've read all the transcripts and my students go through them, and some of the language that was used about Hillary Clinton was really reminiscent. Seriously, it really was. I mean, she was exerting magical powers by the time she --

**FEMALE SPEAKER:** Well, you remember James Dobson coming out and doing all that justifying, just based on how Hillary would ruin the world.

## TRANSCRIPT

"Chosen Nation: Christianity, Politics, and American Destiny"

Dr. Catherine Brekus, Harvard Divinity School ♦ May 2017

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**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** Our last Faith Angle we had a session with Bill Galston and Carl Bowman on this very subject. You can go to the transcript and the audio and the video for that if you'd like to watch. Okay. E.J., you're up. E.J. and Anne and Jordana, and we'll be done.

**E.J. DIONNE:** Just on this last point, I think the most revealing exit poll finding maybe that 18 percent of Americans had an unfavorable view of both Clinton and Trump, and they voted for Trump 47-30, and they were the people who decided the election, not the people who loved Trump.

Two quick things. One, Kate Bowler has helped us all by posting on the mammoth cheese on Twitter, which was delivered to Thomas Jefferson by the Elder John Leland from Massachusetts.

And the cheese was made from milk of 900 cows. So thank you. Second, I hope this encourages you on your book, because I think all of us have been really taken by everything you've said. You had an answer for everything, which made me think of that phrase a well-stocked mind. So thank you so much.

I wanted to ask you about something that I think has not come up. I'm very curious about the Christian socialists and the social gospellers, and their attitude toward this idea. Did they embrace it, did they reject it and is there anything revealing about that for us now?

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** Yes, thank you. Social gospel thinkers, people like Walter Rauschenbusch, certainly embraced this idea. Some of them were also involved in missionary movements abroad as well as charitable endeavors at home. And they had a very strong sense that the essence of Christianity was social justice, and that this was something that was tied up with American identity.

So they did the sort of doubleness that you can see in somebody like King or Phyllis Wheatley, where on one hand they criticized the nation for not living up to its ideals, but also used the nation's ideals to argue that Americans had to do better. They had to work harder to uplift the poor and to dedicate themselves to lives of Christian service. This kind of language, yes, is certainly in the social gospel movement.

**ANNE THOMPSON, NBC News:** Catherine, does American exceptionalism depend on religion, and with more Americans now identifying themselves as NONES and, a President who is clearly uncomfortable about speaking publicly about his faith or whatever his faith life may be, do you think it's in danger?

Then my second question is you spoke about this moment that we are in, where fewer Americans identify themselves with organized religion and more of us see ourselves as spiritual. Has the nation ever been in such a moment before and what may history tell us about how this shakes out?

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** Interesting two questions. Does American exceptionalism depend on religion? I don't think it could survive without its Christian roots. I think it would be something different. A lot of you have asked about the covenant in the sense of obligation and responsibility. I think American exceptionalism as a slogan does not have that embedded in it, which is why it makes me somewhat nervous.

I think, though, that even if it gets increasingly severed from its Christian roots, its ideas are indebted to Christian narratives going back to the founding, when Americans imagined themselves as the Israelites fleeing the captivity of the British. I feel as if these narratives are very deep woven into our self-understanding.

Even if you pick up an American history textbook, there are resonances of this kind of language. I'm not sure that even if American exceptionalism increasingly leaves behind Christianity, whether the Christian basis could ever be completely erased, because it seems to me that the roots are in fact Christian.

I think Molly asked earlier about Judeo-Christian, and I'm not sure I answered that. We now say Judeo-Christian, but that's an invention of the 1940s and beyond. People did not use that language in the 19th century at all. This language was an attempt to make America more inclusive at a time when Jews were moving into suburbs and becoming increasingly well off, and I think you could say the same thing right now about a phrase that maybe you don't hear as much in your world but I hear in mine, Abrahamic religions, which is an attempt to bring Islam into the Judeo-Christian paradigm.

Remind me of the second question. It was about spiritual but not religious.

**ANNE THOMPSON:** The second question was, have we ever been at a moment like this in history, and what may history tell us about how this moment will evolve?

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** Right. I'm not going to place money on this. However, Nathan Hatch, who was mentioned earlier, would argue that the period right after the American Revolution was a period in which a lot of people were unchurched. Deism was actually a pretty formidable movement in the 1790s and the early 1800s, and the response was a group of revivalists who tried to Christianize the nation.

And some historians, for example, Jon Butler, who I worked with at Yale, have argued that America became more Christian after 1800 than it had been before, even in the Puritan era. Revivalists responded to the sense that America was somehow in crisis—that Christianity was waning. They responded with this wave of organizing, of publishing, of media outreach. Huge numbers of Bibles were published and given out for free.

The question is whether there are some seeds of that now, whether there are activists who are concerned about “spiritual but not religious,” who are building the architecture—that maybe we can't see yet—for more revival. I think there's a lot going on on the Internet. There are a lot of evangelicals in particular who are trying to use the Internet to bring people back to a more traditional religious understanding.

I don't think that this is unprecedented in American history. I think there have been times where religious allegiances have waxed and waned.

# THE FAITH ANGLE FORUM

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The question is: whether we're now at a tipping point where there are so many people who are skeptical about the church that we're looking at the birth of a more secular America, or whether the "spiritual but not religious" people are going to reinvent religion in a new way.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** We have one more question. Jordana, if you could make a very concise pointed question, we will have a concise answer also.

**JORDANA HOCHMAN, NPR:** You've described an American nationalism that is a Christian articulation of exceptionalism and chosenness, and Trump is giving voice or amplifying a nationalism that is uncoupled from religion. I wonder if you do see it as uncoupled from religion, and if not then what is the kind of tracing the Christian explanation for some of these ideas of isolationism and protectionism?

**CATHERINE BREKUS:** Right now from Trump, I think it is uncoupled from religion, but he is very unpredictable. You saw the slide of Paula White, who at his inauguration was trying to give him that sort of language.

What will happen there, I'm not sure, but I do see parallels between some of the unsavory people who are attracted to his language, and the movements in the past like the Klan or, in our contemporary period, the Christian Identity movement, which is a white nationalist movement. They also see America as chosen, but for them chosenness means whiteness, and it does mean isolationism.

I'm not sure where he himself will go with this, but I think it's possible his followers will take it to places that maybe he didn't intend or couldn't imagine. It could go towards a kind of resurgence of what we saw in the slide earlier, with thousands of people becoming members of the Ku Klux Klan. I think the Klan has been discredited now, but there are other sorts of cognate organizations today that have that same impulse—that America somehow is threatened. And when they're trying to figure out what America is threatened by, they're pointing toward Mexicans, Muslims, immigrants.

I will say this—that covenant language doesn't always act as a check on the worse features of American exceptionalism. But it can, and I prize the way that it does.

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:** You can tell a session has been a very great success when it runs right into the beginning of lunch. Join me in thanking our wonderful speaker.

**END**

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

For more information visit our website: [www.faithangle.org](http://www.faithangle.org)

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