“Re-Imagining Religion in a Secular Age”

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MICHAEL CROMARTIE: He is the author of numerous theological and philosophical books. His most recent book is called "How Not to Be Secular,” and the subtitle is "Reading Charles Taylor." Charles Taylor has a book, it's like 900 pages, called "The Secular Age.” He has a new book coming out, called "You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit."

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JAMIE SMITH: I want to think with you about what it means to say that "we live in a secular society." And I think that is a much more amorphous term than we sometimes realize.

Is it a description? Is it a prescription? What exactly is being claimed? What are the implications of that for a shared common life in the public square?

And also, what are the implications of that for understanding religion and spirituality? So I think my goal this morning, is to unpack some of the ambiguity that I think is folded into the terms "secularism, secularity, and the secular," with two goals in mind. I would like to spend a few moments thinking about how that might change the way we think about religion in public life, and politics.

So part of it is, I want to think about the sort of social, political, public square implications, of how we think about the secular. And one of the things I want to try to tease out there is why I think not all critiques of secularism are equal. I think sometimes people get nervous when people are critical of secularism, as if that's sort of stalking horse for theocracy. And I just want to introduce some nuance.

You could say, I want to introduce why we might want to distinguish "secularism" from "secularity." Then the second half, I want to try to unpack why I think this changes how we think about religion and spirituality. And why, in particular, I think Charles Taylor gives us a frame to do that.
And I might even hazard some prognostications about the future of religion in light of this. So let me start with, what I'm going to call, "taxonomy of the secular."

Let's distinguish three different ways of understanding the term "secular." The first, we'll just call "secular one," is in a way, the most ancient use of the word, in which the secular simply refers to the temporal, the earthly, the worldly; this sort of the mundane material existence of creaturely temporal life. So for someone like St. Augustine, the 5th-Century North African Bishop, the "seculum" is actually an era.

It's a time; it's not a space. The "seculum" is this time in which we find ourselves between the Fall and the Second Coming for Augustine. And that means it's a contested place, you sort of expect difference, but it also just refers to kind of mundane earthly life. So priests and nuns are sacred; butchers, bakers, and candlestick makers are secular; it's that sort of earthly level of existence.

That meaning, however, shifts significantly, and is changed, starting in the late Middle Ages, and then into the Protestant Reformation and afterwards. And that's partly because you got a little bit of a kind of two-tiered version of Christianity that came out of that in the West. So if you have the sacred secular distinction and then there are sort of sacred vocations, and then there are secular things. Somebody's got to have kids, right?

So those, sort of secular endeavors it's like okay somebody's got to do that, but it's a bit of a second-class citizenship within the spiritual realm. And so that creates this two-tiered picture that actually creates all kinds of problems and tensions. And what happens in the reform movements of the Late Middle Ages and early Protestant Reformation is actually the obliteration and leveling of that distinction.

So that for someone like John Calvin is this sanctification of ordinary life. So someone like John Calvin comes along and says, "Wait, wait, wait, the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker also have sacred vocations."

So you level this distinction. And now, actually everything is sacred in some sense. So what does that do to the word "secular"?

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

So if we want spaces and perspectives that are secular, what you're going to have to rule out is all the contingencies of traditions, authorities, beliefs, and perhaps, above all, religion.

So in the secularization thesis, secularization theory was a very confident expectation that as Western societies, to start experienced modernization and technological advancement, all of the supposedly device forces of religious belief and participation would wither away, and modernity's disenchantment would gradually sort of gobble up the rest of society.

And you expect the end of religion on the basis of the secularization thesis, because everybody is going to become objective, rational, scientific, and so on. So secularization theory is always “secular two” theory.

Furthermore, the kind of prescriptive program for the public square that also lays out an agenda, an expectation that our political spaces, our public spaces, our university spaces will be purified of contingency, particularity, and the irrationality of religious belief, that also is a “secular two” meaning of the word secular. So secularism, if we could call that agenda secularism, that also is a “secular two” understanding of the secular.

In the time in which we find ourselves, now, the secularization thesis is not an account that has survived well, mostly because it has not accounted for the phenomena that we keep bumping into, both in the West and globally.

There’s interesting phenomena that are exceptions that sort of push back on the secularization paradigm. I would also say that this notion of the neutral, unbiased, objective, ‘purely rational’ actor/perceiver has also come under ardent philosophical critique over the last generation, from a number of different places, and not even from just religiously motivated criticisms.

So feminist critiques of that ideal of rationality come along and they say, "You know it's striking. It seems like this allegedly neutral, unbiased, objective, rational actor in the so-called 'naked public square,' looks a lot like a German white guy."
So there's this suspicion that wait a second, you're kind of, you're selling us a line on this neutrality. And so they undercut the myth of neutrality that really underwrote the secularist project.

This leads to the introduction by Charles Taylor of a third way of understanding the secular. And this is what we want to hone in on this morning. For Taylor, a society is secular not because it is unreligious or areligious or antireligious. A society is secular insofar as religious belief or belief in God is understood to be one option among others.

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

Taylor often formulates the question this way. He says -- and Taylor is very careful to say that he's telling a story about the West.

But his question is something like this: "Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God, in say 1500; and yet in the year 2000, in some sectors of Western society, it is virtually impossible to believe in God?"

Now, 500 years is a fairly long time. And there's a long story to be told about how that shift -- it's a story of what Taylor calls the "disenchantment of the world." He defines this the "third sense of the secular" as a "move from a society where a belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, pretty unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others."

One of the things that is one of the challenges for the secularization thesis is it seemed to work fantastically for England, but it didn't make much sense of the United States. Where you had a lot of the same galloping forces of technological advancement, consumer capitalism, and so on, and you could still have this really high religious participation.

For Taylor, the United States is still a deeply secular society, but not because it is unreligious, but because it is still a society in which everybody realizes that their beliefs are contested and contestable. That's what it would mean to live in a "secular" age. It's not a prediction about the withering of religion. It's less a matter of whether people are going to believe and it's more, how they are going to believe and that's the change.
Here's the five themes that I want to try to summarize. So first of all, I do think it's important that secularity here is not synonymous with unbelief. So a secular age is an age in which you experience the contestability of belief.

Secondly, "the secular" as Taylor puts it "is an accomplishment. It's not what's merely left over when we subtract transcendence."

So let me try to make sense of this. Most secularization theorists tell, what Taylor calls a "subtraction story." In times past, many, many years ago, human beings had these fantastical beliefs in gods and God. They believed in an enchanted universe, they believed that there were spirits active, they believed that there was more than the natural and that even the natural in a sense was suspended in and sort of nourished by the supernatural.

So they lived in this fantastical world. But along came sort of turning point of enlightenment. And what happens at this turning point of enlightenment is humanity wakes up to the disenchantment of the world that the natural is all that there is. And eventually what happens, is we realize that this supernatural addendum that we kept adding to our account of the cosmos, is extraneous and unnecessary and we sort of settle for the natural.

And what's left over after you subtract all of those fantastical religious beliefs, is cold hard rationality, the sort of courage to look in the face of how hard things are.

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

It wasn't enough to just subtract the religious for lack of a better term, and be left with the natural, the secular. What also had to happen for this to become plausible, right, for something like non-theism to be a live option, a belief, is you had to come up with alternative accounts of significance and meaning.

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

And Taylor, the Christian, doesn't believe it, but he stands back and he says, "This is an incredible cultural accomplishment to have actually managed to come up with a vision of human significance that didn't appeal to transcendence or eternity" that's what he means by "exclusive humanism."

The fourth theme: This imminent frame in which we find ourselves in a secular age, is cross-pressured. Everybody who believes anything, which by the way is everybody, finds themselves in this imminent frame, but not happily confident and oblivious to the challenges, right? The imminent frame no matter what you believe, is a cross-pressured space.

Let me give you an example: If I'm a “believer” in some sort of traditional religious perspective, in a secular age, I'm going to have to realize that I believe in the face of neighbors, and colleagues, and friends who believe something radically different, which means that doubt is the natural accompaniment of faith, in a secular age.

And I do think this is one of the things, when I'm out speaking to religious communities, Christian communities in particular, one of the things I'm emphasizing is: Folks, you need to give especially young people, permission to name and articulate these doubts because it is just the water in which they swim. And unfortunately too many religious communities still feel like doubt is the enemy of faith, rather than a companion. Notice the cross-pressure works on everyone. So if the believer is tempted to doubt, the unbeliever can also be tempted to believe. There remains a kind of haunting and pressure that is the sort of pull and lure, and haunting of that eternity and transcendence. So nobody gets to encase themselves or ensconce themselves, or insulate themselves from cross-pressure.

So finally, fifth: What that means then is secularity does not end belief. Instead, the cross-pressures generate a nova effect, that's what I'm going for with the exploding sort of aero lines, here. Taylor calls this "nova effect of many modes of believing otherwise." So a secular age is not an age of unbelief, it's actually this really messy, complicated, crazy world in which we find ourselves, in which because people are experiencing all of these multiple cross-pressures it's almost like the pressure builds up and it explodes, and what you get are all kinds of ways of believing. And you get sort of "Eat, Pray, Love"
ways of believing. You get in many ways, a sort of Oprah-significance. There are all kinds of different ways of people pursuing now, a spiritual life.

Okay. So what will be some of the implications of this? Let me, first of all say just a little bit about Public Square, and then religion.

To deploy one of Taylor's distinctions, what you could say is "Dogmatic secularism offers a spin on the world rather than a take on the world." He has this interesting sort of -- I like this -- he says "Spin is sort of closed off. Spin are the stories we tell, in which we try to protect ourselves and stick our heads in the sand about the cross-pressure."

So you can have religious versions of spin that basically try to protect themselves, and insulate themselves from the cross pressure of the alternatives and that gets you various fundamentalisms. But you can also have secularist two versions of spin, which equally ensconce themselves and insulate themselves from the cross pressure of haunting.

In contrast, what interested Taylor, and what interests me, is this space of people not offering spins, but takes on the world. A religious take on the world that is open and honest enough to realize.

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

So offering takes on the world, is preferable to these kinds of spin doctors' of either the religious or secularist version. This is where I wonder if it would change how we hear, some of what's said in the public sphere. One could be a trenchant critic of secular two-ism, and yet have a deeper appreciation for secularity, than the secularist, as the contestability of belief in the contemporary world. That's part of what I'm trying to work on.

So how would we feel this difference? What would change? Now, I do think this is where our societal sequestration you could say, is evident. In other words, you know Charles Murray's book Coming Apart which is diagnosing the sort of almost, like the postal codes of inequality right, the zip code localization of two totally different populations, which I think we're feeling this year. I think that there is a religious version
of that as well, which is, people who basically sequester themselves in a kind of secularist zip code, so to speak, who literally don’t know what to do with people who believe. They're like "What?" Not from any of you, but some religion reporting is a little bit like, "We went to Mars and we found these people in Colorado Springs and you won't believe what they think." It has a little bit of that sort of dynamic to it. And it's partly because they inhabit, they're coming from this tight plausibility structure in which they don't bump into people who think otherwise.

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

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

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

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

You can see this in popular culture, in all kinds of different ways. There's a great British novelist, Julian Barnes. Julian Barnes says this: "I don't believe in God, but I miss Him."

That, to me, encapsulates so much of our age-

We become interested in the sort of hauntings of a longing for something lost, right? That's all over the culture. Steve Jobs. Steve Jobs to me, is a fascinating icon of someone who does not fit the secularization thesis, right? Because you've got
somebody at the heart of Silicon Valley, the heart of innovation culture, the heart of tech, the heart of design. And what's interesting, is he's cross-pressured. In Isaacson's biography, listen to this one encounter.

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

"'About 50/50, I'm believing in God,' he said."

So here's the thing. If you're in that sort of resentment mode, you're like, "Oh see?" What it used to be, everybody believed in God. Whereas, I'm thinking you're in the middle of the Bay Area, and somebody tells you they're 50/50 on believing in God? That's a pretty interesting phenomenon. You know he's in the shadow of Stanford. To me that's a great story of this kind of cross-pressured person right, who is haunted and pulled by sort of competing longings and worries.

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

First, I do think that Taylor helps us make sense of the spiritual, but not religious, phenomenon in new ways right? You meet people who say "I'm spiritual, but I'm not religious," which means they can't quite shake this something more-ness that is calling, though admittedly, they probably kind of want in on their own terms. Often the religion that has been rejected by the "spiritual, but not religious." And in some ways, I actually think the "spiritual, but not religious" could be a better portal to people coming into more authentic, thick religious communities, than the sort of vague, civil religion that we had for so many years.

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

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

For me, part of, the Ted talks are part of the secular spirituality. Do you know what I mean? Clearly, they are the sermons of a secular age right? They're the place we go looking for the "message" to sort of improve ourselves, or whatever it might be. The "sermon-ization" of Christianity and Protestantism, kind of set us up for that.

Here's the other pieces I'm interested in. Taylor says, "what you're going to see happen" -- his hypothesis -- "is that you're actually going to see people who find the paucity of that, is so thin, that in fact, they start actually looking beyond the boundaries of the imminent frame again" right? There becomes a new openness.

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

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

Finally then, I do think you can imagine two futures for -- and here, I'll just speak to Christianity, since that's the tradition that I know -- but I would love to learn more, and hear how other traditions think about this. As I look at Protestant/Evangelicalism for
example, you can see two possibilities: One is a trajectory where you see Evangelical's basically racing to become mainline liberal Protestants. They basically -- what they'll say, is "We want to kind of tack to what we think is plausible within the modern moral order."

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

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

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

**WILL SALETAN, Slate:** At one point, you said, that sort of getting to the point we are at in this modern secular morality or secularism, depended on -- the morality that we have in the secular age, depended on having come through the religions of the West.

Now, my question to you is: Do you think that was contingent? That if we hadn't, that there was something about this particular religion that we came through that allowed us to develop these foundations of our secular morality, or is there something in the nature of things, and the nature of society, people, for example, that we couldn't have achieved what we've achieved if we hadn't had a religion that happens to promote that
idea or be based on that idea, so that the religion of the time is just another product, as is our time, of that foundation?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

JAMIE SMITH: And I think, I just want to be careful about this because secular-two, also has a growing up narrative; right. Secular-two-ism says "I grew up when I stopped believing." Now, I just you know sort of see the way things are rationally.

Secular-three would have a grown up narrative, which is "We've grown up and realized that actually belief is contestable, and others believe differently than I do." I think what's interesting is, for someone working internal to a religious tradition like Christianity, I would also say that is kind of waking up to a reality that Christianity should affirm, which is what Augustine says, "We find ourselves in the seculum. So don't pretend otherwise." Don't confuse where you are. Realize where you are, and expect that kind of thing.

CARL CANNON, RealClearPolitics: If you take this period of time from 1500 to 2000, it seems that one explanation, the obvious explanation for it, the secular explanation, if you will, is that there's been this inextricable discovery of scientific phenomena, mostly, but other truths. That the source was unknown before, and they were thought to be un-noble and they were attributed to God. And what a person, a nonbeliever would say, is "This is sort of a steady -- it's progress, and it's a steady and inextricable march of history, and that these polls we're seeing about these millennials, a lot of them are spiritual, but not religious, but that is a trend that we're never going back. That's the way things are going."

You seem to, without directly taking issue with that, maybe challenge that view. And I would ask you to explain a little more on that.
JAMIE SMITH: So I'm a great fan of air conditioning and indoor plumbing, and without question, there is a certain kind of progress story to be told in modernity, and I don't think any of this has to discount that. What's interesting is if you start asking questions of what counts as progress for humanity, now you're burying down into what Taylor calls the "basement levels of commitments" about what you think counts as flourishing, for example, and so on.

And I think that's where things get a little bit more contestable. What you can't tell, is just some sort of simplistic, dichotomous, binary option here, between the religious and scientific progress, since in many ways we know that what unleashed the scientific endeavor itself, were religious communities that were invested in that; both Muslim and Christian, I would say. And so I don't think we have to feel tension between those two things. What I'm contesting is a maturation story that equates maturity with unbelief, disbelief. “Wake up and smell the disenchantment” kinds of stories, right, and again, this is where I feel like there are just a lot of interesting exceptions to the rule.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And insofar as those are still the incubators of then cultural influencers, I guess I don’t see the sample representation of those elites who are practicing religious folk, being significant enough yet, to have sort of cascaded and shaped, what's happening in Hollywood studios, or newsrooms.

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

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

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

The one piece I think that I also just don't know enough about is the real shifts that have taken place in sort of working class and poor religiosity. And it strikes me that one of the things that has gone away is what we might call, for the lack of a better term, "catechesis." There's just a certain failure of catechesis in the churches, and therefore people don't even feel the tensions that they ought to feel sometimes about that.

**PAUL EDWARDS, Desert News:** Jamie, I'm guessing you're familiar with the "Benedict Option." I was wondering how that fits into what you're thinking about here. So if you might? I can talk about it, but maybe you could explain a little bit about the "Benedict Option" that's being discussed, and how it fits into a particular retreat from secularization.

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yeah. So the "Benedict Option" is a certain response of religious conservatives who are sort of, I would say waking up to the fact that American culture, generally is not going to form them in faith. Apparently this is a revelation.

And so the "Benedict Option” is about prioritizing an intentionality within Christian communities, in this case, to be much more intentional about formation and so on, and less confident that they will be able to steer, shape, and probably dominate wider cultural conversation -- so it's actually a refusal of the culture wars as well.

I would say it just sounds like what the Church was always supposed to be doing. It comes off as a little bit like here's the next great thing, and it turns out it's only because we've failed to do what we were supposed to be doing.

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

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yeah. So notice, I'm working with a certain student population, so you know I teach at Calvin College. In many ways, the windows are wide open, you know, we're sort of engaged, but many of these students, you know a significant percentage of students are coming out of K to 12 Christian education as well.
So for me, it's like some days I wish Calvin College was a college at the University of Michigan, so that we could inhabit both of those spaces and feel the cross-pressure a little more intensely. So in that context, I'm trying to foster an intellectual honesty, where they realize (a) this is saying a lot of true things about beings and human origins, but to also just feel the compelling-ness of this; right, like it's a very adequate story to explain a lot. And so I want them to feel that precisely so they're not then sent out living in some sort of oblivious bubble.

JAMES HUNTER, University of Virginia: I want to push back on Taylor. I think that at certain important points, he needs to be pushed back against. His strength is as a phenomenologist. In talking about religious experience and religious belief, and the super nova he describes, I think is a fair description of what happens in the late modern world, in the private sphere. In personal experience. But culture and this is really important here, culture is not reducible to individual belief.

Culture is not the sum total of individual belief. Culture is a powerful symbolic order, independent of what people believe or don't believe, and to always imbed it in the powerful institution, and this speaks to Will's question earlier, about atheists in the 1500s. Are there more, were there more atheists back in the 1500s than we think?

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

So in the public sphere, however, the world of finance, say, or medical research, or of political campaigning, whatever, this is not a sphere or a culture of contested -- well, certainly it's contested -- but in terms of the mechanics, the logic of running a campaign or of doing medical research, whatever someone's personal beliefs may be, the rules by which people operate are defined by a technical rationality that is disenchanted, that is secular, and it's not really, as I say, contested. An airline pilot, who is a Pentecostal snake handler, can hold his or her beliefs, as long as they don't bring them into the cockpit.
And so the culture of the public sphere, which again, disenchanted, oriented toward a kind of technical, functional rationality, it is totalizing. And this provides a plausibility structure for a kind of exclusive secularism.

So the question is, given this -- I mean again, I think what Taylor describes is accurate insofar as it bears on private life, personal experience, individual belief, and so on. I don't think it extends into the symbolic order and institutional realities of the public sphere. And part of the political dilemma of our global politics and our, even national politics is the pushback against that totalizing secular ethos. Is that a fair critique of Taylor?

JAMIE SMITH: A couple things come to mind. One is I mean you want your pilot to work that way, right? So it seems like there is a certain kind of, I hate the term, but there's a certain kind of compartmentalization that would be welcome it seems to me, right? Because I don't know if I want the dynamics that get the plane up and going, I kind of, I want us to stay within that logic when we're doing that.

On the other hand, I guess I've always thought that Taylor feels the extent to which the wider symbolic universe has been dominated by the disenchanted. At least I can feel that. But again, I think he thinks that's more localized. I mean you're interested in the particularly influential sort of elite culture shaping centers, in which this would be much more true to, right?

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

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

And I think that's right. I think, probably Taylor is best when he's trying to -- sometimes he says what he's trying to do, is describe what it feels like, right. And that's a very
individual sort of subjective experience. What does it feel like to believe in this age? What does it feel like to not believe in this age? But yeah, no, I welcome the conversation. I need to think more about that. That's great.

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

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

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

Now, I would say remember though, even as someone coming from a religious tradition, I can actually be a pretty ardent advocate of secularity three as a healthy realization.

Precisely when you lose the transcendent and eternal, now what has to happen, is everybody has to turn the penultimate into the ultimate. And so now our political identities, our political allegiances are characterized by a kind of religious fervor, that almost makes it impossible for us to do collaboration in that space.

I think what has struck me is in secularistic accounts of morality, they also still tend to imagine morality as primarily a set of beliefs and expectations. And what I think is missing in secular accounts of morality, is precisely an account of habit. And in order to talk about habits of disposition, you need communities of character. Now, maybe the
secularist has an account of where those communities are, and what they're doing, but I feel like we haven't had that conversation yet.

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

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

**JAMIE SMITH:** Yeah. So I'm trying to think of another court decision, but I'm not going to be able to retrieve that on the top of my head. Taylor, in that same interview, advocates then what he calls an open secularism, right. So it is a form of disestablishment, but it's not one that asks people to leave their religious identities at the door of this preverbal naked public square, right.

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

Now, that can be a weasel word, obviously, and we'll fight a lot about what fairness looks like. What's interesting is it's precisely in societies in which religion had such a totalizing institutional expression in the Church, sort of, running things that you also then get the alternative of laicity, which is this ardent secularism endorsed by the State, basically.

And I think religious liberty that's imagined in the kind of secular three middle, is one that obviously does not establish a church. It does not establish a particular religion, but
The question of how to frame the tension between secularism and pluralism is central in Dr. James K.A. Smith's discussion. He argues that while secularism tends to homogenize beliefs, secular pluralism is necessary for genuine pluralism. The limits of the freedom of conscience model, which envisions religious belief as an individual phenomenon, are also highlighted.

In his view, the concept of institutional religious freedom is crucial. It involves not just allowing people freedom to believe privately, but also recognizing religion as a way of life shared by communal bodies. Institutions, therefore, must be allowed to live out their religious expressions.

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

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

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

I guess I'm less inclined to imagine that religious liberty means repristinating the public schools to do what they used to do when we thought everybody was a Christian.

So it's very messy, in how we want to think of it. If the good is making room for communities to pursue their faith in ways that are meaningful, but also allow them to...
contribute to the public sphere that's what I'm sort of looking for. I feel, I guess I do think there is a, certain legitimacy.

People could feel like some decisions and policies over the last few years have impinged on the religious liberty of institutions in particular. But that's different than sort of prayer in schools kind of dynamic.

MORT KONDRAKE, *Roll Call*: So you tossed off this reference to the strong man as something that was in our future, and I fear that it is in our immediate future, and I wanted you to expand on that a little bit, but my theory is that what's happened in America, is that religious people have gone off into their sphere. They go to their churches, they watch FOX News or they vote Republican.

They avoid the elites, they oppose same sex marriage strongly, they shout about it. Whereas the seculars inhabit the city, and the university for sure, and say things like "Well, those poor people. All they do is they cling to their guns and their religion.”

So what I see is not this, what you call "no turning back." I see an attempt to turn back, a division in the society, a polarization politically and religiously. And into this war steps somebody saying, "Follow me. I can solve it all. I'll fix it. I'll make America great again." And I think that there's actually a kind of a strange religious component to this.

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

If then people effectively are secularized insofar as they've given themselves to the realities of the market and consumption is the way that they're going to be happy, then you are going to experience the failures of the market to deliver in ways that have almost a kind of religious crisis about them. And so now, what you're looking for is somebody to pull the levers to make that system generate what it promised for you.

I wonder for how much, I wonder to what extent this dynamic is the reality of people, who find themselves just a million miles from political power and the machinations of political power. So government has always just been some sort of distant magic.
And so now, you're just looking for your magician. You're just looking for the guy who promises to make that magic work for you. I think that itself, is a sign of a disenfranchisement and disenchantment. I could see how clearly some are capitalizing on this campaign on an attempt to rollback secularity.

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

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

JAMIE SMITH: It seems to me, the viability of faith communities in a secular three age, are directly indexed to their ability to draw on wells that are older than modernity.

So that in fact, it's not just a nostalgic retrieval, but it is basically finding ways of being faithful in the present that draw on and are tied to ancient and medieval ways that the Spirit has led throughout the ages.

Do any of you know Dallas Seminary? It's kind of like the heart of dispensationalist Evangelicalism. Two congregations come to mind. One is Christ Community Church in Des Moines, Iowa, which started as a plant of a massive Baptist megachurch in the city, and went out into this very intentional, liturgical, sacramental, catholic, almost monastic expression.

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

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

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

In fact, what we did was we took the cultural liturgies and we thought we could make church cool, because we would make it like the mall or the rock concert, or the coffee shop, and then that turns out to be the dynamics of assimilation.

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: How are they changing their worship service?

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

It’s fascinating how many Presbyterian Churches now observe weekly Eucharist or Communion. So to me that's always just a little signal. Whenever you run into evangelical churches that are practicing weekly communion or Lord's Supper, what's happened is they have effectively appropriated a catholic cadence.

That's both kinds of evangelical denominational realities, like these Presbyterian Churches, I mentioned, but also a bunch of these nondenominational churches.

ABDULLAH ANTEPLI, Duke University: If one can simplistically talk, there are two schools of thought in secularism, and I feel you are -- two Anglo-Saxon schools of secularism centric, and there's a French secularism, which I grew up in Turkey with.

It's not disbelief, but it's grudgingly accepting religion it's not going to disappear, but we have to control it.

To me, most people are in different proportions, both. There's a hybrid secularism that some people are Anglo-Saxon-type seculars unto their own faith tradition towards, but towards other faith traditions, they become immediately French type of secularism.
Ted Cruz, when he’s advocating for people to pray, and when people ask, "Can Muslims pray? Can Jews pray? Can Hindus pray?" He becomes incredibly French secularist says that's absolutely not the case.

So there is so much hybrid people are not one kind.

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

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

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

JAMIE SMITH: I don't have anything to really add to that than others saying, I guess the way I would push back on the French sort of Revolutionary model, is to point out actually then what happens is you actually make secularism religion-like.

So I would love to hear more about how other religious traditions see themselves navigating, like for example. Could Muslim communities accept something like this secularity three analysis?

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

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

JESSICA STERN, Boston University: I am wondering whether the pressure for secularity three results in part from the declining percentage of Christians in the United States and
Canada. The latest pew poll shows that between 2007 and 2014, religiously affiliated persons went down somewhat, from 83 percent to 77 percent so there's a slight decline.

And the group most responsible for the decline, at least according to this poll, is millennials. It's not working class, although I've seen that some sociologists claim that working class people are leaving the Church.

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

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

Now, you could grant that the speed with which secularity three seeps into the social imaginary of a society, as Taylor puts it, has been slower in the United States than in Continental Europe or the United Kingdom. I think that's probably true. The demographic story is more symptomatic of things that have already taken place.

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

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

I don't want to have to pick between universalism versus particularism. I think you could make a case that in some ways fostering a deep catechesis in a particular religion is precisely how you foster people, who make room for a pluralistic public sphere.
KATHLEEN PARKER, *Washington Post*: I was just wondering if, I would just be interested in your thoughts about the Evangelical support for Donald Trump.-Donald Trump says he's a Christian, who doesn't need forgiveness, and he's otherwise, as unchristian like as anyone we've ever seen.

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

JAMIE SMITH: Two things. One is a spectacular failure of catechesis. Because either way, I will say on Super Tuesday, as I was watching some data come in, it turned out that there was also, I think 35 percent of Catholics also voted for Trump.

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

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

The other piece that I'm interested in, is it relates to this theme of ex-carnation that I was talking about. My hunch is that Evangelicalism, as a form of Protestantism, is susceptible to turning Christianity into a web of beliefs to which you ascent.

Which then, doesn't necessarily have to come with a ton of connection to a way of life that you practice, so you get nominal Evangelicals. Whereas, most people became Evangelicals because they were nominal Lutherans or whatever. And particularly in regions like the South and so on, this works.

If our polling, or our social science could be much more fine-grained, if you dig down to the level of practice and participation, I think you see very different numbers about Trump, for example.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: When you hold for people who go to church at least once a week. Maybe twice, but once, the numbers for Trump go way down. I thought that was a description of Evangelical, a person who actually goes to church a lot and says that to be an Evangelical means to be a faithful participant in, not only church, but Wednesday
night Bible studies. When I've had calls on this question, the word "Evangelical" has become so flimsily described that in South Carolina, if somebody says, "Well, you must be an Evangelical." "Yeah, I think so. I go to church once a year during Easter."

JAMIE SMITH: One of the other things that intrigues me, is when Evangelical Protestants start kind of embracing this catholicity account. I would say baked into the DNA of that expression and formation of Christianity, is something that weds you to a people, right that's transnational and ancient.

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

JESSICA STERN: I wonder, whether your concept of the "liturgy of the mall" helps to explain that.

JAMIE SMITH: This is a different way of thinking about religion, not as a constellation of beliefs, doctrines, and ideas, but actually as a formative way of life, right. It's something that's practiced. The primacy of practice.

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

And I think, to me, a lot of the explanatory dynamic for say Protestant Evangelical assimilation to wider cultural dynamics is not that somebody changed their mind. It's that somebody trained their hearts. And they were co-opted by these rival liturgies, which then is what catalyzes new intentionality about Christian liturgical formation as a counter measure to that.

DANIEL LIPPMAN, Politico: How would you address the responsibility of Evangelicals or Christians in general, Protestants or Catholics, for I guess secularists have -- kind of split themselves away from people who are religious in America, where they think Oh, those people are crazy. We don't associate.
What's the responsibility of Evangelicals for doing their own splitting...it's like two different countries, and how do you think that's going to continue?

And the second part of my question is, you've talked about how secularism has hurt the country a little bit. What can be done to keep America a democracy, but dial back some of the secularism, but not return back to where religion is everything?

JAMIE SMITH: On the first point, I mean to be perfectly honest, I think it is way harder, and almost impossible for religious people to insulate themselves from secularism in this society, than it is for "secular elites" to ensconce themselves without ever having to bump into religious people.

You can also understand some of the feelings of stuff kind of being crammed down throats. For us, raising four kids, you're working on all of these kinds of intentional measures, not to cocoon them, but to be intentional about their formation, and there's just all this kind of competition.

So you can see how they feel, like it's not a fair game. That Goliath gets to pull the strings of society.

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

So he's like, "No, we need religious folks to participate in our democracy for the good of our democracy.” He frames this as, what does it look like for religious folk, let's say, to get involved and engaged in municipal politics, neighborhood politics, state politics?

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

WAJAHAT ALI, Al Jazeera America: Is the existence of religious minorities in America, not just the existence, but if you will, the swagger, the prominence, the emergence of
religious minorities in America. Ironically, fueling, not only secularism, as manifested by the New Atheist, also secularity. And also religious fundamentalism.

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

JAMIE SMITH: It would absolutely contribute to secularity three, as well. Although, what I would say, is contribute to an awareness of it. Now, for somebody who sees secularity three as actually a healthy environment for religious communities to be who they are called to be, I welcome that. Like that seems like a good. But I can clearly see why it also then becomes this catalyst for resentment.

And by resentment, I also mean kind of a retrenchment back to this myth. And that's the turning back the clock thing, which I just think is characterized by a kind of ignorance.

I guess what's worrisome though, is how much energy that seems to be able to generate.

ABDULLAH ALI: I agree with you, then the secularism aspect of it and the secularity aspect of it. But the position, then of the religious minority with the swagger, let's say Muslims or Jews with Catholics, when it comes to the Evangelical Christians who feel like the emergence of this religious minority in America, is forcing them to retrench instead of embrace secularity three. Can you talk about that?

JAMIE SMITH: The analysis I want to give, is of those Evangelicals who are responding, in which something other than their Evangelical identity is trumping their political interests at that point. We need a diagnosis of how and why Protestant Evangelicalism seems to susceptible to being co-opted by forces other than it.

To what extent can Evangelicalism be something you wear to really cover your American nationalism, or something like that. We almost have to get down to the level of theological correction within the Christian community.

This is why I keep bringing up catechesis, like do people really understand what they should be doing?

CLARE DUFFY, NBC News: When did the impression of libertinism attach to secularity?
JAMIE SMITH: I guess it depends on the story you want to tell about the 1960s. At the heart of a secularist outlook and therefore even [sic] a lot of secular spiritualties, is this valorization of autonomy as the ultimate good. So that then gets realized in different ways, and it seems to me that one of those, is realization in the sexual revolution of the '60s.

But I do feel like there's a certain reassessment of that going on. At least, I'm of the generation, of sort of kids whose parents were divorced multiple times over. And so we're asking ourselves questions about certain sexual morays that were taken for granted.

It's just two totally different worlds, so that association of libertinism, this trenchant fixation on autonomy, as really the only good that could be affirmed, and wondering whether people are already feeling the effects of that.