

## SESSION TWO: RELIGION AND RACE IN AMERICA with Esau McCaulley and Eugene Scott

Josh Good:

Okay, if I could call us back to order to dive into another easy topic after this morning's thick dialogue on polarization. We're going to turn to the topic of race and religion, and how they fit together. I think one of the departure points for the project is the idea that religion is at least part of the American people, as Sydney Osterman's book talks about. It's in play all the time. It's always in the room whether that's the slavery movement to the 15th Amendment, to Civil Rights, and of course many other critical topics in our country. We're going to have two speakers today who talk a little bit more about that.

Eugene Scott is, as most of you know, a national political reporter for the Washington Post. He will offer a snapshot of where we've been and some of the distinctives, Eugene, that you've seen in this very difficult season of the last 18 months or more. Eugene has an awesome background, which you can read about in the program, from Phoenix to some other roles writing on identity politics in the Washington Post, and it's a privilege to have you here today. He'll be talking a little about George Floyd, 2019, Black Lives Matter protests, the killing of Breonna Taylor in Louisville and other evidences of racism caught on camera and flung far and wide on social media that have prompted politicians and clerics and others, pundits, journalists, to be entering into the world of police reform questions, body cameras, university admissions policies, the question of cancel culture, and other ways to potentially check structurally embedded racism that is, of course, extremely difficult to upend.

Following Eugene will be Dr. Esau McCaulley, a New Testament professor and theologian teaching at Wheaton College in Illinois. Esau has somehow managed in the last couple of years to take a number of more progressive, more secular New York Times readers and others, certainly in the Christian world, by storm, perhaps because so much of his writing isn't two dimensional and isn't stereotypical. This is an excellent book which I would commend as well, *Reading While Black*, that I've read half of and my wife has read all of. There are interviews that you have done with David Brooks and with Emma Green and with a number of others that are familiar to people in the room. On the question of what unique role has the Christian church and theology played in creating and maintaining today's unjust, racialized reality, drilling down into the dynamics you talked about this morning. Also, how does Christian scripture and the role of Christian theology and the Black church speak into these things and offer a way forward towards justice and reconciliation.

So Eugene and Esau, thank you so much for coming and doing this and being here. Eugene, the floor is yours.

Eugene Scott:

Just to give you a brief background about why I am doing this - I cover national politics at the Washington Post, as Josh mentioned. I covered the 2016 Presidential Election for CNN, which, as many of us know, was an eye-opening experience for many people in terms of the intersection of faith and politics, specifically in relationship to the evangelical church. I then came to the Washington Post to cover identity politics in the Trump Administration, recruited in part by the awesome Scott Wilson, and continued to cover that through the 2020 Presidential Election. I'm going to share with you some of what I learned and noticed specifically from covering racial issues related to, of course, police violence and beyond, the role of the evangelical church as well as the role of the black church in the 2020

election. We'll probably finish a little shorter than we have time reserved so that we can have more time for questions.

Just to get started a bit, I want to focus on national politics broadly but also the country's current reality of racial injustice and division, protests and pain, and many ways in which that reality dovetails with religion and politics. The reality of racial injustice and policing has led to many communities being introspective about how those inequalities manifest in their own spaces, including in faith communities. Prior to maybe 2016, for more than a decade, there had been some significant conversations within white evangelical spaces, arguably the most influential voting bloc in America, about ongoing issues of racism. I'd argue that the most prominent examples of this may have been within the Southern Baptist Convention, which is the largest Protestant Christian denomination in America, usually tied to that organization's founding and its connection to slavery.

Following the 2016 Presidential Election and white evangelicals' overwhelming support for Donald Trump, the candidate who multiple polls showed most Black people voted against and most Black people believed to be racist, it became obvious that churches were not only dealing with past issues of racism within their congregation, but present issues. There are a few reasons this conversation in this moment about the role of racism within conservative Christianity specifically seemed to reach a boiling point. One is something we've been paying attention to for some time that seems not to be slowing down, and that is the declining number of people self-identifying as Christian in America. Anyone following Public Research and Religion Institute or Pew has noticed this. For more than a decade now, polls have shown that young Americans in particular were increasingly becoming religiously unaffiliated. Prior to last summer, there had not been that much talk about the number of older Americans disconnecting from conservative faith communities, which is an admittedly smaller number but not insignificant. There appears to be even little talk when we talk about the rise of the nones, about the role of racism within the church being one of the reasons why people were disconnecting from church as a whole and, quite frankly, a lot of conservative faith communities.

The second reason this moment reached such a boiling point within these communities is because after more than a decade of effort and emphasis on multiculturalism within largely white Evangelical communities, there appeared to be an exodus from those spaces by Black people, fatigued with seeing no progress on issues to combat racism within those spaces or worse, noticing intentional efforts to lean into much of the racism that they believe had overtaken conservatism in general. Some of you who were around, even if you weren't around Faith Angle Forum, but just in your respective newsrooms may remember those early reports. Trump announced he was running for president in June 2015. By August, he was already leading with Evangelical voters. One of the main responses from a lot of people in media who were connected to Evangelical communities was "I don't know anybody voting for Trump" or, as those numbers continued to favor Trump, there was more "Well I have to vote for Trump, the lesser of the two evils." But what multiple reports and data show is that Trump did not win Evangelical vote reluctantly. People weren't dragged onto the Trump train, people were waiting for the Trump train and not solely because of LGBT issues or abortion. There's polling from Fox News that shows that abortion was not the top reason that Evangelicals voted for Trump.

As I previously stated, conversations within the SBC about the role the denomination played in perpetuating white supremacy had been happening for at least two decades. We've seen an expansion

over the past several years in which conservative Christian associations are being questioned about their various roles in promoting anti-Blackness. This might be very niche but there are conversations about the role of Evangelical seminaries and maybe the need for reparations in some of those spaces, white supremacy and people's missions approaches in terms of what they do internationally and aid wise. I think this was all an extension of a summer where many people were asking about just how prevalent is anti-Blackness in conservative Christian spaces, or should I say in spaces beyond policing but also in conservative Christian spaces. As you all may recall, last summer - I laugh I guess it's not that funny - but the issue of George Floyd just made so many people start thinking about what racism looks like in their respective communities. I laugh because I remembered how BandAid came out with BandAids of various complexions. I was like, this is cute but it's not what we're talking about right now. It was also deeply frustrating, more seriously, to many people because we were asking for darker BandAids for decades and now all of a sudden you have the material. That's another question, I mean another topic, for a dark-skinned reporter who gets wounded often.

Alongside that conversation about what racism looks like in conservative Christian spaces and churches and seminaries and faith organizations and the role all of that plays with politics has risen increased interest in what some people call the religious left and movements that center social justice, including those combating racism. One of the most prominent examples of that in my world, as a political reporter, is connected to the Reverend William Barber, who we all know has been very vocal and visible in a lot of social justice work. A great book on the religious left you can check out by Jack Jenkins, he's at Religion News Service, and he does a really good job of writing about how the idea of the religious left is not new. It's not as cohesive as the religious right for multiple reasons, most of it being funding, but also because the religious left, like the left, I do believe is much more ideologically diverse than the religious right is like the right is. Another way the religious left has been very vocal very recently has been in the work of voting rights and some of the marches in response to that.

We often talk about white Evangelicals and politics in part because I do believe that history continues to prove that it is the most influential religious voting bloc in American politics. I think what 2020 did was introduce many people who were unfamiliar with it to the concept and the power of the Black church, specifically related to the Georgia election. That's in part because, as many of you know, Senator Rafael Warnock is a pastor, and a pastor of a very historic church in Georgia, Ebenezer Baptist Church, which was once co-pastored by Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King. The reason why all of that is tied to a lot of this voting rights work that you see many people on the religious left getting involved with is because when you look at some of the restrictions that some of these states have proposed to make voting much more difficult, one of the areas in which they would like to make voting more difficult is by making voting on Sundays something of the past. That is a time when many Black Americans would go to church, be moved to vote, leave service and actually go vote. That has gotten harder in the last couple years, specifically after Black Christians helped Georgia go blue for the first time in a very long time.

With all that being said, the role of the Black church and shaping American policy and democracy is not new to anyone familiar with the Civil Rights movement. It's fair to say that many, if not most, of Civil Rights activists who were very prominent in their time were, at the very least, ordained ministers if not pastors, as I mentioned Martin Luther King being one of them, the late John Lewis was an ordained minister as well. The influence that the Black church has had in the modern social justice movement had been less obvious in part because the Black Lives Matter movement, which is arguably the most prominent anti-racist movement fighting anti-Blackness, does not find its roots in the Black church.

Many of its core values are actually some that just aren't embraced by the Black church in terms of, in general, not all but in general, such as it being more progressive on issues related to the LGBT community and even women, to say the least.

As a journalist, with the role that the Black church played in the 2020 Election and will continue to play in how we view voting rights and other issues, I think there's been more interest among journalists and political journalists in how do you cover faith in America more broadly, especially when it comes to talking about a community that we haven't covered much and many of us have very limited exposure to and background with and familiarity with. That's been really fascinating because it brought up a bitter issue that we've been talking about quite a bit in journalism, which is the lack of diversity within journalism. There are very few, I mean even in places where there are large percentages of Black Christians, there have been very few people in newsrooms who have roots in the Black church. That shapes, as you can imagine, how this community is covered.

One thing that I've spoken about often that I found to be very fascinating about how the response to the George Floyd killing manifested as just the range of where protests existed. I covered the killing of Mike Brown in 2014, after Ferguson. Back then, protests were overwhelmingly Black and young. If you remember George Floyd, there were protests in Cheyenne, Wyoming and Anchorage, Alaska. As you can imagine, those were not predominately Black protests. But, what I think was very important, is if you went to some of them, the impetus was George Floyd but if you start talking to the people, all these communities had their own versions of George Floyd or something close to them. Many people in these newsrooms had not been covering these issues in this community. It led, at best, to some type of reflection in companies, in media companies, to say how have we missed this story so significantly? It's not just this thing that was happening in this part of the country but all over the place.

One of the ways, one of the reasons why this story was so missed was because newsrooms just aren't diverse and there aren't people often mindful of the issues happening in certain parts of a community because they're not in those parts of the community. So the response to that has varied, depending on the newsroom, in terms of what needs to be done to improve how a space is covered. There have been initiatives and efforts to diversify newsrooms on multiple levels, especially as we're gearing up for Midterms and future elections. But, that also has not happened in many places for multiple reasons, one of them obviously being funding, another one being the reality is that there are parts of the country that have naturally smaller populations of Black people and Latino people and Asian people, and there are parts of the country that people of color are less interested in going to.

I remember when I covered politics in Arizona for years and I remember when I was recruited to go there, the first question I asked the recruiter is "Do you all even celebrate MLK Day?" He laughed but it was uncomfortable, they did by that point but those of you all old enough to remember is all I knew growing up is that Arizonans did not like MLK. So I was screwed. Those reputations are hard to get rid of, even when you do make changes. That covers everything I wanted to touch and will certainly be able to answer questions as they come forward after Esau.

Esau McCaulley:

A little bit of a background to give what he said some context, I like to refer to myself as a son of the Black church. I grew up in Huntsville, Alabama in the shadow of the Civil Rights movement down the

road from Birmingham and Montgomery and Selma. At least in the Southern sense of the term it is down the road. I now teach at a white Evangelical institution. I've actually given versions of what I'm about to say before, but I've noticed that whenever I do, people always misunderstand me. What I'm actually going to do is two things, which is probably overly ambitious but what can I do? I'm going to give you a 10-minute history of the development of white theology and that's going to help to explain why Black Christian voices are always misunderstood. I think we're often put into someone else's narrative. So I'm going to tell you that narrative relatively briefly, which risks me doing two things that are a problem. One, giving you an overview of white theology that you maybe are vaguely familiar with, and then putting it in a black framework after that. I think it's at least helpful to get at why the Black Christian voice strikes us as unique and how we might actually contribute to the current context.

I have two jobs. I'm a professor but I also, like they said, write for the New York Times. This is going to be my professor mode. Can I do that? Is that okay? So I'm going to do what professors always do, which is go a little bit back in history to the Enlightenment. Do y'all remember the Enlightenment when you were in undergrad? Do you remember the Enlightenment? At least nod. I'm used to having undergrads, you got to nod a little bit. If you remember, the Enlightenment was the age of reason when we kind of came of age as a society and we got rid of all these backwards religious views. We put aside miracles and highlighted of the age of reason. One of the big issues there as it relates to the white Christian story, is the doubting of miracles, the distrust of authority, real resistance to the supernatural aspects of the Bible. The debate that broke out in white Christianity was between one group says that you can believe in these things and another group that says that you can't.

What becomes progressive white Christianity said that we need to remake religion in a way that's acceptable to modern man. So they do a lot of searches for the real Jesus. You guys read these? You all publish these stories every year on Easter the real Jesus. Isn't it amazing how the real Jesus is basically a white Western progressive intellectual who loves everybody? Yeah, there we go. So this was going on during this period in white churches. There's another thing that's actually going on at around the same time, which was the Industrial Revolution, which led to massive suffering and inequality, especially as it relates to children working in factories. So Christians started asking two questions at the exact same time, that we actually fight about from this time forward, in my argument, to the present day. The first question is this, what is the role of Christian faith in responding to social ills? What does Christianity have to do with the Industrial Revolution, the mass inequality created by the increasing technology? Question number one. Question number two, how do Christians respond to these new questions related to the miraculous aspects of Christianity like the resurrection and the walking on water? These are two things we were asking at roughly the same time.

This kind of plays about in the white Christian context in what is known as the fundamentalist-modernist debates. As an oversimplification, Christianity, white Christianity breaks into two parts. On one side, you have a group of people who have a strong emphasis on social action, called the Social Gospel. They say it is an important job for Christians to make the world a better place. Those people who emphasize social action are also the people who say that the miraculous aspects of the Bible need to kind of go away. So you have, in white Christian circles, social action, we should make the world a better place but all the kind of distinctively religious aspects of Christianity need to be revised in keeping with modern intellectual white society.

On the other side, you have what becomes the Fundamentalists who say no, we need to keep these supernatural aspects of the Bible, but for whatever reason they also say we shouldn't care about poor people. These two divides exist. These are what I call the white Christian binaries. One of the things that's really interesting about that is that even today, when we talk about what becomes of the Democratic Party and the Republican Party, the religious right and the religious left, are basically these two arguments playing themselves out. One group says that the Bible is the word of God and we need to keep Christian morals and caring about poor people is a little bit suspect. Then there are the progressive side of Christianity that says Christianity is only useful in so much as it's for some social good. Now, when Black people show up into this conversation, we're put into this narrative. We're either part of the religious right or the religious left. I am very hesitant to name Black people who I disagree with publicly, but you can imagine the representative Black conservative who they just put forward who basically affirms this kind of genuine distrust for racism, originalist conservatism, or a Black progressive who is theologically progressive but also cares about social issues.

The interesting thing about telling this story, which is the way that the religious story is often told in America, is it leaves a lot of stuff out like slavery, Jim Crow, and the entire Black church experience. As white Christians tell their story, Black people just kind of emerge in the 1960s, all born of James Cone. This is not a shot at James Cone, but basically James Cone becomes the birth of what becomes Black Christianity because he reaches national prominence as a Black theologian. The problem with this is it leaves out the entire history of the Black church. One of the complicating factors in this is when Evangelicals tell this story, they're the heroes. In other words, when Christianity is in danger from the liberals, Evangelicals swoop in and save the faith. I'd say what they often leave out is the people who are saving the faith were also segregationists. The people who are one side of what would become the religious right were often the people who said Jim Crow is fine, slavery is fine.

The other thing that I actually say is what becomes the religious left also has this racist paternalism too because things like eugenics and other things that come out of the religious and secular left are also legacies. You actually have both progressive manifestations of anti-Blackness and conservative manifestations of anti-Blackness that is left out of the story. They're told as if they are just these two different ideologies that are going on. The way that I like to help my students understand this is we tend to think of America beginning at the Mayflower. We kind of tell the American story as a bunch of people encountering white people and white people responding to them. If you imagine the white family that goes through history, they encounter the Indigenous people, they kind of encounter these different groups, and they become more or less racist through time as they encounter different groups and go through history. The story is centered by a white framework in responding to what's going on in a white context.

Well what happens if you tell the story in the opposite way? Not just the story of America, but the story of Christianity beginning with the Black person who arrives on the slave ship. How did they experience Christianity? That shift is what I actually want to talk to you about. How does the story sound different when you talk about the beginning of Christianity in America from a Black perspective? Now, I'm going to read a quote that was given to an African American slave congregation before they would agree to be baptized in the 1700s. I'm just going to read it because it's important for you to hear: "You declare in the presence of God and before this congregation that you do not ask for holy baptism out of any design to free yourself from the duty and obedience that you owe to your master while you live, but merely for the good of your soul." So in other words, they came down into the plantations and the white churches

said "We will baptize you under one condition: if you agree that Christianity cares only about your soul and not your body." As you can imagine, this is not a super effective means of evangelization, so a lot of Black people passed on that offer. Christianity in the first attempt to evangelize Black people in the South was largely unsuccessful because who is going to accept that we're going to be slaves forever?

Interestingly enough, the roots of what becomes the Black church, much to our chagrin, actually comes from Evangelicalism and the Second Great Awakening. So the Evangelicals come down to – this is an oversimplification by the way but we only have 20 minutes - they come back down to those same slave plantations and they begin to talk to them about Christianity, but they do some stuff on accident. They start talking about how all people are sinners, that we're all equally sinners before God. The slaves go, oh, if I'm equally a sinner before God then you don't actually have the right to enslave me. So they said okay, I can become a Christian if the basic premise of Christianity is that we're all equal. The other thing that actually happens when African American become Christians is a strong emphasis on *imago dei*. Sorry, I'm going to do theology, is that okay? You at least have this stereotype in your mind that Christianity tell us that we're all horrible and that God loves you and you can be better, right? Well if you're in a Black context and they're already saying that you're horrible, well they just added to the pool of horrible when they called themselves that. So what the actual preaching of sinfulness did was create equality.

In other words, African Americans heard the story of Christianity not first as a humbling of them to come to God, but actually a statement about their value before God, a strong emphasis that everybody was made in God's image whether you're Black, brown, yellow or blue, whatever it was. So what happens at the African American church is not a huge emphasis on sinfulness being the prerequisite to salvation, but the idea that we're all made in God's image. And because we're all made in God's image, we can't be enslaved.

The black churches began to be founded. And initially they were part of white churches. The first black church has founded when Richard Allen goes down - Richard Allen and Absalom Jones - they go and kneel before the front of the church to pray. This is a famous story in the black church context. They're carried out from the front, and told to go back up into the segregated pews in order to practice their religion. And they say, well, this isn't going to work. So they leave and they formed the first black denomination, the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Now the interesting thing about this is that once they're founded, they have these things called catechisms. These are like belief statements that you have to hold to in order to be baptized. And there's an interesting quote here that I quote in my book. In order to be baptized in the African Methodist Episcopal church you have to answer the question this way.

This is the question: 'What should be done for the extermination of slavery?' Answer: 'We will not receive any in our society as a member who is a slave holder, and any who are now members that have slaves and refuse to emancipate them, being given by the past, that shall be excluded.'

Interestingly enough, if you think about these two things, white churches come in and say, 'We will only baptize you if you agree that God doesn't care if you're a slave.' The black church says the opposite. By

the way, this is all notional. You know, very few Africans, there was some, but very few African-Americans actually owned slaves. So 99% of the time, this is a notional question, but just so you know, when you joined the team in the Black church, no slaves.

So what happens then in the founding of what becomes black churches? My favorite quote is by a guy named William J. Simmons. He's a black Baptist - probably the dominant form of black religion in America is probably the black Baptist tradition - possibly overtaken at this point by the black Pentecostals.

But he's talking about what it means for him to be a Christian about 20 years after the end of the Civil War. This 1887, 20 years after the Civil War. And I'm going to quote him again. He talks about what it means that God has permitted us to triumph, and through him, he has implanted in us a vigorous spiritual tree. And since freedom, how has this been growing? He says, we have started thousands of schools, built thousands of churches, educated millions of children, supported thousands of ministers of the gospel, organized societies for the care of the sick, and the burying of the dead.

In other words, because the African-American church grew out of slavery, it was the central organization. The first thing that black communities built coming out of slavery was black churches. Most historically black colleges and universities also come out of black Christian backgrounds. Most actually, even secular black organizations like the NAACP, also have their roots in black churches.

And so the black church becomes this place out of which most of what we would call the social transformation of black life comes from. Because especially after reconstruction, white people weren't trying to help black people, just to be honest, in the south.

So I want to say a couple of things about what comes out of the early postures of black Christianity and America out of this period. And I'm going to talk about three strands, and I want you to believe me because I don't have time to give you the full lecture. Okay?

The mainstream version of what I would call black Christianity in America becomes what I call the transformational tradition. That's this idea that society can be changed, and there can be brotherhood on the other side of justice. You might think of someone like Frederick Douglas.

One of the interesting stories about Fred is that there is a German woman who he actually did a lot of abolitionist work with, who asked him at a certain point - it's in his biography, in the autobiography of Frederick Douglas - who says, 'Why don't you give up Christianity? It's a kind of negative, it's holding you back. This is the moment. Why don't you kind of adopt a secular perspective on abolition?' And Fred goes, 'No, it's my Christian faith.'

So there is a strong tradition of critique of America based upon his failure to live up to his Christian ideals, and a calling for it to be what it says it's supposed to be. Frederick Douglas does this, the civil rights movement does this. That's one option.

The other tradition that you see is what I would call the black radical tradition, in which they look at the evil that is done in America and say, America's fundamentally wicked. Christianity is complicit in this wickedness in a way that is not even easily distinguished. And they call for both a transformation of America and a transformation of Christianity.

And the third strand is what I would call the accommodationist strand, which actually begins to appear much later than it does at this period. I used to be meaner to some of these people when I read about them at the time. But what I would say is the accommodationists are people who basically adopt the talking points of majority white culture.

They don't push back strongly against the slavery movement like the abolitionist movement does. They say, we should focus on the salvation of souls, and they don't really push back on the dominant white narrative.

But in that context, especially during something like Jim Crow, your life was on the line. There's this image of the entirety of the black church participating in the civil rights movement. That's actually not true. There is, I think it was in the national Baptist convention, but Martin Luther King at the height of the civil rights movement actually gets run out of this denomination because they refused to adopt the progressive social action critique. But that's much easier for me to say from the prospective of 2021, where being like socially out there isn't going to get me killed in the exact same way.

So there are three strands that come out of the early black church tradition: the transformational tradition, the accommodationist, and the radical tradition.

And so, if you look and say, 'Well, then what is actually the legacy of the black church in America?' It is this: Because the black church in America is born during the period of slavery, it never had the luxury of separating the spiritual from the political. In other words, from the moment that they heard about Christianity, they had to ask themselves this question: What did this God have to say about the enslavement of my black body?

We treat slavery like a moral issue when it was a legal issue. And so the abolitionist movement was an attempt to actually change American law. African-American Christianity was always inescapably political, but it was also strangely enough, for a variety of reasons, coming out of the evangelical Great Awakening, relatively religiously traditional.

In other words, if you got to go back to the original story that I told, social gospel and theological revision go down one strand and white churches and resistance to social action and kind of traditional belief goes down this way. Black churches often find themselves religiously being seen as a little bit strange.

I think you all notice this, right? Black Christians tend to be more socially progressive and theologically traditional. Why was this the case? Because when the black church was founded, it was not founded upon the same binary that split white Christianity.

So what is really difficult for me as a writer, and as someone who writes about religion and faith in America, is that I find myself often put into a series of white buckets. I teach at a white evangelical institution, and so people just download a series of religious assumptions about me that aren't true. But, on the other hand, the white progressive tradition that often sees itself as the bastion of black culture, the ones who are able to give their seal of approval, and if we like this black guy then he gets to speak for black people, also kind of go, well, you're not in charge of me either. And so what I would actually urge reporters to do is to learn to put black Christians into conversations with other black people, instead of putting them along this white spectrum of the story that we know so well.

Because there is an ongoing debate within black Christianity about the means and nature of liberation. The debate between Martin Luther King and what we call the black power movement is actually a Christian theological debate that happens within black communities.

The black community does not run from left to right with the same set of clusters that are often stereotypical in white Christian circles. Although we have our same theological divides around conservative versus liberal, more often about the best ways to deal with anti-blackness, related to the possibility of America to change versus hopefulness about that America can.

So what I would actually really, really urge people to do is to take time in their writing, to frame black stories in black contexts. Because one of the things that I think is going on now is that the internet created a, 'here comes everybody' scenario.

In other words, we're all talking within constantly different stories, and those stories are being heard in different ways, depending on your context. I can say more about the black church and its own contribution, but I think I'll stop there.

Sewell Chan:

Starting with Esau. So I'd like to ask a little bit about the generational changes going on right now within black thought. You know, I encountered James Cone's book about white racism, and Derrick Bell's book when I was in college in the late 1990s. And if I'd had to guess which book would be more influential over time, it probably would have said at the time Cone.

But now actually with the reemergence of discussion around critical race theory, I want to pause for a moment and say that what people, what white people have labeled critical race theory is very, very, very far from others. But right now it seems to me that certain intellectual strands are dominant that are exclusively kind of post-Christian, to be frank. Afro futurism, Afro pessimism, the works of Octavia Butler, Ta-Nehisi Coates is very adamant about not offering a kind of narrative of absolution, of redemption, of salvation.

You know, this is a very, very stark and clear-eyed approach to structural racism right now that seems pretty, it would be almost naive, too simplistic to say it's secular because it actually, in some ways reminds me of kind of European philosophical traditions that are very much bleak. And I would say that's kind of intellectually what's very much in favor right now. And I'm curious if you agree with that.

Esau McCaulley:

I think that that conversation is really important, but let me tell you what frustrates me about how it gets appropriated. In other words, Ta-Nehisi Coates and others arrive at a secular view of the world rooted in kind of a certain analysis of the black Christian, the black experience in America, which is actually relatively common.

What happens is those conclusions are actually adopted by white progressives who came to those conclusions for different ends. And then the black secular person becomes the voice of black people. You see how that works. So he, Ta-Nehisi Coates, is not seen in dialogue with others. That's what I was trying to say. He's not seeing it as a dialogue within the larger black church. He's conforming to the white secular progressive narrative.

That's what I tried to say, that like the black radical thought has been there from the beginning. It's not new. Like Ta-Nehisi Coates, he has his own set of intellectual issues. And so what I would actually like to see is a dialogue putting Ta-Nehisi Coates into that context. In other words, the black secularism or black thought, is taken out of this dialogue. It loses his dialogical partners.

And even Cone. Cone is trying to say that black power can be Christianized. All right. Cone is responding to this idea that black power...Cone is actually saying, 'Hey, black power is going in one direction, but it can actually be Christian. Here are the ways in which black power is compatible with Christianity.'

And then someone goes, 'No, like you can't do that.' You have someone like Roberts, or even - obviously King is not in conversation with Cone - but King's like, here are the problems of black power. But what happens when you take Cone out of that conversation among that community, then you make Cone or Coates the representatives of black Christianity to serve other ends.

That's where I think it becomes complicated. What critical race theory gets right is a certain disappointment about the periods of long-term change coming out of the civil rights movement.

Probably the best book about this is by Baldwin, which actually covers James Baldwin's own existential angst after the failures of civil rights movement. He's the last one alive and he's talking about the failure.

What I see is that what's become black secularism in part is an analysis of the failures of the Christian hopeful vision of the world of transformation through faith based activism. And that's actually true. I think that's interesting, and I am someone who would say in my own context, I am making the reaffirmation that, despite the fact that that movement failed in a lot of ways, it's still useful.

You're correct that the dominant public discourse are the people who've seen the limitations of the civil rights movement, and its own hypocrisy, and its own brokenness and are now trying a different way.

But I would wonder if that perspective is more represented in public discourse than the actual community which it represents. I know it's growing among young black people. It's undoubtedly influential, but I do think there are other strands of that tradition also.

It's important to say this out loud. There is an idealized picture of the civil rights movement in which all of these civil rights leaders were like these wonderful Christians who were just like out saving the world. But there's been lots of studies about how women were mistreated in the civil rights movement, and especially how some of the things they did that were influential in that movement were suppressed.

You're seeing kind of a similar demographic or sociological analysis of the black church in similar ways. And some of that stuff is becoming public, even though it's not as big as the exit evangelical movement. But you're starting to see those kinds of studies about the ways even the black church has its own issues that it needs to deal with.

Josh Good:

Let's go next to Christine Emba, a columnist and editor at Washington Post, with a forthcoming book.

Christine Emba:

Thank you for these presentations. They're both really interesting. I actually was wanting to follow up on that question. I think that you, Esau, are really correct. In fact, that some of the most popular black writers and thinkers in liberal circles are the most celebrated do tend to be the ones who agree with that particular agenda, which kind of makes sense. People love people who agree with them, especially if it's flattering to have that person agree with them.

But in thinking about how even members of the black church, or some people within the black church movement, have been thinking aloud about and responding to what does seem to be a growing secularization, even among, you know, not famous Atlantic columnists. But you know, the leaders of the black lives movement who, you know, sort of openly pushed back against the tenants of what might be called traditional black church theology, whether it's a focus on the family or traditional, you know, sex and gender roles.

And also just among young people in general, but even in the black church, not necessarily just futurism, but alternatives to Christianity altogether. You know, not just pushing back against Christianity because it feels like it's identifying with values that they disagree with, but you know, Christianity wholesale, even the black church being sort of something put upon black people by an outside oppressor white community.

That thinking seems more visible to me lately. And also it seems to be drawing people in the same way actually that you know, many white and other millennials and young people leaving religion and church movements. Where would you locate that? Cause I don't think you can just say that they're the favorites.

Esau McCaulley:

Oh no, I'm sorry. I apologize if I said that. I apologize if I implied that it only exists in that. What I was trying to say is that white reporters tend to be drawn to that story. I think that African-Americans have, first of all, it's a more open culture. And so if you have a more open culture, people have more options, then they're going to choose to do other things. That's the first part.

And the second part is what I was trying to get at earlier is the sociological attention to the theories of black Christianity that have become more public. And that's what I was trying to get at that, even though it's not public in the same way, at least ex-evangelical stories are, there have been a lot of studies about some of the things that black churches have done poorly, as being one issue.

In order to answer this question, I have to say a little bit about like theology. Forgive me. One of the things that happened coming out of black churches is because there was not a lot of infrastructure, Black pastors were also involved in industry.

So the black pastor was the most educated member of the congregation or the community. They were both the pastor and the businessman, and because most black churches were Baptist in their polity, there wasn't a lot of checks and balances. And so what you actually have is a lot of concentration of power in black pastors. But black pastors, because they were also mediators to the white community, a lot of influence for corruption. So the black pastor in the black church was sometimes the economical, political and religious center of that community.

Well, that's a whole lot to ask over a hundred years of people not to go corrupt. What you actually had is the corruption of the black pastor, because of access to these things.

And so I would say that the religious trauma visited by black leaders in black spaces is one reason. The expansion of religious opportunities is going to always lead to people choosing to do more than the other one.

And you have the actual complicity of Christianity in anti-blackness. So all of those three things are things that I think are... And then, sorry, the fourth one, the experiences of the black middle-class, which led to it no longer being worth it to participate in civil rights movement and kind of the black churches pulling back from the justice work, being replaced by secular organizations.

And so it wasn't like when the black lives matter movement started, they like push Christians out of the way. Christianity was already in the streets. But you know, the expansion of the black middle-class led to kind of the black suburban pastorate. So there are a bunch of problems going on with black religious spaces.

There's another one that's a much larger conversation about what happens when black Christians go to majority white institutions and kind of the breakdown of religious cohesion from black churches and HBCUs back into black communities where there's a much more closed and symbiotic system versus going out into the wider majority white institution which weakened black churches.

So the black church has a lot of different factors leading to why it became what it became. Because now black pastors are not beholden to people in black communities, they're beholden to people who are in white suburbs who then drop into their black churches.

Christine Emba:

I'm going to follow up, I promise I'm almost done. Eugene, this was a question for you too. I guess I feel like I've been just hearing rumblings of these fissures, unrelated to relationships with sort of the white outside world.

But is that something that is, that you see represented in politics and political action or has it risen to that level of visibility? I'm thinking of, you know, there may be fissures within the black church, but you know, still got together and elected Joe Biden, right? So how big are those fissures?

Eugene Scott:

You know, I think about this often. I was, more than 15 years ago, profiled in a book by David Kinnaman called "You Lost Me," which was looking at, you know, young people disconnecting from conservative Christianity.

And I was a lay leader in an evangelical church at that time. And for the most part back then, when we thought about the religiously affiliated and the nones, that large event was skewed as a white people thing. Black people were still going to church.

We have seen that it's not as much the case as it used to be, even though there's still a gap. And I very much think, I mean, so many of the reasons you mentioned as the case are the reason why that's happening is true. We've talked about, you know, the middle-class and something that's also tied to that is increased higher education opportunities for black people.

As they become more educated and have been exposed to more ideas and more philosophies, and reasons for good and bad, and why things happen, the faith of their grandparents is just not sufficient enough of an answer. Also combined with, you know, we have more examples of these institutions being untrustworthy, that also leads to the decline of faith.

Also just data collecting in general for black people, it's just always going to be later and weaker than white people. And so it's been fascinating. I mean, if you were to Google, you'd find an increase in organizations of like black atheist or black agnostics.

I was talking to a friend of mine who has her master's in divinity from Howard Divinity, very prominent HBCU, who used to be a minister. And she's now an atheist. And she was talking about the need for something to be a culturally black church, kind of like culturally Jewish and culturally Catholic.

She's like, I know a lot of us who were born and bred in the black church who are no longer subscribing to the worldview that was taught. And 15 to 20 years ago, I did not know these people, but I probably know I'm an elderly millennial and I probably know more black agnostic and atheists than I can count. Yeah.

Esau McCaulley:

And I would agree. Like I write most of the things that I write with that community in mind, people who were once affiliated with black churches who are now skeptical, precisely because they've seen the irrelevance of black religion to deal with issues of the day.

So when I wrote on George Floyd, I wrote about it from the perspective of the black church, precisely because I wanted people who read it to at least see that aspect of their tradition.

One of the other things, and this is what I mean when I say things that are off the radar, because you asked the question earlier. There's been a lot of research now about African Christianity, precisely in response to this idea that Christianity is the white man's religion. And because it comes through the slave holders and there's been a strong emphasis, interestingly enough, on African Christianity, which ends up being not Baptist, but it's like Coptic.

It's funny that there's like these Ethiopian black churches and these Coptic black churches are being presented to black churches as evidence of the example of Christianity coming into black spaces, African colonialism.

I have seen it, but it's coming, it's showing itself in a variety of ways. But I've never seen like any national column about the turn to African Christianity in black churches, which is weird because black Baptists talking about like Coptics who are singing like acapella Psalms, and those little pictures are those, those YouTube clips, those churches are spreading around black communities, precisely because of the problems that you're talking about.

Josh Good:

Let's go next to one of our speakers recruiters, Scott Wilson,

Scott Wilson:

Two questions, and maybe both could answer. One is maybe you could explain a little bit about during the civil rights movement, and the black Christian Church and the fracturing of that movement into what emerged as Islam for a portion, a segment of black nationalists in particular, and the rise of Islam within the black community, and what that says about the black Christian Church.

Are these people that saw the Christian, the black Christian Church as accommodationist, that strand you talked about? Are these the radical strand and it just couldn't hold them anymore? And so I, and you know, in the prison system, Islam is, you know, very strong in its recruiting. I won't say stronger than Christianity, I don't know, but really makes a lot of progress in recruiting there. Or is it just a posture of resistance basically to the American system and the accommodationist black Christian Church in particular?

The other question is, and there's probably more for Eugene. We heard a lot during the Trump administration that Trump quote unquote gave license to large segments of the society to be racist, to say racist things out in the open that they never would have before. Seems kind of simple. And I'm wondering, just kind of your assessment of that, kind of that phrase and that motivation, if that holds water for you.

Eugene Scott:

Briefly before Esau talks about black Americans leaving the black church, following the civil rights movement, because he has more historical knowledge in that area. I was just going to note, and you know, there's a new Ken Burns documentary on Mohammad Ali that many of you all may have heard about that I haven't seen, but have heard a lot about.

And I only bring it up because it's by no means an irrelevant question, it's always important to know that the percentage of black Americans who are like a part of like the nation of Islam. It's way smaller, way smaller than the mainstream media has ever given it.

And that, that doesn't mean it's insignificant because Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad are two incredibly influential black Americans, especially during their time period. But while there definitely was flight from the black church during that period, it was not by the numbers that people tend to think.

Esau McCaulley:

I think should have used the language black religion rather than Christianity in the earlier part. So when I talk about the spectrum, like the nation of Islam was ever present in my own context. And I considered joining the Nation of Islam when I was in middle school. Because everybody did. It felt like everybody thought about becoming a Black Muslim, but nobody did, in the context. He did, he thought about the two, like Malcolm.

Eugene Scott:

I would tell you X by Spike Lee was incredibly influential... I remember while we were a very Baptist family, my younger brother was in fourth grade reading the full autobiography of Malcolm X.

Esau McCaulley:

I read the autobiography in sixth grade.

Eugene Scott:

Yeah. Yeah.

Esau McCaulley:

And so what I wanted to say is, the critique of Black religion, Malcolm X did a great job of it. The perpetual question is: Is this religion any good for Black people? Seeing both in Malcolm X and in different manifestations now in the Black secular movement has always been there. You can go back as far as you want to these debates and what I'm trying to say is, that debate has always, from the Christian perspective, it has actually been good for Black churches because it's kept them from resting upon their laurels. There's always been someone who's standing outside saying, "You're not doing enough. You're capitulating." And during different points of the history of the Black church, that has been more or less true.

And so I don't know if the Nation of Islam has ever been as influential as it has been covered. But the voice or the criticism of Black faith has gained more sympathetic hearings at points of pressure. So the Nation of Islam gained a sympathetic hearing in the context of the Civil Rights Movement, because it

was a time of reckoning with anti-Black racism in America. Where in the Trump presidency, the criticism of Black religion to not transform society in ways we promised, it's also gaining a fresh hearing.

So here's historical context, this actually happens all the time in the history of Black America. We periodically look up and go, "Is Christianity working for us?" You can go back to the abolitionist movement. There's always this idea of is this the right thing for us? And so I don't think there's ever been a time when that question hasn't always been there and pressing. What is unique is I think the thumb on the scale of the fact that it's not working from communities that don't actually know the other parts of the Black argument. I just keep reading this. I'm not asking for a privileged space, but for a more nuanced wrestling with these things in public.

Because for example, during the Civil Rights Movement, I'm just guessing this is the case, but no one actually knew about the interior struggle of those Black denominations with King and against King, where they were asking within the Black church, is the Civil Rights Movement a good thing? It's now heard as, everybody Black was on the Civil Rights Movement. That's not true at all.

And so what I guess I'm trying to get at is, we are really good at framing white Christian stories. But I don't think we're very good at framing the Black Christian story. Martin Luther King deals with it. I'll stop. You should read, there's these parts where King just goes into four or five pages of arguments that are not religious at all, where he's talking about the pragmatic failures of revolution. He's like, "We don't got enough people. We don't got enough money." And he's saying this, because he's not talking to white people. He's saying to Black people, "We can't win in this way. And here are five pragmatic reasons." You can read this in places like Chaos or Community. And so what I'm saying is there is a robust Black religious debate that I find super interesting. And the Nation of Islam is a key conversation partner.

Eugene Scott:

In relation to your second question, concerns about Trump giving specifically white evangelical pastors permission to put forward ideas that are racist or deemed to be racist that years ago, they would've been more anxious to share, I think is directly tied to an exodus of Black people from predominantly white churches, and people of color more broadly. And this has been covered in the New York Times. It's been covered in the Washington Post. And it's noteworthy, considering how much work had been done the 20 years before to make spaces more multicultural. There were movements that were almost measuring, is your church at least a fifth people of color? And those of us who were covering race and faith in politics in 2016, so many of the things that Trump would say in 2016 or 2017, that white evangelical pastors would apologize for, feel uncomfortable with, they just aren't apologizing for it anymore.

I tweeted a piece, I believe yesterday, 61% of white evangelicals believe that the 2020 election was stolen. They are to your point, very comfortable now. Not obviously everyone, but significant percentages backing thinks that so many individuals have been working to view as deplorable. I remember I started at the Washington Post, as you remember, a week or two before Donald Trump was campaigning for the Senate candidate in Alabama, where when he was talking about NFL players protesting, he said, "Get those son of a bitches off the stage." This was in Alabama. In response to cheers, as you can imagine, many of the people in that crowd self-identified as white evangelical.

That is something that four to five years ago, before, when people were wondering if Rick Santorum is going to be the next, evangelical Republican, evangelical Catholic Republican to be influential, that just would not have gotten said. Just briefly, I remember the hesitancy to which Franklin Graham got behind Trump in 2016 versus 2020, it's just mind blowing. And they got to a point where justifications were given for things that were blatantly racist or just flat out ignoring them. And as a result, spaces where many Black Christians may have felt comfortable before, they just don't.

Esau McCaulley:

Just 30 seconds. I think that one thing that people don't know is that the second largest gathering of Black Christians in America are in evangelical churches. So I think the numbers will be wrong. Something like 60 to 70% of African Americans who go to church go to historically Black churches. The next largest percentage is evangelicals. And I can't remember if it's 13 or 19%. Then after that it's Roman Catholic. And then after that, it's what you would call mainline denominations.

What Eugene was talking about was a massive exodus. So that 19%, where people came out of Black churches, went to universities and then came into evangelical churches. And those evangelical churches were becoming multiracial until the Trump presidency. And so what you're actually seeing now in the Black Exodus, what was not really covered was the Black introduction coming into majority white colleges and running into evangelicalism there. And that's what you're actually seeing, the loudest voice of disaffected Black people who are struggling with evangelical spaces or the people who came in during the things are going to be great movement, and you're seeing the aftermath of it now.

Josh Good:

Kelsey Dallas. Deseret News.

Kelsey Dallas:

Eugene, I wanted to follow up on the comment you made about the 2020 election introducing a lot of Americans to the power of the Black church as a voting bloc. And I think you were talking about maybe the Republican party might be following up on that information with making it harder for the Black church to vote, at least on Sundays. What is the Democratic party doing with that information?

Eugene Scott:

Well, you may have heard of the voting outreach effort called Souls to the Polls. And that is when in places like South Carolina and places like Georgia, churches would, try to get their people to go from church to the voting booth. And these legislatures, in many of these states, which are Republican-led, have tried to make that illegal and eliminate those programs. The main response from Democrats has been to draw attention to that. And when you hear blanket statements like the GOP is racist, which of course is frustrating to many people, it's this type of thing that these people are talking about, when they feel that Black Christians are being targeted and making things more difficult to vote. And so if I remember correctly, efforts to eliminate Souls to the Polls in Georgia was not effective. I didn't follow up on Texas and in South Carolina, but just shining a light on what these restrictions look like and who they're disproportionately more likely to affect has been the main response from Democrats.

Kelsey Dallas:

I was just wondering if that's kind of frustrating in the sense that Democratic leaders might be acting as defenders or critics of that approach, but not doing more positive work if that makes sense, like let's respond to your values, let's listen to the Black voters about what they want our party to focus on. So I hope that makes sense. Basically, it's like, "We're going to get the GOP away from you, but we're not going to then be proactive about some other issue that these voters care about."

Eugene Scott:

They would argue that they're doing both. And I think it's fair in many cases to say that that is definitely what is happening. But there will always be criticism towards the Democratic party, that the Republicans don't like you, it's not sufficient enough of an outreach, a strategy. And it perhaps happened in the past in some spaces, but not now. And one of the reasons it's not as effective is because we saw, more Black people voted for Trump in 2016 than people thought. And that number went up in 2020. There are obviously people who do align with Trump who are Black, philosophically and politically, but there are also a group of Black Americans who don't have this deep voting history and pattern tied to the Democratic party who were free for outreach.

One of the things that's so fascinating about Trump doing better with many Black voters, specifically Black men, than any modern presidential candidate, is many Black people have said for years that the GOP could win more Black voters if they targeted Black voters. Because as Esau mentioned, there's a lot of ideological conservatism within the Black church, but they didn't see a political party that pursued them and made them an argument to come support them. And the truth is the Trump campaign did in some very specific ways that that was ultimately winsome for them.

Esau McCaulley:

One of the things that people don't often attend to is if you can say Detroit, Atlanta, and Philadelphia were centers of criticism around voting irregularities in the Democratic, I mean the Republican party, these are places where these things went corrupt. The questioning of Michigan and Georgia. Well, those are Black Christian strongholds. And this gets to the racism critique, when you start talking about disenfranchising, overturning the votes in these major metropolitan areas, they were won by the Democrats by the Black vote. That's how this voting question gets turned racist, because you're effectively saying Detroit, Atlanta, Philadelphia, I think Milwaukee, these places where a lot of these elections hinge, in the Black urban vote. And when you start hearing people say, "Well, we need to slow this down," it is frustrating to hear these blanket statements of racism. But that's received in Black communities when you're trying to overturn these places where the cheating happened, because the accusation that the cheating is all where there's a lot of Black people. And so that's where you get some of the racism criticism.

Josh Good:

So first up is Miranda Kennedy from NPR.

Miranda Kennedy:

Thanks. So Esau, I think you said at the beginning that the Black church is more progressive than the white church.

Esau McCaulley:

No, I think that the frame of progressive and conservative is, they're clustered along different issues. So what I was trying to get at is if you look at something from the Nation of Islam on one end all the way through to what you would call, I call it Black accommodationalism, and then the Black transformational strand, I don't think that the Black Christian tradition functions around defining conservative and liberal along the same sets of clusters that exist in white churches.

But what you would say, if I'm going to translate this, which is what I have to do oftentimes, is to say that Black churches tend to be socially progressive in the sense that it tends to vote overwhelmingly Democratic. So in that sense, it tends to be socially progressive. And theologically traditional. Which in white churches, those things are clustered together. The being theologically traditional goes along with being politically right-leaning, and Black churches in general vote overwhelmingly Democratic, but would have something like a strong belief in the Bible and a belief in the literal resurrection of Jesus and the importance of prayer or something like that. So actually, you can do this. The closest political cluster of Black political views are actually secular Jews. So if you start asking them political questions, we tend to line up with secular Jews on a host of political questions. But if you then look at religious practices, we practice our religions, church attendance, Bible reading, prayer like evangelical Christians.

Miranda Kennedy:

On issues of gender and sexuality though, I don't think that the Black church is that different from the white evangelical church. Is that correct? Or is that something-

Esau McCaulley:

We were just talking about this. Actually the Black church is still traditional, but it's not as traditional as evangelical churches. **Generally speaking. But once again, I would say that defining liberal or conservative by sexuality is a white framing. You can disagree, but if we say that what makes you a conservative or a liberal is based upon the answer to these sets of questions, who decides which sets of questions cluster you in what community? We were talking about the sexuality question. I think it's 60/40 in Black churches. Namely, 60% of African American protestants hold to a traditional view of marriage.** And I would guess it would be something like 80/20 in evangelical churches. I don't know the number in evangelical churches, but actually even on those questions, they don't line up in exactly the same way.

Eugene Scott:

But the reason why that's so important, and my white evangelical friends tend to be shocked by this, is the reason why it's so important to note that that framing doesn't always work, it's because in most Black churches, the abortion and LGBT issues are discussed so much less than white evangelical churches. The idea that that would be a defining issue for these congregations, it's shocking that so many decisions about how people will engage politics in conservative Christianity are shaped around abortion and LGBT issues. One of the reasons why so many Black Christians do tend to vote left is because a topic that is discussed so much more, it's the idea of caring for the least of these and loving your neighbor as yourself. And ideologically, most Black Christians believe that that's a higher priority for the Democratic party.

Esau McCaulley:

Josh Good:

Quick follow up to Esau, if this is a room of journalists and your fundamental encouragement to us is to not get locked into one binary or our binary or our frame when trying to understand the larger story, the true story, the other story, do you have a meta piece of advice for how to actually do that? Sewell was talking about paradox and the craft of journalism story. What's your best piece of advice for how to do it?

Esau McCaulley:

I think about conversation partners. I always think about conversation partners. And if you just add the Black voice into a white conversation, it is often distorting. What I'm saying is, there tends to be three or four white perspectives and then the Black perspective, versus three or four Black perspectives. Or, the other thing is the rhetorical use of, I'm going to give the alternative Black voice, but it's a crazy person. I'm just being honest. So the alternative Black voice is this person who we all know is clearly ridiculous, but now we've shown the alternative side. And so I guess what I would ask for is more Black voices.

I think about this when I talk about television. And once again, it's the importance of clustering identities and representation. But sometimes when you cluster identity representation, it's to actually put all of that stuff in one character. So I think this is the rule. Like in movies, where there are two women who are talking or not talking about a man or love interest, that's one way of thinking about it. And so are Black people allowed to have Black conversations that don't center how they fit within the white perspective for their readers?

One of the things that I did in my book is I opened the book with the story of Outkast at the Source Awards, where a lot of white people didn't even know what the Source Awards were. But if you're a Black person from the South, you knew about the Source Awards. And so when I go into white settings and they start with Seinfeld references or whatever, it's a white framing. I'm always translating. And so what I like to do as a writer is disorient readers by putting them in a Black world without explaining it. And maybe that's bad journalism, but I think it's important to allow Black voices to argue with each other. That's what I would want to say.

Josh Good:

Thank you. Jon Fasman, The Economist.

Jon Fasman:

Thank you. This is sort of ends up being a follow up to Miranda's question and it's so basic almost feel I ought to apologize. But again, I'm a secular Jew, this is just unfamiliar territory to me. You said that Black churches tend to be socially progressive and theologically conservative. I suppose I want to know, what in this context is theological conservatism and what would a theologically non-conservative church believe and look like?

Esau McCaulley:

Something like the belief in the literal resurrection of Jesus. The belief in the importance of the Bible for guiding faith and practice.

Jon Fasman:

Does that mean there are churches do not believe in the literal resurrection of Jesus?

Esau McCaulley:

Yes.

Eugene Scott:

Mainline.

Esau McCaulley:

Yes, there are. There's a spectrum. There are churches that kind of think that the Bible is only useful so much as it confirms the current cultural, social, and political consensus of left leaning America. And so those are ways which I would speak about the relationship between being theological... When I say theologically traditional, it's nothing revolutionary. It's kind of like what Christians have always thought that Christianity was about.

Jon Fasman:

In the African American church, theological conservatism often aligns with social progressivism?

Esau McCaulley:

Yes.

Jon Fasman:

It is not the case in white churches.

Esau McCaulley:

What I think people don't really understand is that the sexuality and gender debates come later. That if you go back to the fundamentalist modernist debates, it's not about sexuality and gender. That's the way that this divides now, but this argument actually precedes that question. And so when you all hear theologically conservative, you think, "Oh, it's conservative on sexuality." But if you go back to when these questions were being asked, the questions were about, how do you think about the Bible? How do you think about the Trinity? How do you think about the resurrection? What do you think about the Virgin birth? And then these things manifest themselves in a bunch of ways, different cultural warrior issues kind of appear that are important.

It doesn't mean that the Black churches don't have like a traditional definition of marriage, and on the most part they still do. But if you dig beneath that, there tends to be more nuanced ways of talking about the varied issues at play.. Many black churches might hold to a traditional definition of marriage within an ecclesial context on the one hand and be vocal support for legal protections for same sex couples on the other. It is not just a

Eugene Scott:

Nuanced, but not complicated, right?

Esau McCaulley:

Yeah.

Eugene Scott:

And so as I think I mentioned, my younger brother is a pastor in Charlotte, in a Black church. And what he would say, because he's more conservative on this issue, like many people in his congregation, he would say, "I believe that God's ideal is that marriage would be between a man and a woman. However, I don't believe that it should be legal to discriminate against gay people based on their sexual orientation." And that's why you see a lot of Black people, to your point, sympathizing with the LGBT movement when it comes to policy issues. Immigration policy issues, women policy issues. Because one of the many ways in which they find common ground as this is another marginalized group. It's fascinating.

Esau McCaulley:

That's what I was trying to get at. What you could do is to then look and say, "Okay, on one side, you have evangelicals. And then on the other side, you have kind of progressive Christians." And then it's tempting to put Black people as the moderate, that position as in the middle of those two. Without asking, well, why did they say this? Well, they say this because we're a part of understanding being in a marginalized community. So I just think there's a lot more nuanced conversation. I think. Not complicated.

Eugene Scott:

Yeah, it's not complicated, but it definitely is nuanced. I just want to say to that, Pew Research Center, February of 2021 this year, put out a great study called Faith Among Black Americans. And I know chapter number seven is on gender, sexuality, and chapter number eight... No gender, sexuality, and religion. And chapter eight is religion and politics. And they break it down like Black Catholics, Black Protestants, where they stand, how that compares to Black Americans. It's really interesting and helpful.

Speaker 1:

Eugene, who put that out?

Eugene Scott:

Pew Research Center, and they put it out this past February. So it's on their website and it's free.

Josh Good:

Okay. We got five of us. We've got Alayna Treene, Andy Hanner, Will Saletan, Linda Kinstler, and hopefully Sewell Chan. So Alayna, to you first, from Axios.

Alayna Treene:

And this is more for you, Eugene. I'm just curious. I feel like when it comes to identity politics, a lot of what I see of criticism, particularly of progressives and Black progressives from people on the right, is to be dismissing a lot of what we're discussing now and these ideals as being woke or wokeness. I'm curious what our thought is on that. I just find the idea really fascinating to me. I see this play out all the time on social media, and then what I cover and covering politicians in particular. And I don't know how to tie it into the faith conversation, but from an identity politics standpoint. I'm curious what you have to say.

Eugene Scott:

Clyde McGrady is a reporter for the Washington Post in the feature section and he wrote this wonderful piece, this historical piece about how the phrase, the word woke originated in black spaces to signify some level of consciousness about an issue. And it's now a slur among the right, towards anybody who is remotely liberal. And it's a really good piece and it's in depth, and it's fascinating how often conservative Christians have adopted the language of the right. And when talking about issues that come to rates and matters that are of importance to many black Americans.

I'm making a generalization but a good point in the piece and the replies is like, there are all these young black people who are like, "I don't even know anyone who says woke anymore". It's just Candace Owens calling AOC woke. And this is just not even what this is about at all, but one of the really unfortunate things about it, and this is not to make a blanket statement about white evangelicals at all. There are a lot of issues that people in various faiths, traditions believe need more awareness and attention.

And how do you talk about those things seriously, without people dismissing you and trying to portray a caricature of you in ways that are often used to signal to their tribe, if you're in it, or if you aren't. I feel if you've never been called a woke journalist in your tweet replies by someone, maybe you don't completely understand what this is about, but it's an effort of some people to say that you are an outsider. And we see that in some really interesting conversations when it comes to faith and politics, because there's been, as many of you all know the past four or five years, there have been some real wars and battles within the faith community about what's happening politically and churches splitting up and people stepping down from leadership and folks leaving the faith as a whole, because of a desire to be on certain sides of certain issues.

I think this topic is important because we're going to see a lot of it in the midterms, and we're going to see a lot of it in 2024, which will be here very soon. And these issues won't be going anywhere.

Josh Good:

Linda Kinsler

Linda Kinsler:

I just want to go back to something, Eugene, that you mentioned very briefly about evangelical seminaries and reparations. I'm just wondering if you can talk a little bit more about that. And in general, I'm really curious to hear about how the discussion of reparations plays into the discussions about black, among the black religious community and black secularism.

Eugene Scott:

Yeah. So the point that I was making is prior to Trump, one of the most prominent conversations about racism within white evangelical spaces had to do with the origins of the Southern Baptist convention, which some of you may or may not know, it's the largest part of denomination and was formed in part, over disagreements about slavery. The Southern Baptist convention wanted to keep slavery, at least going, or at least not criticize people who chose to continue to enslave black people.

The conversations about the role of conservative white churches, and anti-blackness have gone in some circles beyond just looking at churches and denominations, but also seminaries and missions organizations. I haven't read it in a long time but there was something happening with Southern seminary and Louisville, I believe, and conversations about reparations, their president, who I think is still Al Mueller came out and perhaps obviously not in support of reparations but it was a big deal.

Esau McCaulley:

One simpler way of thinking about it is that I think it was Princeton seminary, actually involved in some reparations work through scholarships to descendants of slaves. And that's happened in a couple of others. This is a good example of progressive majority white institutions that have said, "Yes, we are complicit. We'll change the names. We'll give some financial remuneration." And in general, the white evangelical churches have said, "No, we're not going to give any money or any institutional reparations in the same way."

Eugene Scott:

Some of them even acknowledged and apologized.

Esau McCaulley:

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Eugene Scott:

Briefly one example, arguably of reparations within Christian higher education outside of evangelicalism would be what's happening in Georgetown University, which as you all know is a Jesuit school. It became clear a couple years ago that during a very difficult time financially the university sold slaves. And now to your point in your reference about the scholarship and the admission's policy, if it is clear that you are a descendant of one of those families, I don't know how it factors into the decision, but it does get factored into it.

Josh Good:

Let's go to Naomi Ishisaka please, from Seattle Times.

Naomi Ishisaka:

Thank you. Eugene, I think you said earlier that Black Lives Matter was not rooted in the church. And I was curious if you thought that that impacted its ability to have a ceiling of support for the movement or if that made any difference at all.

Eugene Scott:

That's a great question. These are two different answers. I can't help but to think about how much support existed for Black Lives Matter right after George Floyd. And then if you saw the post two or three months later it dropped off and that has nothing to do with the black church. That has to do with, there was a lot of attention on anti-black racism in America. I think a lot of people wanted to be on the right side of history for five minutes.

When you talk about support for Black Lives Matter and there's not been a lot of talk about Black Lives Matter in the last year. And so I think a lot of what, or last six months, but when we talk about Black

Lives Matter and support, a lot of that data is dated. But I would say initially hesitation to getting behind Black Lives Matter among black people was generational because many of the Black Lives Matter leaders were younger. And the black church is, we were talking about this a bit, is very institutional. And there's a lot of respect reverence for elders and people who've been in place in it for a very long time. And there was some thought about who are these young Rebel Rousers coming and disrupting things and doing things very differently than we have.

The interesting thing about that, as Esau mentioned, that is not a new approach when Martin Luther King was getting involved in things he was in his twenties. People forget that. And a part of that, there was a split in the national Baptist convention and became the national progressive Baptist convention over the civil rights movement. I think a lot of times, as Esau mentioned, people assume that every black minister in 1960's was supporting the Montgomery bus boycott and that's literally just not true.

Esau McCaulley:

There are multiple black denominations in the United States now. Leaving aside the personality splits, but the progressive Baptist church in USA, I guess it's the name of it, exists because they needed a more socially progressive black denomination, there were more pro-civil rights. Now at this point, I don't think that that distinction still holds. I would say that most Baptists have kind of come around to that, everybody claims to have been at Selma, but not that much.

Eugene Scott:

Everyone has a photo about that.

Esau McCaulley:

But the funny thing about it is we ask about the support of Black Lives Matter is that never in American history, outside of particular high points of social stress, are justice movements is ever popular. So right after the water hose has come on, then people are sympathetic, but Martin Luther King's approval rating, which was never high, except for these moments where there was the bombing of the four little girls. And so on one level asking the question about the popularity of Black Lives Matter movement could be seen as a general phenomenon of 'America doesn't, black or white, support movements for justice on a broad scale apart from acute moments of suffering.' I'd be willing to be corrected. I know that's your area of expertise, but I think that's just a general fact.

Josh Good:

So we've got Sewell Chan and Jackie Calmes. Let's get to at least both. Sewell, you're up.

Sewell Chan:

I wanted to just bring up two topics that we haven't quite touched that much on. One is the role of the prosperity gospel and folks like the Reverend Creflo Dollar. And I'm very interested, in general, in economic inequality and precariousness, which I think is driving a lot of the polarization in America. And I'm curious about this self-help gospel prosperity-related initiative led by folks like Dollar and well, let me ask that first.

Esau McCaulley:

My grandfather was called a chicken eater when he first started to go into the ministry, because of the idea that they would prey upon young families for fried chicken. So the stereotype and reality of black prosperity preachers goes all the way through black Christianity. And that's once again, the manifestation of the threat, I just find black religion super interesting. And I found Creflo Dollar super problematic.

So I don't want to hear it just as a quirk, but it's another manifestation of black religiosity that is also driving some of the alienation that Christine mentioned earlier. Like the black pastor with the BMW while the congregation suffers is a trope for a reason. I always say we drive past 25 black storefronts and then cast their eyes upon the black prosperity preacher. But if you just do an economic analysis of the majority of black pastors at bi-vocational pastoring, storefront churches, most black pastors aren't making the money that Creflo does, but it's definitely a phenomenon.

Eugene Scott:

I would say many black pastors who get frustrated with being grouped in with the prosperity gospel have often said, "We can't be living that life because y'all not given like that." The numbers aren't there. But I do think when we talk about, this point earlier, about the number of black people and increase in younger black generations disconnecting from churches. It is definitely tied to, I think, broader concerns about financial accountability among younger people of institutions. I think a lot of young people want to know what are these organizations doing with the dollars we're giving them.

Sewell Chan:

If you'll allow a second final question, we haven't talked much about, we talked a little bit about Warnock, but I'm thinking about Jesse Jackson who I think in many ways opened up political possibilities that sometimes are forgotten. I personally think that it opened up possibilities that may have led to the possibility of Barack Obama in '08. And I'm curious about whether you see any trends about the idea that the head of Ebenezer Baptist running directly for office and starting at the federal level is astonishing. And do you think that there's any direct mobilization or desire for elected service that is percolating as a result?

Eugene Scott:

I actually hadn't given much thought to that, but that certainly is interesting and worth considering. I don't know how many other examples there are of that being successful. Right? Probably none. I should spend some more time looking at the political biographies of other successful black political candidates who...

Esau McCaulley:

Now, forgive me, was not John Lewis ordained.

Eugene Scott:

He was, yeah. I mentioned earlier. Yeah.

Esau McCaulley:

I'm going to be weak on the modern moment, but out of reconstruction, I talked about the combination of social, cultural, and economic power in black churches. So coming out of reconstruction, you have a

lot of those early black leaders are clergy, Civil Rights movement. Jesse Jackson, John Lewis, Al Sharpton. That era, the people who survived the Civil Rights movement, who were still alive when the dust settled. But it feels like after that, and this is where my history doesn't go this far, after the Civil Rights movement, you gone beyond my confidence. But it feels like from the '80s up through the early, that's ceased, there wasn't a generation of like non-Civil Rights movement involved, black religious leaders who transition to politics until you get to Warnock.

So it looks like the people who were around the Civil Rights movement went into politics and then their kids didn't do it except for Warnock. And I don't know if that would lead to another movement, but it would seem to me that since the people who are leading the movement now aren't religious leaders that you are probably going to see the Black Lives Matter people going to politics, not a return to religion, because for the most part, the people who are leading these activists movements, aren't religious leaders.

Eugene Scott:

So an example of that would be, you're seeing some people come out of that activist movement and go into politics like Cori Bush from St. Louis.

Esau McCaulley:

Exactly. That's I was saying.

Eugene Scott:

But I'm pretty sure she's an ordained minister as well.

Esau McCaulley:

She might be yes.

Eugene Scott:

But I think the mayors of Jackson, Mississippi, the mayors of Birmingham are all young millennials, black millennials, who, if weren't a part of the movement were on the outskirts somehow I don't know that they were ministers as well. But I think the important point is a significant percentage of black Americans still live in the Bible belt. And so having some loose ties to the church will be important to being able to be elected. And I'm sure when they're making their rounds if they're like "I'm not a part of this congregation, my mom was".

Josh Good:

Just a real quick reference point on the first question you raised, we did host Kate Bowler talking about 'Blessed', a history of the American prosperity gospel, in I think November 2017, and that was a very good talk that touched a little bit on pockets in the black church as well and explaining some of that. And we also did a podcast with Robert Jones on the denominations question, a little bit, with the Southern Baptist convention. That's part of things. Carl Cannon, of real clear politics.

Carl Cannon:

All right. I have a question. It's the same question for both of you with this just one or two word difference. Have either of you thought about, and if you haven't would you care to think aloud, about

the ramifications of Senator Tim Scott on the Republican presidential ticket in 2024? Eugene, you and I covered politics, so if you could handle the political ramifications and when I say on the ticket, either as the nominee or as the vice president, but just for the sake of argument, I'd say not running with Donald Trump.

Eugene Scott:

Sure.

Carl Cannon:

And Professor, if you could ruminate what that would be, that's the next chapter in what you've been talking about? The black church in America, because he's an evangelical Christian and a member of the black church.

Esau McCaulley:

It would get super messy.

Carl Cannon:

That's my question.

Eugene Scott:

Just briefly, I have thought about it. I believe that if Tim Scott ran either as vice president to Trump or the nominee, he would get a higher percentage of black voters than the GOP has ever gotten before. I do believe most black people would still vote against Tim Scott because despite being black, despite being a Christian, despite being from South Carolina, he will still be a Republican. And it's very interesting. We were talking earlier about identity and the ranking of identities and how you are seen first. And Tim Scott is not a popular person among black Americans in part, because of his affiliation with Donald Trump.

Eugene Scott:

What do you think would happen in terms of outcome? How well do you think he would do with black Christians?

Esau McCaulley:

12%.

Eugene Scott:

So the minority still.

Esau McCaulley:

I'm thinking if Trump was 8%, I was picking a number. I think maybe 12%, 12 to 15%. Yeah.

Eugene Scott:

But it would still be the minority.

Esau McCaulley:

That's your area. I would just guess 12 to 15% maybe if Trump got eight and I think it would actually, sorry. What you would actually see is probably a greater polarization between black male and black female votes. So I don't know if he would increase on Trump and the black female vote. I think he might win some on the black male vote.

Eugene Scott:

It would be interesting. A lot of it has to do with is he running with Trump.

Josh Good:

Jackie Calmes, Washington post, Los Angeles.

Jackie Calmes:

I just had a couple quick questions to follow up on things that have been said. One is going way back when both of you were alluding to the alienation on the younger generations of black people to the church, to the black church, which the way you were describing it was very resonant to me as someone who's a cultural Catholic, who is constantly in conversations with fellow Catholics and ex-Catholics about having grown up. 12 years of Catholic school for me, church every Sunday, sometimes on Saturdays, and I just miss our conversations, we miss the cultural Catholicism.

We miss the fact that our calendar literally revolved around the church calendar. My question is simply whether there's, I'm assuming of course there's some connection here, there's some commonalities. What do you see as distinct for what younger generations of blacks are feeling towards the black church, as opposed to what Catholics, the alienation, but the nostalgia that Catholics have for their church?

Esau McCaulley:

I probably should use the Catholics church as a better frame. I've often thought that the black church is closer to the Catholic church, in that the Catholic church holds greater ideological diversity than most product of religious traditions. But in general, if you think about New England Catholics as being in, during a certain period of time being a different political animal.

So I think that there is analogies between cultural Catholicism and cultural black Christianity, I don't know how much further to draw that analogy because I can't speak to other than in general terms, the alienation coming out of the things like the abuse scandals in the Catholic church leading to disillusionment and some of the other scandals that are of a different nature that have impacted black Christianity in the south.

But I can say that, as far as being a cultural part, running into the religious part of life, that the black church and the Catholic church had that similarity.

Eugene Scott:

This is just based on my experience with many former black church millennials or Jesuits is that while obviously not overly romanticizing it, they tend to have a higher percentage of positive thoughts about their upbringing in the black church than ex-evangelicals. And that seems to be a little more similar to a

lot of former Catholics. There are just so many memes being shared by former black church kids that they know only other black church kids will get.

And while obviously Twitter's not representative of much of anything. The ex-evangelical movement seems to be a deeply wounded, angry space for a lot of people, featuring people who seem to really struggle to know anything, even remotely positive about their evangelical upbringing, which is not what I have always seen among ex-black church folks. Lastly, a lot of people affiliated in the black church are really protective of the black church culturally from a race perspective.

And so I know people who have disconnected from the black church who are very uncomfortable when white people who don't know a lot about it are criticizing it, but also there's a lot of close affinity to the black church from many of these people because of what the black church has given America culturally, right? Like almost every great black singer has started in the black church.

And with thought, and I say this respectfully, and many of the white singers who mimic those black singers. Right? There is their thoughts of that. I have a friend who's no longer part of the black church and she's fascinated with what she calls black funeral culture. Someone dies in south and the eating and the food and their stories and how people talk about the families in the funeral. And so it's this reminiscing of this time of life that they're glad not to be a part of anymore, but wasn't completely negative.

Jackie Calmes:

And the last narrow thing goes going back mainly to what Esau was talking about with Jon, you were referring to, especially for older generations of black Americans, the traditional, the conservative theology and the more traditionalist approach. And I wondered because since Reagan's time have heard Republicans talk about for those very same reasons, they thought they could make inroads with Latino voters, but they never talk about trying to do the same with black voters, which I've just always attributed basically to racism, but when I would ask Republicans, they just said it would be, they're just too wedded to the democratic party.

And I said, well, they didn't used to be. My mother in her time, the blacks were a Republican party. Right. So I guess the question is whether you would see because of maybe the culture war issues and a traditionalism, that there would be any chance in the world that a Republican party could set aside its racist bent these days, that it could actually make inroads with black voters.

Eugene Scott:

I was just going to say I think the Republican party now knows that it can make more inroads just because of how well Trump did. And one can make the argument that doing that well with Trump suggests that maybe they don't have to put aside the racists rhetoric and ideas, but the point could be, what if we did look how much better we could do? I think there are people studying how well Trump did with black voters to see what can be done better.

But as I stated earlier, from what I saw talking to the Trump campaign, their connection with black voters wasn't flipping Democrats to Trump supporters. It was connecting with black voters who didn't

have a history of voting and many of those black voters being men or working class blacks or Southern blacks or people who, because of other reasons might be a bit more receptive to conservative ideas politically, than some people who were voting Democrat for decades.

Esau McCaulley:

I'm going to just say this. And if I'm wrong, Eugene, you can correct me. I think in general the immigrant experience to the United States is much different than the black experience in the United States. And it's also different voting patterns for black African Americans like Nigerians and Ugandans who come to the United States in general.

So one of the things that tends to happen in at least the black context is that we expect black African American descendants of slaves tend to want to expect immigrants to come to America to become up to date on our historic grievances and then join in our fight for liberation. And a lot of immigrant communities are trying to assimilate into American culture. And so for those reasons they tend to be more open to the Republican party than black people who kind of come up through the store, the Civil Rights movement and those kinds of things. So I just think that in general, that's the reason why certain immigrant communities have been seen as more fertile ground than African American descendants of slaves as a voting block. Is that roughly accurate?

Eugene Scott:

No it is very true. I mean, it's so niche, but it's such a real topic in terms of which black people are voting for Who and why.

Eugene Scott:

Yeah. There was a lot of conversation about this in relation to like Kamala Harris of course. Yeah.

Josh Good:

Well perhaps one part hopeful, one part tragic. Thank you for a wonderful discussion gentlemen.