“To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, & Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World”

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MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Professor James Hunter’s new book To Change the World is just out from Oxford University Press. James is the LaBrosse-Levinson Distinguished Professor of Religion, Culture and Social Theory at the University of Virginia. He is the author of eight books, the editor of three books, and has published a wide range of essays and reviews all variously concerned with the problem of meaning and moral order in a time of political and cultural change in American life. James, we are delighted you can join us.

DR. JAMES DAVISON HUNTER: Thanks, Mike. I’ve got way, way too much material, but I’ll talk really fast. This is a new book that’s comprised of three essays that address the question of how Christians in America engaged the late-modern world.

All of my work tends to range between social theory, history, moral philosophy and political sociology, but this project I also move into theology, and it was a surprise to me. I moved in this direction largely borne out of my own long frustration with the disparities between my understanding of Christian faith and a range of initiatives actively promoted in the name of Christian engagement. And I guess that frustration reached the breaking point. And so I started putting pen to paper.

The point of continuity with my previous work is the ongoing questions of meaning and moral order. How do we make sense of the late modern world? How do people live in the
late modern world with any integrity, coherence? How do they do it, and is it possible to do it? So there are points of continuity. I’m still trying to answer these questions.

Again, there are three essays, and I want to focus on the second essay. The whole project is framed in terms of Christianity and world changing, and the first essay essentially looks at how the implicit social theory that underwrites the ways in which Christians of all stripes, all varieties, engage the world. I make a case that the social theory that animates their engagement with the world is very flawed and deeply problematic, and all their ambitions for changing the world will fail precisely because they don’t understand the nature of culture and how it changes.

But the ambition to change the world is still there and so the second essay addresses the obvious issue of power, which is that to change the world implies influence, and influence implies power. So the second essay is called “Rethinking Power,” and it’s an attempt to again unpack the implicit view of power that underwrites their attempts to change the world. The means of influence and change is overwhelmingly the instrumentalities of politics.

In getting at what I think is most interesting in this second essay, I don’t focus on political theory. I focus on a realm that I call political culture. By political culture what I mean is, the framework of moral claims and narratives within which ideals, attitudes, institutions, and actions, operate.

By comparison to political theory and political science, the dynamics of political culture aren’t often discussed in academic circles, but it seems to me critically important. It brings into relief the nature and character of politics as opposed to simply the form and process or the ideals and ends of politics.

So I begin the second essay with a reflection on one of the great puzzles of modern social theory, the problem of social solidarity.

How do societies hold together? The classic answer to that question was that traditional societies, that is agrarian, economically underdeveloped and non-urban societies, were
held together mainly by beliefs held in common by all of its members. Modern societies by contrast are held together through social and economic interdependence.

Now, the reason why this question remains a puzzle is that just as people and associations and so-called traditional societies depended heavily upon each other for the sake of survival, so too in modern societies we depend upon at least some common beliefs, some shared ideals, some collective myths to function smoothly. The question of how societies hold together gains new poignancy in a world like ours where even a minimal consensus of sensibilities, dispositions and attitudes seems elusive.

Where there are even fewer beliefs, ideals, commitments, and hopes held deeply in common and where there are few if any real meaningful traditions observed, or binding public rituals practiced, what else is there to hold such a society together? What remains to bind together its innumerable fragments? The answer in large part is power, the exercise of coercion with a threat of its use.

Now, in a democratic regime individuals and communities can’t exercise force themselves willy-nilly. Rather the final repository of legitimate force is found in the state. Clearly the state is not the exclusive domain of power in the modern world, nor is its instrumentalities the only means for ordering social life. But it is the final repository of legitimate force, and in this way it plays an exceedingly important role in modern societies. In its ability to make law, the state has the ability to assert its power positively or negatively on people and communities, to confer privileges or impose sanctions, to provide assistance or create difficulty, to bestow rights or to inflict punishment, harm, injury and loss.

Part of what I want to argue, and part of what I do argue in this book at this level is that in the context of late modernity, power does the work that culture used to do. Now, the reason for this excursion into social and political theory is that it seems to me to provide a starting point for some important developments in American political culture over the last century, and especially since the New Deal.

There is a tendency towards the politicization of everything. If modern politics is the sphere of leadership, influence and activity surrounding the state, politicization is the turn
toward law and politics, that is, the instrumentality of the state to find solutions to public problems. The big problem is how to create or reinforce social consensus where little exists, or none could be generated organically.

And this is demonstrated by the simple fact that the amount of law that exists in any society is always inversely related to the coherence and stability of its common culture. The amount of law increases as cultural consensus decreases. By these lights the fabric of the common culture in modern America has worn even more thin in the last several decades, and the extraordinary amount of litigation we have seen in recent decades is just one place in which we see this. Much of that litigation and policy formation simply represents the attempts by institutions and groups to clarify its position, or jockey for position in the larger social world.

Politics it seems to me has become so central in our time that institutions, groups and issues are now defined relative to the state, its laws and procedures. Institutions such as popular and higher education, philanthropy, science, the arts, and even the family understand their identity and function according to what the state does or does not permit. Groups, women, minorities, gays, Christians, and so on, have validity not only but increasingly through the rights conferred by the state. Issues gain legitimacy only when recognized by law and public policy. It’s only logical then that problems affecting society are increasingly if not primarily seen through the prism of the state. That is in terms of how law, policy and politics can solve them.

So democratic ideals, principles and reasoning, provide a framework for making sense of and justifying the bend toward politicization in public life. When you boil it all down, politicization means that the final arbiter within most of social life is the coercive power of the state. I realized this is in my early work in the 1990s on culture wars.

It seemed to me that in all of these disputes, the first recourse in trying to resolve conflict was through litigation. And the reason why was that each of these special interest groups or factions, or aggrieved parties, was looking for the patronage of the state to simply resolve things. Persuasion was out the window. It was all about the patronage of the state.
So when politicization is oriented toward furthering the specific interests of the group without an appeal to the common good, when its means of mobilizing the uncommitted is through fear, and when the pursuit of agendas depends more upon the vilification of opponents than on the affirmation of higher ideals, power is stripped to its most elemental forms.

Even democratic justifications are not much more than a veneer over the will to power. The actions themselves may be within the bounds of legitimate democratic participation, yet the basic intent and desire is to dominate, control and rule. What adds pathos to our situation is the presence of what Nietzsche called *ressentiment*, a political psychology of resentment, anger, envy, hate, rage, and revenge as the motive of political action.

The *ressentiment* has historical precedence. It has become the distinguishing characteristic of politics in modern cultures. Nowhere does it find a more conducive home than among the disadvantaged or mistreated as directed against the strong, the privileged, or the gifted. That was Nietzsche’s argument. But here’s an important qualification. Perception is everything. It’s not the weak or aggrieved, per se, though it could be, but rather those that perceive themselves as such. *Ressentiment* is grounded in a narrative of injury, or at least perceived injury, a strong belief that one has been or is being wronged. It’s the sense of injury that’s key. Over time the perceived injustice becomes central to the persons or the group’s identity.

In that logic it’s only natural that wrongs need to be righted and so it is that the injury, real or perceived, leads the aggrieved to accuse, blame, vilify, and then seek revenge upon those who they see as responsible. The adversary has to be shown for who they are, exposed for their corruption, and put in their place.

*Ressentiment* then is expressed as a discourse of negation, the condemnation and denigration of enemies and the effort to subjugate and dominate those who are culpable. So, what am I saying about contemporary political culture? My sense is that Nietzsche was mostly right, that while the will to power has always been present, American
democracy increasingly operates within a political culture that is a framework of meaning and of myth and so on that sanctions a will to domination.

This in turn is fueled by a political psychology of fear, anger, negation and revenge over perceived wrongs. I don’t want to overstate the case here. Clearly what I describe are not fully and comprehensively established realities. All is not power and all is not ressentiment. There are generally public spirited people on all sides of all issues. We know this.

Indeed most people are not resentment filled and power-hungry, but the key analytical point is this: That the motives of individuals and the structure of culture are not the same things. In terms of the structures of our political culture, these dynamics are clearly present and represent increasingly significant tendencies.

So with that backdrop the question is how do Christians stand in relation to the present configurations in our political culture? That’s the question I try to answer in the second essay of this book. There is no simple answer, for Christians, like any other social group, are not monolithic. Christians approach politics differently. So in this part of the book I focus on just three of these key positions, the conservatives, the progressives, and what I call the neo-Anabaptist positions because in contemporary America, these are the most prominent.

They are in effect political theologies and they are powerful in part because each is shrouded by compelling myths that give voice to the ideals and public identities of different parts of the Christian community. And though the political landscape is changing, and I hope we are able to talk in detail about some of that, these myths provide a source of continuity and the language and logic of their competing positions.

In their broad contours then these myths and the political theologies that emanate from them provide the primary scripts for thinking and discussing faith in public life for most Christians. These myths and scripts that derive from them cut across denominational and confessional traditions and principled Catholics, Evangelicals, fundamentalists,
mainliners, Orthodox and Pentecostals could all be found, and are in fact often found, giving voice to each of these three public theologies.

So, what I try to demonstrate in the empirical heart of this, and using the voices of the key players in each of these three political theologies, is that all tell very different stories about America and the world, what’s wrong with it, of what needs to be changed, and yet for all of their differences, they all more or less share a common narrative structure. What is it?

One, there are problems in our historical moment that the community of faith worries about deeply and over which they have suffered injury. The fear that is experienced and the injury born by Christians of all commitments are not rooted in misapprehension, but have a basis in the historical realities of our time.

For one, for Christian conservatives, the forces of secularity in contemporary America within such institutions as higher education, public education, the news media, advertising, popular entertainment and so on, are very powerful, and their agenda, deliberately or not, is fundamentally at odds with certain traditional Christian morality and spirituality. Whatever positive contributions one may find in it, much of the secularity is a solvent, unsettled convictions and ways of life. What remains of a traditional culture therefore is threatened with extinction and Christian conservatives are right to worry about the effects of this on their descendants.

It’s also true that among various Christian groups the Christian right has held disproportionate political power since the early 1980s. From the vantage point of progressives, their concerns are narrowly conceived and do not at all represent the spectrum of Christian conviction. One result of this is that the interests and concerns of Christian progressives have been eclipsed.

Christian progressives are right to be alarmed and distressed by that fact. By the same token, the fear of the neo-Anabaptist of a Christian community unthinkingly assimilated to the worst aspects of consumer culture and complicit in the perpetuation of a
Constantinian alliance with the secular state and super capitalism is undoubtedly well grounded.

The effectiveness of the church is certainly compromised by those alliances, especially when they proceed without any consideration for the standards of Scripture and their tradition. So the neo-Anabaptists are right to be uneasy with the present situation.

BARBARA BRADLEY HAGERTY, NPR: Can you tell us what neo-Anabaptists are?

DR. HUNTER: The neo-Anabaptists are the neo-pacifist tradition. They’re the smallest of the three traditions of political theology, but what makes them so interesting is that they’re the most intellectually serious and an entire cohort of younger Christians, I think in the Catholic as well as Protestant traditions, are turning in that direction in a way given the ineffectiveness and given the exhaustion of what they see within the Christian right and left.

So the first thing they do is they’ve got fears. They do sense real injury, but what do they do in the face of it? Well, they politicize their concern. This is not all they do, but it is the strategy of choice for collective and public engagement. And though there are changes in the political landscape that are taking place even now, the propensity of certain Christian organizations and their leadership to politicize their engagement with the world isn’t likely to diminish any time soon.

To use Charles Taylor’s helpful concept, politics has become a social imaginary that defines the horizon of understanding and the parameters for action. Myth and history provide narrative context, but in each of the three dominant perspectives on the church’s engagement with the culture, politics is the way in which social life and its problems are imagined and it provides the framework for how Christians envision solutions to those problems.

This is especially true for the largest factions, the Christian right and the Christian left, but it’s even true for the neo-pacifist, the neo-Anabaptists. Most people think that what matters is the ideological direction of one’s politics. Are you conservative, are you liberal?
These differences occupy most of our attention and argument, but what’s never challenged is the proclivity to think of the Christian faith in its engagement with the culture around political terms. This proclivity has been both ubiquitous and unquestioned for a long time.

Okay, so politicization is the second thing that they all hold in common. Here’s the third, and it’s the way that Christians in their variety have assimilated to the dominant political culture of *ressentiment*. Contemporary political culture in America is marked by a *ressentiment*, manifested by a narrative of injury and in turn a discourse of negation toward all they perceive to be the blame.

Though each expresses this *ressentiment* differently and in different degrees and to different ends, it is present in all of these political theologies. It’s especially prominent of course among Christian conservatives which may be why they have been so effective over the years in mobilizing their rank and file to political action.

*Ressentiment* is also essentially present among Christian progressives and it’s clearly a major source of their new solidarity and the motive behind their recent assertiveness in Democratic Party politics. Both the right and the left ground their positions in biblical authority and they both appeal to Democratic ideals and practices to justify their actions, but the *ressentiment* that marks the way they operate makes it clear that a crucial part of what motivates them is a will to dominate.

The neo-Anabaptists are different in this regard. It’s true that they participate fully in the discourse of negation, but domination is not their intent. So let me just say a couple of things, long concluding observations. I want to touch on a few ironies. The problem is that there are no political solutions to the problems that most people care about.

Politics can provide a platform for dissent and procedures for establishing public order. And the state can address administrative problems. This is what it’s designed to accomplish, but this only happens through accommodation, compromise and conciliation. The state can also address some of the legal and administrative aspects of these problems and in this way help or hinder the resolution of value-based problems.
Laws that prohibit discrimination against minorities are one important illustration of the constructive influence of the state. And while politics can only do so much, it’s also true that bad politics can do truly horrific things. These are all good reasons to be involved in the work of creating and maintaining good government.

The issue is really one of the appropriate expectations one should have of the state and its instrumentalities. What the state can’t do is provide fully satisfying solutions to the problem of values in our society. There are no comprehensive political solutions to the deterioration of family values, the desire for equity, or the challenge of achieving consensus and solidarity in a cultural context of fragmentation and polarization. There are no real political solutions to the absence of decency, or to the spread of vulgarity.

Because the state is a clumsy instrument and finally rooted in coercion, it will always fail to adequately or directly address the human elements of these problems, the elements that make them poignant in the first place. As a rule, when the state does become involved in such matters, its actions can often create more problems through unintended consequences, not fewer problems. At best, the state’s role addressing human problems is partial and limited.

It’s not nearly as influential as the expectations most people have of it. It is true that laws are not neutral. They do reflect values, but laws cannot generate values or instill values, or settle the conflict over values. The belief that the state could help us care more for the poor and the elderly, slow the disintegration of traditional values, generate respect among different groups, or create civic pride is mostly illusory.

It imputes far too much capacity to the state and to the political process. There is irony here. Values cannot be achieved politically because politics is finally and invariably about power. It’s not only about power, but finally about power. For politics to be about more than power it depends upon a realm that is independent of the political sphere. It depends upon moral criteria, institutionalized and practiced in the social order that are largely autonomous from the realm of politics.
The problem is that the impulse toward politicization extends to the politicization of values. This means that the autonomy of moral criteria, upon which a higher practice of politics depends is increasingly lost. Today most of the ideals and values that are discussed in public have acquired political content and connotation. Fairness, justice, equity, liberty, these have come to have little or no meaning outside the realm of politics. The other ideals and values that are discussed in public are largely reduced to instruments for one side or another in the quest for power.

Decency, morality, hope, marriage, family, children, are all important values, but they too have become political slogans. The irony of course is that no group in American society has done more to politicize values over the last half-century and therefore undermined their renewal than Christians, both on the right, since the early 1980s, and on the left during the 1960s and 70s, and in a way more recently.

Both sides are implicated and remain implicated today. The deeper irony is that in the Christian faith, one has the possibility of autonomous institutions and practices, both in judgment and in affirmation that could be a source of ideals and values that could elevate politics to more than a quest for power, but the consequence of the whole hearted and uncritical embrace of politics by Christians has been in effect to reduce Christian faith to a political ideology and various Christian denominations and para-church organizations to special interest groups. The political engagement of the various Christian groups is certainly legal, but in ways that are undoubtedly unintended, it has also been counterproductive to the ends to which they aspire. But there is also tragedy here.

With the reduction of the public to the political, and the subsequent politicization of so much of human experience, there is an assimilation to late modernity that has made politics the dominant witness of the church to the world. And then there is Christianity’s embrace of certain key characteristics of the political culture, a culture that privileges injury and grievance, that valorizes speech acts of negation and that legitimates the will to power. There is variation throughout the Christian community, and that the loudest public voices are all implicated in these distinct ways, especially Christian conservatives.
Let me dwell on them just for a moment. To be sure, there’s significant spiritual vitality in Christianity and all of its communities, and not least within the evangelical and fundamentalist wings, at the same time key leaders and factions within American Christianity have cultivated collective identities that are constituted in distinct ways by that sense of injury to the faith and to America itself. The histories from which this narrative is drawn are always selective and sometimes just plain wrong, and yet the injuries sustained are not a complete fiction, as I’ve argued. There is a basis in fact for the claims made by each of these groups.

Yet an identity rooted in resentment and hostility is an inherently weak identity precisely because it is established negatively by accentuating the boundaries between insiders and outsiders and the wrongs done by those outsiders. Christian leaders, para-church organizations and denominations didn’t create that political culture, at least not by themselves. These patterns of understanding and engagement are fixed deeply in the larger structure of contemporary political culture.

Both established political parties depend on the culture war, for example, on their political, internal cohesion. The problem is that many prominent Christian leaders and Christian organizations in America have been at the corrupting center of this kind of tribalism, Christian conservatives most prominently. Christians may not have created that tapestry but they are certainly a fabric with it. What’s even more striking than the negational character of that political culture is the absence of robust and constructive affirmations. Vibrant cultures, healthy cultures, makes space for leisure, philosophical reflection, scientific and intellectual mastery, artistic and literary expression, among other things.

Within the larger Christian community in America, one can find such vitality in pockets here and there, and yet where they do exist, they tend to be eclipsed by the greater prominence and vast resources of the political activists and their organizations. Once more, there are few if any places in the pronouncements and actions of the Christian right or left, where I could find these kinds of affirmations, those kinds of gifts and so on are acknowledged, affirmed or celebrated. What this means is that rather than being defined by its cultural achievements, its intellectual and artistic vitality, its service to the needs of
others, Christianity is defined to the outside world by its rhetoric of resentment and the ambitions of a will in opposition to others. To suffer is one thing. How one bears that suffering is quite another.

Among all factions within contemporary American Christianity, one can readily find an anger and resentment about what suffering they do endure. We know of course that bitterness can provide its own consolations. For one, it creates the gratifying sense of being winners, and on the right side of history. Indeed one cannot deny that prophetic judgment is part of the biblical narrative and the tradition of God’s people, but is the kingdom of God to be known predominantly by its negations?

To the extent that collective identity rooted in ressentiment has been cultivated and then nurtured through a message of negation toward the other, many of the most prominent Christian leaders and organizations in America have fashioned an identity and witness for the church that is, to say to the least, antithetical to its highest calling. The political options taken by the Christian right, the Christian left and the neo-Anabaptists, are perfectly legal, of course, but that doesn’t mean that the ways many of them engage their politics is either salutary or constructive. Not least it creates a dense fog through which it is difficult to recognize each other as fellow human beings and impossible to recognize the good that still is in the world.

The final tragedy is that in the name of resisting the internal deterioration of faith and the corruption of the world around them, many Christians, and Christian conservatives most significantly, unwittingly embrace some of the most corrosive aspects of the cultural disintegration they decry. By nurturing its resentments, sustaining them through a discourse of negation toward outsiders, and in cases pursuing their will to power, they become functional nihilists, participating in the very cultural breakdown they so ardently and passionately strive to resist. I’ll end it there.

MR. CROMARTIE: You can understand why in light of this presentation I decided to ask two of the most gifted political journalists and writers in America to respond to this argument about politics, and about the law. Ross is a columnist for the New York Times. He previously was a senior editor of The Atlantic and a blogger at Atlantic.com. Right after

ROSS DOUTHAT: Thank you, Mike. The difficulty with being respondent to a critique with which you substantially agree is figuring out exactly how to respond, and I’m going to use the trick of basically taking Prof. Hunter’s argument and reframing it (a sort of classic respondent’s trick) by going much further back in time.

I think that if we’re talking about Christianity specifically, and Christianity and its relationship to power, it’s useful to think of it this way: Christians are very comfortable having lots of power and very comfortable having no power at all. And there’s a historical reason for this, which is the way that the Christian faith developed specifically in the Roman Empire. You had a long period of Christianity as an essentially politically powerless minority that suddenly pivoted in the post-Constantinian era to becoming an enormously powerful effectively ruling class dominant majority and so on, without really a period in between.

I think part of what we’re seeing in America today is the challenges of this kind of in between-ness and figuring out where Christians go in that situation. So it’s useful, actually, to go back to the pre-Constantinian debates within Christianity, where you had a couple of views of how Christians should proceed in their relationship to power if they were powerless. One was I think essentially the sort of third and fourth century version of the neo-Anabaptists, the idea that basically Christians should have no part in what was effectively a corrupt, decadent, pagan society and so on.

And so you have people like Tertullian, for instance, one of the more stringent voices in early Christianity, saying, “shall the son of peace take part in the battle when it does not even become him to sue at law, and shall he apply the chain and the prison and the torture and the punishment who is not the avenger even of his own wrongs?”

So here you have — and this is me now and not Tertullian—essentially a very stringent model of what obedience to the message of Jesus means in the political sphere. It means
absenting yourself from anything that lends even the possibility of corruption. And that’s really I think the earliest narrative in the Christian church, but then later, especially as you enter this sort of transitional period in the third and fourth centuries, you have what you might call a more nuanced view — or what Tertullian would probably call the sellout view — which is basically the idea that Christians can legitimately participate in non-Christian institutions of power, but they should do so without any dreams of transforming the world, of remaking pagan culture and so on. They should serve because the world is worth serving, but they should be aware of the difficulties involved.

I’m oversimplifying here, but that’s roughly St. Augustine’s view: with Augustine you get a kind of real tolerance for things that I think we wouldn’t expect Christians to tolerate in terms of political action. One of the most famous examples is when Augustine writes about the duties of the magistrate in the Roman Empire, and of course the duties of the magistrate included overseeing the use of torture to extract concessions and so on. And Augustine mounts a somewhat famous defense of Christians serving in this kind of magistrate capacity. He says that for the Christian magistrate in that situation, “human society, which he thinks it a wickedness to abandon, constrains him and compels him to this duty.” And you can see the implications following from that: Christians can enter the public realm and recognize that they’re going to do things that in some sense aren’t Christian because of their service to the world, but you don’t have the idea that the goal of Christians is to abolish torture, abolish slavery, etc.

All of that comes much later in Christian life, and it comes much later because over time, as Christians become more and more accustomed to the idea that they are affectively in charge, you get Christians beginning to have real ambitions, not only as being the salt of the earth, but of actually transforming the city of man, the political systems and cultures in which they are embedded. And you can cite specific examples of this from the attempts to create the truces of God in the Middle Ages to diminish warfare and make medieval society, which was obviously very warlike, more pacifistic and thus more Christian, down to the arguments against slavery advanced from Christian premises in the 16th century. You can also just see the overall architecture, the idea that’s born and eventually taken for granted that you would have legal norms and cultural norms shaped by Christian principles. It reaches its high point at various moments in the middle ages and early
modern world where you have the Catholic Church assuming that it’s appropriate to have the civil law enforcing the moral and theological norms of Christianity.

Now, in its more totalistic form, this idea of a Christian politics in the Christian society basically disappeared after the wars of religion, the spread of religious toleration and so on. But in a more limited way I think it persists well into the 20th century, even or especially in the United States, where for all of our wild religious diversity, we retained a real Christian canopy, or at least a kind of mainline Protestant canopy for much of our history, that establishes the parameters for our major debates. If you look at these sort of spasms of Christian influence, political reform in the United States, down to the abolitionist era down to the social Gospel, Prohibition, the civil rights movement and so on, and including foreign-policy debates as well, there’s always a sense that a generic Christianity that provides a shared moral framework for these political debates. And there’s a general consensus that however much we may disagree about the specifics, society should be shaped by Christian principles. And so you have debates about what that means, not debates about whether it would be a good thing if American law and culture lived up to the highest Christian standards.

These are the traditions that both the Christian left and the Christian right in different ways I think emerge from, but I think everything that Prof. Hunter said about the nature of the late modern world is essentially correct. That the world has changed. America has changed. Larger proportions of Americans obviously still believe in God, call themselves Christian, et cetera, but Christianity as a canopy of shared assumptions is vastly weaker than it used to be and more. Anyway, it has a much weaker purchase in particular on American elite, intellectual, political and so on, than it did even 50, certainly 100 or 150 years ago and so on. The most vibrant and vigorous forms of Christianity in the US in the last 30 years tend to be Pentecostal and Evangelical, which are scorned I think in different ways at the highest levels of American society, and there’s also obviously much more room for non-Christians and much more self-conscious efforts to make them feel welcome in American society, make American political debates, not just be shaped by a sort of narrow Christian approach and so on.
So this creates a problem for a Christian politics that came out of an age when there was an assumption that, you know, okay, we’re all Christian and we’re just debating about how to put these ideas into practice. And it leads I think to all of the kind of traps that are implicit or explicit in what Prof. Hunter is talking about. For one thing it means that you try and do more with politics — because if the canopy has fallen apart, the thing is all that we have left to repair the canopy with is politics. So you get this idea that the decline of Christianity in America can be reversed if only we vote for the right candidate and so forth. And you get this weird spillover effect that I think the professor gestured to where the political and cultural bleed together. I think you can see this very potently in the reactions on both sides of the political divide, a figure like Sarah Palin where the policy position she takes, matter left than for good or ill, the sort of idea of American culture that she represents. And it’s like a vote for Sarah Palin is a vote for restoring this lost idea of American society, or it’s a vote for defeating the return of this evil archaism or something.

So that’s one problem, the “do more with politics” problem. The second problem is the idea that you’re always fighting to win, dominate, to control. When I was a teenager my parents were involved with a very small Evangelical Church at Yale University and what I remember most visibly about it is the rhetoric of some of the people involved with it, where it was always “we are going to win Yale for Christ. We’re going to take back Yale for Christ.” The struggle for Yale is not an explicitly political situation, but the language of political victory bleeds into it.

And finally, the other thing that happens when you’re strong enough to be influential but not actually strong enough to set the terms of debate is that you end up getting co-opted in politics. And you see this I think with both the Christian left and the Christian right in different ways. The Christian right is more politically powerful within the conservative coalition in the United States than the Christian left is within the liberal coalition. In some ways this gives the Christian right more independence. So you’re much more likely to hear Christian conservatives threatening to take their ball and go home. If the Republicans don’t deal with our issues, then they’ll lose 40 million evangelical votes next year and so on. And you’re less likely to hear that kind of rhetoric from people on the religious left I think because they’re more conscious of their weaker position within the liberal coalition.
MR. CROMARTIE: And less money.

MR. DOUTHAT: Right, and less numbers. But what happens within the Republican coalition, with the religious right, is that religious conservatives have their set of issues and—again, this is grossly over-generalized—but all they seem to care about is getting the Republican Party to pay attention to their issues, and all of the issues that aren’t their issues, they’re just happy to go along with whatever movement conservatism broadly understood is doing.

So you get this weird situation where, you know, if you listen to leading Christian conservatives you would think that their religion has nothing to say about healthcare that hasn’t already been said by AEI or Heritage, and it doesn’t have anything to say about foreign policy that hasn’t already been said by Dick Cheney, which I think is a peculiar state of affairs for American Christians to get into. So these are the problems which the professor has stated, and which I have just restated.

Part of the obvious answer, I think, is for Christian engagement in American life is a kind of depoliticization and both a shift in focus away to some extent from politics and toward family, community, and culture, and also a shift away from a language of power and towards the language of influence. At the beginning of your talk you said the need for influence leads to the need for power, and I think that’s true, but I think it’s possible to shift back. This is especially true I think in the cultural arenas. If you think about sort of a vibrant Christian presence in American culture, whether it’s in the university, in Hollywood and so on, it could be achieved by people in positions of influence who aren’t trying to retake Yale for Christ or conquer Hollywood for Christ, but who are trying to have some good Christian professors at Ivy League institutions, or a place for talented Christians to make movies influenced by 2000 years of Christian culture in Hollywood and so on.

So broadly speaking I think we’re in agreement, so I’ll just throw out a little one tension. I’m going to quote from the third essay in James’s book. At one point he says Christians must recognize that “it clearly benefited in many extraordinary ways from people of faith
and the good ideals of the Christian tradition, America was never in any theologically serious way a Christian nation, nor the West a Christian civilization. Neither will they become so in the future. Ours is now emphatically a post-Christian culture and the community of Christian believers are now more than ever spiritually speaking exiles in the land of exile. Christians, as with the Israelites in Jeremiah’s account, must come to terms with this exile.”

Now, to a certain extent, that is very good Christian theology. I mean it is true that there is no such thing in a deep sense as a Christian nation, under the sort of broad theological premises of Christianity.

That being said, there are nations that are more Christian or more influenced culturally and politically by Christianity than others. And I think America remains such a nation, and the fact that it remains such a nation makes it hard for Christians to take quite as large a leap as I think James sometimes suggests they should. I think in certain ways, you were suggesting that Christians should take more of what I suggested with St. Augustine’s position: a kind of participation that does seek change but involves a much greater withdrawal from politics than I think is actually possible for Christians in a society where there remains so many live debates, major political debates, that touch on issues of grave Christian concern.

In a way, if you compare the United States to Europe, Europe is closer to the kind of truly post-Christian society, especially Western Europe, that James is talking about. And I think in a way that makes things easier for Christians in dealing with European politics. I’ll take a sort of conservative issue, the issue of abortion for instance. Abortion is much more of a settled issue in a lot of Western European societies. It is much less of a political issue than it is in the United States, and there is much less room for Christians to hope that certain frankly ancient Christian ideas about abortion could influence law and public policy than there is in the United States. Now there’s some paradoxes here, and the actual existing laws in many European countries are actually more restrictive on abortion than those in the US, but in terms of the liveliness of the debate and the potential for further change, I think it’s clear that there’s more space for Christian ideas to affect politics in the US — to affect the politics of abortion in the US than there is in Europe. But this leaves
Christians in the US in a much harder position, where I think you are sort of forced at some point to make choices. If you feel like you’re 3% of the country in Great Britain for instance, you don’t have to make some of these hard choices about ultimately siding with one political coalition over the other.

And I think that the problem of being not so powerful that you can ever hope to dominate the culture, and not having your religion be the kind of canopy that it used to, but at the same time not being so weak that you feel like you can just pull back from some of the political debate — I think that’s the challenge for Christians and the problem that’s driving a lot of this problem that you legitimately cite. Thank you.

MR. CROMARTIE: Thank you, Ross. We’re going to hear now from Amy Sullivan, who is a contributing writer on religion for Time magazine. Amy is a graduate of the University of Michigan. She went to Harvard Divinity School. She worked as an editorial director at the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, and then she was an editor at the Washington Monthly, but more importantly, Amy has written a very important book that got a lot of attention called The Party Faithful: How and Why Democrats Are Closing the God Gap. Amy, thank you so much for joining us.

AMY SULLIVAN: It’s such a pleasure to be here. One of the things that James does that I really appreciated in the book is go through the myths and the self narratives that religious traditions tell about themselves. He kind of outlined them a bit in his presentation, but I want to spend a little more on that because I think it’s important to understand if you want to understand how religious traditions conceive of their relationship to power, and where their position is, particularly in the political structure.

I’m going on the assumption that we’re all somewhat familiar with the narrative that the Christian right tells, and particularly the victim-based narrative that Ross talked about as well. Although I do hope we’ll have a chance to get into perhaps some questions about that. I’ve always wondered how the Christian right is able to reconcile what I see as something of a hole in the narrative, which is: we were a Christian country, everybody agreed on the same Christian values, the same Christian morality, and then the secular
elite snatched it from us. That is the language that comes up over and over. “They took it away. They stole our country. They stole our values.”

There seems to be a hole there in the middle between “it was our country to begin with” and “now we’re on the defensive and we’re trying to take it back.” So that’s something I hope we can fill in, but it’s on the whole a better understood narrative than what has happened on the Christian left.

This is going to be outlined in very broad strokes and probably getting a lot of things wrong. But in general, the Christian left traces its roots back to the oldest strands of Christianity, which is to say that it likes to focus on the teachings of Jesus, and Jesus as a role model. Matthew 25 has become the most popular political verse in Democratic circles. If you hear a Democrat quoting Scripture, it is probably Matthew 25 talking about caring for the least of these. And there’s a good reason why that is used as kind of a key verse for a lot of progressive Christians.

I should also step back here and say that in general I think it’s most accurate when you’re looking at American politics to speak of the religious left instead of the Christian left these days. But because there are specific aspects of the Christian left that you discuss and I think are worth talking about here, I’m going to focus on how the Christian left sees itself and some of the challenges there.

This self-identity goes back to the idea that the Christian left is looking to bring about God’s kingdom on earth. “Thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.” And because of that, they have been very involved in social causes, but ones that have kind of risen within the history of the Christian left to canonical status include the fight for abolition, the progressive era efforts, the social Gospel, antiwar efforts leading back to World War I, but certainly opposition to the war in Vietnam, and then civil rights, which was what a lot of folks on the Christian left see as a high water point for themselves. And then after that high water point there came what I think is best described as forty years in the wilderness, declining visibility and certainly declining influence for the Christian left, both in the political world but in larger culture in general, where they were rendered somewhat invisible.
There are some good questions to be asked about why that was. One of the theories that James puts forward in the book is that the Christian left simply achieved most of its goals, and it was hard to find a motivating mission, particularly after the civil rights movement was over. I think there’s something to that. You would have to deal with the fact that poverty has continued to be the driving topic that has occupied a lot of groups on the Christian left and we’re obviously not in a world where poverty has been alleviated or eliminated. But I think it’s also the case that a fair number of groups on the Christian left, and certainly the denominations themselves, were very distracted after the 1960s by internal issues.

These groups were somewhat distracted, preoccupied, and perhaps felt less urgency in terms of the issues that had been driving their agenda. And it was also the case that they were somewhat slow to recognize the rise of the Religious Right. I think they failed to recognize the fact that they didn’t have the prominence they had had 50 years earlier.

Jerry Falwell and other leaders in other Religious Right were extremely successful at capturing media attention, political attention, and over the course of 20, 25 years, established the conventional wisdom that if you were Christian you must be conservative, and you probably were a Republican. Now, James spoke of resentment. This certainly did foster quite a bit of resentment on the Christian left.

Somebody like Jim Wallis has been preaching basically the same message since the early 1970s, and yet only seemed to get through about six or seven years ago. There’s certainly a healthy dose of resentment that comes with speaking into the wind for that long. But it was a diffuse resentment. There was resentment at the media for not noticing that the Christian left existed. There was resentment with the Democratic Party itself for not forming close relationships with these leaders who seemed to have common interests and common goals. And there was certainly resentment with conservative Christianity for purporting to speak for Christians in general, and yet presenting just a very specific kind of Christianity and Christian goals.

Now, that’s kind of the narrative in broad brush strokes and it ended around 2004, for various reasons, including the fact that the Democratic Party decided that nothing else
seemed to be working, so maybe they should try talking to some religious leaders on the left. As EJ likes to say, Democrats found God in exit polls in 2004 and thought, well, we’ll give this a shot.

I think at this point it’s worth spending a little time talking about the effect of resentment as a motivator and a characteristic of our politics. When you look at the Christian right, there’s no question that the movement is driven by the idea that these Christians are a persecuted minority, that they are fighting against the culture, they’re fighting against the political system, that now the enemy is a secular elite that wants to undermine their values. That’s not only a part of their narrative. It is key to their narrative. And it always has been, so it’s nearly impossible to understand the Religious Right without understanding that part of the scenario.

It’s different with the Christian left. Resentment provides some motivation these days, but it plays a slightly different role, which is to say if you listen to a lot of leaders of the Christian left these days, and a lot of the rhetoric, it’s about how the Christian right doesn’t speak for us all.

So that kind of resentment has been a very effective tool at kind of bringing a lot of folks on the Christian left out of the closet and bringing them into contact with each other. But I think that that’s really what it is--a tool. It’s most certainly a recent part of the Christian left narrative, but it is not something that has been part of their self identity going back, and I would suspect that it’s probably temporary as well.

It’s been an extremely effective kind of media narrative for Wallis and others to get the attention of people in the news business, to get Jim on Meet the Press, to be able to present this new, crazy idea that you can be religious and not be conservative. So they are aware of that and they’re running with it. And probably appropriately so, because it’s hard to get people to listen to what you stand for if they don’t recognize that you exist. Certainly if they don’t recognize that you exist and you represent a pretty sizable population. I think there will be a period of time--maybe it’s a decade, maybe it’s 15 years--during which you see folks on the Christian left continuing to push this idea that the Religious Right inappropriately stole the Christian identity, that they’ve been hurting the
faith, that the Christian left wants to reclaim its tradition, its face. But I do think that that will end up being a temporary part of their narrative.

What is not so temporary is the struggle and the tensions that they are dealing with now that there is a Democrat in the White House who knows that they exist, and who spent much of the 2008 campaign reaching out to people of faith, talking to religious leaders, and who has in fact not only disbanded the office of the faith-based initiatives, but expanded it and added an advisory council with 25 faith leaders.

I think more than anything that has led to a bit of an identity crisis on the Christian left, for a number of reasons. One is that it raises expectations. The faith-based office is a much more visible--and at least in the structure of the White House--of a higher rank than just the religious liaison office that folks on the Christian left had during the Clinton years. With that carries an expectation that perhaps they will have the ear of the president, or at least the ear of somebody who has the ear of the president.

We’re only a year in, so the verdict is still out, but there has already been a significant amount of grumbling, particularly in terms of how much can actually be seen in a tangible form of what the council has done versus what the impact has been, particularly with the president and some of his more senior advisers.

Leaders in the Christian left have also had 30 years to see the Religious Right establish and navigate a relationship with the Republican Party, and not necessarily do it well. They have been able to see from the outside the challenges of being close to power, of being inside the room, but trying to retain still your own prophetic identity. That doesn’t necessarily mean that they can avoid succumbing to the same challenges, and I think that also can be observed right now. But it does mean that they are aware of what the challenges and what some of the risks are.

Again, in the book, James points out that already some of the leaders have failed to avoid succumbing to these temptations, that it is very easy to use the same kind of demonizing language against opponents that they have rightly complained about the Religious Right using in the past, to use the same construction of, you know, what would Jesus do. Well,
Jesus apparently no longer would try to outlaw gay marriage but he would make sure that we had universal health care for everybody. I think it’s as difficult to claim that you know what Jesus would do about both of those and yet that is kind of the same line of argument that many groups end up falling back on.

And there’s also no question that the temptation to align yourself with the party in power, particularly when the party in power is listening to you, is extremely strong.

And lastly, I think there is a tension that the Christian left has got the Christian right just never had, and that they accept more of the legitimacy of government to solve some social problems. It is the case that many on the Christian left think that they should be working in concert with government, that there is an appropriate partnership between faith-based groups and the government to solve social problems, and so that makes it difficult to just throw up their hands and say, well, we’re not going to have anything to do with you. Because at the end of the day, they do believe that you can do good by changing laws. As you say, you can’t make people believe in equity, but you can give children health insurance, and that’s something that some of these leaders believe very strongly in.

There’s no question, when you read this that this is an extremely personal book for James, borne out of very deep frustration with how both the Christian left and the Christian right have navigated their own power, have aspired to power, have tried to live up to the Christian commission to change the world.

And so I’m very sympathetic to how strongly he feels about this. I wonder, however, if it’s a frustration you feel with a generation that may be passing, and an approach to politics that may in fact turn out to be limited to a certain period in time. I may be overly optimistic here, as somebody who thinks that it can be both inappropriate but certainly can lead to some bad theology for religious groups to be too closely intertwined with the political system. But in my reporting particularly on young evangelicals, I think I’m seeing some trends that suggest that perhaps this model is changing.

Young evangelicals by and large continue to vote for Republicans--in 2008, they were strong McCain voters. But they don’t tend to have the same strong identification with a
political party that their parents’ and grandparents’ generation did. I think that’s in large part because neither political party really matches up with what their priorities are. If you are concerned about abortion, and maybe have questions about gay marriage or civil unions, but you also think that the government should be doing more to protect the environment, you think there should be a stronger social safety net, you think that diplomacy maybe is a better way to go about sorting out problems than military intervention, there is not a clear answer for you when you go to the voting booth of which party matches up best with your priorities.

That wasn’t necessarily the case for their parents’ generation and I think it is maybe detaching them a bit from politics in a way that their parents always talked about but is a little more natural for them. A lot of their parents and their grandparents had about whether it was even appropriate to get involved with politics. That debate simply doesn’t even exist for young evangelicals. The argument has been ended. It’s okay to be involved in the political structure. And in a way, I think it’s led to a post-religious right mentality among a lot of young evangelicals. I kind of think of them as the faith-based generation.

They don’t necessarily accept the argument that government is an inappropriate partner to solve problems like third world poverty or global AIDS. They see government as having a much broader reach, much greater resources. They know their churches have been working for decades to try to help on these issues. And they can only get so far. So that then makes it much harder for them to be reached by Republican rhetoric of “government is bad, we should only focus on the private sector and charities and churches to do this kind of work.”

A lot of these evangelicals have been going on short-term missions, and that’s just changing their sense of the scope of the problems that they’re facing in a way that their parents’ generation just couldn’t see.

This may also be something we’re seeing with young Catholics. First of all, you are seeing some resentment play out there with the idea that the bishops don’t speak for all Catholics. A group like Catholics United is presenting a Catholic faith that we just haven’t seen before in terms of pushing back and being willing to stand up for a set of different
issues. Perhaps the next generation will have a different model of pursuing political engagement, and perhaps that will make you a little less concerned.

**DR. HUNTER:** The one point I really can’t let pass is the question, is this passing? Is it a temporary thing? Three things very quickly, under this heading.

In my larger work and the way I am oriented as a scholar, I speak about the difference between climate and weather. Most people think about current events, about politics, about the things that are going on in our world, in light of the weather. Today it’s sunny, tomorrow it’s rainy, it’s cold, but it’s going to get warmer, those kinds of things. That tends to be our orientation, and it tends to focus our attention on the surface.

The work that I do tends to be oriented and framed in terms of climatological changes that are taking place, for which the weather could or could not be indications of what’s going on at that deeper and more implicit level of social and cultural change. Why is this not going to pass? Three reasons. The first reason has to do with solidarity. Unless the issue of solidarity and a deeper more common culture is found to replace the dynamics of power, we’re not going to see any diminution of the dynamics of power in a highly and irrevocably pluralistic world like ours.

The second is that a notion of the public has been subsumed by politics, and conflated it so that until we disaggregate the public from the political, it seems to me the only way to think about the common good or common problems, is through political means.

The third issue has to do with the nature of culture itself. Is it about attitudes and opinions of individuals even if they’re collective, or is it about powerful institutions that frame our understanding of time and space of identity and of purpose and all of these kinds of things that operate again below the surface? My argument is that culture is most powerful when it’s unstated, not when it’s conscious. And there is a fundamental difference between the attitudes of say in this case young evangelicals and very powerful institutions like the party system, and the special interest organizations that surround these.
So on those three different levels that are operating at the level of climatological change, I don’t see this passing anytime soon.

JOHN FUND, The Wall Street Journal: I talk to people many of whom say that they’re increasingly disenchanted with parties for whom their adherence to principles is so weak that you could walk through their deepest principles and not get your ankles wet. So they increasingly are going more and more towards organizations they trust more, including at the neighborhood and local level, people and organizations they can deliberately impact.

But what struck me, and I certainly agree with you that the Catholic left was ignored very much by the media for far too long, but I think also a subset of the Catholic left was also even more ignored and that’s pro-life Democrats, and then you mentioned them at the end and I think it’s particularly relevant because we may be days away from universal healthcare being defeated, perhaps solely by the votes of pro-life Democrats.

And I admit, I do not come out of a direct pro-life tradition. I didn’t spend a whole lot of time talking with them until recently, but in talking with them, you get a real sense of alienation and resentment just beneath the surface as to how long their concerns were — they still hark back to Gov. Casey being denied a speaking role in the 1992 Democratic convention, and just as we talk about the alienation and perhaps the anger of some of the people in the Christian right, I think we may be seeing another news story coming up in the near future, which is that if you look at Democratic primary voters, and you look at the actual people who cast the votes for Democratic candidates as opposed to Democratic representatives, you’re probably dealing with a population of about 30%, especially even in minority communities.

So I think this tension between religious communities and political parties is only going to grow because they have found the avenue to influence the local parties, but they’ve also found that there is a glass ceiling effectively put on them. A bunch of politicians that want to pat them on the head and say thank you very much for your vote, thank you very much for your support, but why don’t you just go sit in a corner and be quiet. We’ve seen that certainly with Republicans and Christian right recently.
We may be on the verge of seeing that depending on how much the leverage on the health-care bill goes and how influential they suddenly become, we may be seeing that on the Democratic side in the near future, too.

**MS. HAGERTY:** I’m just curious what you think the future of the religious right is. Do you think they are able to galvanize the next generation politically, or do you think that this next generation is becoming detached from religious institutions? The other thing I wondered is I’m curious about whether religious progressives are disillusioned with the Obama administration because I hear that a lot.

**MR. DOUTHAT:** I don’t know what the future of the religious right is. One of the fascinating things about our politics now is that the election we just had was fought in such a different socioeconomic climate than America is in right now. I mean, just take the case of the idea that young Americans are much more concerned about the environment and global poverty and so on, and that this would be one, a galvanizing force within the Democratic Party and, two, something that conservatives, religious conservatives would have to speak to going forward—this would become a big part of our politics.

Then the economy collapsed. Now, some of the religious-based, cultural water-based issues are still very much in play as John says in the health care debate. Obviously abortion has been very much in play and so on. But, you know, if you look at the polls, nobody cares about the environment right now. Nobody cares about fighting AIDS in Africa right now. These issues that seem to be so crucial to understanding shifting patterns of religion, religious-based voting and American life may become crucial again in three years or five years or 10 years or 15 years, but American politics has undergone a shift. We have a culture war in this country right now that isn’t about religion. For the first time in my lifetime, we have a culture war about the future of the size of government. Basically that’s driven by these economic changes. We’re going to come out of that debate at some point, but it makes it very hard to say what will the religious right and the religious left landscape look like when we come out of that.

**MS. SULLIVAN:** There is no question that young evangelicals continue to be extremely pro-life and in fact often more pro-life than their parents. But gay marriage is a very, very
different issue, and in the long run, it’s going to be very hard to appeal to this generation of young evangelicals by focusing on things like preventing gay marriage without picking up some of these other issues.

I’ll continue to push back at James here. He talks in his first chapter about how you think about how to change the world. I think one of the things about young evangelicals is they don’t necessarily see it as doing it through politics and electing the right people, but they also don’t see it as a matter of changing hearts and minds one at a time. A lot of them, and not a majority yet, but a significant portion of them see it as through service. You see an increase in the number of young evangelicals ending up in Teach for America, or in the Peace Corps. They’re giving money to Invisible Children. This is the way that they think they can change, and it may not end up changing culture because these aren’t institutions, but it is a very different way of conceiving of what their role as Christians is and then how they change things.

DR. HUNTER: Journalists, by the very nature of what they do, by the very nature of what you do for a living, you study the weather. You report on the weather, and the give-and-take of politics, it’s a sphere of social life that operates at that level, and politics is very important.

Don’t get me wrong, but at least in terms of what I’m trying to do, and the book certainly in that particular essay, is to reframe the discussion, to see politics from a slightly different perspective. We see manifestation of the political culture all the time, but seeing the patterns and how they relate, it’s a different analytical process, and that’s what I’m trying to do in all three essays.

It sounded like I was being just relentlessly hostile and negative toward politics, but I think the book in its totality is an attempt to be very constructive. I don’t think that the tone is negative at all, and for reasons that I explained in the book. If this is simply a critique, then it participates in the culture of negation that I think is so deeply problematic.

What I presented today was a distillation of a big argument that in its presentation sounds really negative, I think. I do leave out a lot of detail, a lot of nuance. The universal
declaration of human rights and the civil rights movement, were spectacularly important achievements, in my opinion. The problem is that the political culture in which achievements like that could take place has changed. It’s different now than it was in the 1960s, at the height of the civil rights movement, and it’s different from the time when the universal declaration of human rights was written. In our political culture, the concept of justice itself is divided and politicized, in my opinion.

On competing sides of the culture war there are those who view justice as right and wrong, you know, law and order. That’s how they understand justice, and on the other side justice is largely understood as equity. And the more robust and capacious and satisfying understanding of justice, it seems to me is less and less available to us in our culture. And it less and less informs our political debate. It’s not that it’s not there. It’s just less and less available to us.

So from my vantage point the biggest part of the challenge is our ability to imagine a public realm that is not merely subsumed by the political. A public realm in which the common good is not merely sought through political means. A public realm in which we have the capacity to develop deeper and more integrated and cohesive notions of human justice that can inform political debate, but that’s only going to happen if the climate changes.

Politics can’t get us there. Precisely the things that you want, that I want, that we’ve seen achieved in the past, our political culture has taken us further away from that I think than we wanted. And so again — we have fewer resources to accomplish those kinds of things. They’re there, they can be retrieved, but not under the current conditions. We have to disaggregate the public from the political.

What [the third essay] finally leads to is a reframing of how Christians engage their world and a reframing of how they engage the culture and how they engage politics in particular. It’s about a reframing that will in fact create the possibilities of stronger institutions that allows for that deepening; for a retrieval for what has been lost to our memory, or at least for the most part, at least in practice.
I argue for a paradigm which I call “Faithful Presence Within.” But the heart of that paradigm depends upon an understanding of climate and weather, of the difference between the two, of the dynamics of culture versus the dynamics of politics. And how the culture itself, and the way in which Christians engage it, can engage those things in ways that are truer to their own tradition and that will in fact finally make their politics far more substantive, far less polarized, far better, and that will in fact lead us in ways that will finally speak to the common good.

What is the future of the religious right? The old Christian right is dead, in my opinion. The future of the religious right is that it is in fact rooted in the recognition that politics isn’t the answer, but it’s really culture. It’s really the arts. It’s about schools, but because the myth that animates the Christian right is still the myth of a Christian America, the pungent story that follows from that and the need to take over, sort of the win it back, as Ross was saying.

The terms of the strategy, or I take it back, the tactics will be different, but the overall orientation will be just the same. It’s still a narrative of decline, of resentment, and finally of the desire for conquest.

Ross, just very quickly, semi-withdrawal, absolutely not. My sense is that Christians don’t know how to do politics any other way. And until they figure out how to do politics better, maybe it’s time to step back a little bit. The real point is to reengage public life much more robustly and in ways that are integrated, and it’s the exact opposite of withdrawal.

And I think that the comment, John, that you made, about people stepping back and wanting to be engaged in service things, this is constructive action. But it represents in a way an alternative to politics, but it’s an alternative that doesn’t finally change the frame.

**JOHN SINIFF, USA Today:** What would be the alternative without politicization, and wouldn’t just walking away from it or changing this religious/political culture hasten our transition into a European like post-Christian nation?
DR. HUNTER: I think the alternative is a different way of thinking about public life altogether. Would that hasten the move to a more European way of doing politics? It might or it might not. It depends if there’s a robust Tocqueville alternative...basically strong institutions of civil society. There are mediating structures that stand between the market and the individual, or the state and the individual, that are also semi-autonomous from them. They’re not factionalized. But again, partly because I think about climate rather than weather, I’m looking at the next 50 years, 50 to 100 years.

I do believe that to the extent that our political rhetoric can begin to tap into some of those things, we will find a language of a common good that might begin to reframe our politics. I think Obama has tried that, but mostly has failed.

DAN GILGOFF, CNN: I’m wondering if you could reconcile some of the major developments in Christianity that various folks here have spoken to that seem to point to a depoliticizing trend and how you reconcile that with the trend you speak to of politicization of everything.

REIHAN SALAM, Forbes: Because a society has to be governed by consent in order to actually get the kind of collective action, you have to kind of actually introduce the idea of contamination, the idea of invisible danger. This is the product of the desire for domination, but one could argue that actually it’s baking the cake even if you actually aren’t seeking domination per se. If you want to have any kind of action in a society governed by consent, you actually do need to use this kind of rhetoric of emergency. So I wonder if that’s even worse than you’ve just described.

DR. HUNTER: We actually don’t disagree at all about the politics of fear and its sources. I do think it’s as bad as you think it is, and you know, part of my argument about culture wars was in the sociological and historical dynamics of cultural wars is that that actually comes right out of the tradition you’re talking about. Durkheim, Erickson and Douglas are basically addressing the issue of solidarity, right? When societies form identities and form
solidarity, not only by the affirmations that they make, but by their oppositions as well, so boundaries are maintained.

With the disestablishment of the WASP establishment, you no longer sort of had a kind of consensual culture. With the decline and fall of the Soviet empire we no longer had enemies to oppose. While I think the roots of the culture war go back 200 years, the intensity that we’ve seen in the last 30, 35 years or so on, had to do with a turning inward for finding enemies.

And that turning inward was based upon the coalitions that you’re talking about, Lauren. It was evangelical and fundamentalist Protestants, conservative Catholics, Orthodox Jews forming coalitions that were as early as the 1980s. In part, against liberal Protestants, progressive Catholics, reformed and secular Jews and secularists. And the culture war actually goes into a lot of detail about those coalitions and their historical meaning. We do need to pay attention to those because Islam is going to become a part of that conversation in a big way in the future, and certainly in global terms.

The other point I want to make concerns institutions. It’s the institutions that are politicized. The individuals are not. But I do think that to the extent that institutions remain involved in trying to shape public and common life, they’re not withdrawing — to the extent that they’re not retreating into the private sphere, like Focus on the Family might be, but to the extent that they are involved in public, I don’t think that there is an alternative at this point to the politicized way.

LISA MILLER, Newsweek: I’m wondering why you think the climate now is more corrosive, more destructive, more dangerous to the future of productive life giving Christianity than at any other time in history. I think of all our great religious traditions were actually born out of time of instability and chaos, not out of time of stability and unanimity.

DR. HUNTER: I’m not trying to make an argument about all of time in history. I’m talking about modern America. I don’t live with the conceit that a lot of intellectuals or others do that ours is the pivotal moment. I do think that there are urgencies but I don’t think
necessarily that things are worse for Christians. Things are different, definitely different. There are two things that animate my own thinking.

First, because I do believe that Christians in all traditions and confessions genuinely and deeply want to make the world a better place. Yet sincerity isn’t enough. I think at some point in the book I say “God save us from Christians who are sincere but not wise.” And the problem is that so many of the strategies that Christians – in their variety – have chosen to change the world, not only are ineffectual, not only are counterproductive to the things that they care about and want to do, but there are times and in certain areas where they bring about the exact opposite to the things that they care about most.

So I don’t know if that’s urgency or not. I just think that I begin with the recognition that Christians want to change the world for the better, and I end with an argument about a paradigm shift in which they, in their variety, can think more constructively about that. And hopefully in the meantime stop doing things that are destructive or ineffectual.

MR. DOUTHAT: I think that some of the answers to your question are suggested in part one of the book. One of the things that I found most interesting in part one is an argument about the essential thinness of Christian culture in America, despite the fact that America is majority Christian, has thriving churches and is more religious than Western Europe.

When you start to drill down and look at the cultural products of Christianity, there’s a stretch where you look at the budget of the sort of Christian foundation in the larger context of foundation work in the United States, and it’s very, very small. I think you could make the same point going through all this, going through the universities, going through the culture-making industries and so on. And what I found particularly potent about that argument is that there’s nothing wrong with polarization. I mean there can be things wrong with it but, you know, the Reformation was one of the most culturally and theologically rich periods in 2000 years of Christian history. That’s fantastic, if you have the kind of polarization that’s producing, you know, producing great, great culture.

Polarization is fine. It’s just when the polarization subsumes Christianity so that, you know, being a Christian conservative means being a Republican and being a Christian
liberal just means being a Democrat and you’re watching Fox news, you’re watching MSNBC. I mean I think that’s the concern.

**DR. HUNTER:** On the first question, I think we are at a very interesting moment. You know, part of the disaffection of young Christians from the Christian right can be seen and should be seen within again a larger climatological pattern which has been growing over the last 40 to 50 years, since the polling has been invented we have seen the loss of confidence in political institutions, other major institutions, but political institutions not least.

**MS. SULLIVAN:** On the question of whether this younger generation is doing something more than service--maybe even challenging institutions, challenging cultural norms--just one example is the Advent Conspiracy. It’s not an organization but a movement that has cropped up. The idea is to take on both the secular value of consumption around Christmas and the idea that the way you show love for people in your life is to buy them things, but also those values that have crossed over into the Christian community where there is also a focus on consumption. The reason I bring it up is because it’s a critique of the culture in the way that I think James would agree has to take place if you’re going to have larger cultural change. I’m not arguing this is the majority of the younger evangelical generation, but the fact that it exists, it’s taking off, suggests that there is a hunger for some other sort of leadership and some cultural critique that just hasn’t taken place.

**MR. CROMARTIE:** Ladies and gentlemen, we’ve worked our speakers very hard. I think we ought to give them a hand for all of it.

* END *

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