MICHAEL CROMARTIE: We’ve been doing this conference for 10 years now. For those of you who have never been to this conference, let me tell you why it exists. America’s preeminent religious historian is a man named Martin Marty from the University of Chicago. Marty once said there’s no news in the news today that’s not somehow related to religion news. Whether it’s the rise of the Christian right in politics or the religious motivations for terrorist attacks, or declarations from the Catholic bishops on war and peace or on the economy, or the nature of marriage, or bioethical concerns, or what is a mega-church, or what do Mormons believe, presidential faith-based initiatives, religion and foreign policy, or the global revival of Pentecostalism. All of these issues are related to religious convictions and religious actors in the public square, and everywhere we turn the relationship of religion and politics, and religion and rhetoric, the question of the “faith angle” keeps coming up. So we came up with this idea to hold these conferences to help reporters, and not just religion reporters, but political reporters, to understand different aspects of religion in American public life, and religion and international affairs. Our purpose in these programs is simply to bring you into contact and conversation with some of the best scholars in American life today on these questions, in order to help you understand more clearly these important issues.
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. You know one of the unofficial status symbols of popular culture is how many times you get to host Saturday Night Live. Well, in academia it’s how many times you are invited as an academic to this conference. This is my third time. Mike, thanks for keeping me in the game here.

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. I never set out to write this book, and once I wrote it I didn’t think I would publish it, and then when I decided to publish it I thought maybe I would even publish it anonymously. Well, here it is.

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. It’s a new territory for me, because I have no formal training in it and very little expertise. But 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, and the book I wrote of the same title, about 18 years ago.

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. It was made most prominent in recent history by John Howard Yoder, who wrote a series of books, but most importantly *The Politics of Jesus* written toward the end of the Vietnam War, but it’s been picked up by again many others, but most importantly Stanley Hauerwas and Richard Hays at Duke Divinity School, and a number of others.

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 legitimizes 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: Thank you. James, I think that’s the first time we had anybody clap after a presentation. You’ve put a lot out there. 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, and we’re delighted that Ross Douthat could join us, and Amy Sullivan. Ross is a columnist for the New York Times. He previously was a senior editor of The Atlantic and a blogger at Atlantic.com.


Welcome, Ross.

ROSS DOUTHAT: Thank you, Mike. I’m a repeat offender at this conference but this is the first time I’ve been up here, and it’s a very different experience. 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 —

**MR. CROMARTIE:** He’s never been quoted here before.

**MR. DOUTHAT:** Never been quoted before? All right. This is the first Tertullian quote. So he’s talking about the idea, can Christians legitimately serve in the Roman military, for instance. He says, “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 — here you have 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 — well, you could call them enhanced interrogations, but
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. Bartolome De Las Casas where — right. Has he been mentioned here before?

MR. CROMARTIE: No.

MR. DOUTHAT: Okay. Good.

MR. CROMARTIE: You got two new ones in.

MR. DOUTHAT: I got two new ones in. You can pick these specific issues, warfare in the middle ages, slavery in the early modern world, and so on, but 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 — I never know how to pronounce this, which means I shouldn’t have written it down — fissiparous. 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.”

MR. CROMARTIE: How’s it going?

MR. DOUTHAT: You know, baby steps. We left and converted to Catholicism, but I’m sure they’re still there. The struggle for Yale is not an explicitly political situation, but the language of political victory bleeds into it. You see it in the way evangelical Christians have often approached Hollywood and the movie industry, where there’s this idea that if we can just get this great film made somewhere outside of Hollywood and blessed by the Holy Spirit, then we’ll show them. Then we’ll beat them. Then it will make $500 million. (That only happens when Mel Gibson is directing your film, it turns out.)

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 — the professor quotes some of them in his book — threatening to take their ball and go home, basically James Dobson is famous for doing this thing. 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 — I mean you hear some of it, but 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 all they care about is — 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 — 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.

You don’t want to be too prescriptive, I think, at an event like this. But broadly speaking what Prof. Hunter talks about —

MR. CROMARTIE: Prof. Hunter said you can call him James.

MR. DOUTHAT: I can call him James.
Mr. Cromartie: Yes.

Mr. Douthat: Okay. 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 for the sake of having some kind of tension in my response, and here I’m going to cheat a little and quote from the third essay in James’s book, which he wasn’t talking about. So it’s a little unfair on my part.

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, and I’ll be curious to hear your thoughts on this, you were suggesting that Christians should take more of what I suggested with St. Augustine’s position: A kind of participation that, you know, 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 that problem — 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: Well, thank you. It’s such a pleasure to be here. Although I have to say it is more work when you’re at one of these things and you have to be up here. But I’m especially happy to be talking about James’s book, which I know he felt somewhat ambivalent about writing, but I think it’s a very important book, and if there’s any justice, it will get discussed widely within both Christian traditions that we’re discussing here today.

And I also hope this means that he has forgiven me for not coming to Virginia to work with him as a doctoral student. Eight years ago, in a misguided effort encouraged by EJ Dionne to get a PhD in sociology, I was looking at Virginia, but ended up going to another program where they kept telling me that I wrote like a journalist. It took me about a year and a half to realize that they didn’t mean that as a compliment—[Laughter]—which led me into journalism happily enough. So I’m sorry that I didn’t get a chance to work with you, but kind of not, because I think I would have enjoyed it too much to get into journalism. This is much more fun 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. A few years ago Jim Wallis started up a group called the Red Letter Christians, and the idea there was these were Christians who paid attention to the red letters in the Bible, the words of Jesus that are usually printed in red ink. You see this as well in the reference to verses like Matthew 25, which I think 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.

Some of these were fights over whether to ordain women in certain denominations. Some of it grew out of the civil rights movement itself and struggles within denominations about race relations and about how active some denominational leaders had been in the civil rights movement, and in opposition to Vietnam as well. You saw within a lot of denominations a split between the leadership-which was much more likely to be opposed to the war-and the people in the pews, who were not necessarily of the same mind when it came to looking at the war.

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, that there was not the same sort of mainline Protestant establishment that could issue an editorial in the Christian Century that would then reverberate around different news outlets and actually have a voice in debates in society.

One of the stories that I found when I was writing my book that really seemed to illustrate this best for me was an account of a debate that William Sloan Coffin at Yale and Jerry Falwell had on the Phil Donahue show early in the 1980s. It’s hard to imagine people tuning in to see that these days, but the two of them debated for a good hour, and the essence of the debate was Jerry Falwell running circles around Coffin, whose demeanor was such that he couldn’t understand why he was paired against this guy who just seemed to be spouting nonsense. He couldn’t be bothered to even respond to most of the points that Falwell was making and just seemed completely unaware that this man was driving an extremely powerful movement in the country. And that kind of characterized the Christian left in general. They were right and the folks from the Religious Right were maybe temporary interlopers, but certainly didn’t need to be engaged with at all. Well, obviously we know what the upshot of that was.

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. In fact, there was a website that was started up during the 2008 campaign called Jamesdobsondoesn’tspeakforme.org, and it was pretty effective, after Dobson had gone after Obama and said that he didn’t think he was a real Christian.

They got tens of thousands of people to sign up, and it really pushed some buttons for people who had looked at the religious and political landscape for years and had seen the same picture we all had seen-if you were religious you were supposed to be conservative, and if you weren’t, well, maybe you weren’t religious. Or maybe you weren’t really as liberal as you thought you were, but regardless, there was no real space for you. And so after 2004 when somebody like Jim Wallis started to get more prominence, he served as
an inspiring figure for a lot of folks who weren’t necessarily responding to him so much as the idea that it was okay for them to be religious and not look like Ralph Reed, or sound like James Dobson.

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. And I think we’ll still need to wait to see if this is anything more than Joshua Dubois running a very effective liaison operation, but not in fact having himself the power to turn that into policy recommendations to be implemented.

Again, I say that as the recommendations I believe just went out last week. It’s too early to say that they’ve been ignored but—and I hope David Saperstein will jump in some time in the question period to give us some sense of what’s been going on on the inside and his sense of that.

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. Somebody like Jim Wallis continues to say God is not a Democrat or a Republican, and yet there’s no question that Jim’s access is very good in the Democratic Party, and that is where most of his time is spent. He says once he is off the council-because the council members rotate every year-that it will be easier for him to kind of fight from the outside, and that was certainly how he sees the Clinton years. He had almost constructed a self-narrative of how he had access during the early years and then he agitated too much and was kicked out and then became kind of the Crusader from the outside, particularly critiquing welfare reform. So I’m personally interested to follow him and the story that he tells during the Obama administration, as that continues.

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.

I want to end by throwing out one suggestion that kept occurring to me as I was reading the book, which is that there’s no question, when you read this, and particularly the second section, 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.

Just to throw out a couple of examples here, 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. There is also something I have talked to Mike about, which is that the dichotomy of the sacred and the secular that really was a very strong debate that 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, even though that argument was kind of taken care of by the religious right, 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, and I wonder what the effect of eight years of Bush making an argument that it’s okay for a faith-based organization to be in partnership with government, will have on this generation of evangelicals.
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, you know, either through their colleges, and that’s just changing their sense of the scope of the problems that they’re facing, again, in a way that their parents’ generation just couldn’t see.

My time is apparently up and I’m going to take a minute just to say that 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. On an issue like healthcare, you really saw Catholics United in particular walking this fine line, and not necessarily saying, well, because the Democrats are for this health-care package, health reform package, we’re going to sign onto it. They in fact had huge concerns about what the funding of abortion was going to look like and we won’t know whether they would have been willing to oppose health reform in the final consideration if things like the Senate language from Ben Nelson hadn’t been in there. But it was a very large concern of theirs, and now that that’s there, they’ve been pushing the bishop’s conference and they are gathering all their members to flood the bishop’s conference with phone calls and e-mails urging them to support healthcare reform and taking a very vocal, different stand on this health reform bill than the bishop’s conference has.

So that is just to say that perhaps the next generation will have a different model of pursuing political engagement, and perhaps that will make you a little less concerned.
MR. CROMARTIE: I do want to mention that in James Hunter’s book he dealt with the section on power. The whole first third of the book is about cultures and how cultures change over time. And so it may be that you’re going to ask a question about that chapter not knowing that he’s addressed it in the book. So James, be prepared to answer that question because I thought it was one of the most fascinating parts of your book. Mike Gerson, you’re first and then John Fund. Do you want to respond quickly?

DR. HUNTER: It will be very brief. It will be two comments. First of all, I’m very grateful for the comments that both of you offered. I could elaborate at great length, but thank you for the time that you put into this, and I’ll try to address some of the things woven into some of the comments and responses of others. The second, 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, and again this is addressed more in the first essay, 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.

**MR. CROMARTIE:** Michael Gerson.

**MICHAEL GERSON, The Washington Post:** I don’t think I have heard a presentation that I agreed with more and that I also bristled at more, in a certain way. I mean this is — I realize it’s a corrective, but you talked a lot about the will to power and resentment and fear, and very little about justice, which is also one of the most powerful of the political theology kind of concepts that’s guided Christians over the years in the way they approach these things.

And it strikes me that the historical context for this politicization is not just liberalism or other things. I mean it’s a lot of that in international relations was because of the Holocaust, okay, where you have the growth of natural right theory and universal human rights, and kind of the political claim to universal human rights after in reaction to Nazi Germany, a lot of that informed by the way by mainline Christian thought.

Mary Anne Glendon points out a lot of influence from Catholic social thought, on the universal declaration of human rights, and all those kind of categories. And of course, the tremendous indictment of the church in Germany, for not opposing a political paganism, may be the greatest scandal in the history of Christianity, taking place just 60 years ago. Amy and others have mentioned that there’s central role that the civil rights movement played in this which was an indication of a traditional community that was firmly bound,
that had rules, that had gone over for a long amount of time that was deeply unjust, that violated human rights, and that law had to intervene in order to, you know, guarantee those rights.

And we often talk about culture being upstream from politics. That is just a huge example of law being upstream from social change and that we have all gone through. And it was the very message of the letter from the Birmingham jail. I mean that’s what Martin Luther King was fighting against in this context. So I completely buy the critique that whenever the Christians act as a group to defend their own institution and ideals as opposed to other institutions and ideals, becomes a special interest group in a political setting, that it both undermines its influence and its own authority and background.

But the history that we have seen over the last 60 years is really the predominant history in many ways Christians not doing that, but taking a Christian anthropology seriously, a theory of human beings, their rights and values, okay, which is their greatest contribution in a lot of ways in the modern world.

That’s the way people who are pro-life view themselves for the most part. That’s the way people who want universal healthcare view themselves, and you can argue about prudential matters that relates to how you do that and other things, but you can’t argue that the law is not related to the protection of basic human rights and dignity.

There are plenty of abuses, but I’m not sure that at least the presentation, and I’m anxious to read the book, takes that element of political theology seriously enough.

MR. CROMARTIE: John Fund, you’re up next.

JOHN FUND, The Wall Street Journal: I couldn’t agree more with Amy. 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.

**MR. CROMARTIE:** Okay. Barbara Bradley Haggerty and then John Siniff.

**MS. HAGERTY:** Who are the Anabaptists?

**MR. CROMARTIE:** Quakers and Mennonites.
MS. HAGERTY: Got it. Okay. I don’t really think of them as a political force, but I really actually have two questions. The first is aimed at all of you, and the second is probably more at Amy. I’m just curious what you think the future of the religious right is. We see the old guard dying off. We see Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson who isn’t dead but he has said so many outrageous things he’s practically dead in terms of influence.

All these guys are getting old and in their place you have folks like obviously Rick Warren or Joel Osteen, who is very influential but really isn’t influential politically. Then you see young people who seem to be less engaged with some of the hot button political issues like, for example, gay marriage. Religious conservatives, young religious conservatives don’t get hopped up about gay marriage. Maybe they do about abortion but they seem to be more engaged on issues that are kind of the less family values, moral issues. Like, you know, they’re interested in the environment.

So what I’m wondering is do you think they are able to galvanize the next generation politically, or do you think that this next generation, as Amy kind of alluded to, is becoming detached from religious institutions. For example, there was a recent study that showed that young Catholics have become much more disengaged from the Catholic Church, even though they subscribe to the values of the Catholic Church.

So, I’m just wondering what’s going to happen to the religious right. And 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, and I would love your take on that, too, David. They were so effective in the political campaign, but it feels like they’re not getting any payback. And I’m just wondering what you all think about that?

MR. DOUTHAT: I would associate myself with Mike Gerson’s comment. I mean I think that, you know, one, you can easily get too caught up in critique of any kind of religiously infused political movement. As you get further and further away from a sort of galvanizing justice based moment, I think it becomes easier and easier for a movement to sort of get into ruts and shift into darker patterns and so on but, yeah, I think the kind of semi-
withdrawalism that you sometimes seem to be counseling I think isn’t going to be a sufficient answer for Christians on both the left and the right.

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. This seemed true during the campaign when you had Obama affectively co-opting religious language, co-opting maybe seems like a pejorative term, using religious language and McCain seemed uncomfortable with it and you could see this kind of sea change happening and so on.

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 — you know, you could argue it’s a little bit like this with Perot in the early 90s — we have a culture war about the future of the size of government. Basically that’s driven by these economic changes. And I think it makes it very hard — 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. So that’s my way of not answering the question.

MR. CROMARTIE: Certainly. Thank you. Amy and then James.
MS. SULLIVAN: They’re trying. Obviously at Focus on the Family, they replaced James Dobson when he retired with Jim Daly who is there in order to appeal to young evangelicals. The Super Bowl ad with Jim Tebow, I think, was part of their media campaign to try to put a different face on Focus on the Family and on the Christian right in general. At the end of the day, I think it’s going to be very, very tough for them, though.

On abortion, I think you’re right. 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 that—as we’ve seen with Richard Cizik getting kicked out of the NAE, are still extremely controversial within the evangelical community.

And I would also say there is one other thing, and 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.

Just very briefly, religious progressives I think are frustrated. Democrats are frustrated with them. That’s one of the interesting things here. You know, one of the things that Obama promised during the 2008 campaign was: when I get in the White House, I’m going to end this executive order that allows faith-based groups to discriminate in their hiring. It turned out maybe they should have vetted that with their friends because not all of
their friends in the religious progressive community were okay with that. So it’s been one of the underreported stories of this year, I think, that that rule has gone untouched and it is supposedly being handled by the Justice Department.

It was taken off the plate for the faith advisory council to deal with and I think it’s one example of several, and probably the most extreme example, where these two groups aren’t necessarily lining up perfectly and they’re having to kind of navigate what that means and how they deal with each other.

**MR. CROMARTIE:** Before we get others in the discussion, we will let James respond to the various questions.

**DR. HUNTER:** The questions were coming from various angles, and I would like to respond to them at least briefly, but I don’t know if I can do it in a way that tries to integrate, but I do want to echo a point that I made earlier as an attempt to provide some integration. 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. Again, not political theory, which would be a robust discussion about justice, for example.

**MR. CROMARTIE:** Which you’re for.

**DR. HUNTER:** Which I’m all for, and not about political science per se because that really is the most granular level of the weather here, but again, in terms of political culture, trying to see some larger — and largely, I don’t want to say completely invisible, but largely implicit because they tend to move slowly and they don’t move as quickly. 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, but not least the second essay which deals with power.
Let me make a brief comment in my own defense. 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.

And so, 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 and a lot that I hope would respond, Michael, to much of what you’re concerned with. There’s no question about it. 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. It’s thinned out.

So from my vantage point the biggest part of the challenge, at least as it bears on the things we’re talking about right now, 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.

On this point, just very briefly, and I’ll mention something about the third essay. I mean what it 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 that the three dominant political theologies are really just the political edge of larger paradigms of engaging the culture. And I call those paradigms of engaging the culture “defensive against,” “relevance to,” and “purity from.” “Defensive against,” “relevance to,” and “purity from.”

What I argue, as I pushed toward the end of the book, is for a fourth 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.

And the heart of “Faithful Presence” quite frankly, is a theology and practice that is fundamentally committed to human flourishing, not just for the community of Christian believers, but for everyone, all right? That is the heart of it. And until it seems to me we frame things along that line, in these terms, or some terms something like that, we’re not going to be able to change the frame.
So Barbara, very quickly, you talk about the neo-Anabaptists not being a political force. You’re absolutely right. They’re not, which is part of the point. The younger generation we’re talking about is so deeply disaffected from the right and the left and from party politics, that they’re looking for an alternative, and where do they find it? They find it in Stanley Hauerwas. They find it in the neo-Anabaptist tradition because nonetheless it’s intellectually serious.

It’s very self-consciously rooted in historic traditions of the faith, but what it does is to lead people to isolation. It doesn’t move them toward a different kind of politics. So your comment was actually exactly right, but it’s really significant. What is the future of the religious right? Very quickly, the old Christian right is dead, in my opinion. What we saw in the manifesto produced this past fall, the Manhattan Declaration, it seems to me is the spasms of especially a dead body. You know, there are a few brain waves, but it’s essentially the spasms of a dead body. I’m sorry. I apologize for that. I mean to me it was an empty speech act, to use a little bit more sophisticated language. It was a largely empty speech act that was intended to galvanize, to renew the Christian right, but it didn’t, and I don’t think it will. You know, on their webpage people kept saying, what do we do, what do we do? This is great. I really agree with this. What do we do, and the only thing that Charles Colson could say is sign on the dotted line. You know, add your name to the list. This shows a profound lack of imagination, right? That’s why I say it’s largely an empty speech act, just in sociological terms. 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, all right? It’s really the arts. It’s really about all these — it’s about schools, okay, 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. And you find this in fact — I mean there are documents I reference in the book that show exactly this, the seven mountains of culture. We’ve got
to take over, you know, these seven mountains of culture, but it’s the same paradigm, okay?

Ross, just very quickly, and this just echoes something I said before in response to Michael’s concern. Semi-withdrawal, absolutely not. That’s really not the point. Maybe from politics, as we’ve understood it, but the only reason I say in that one little section, sort of maybe the time is to step back from politics because 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, and the whole point of the third essay is to reengage public life much more robustly and in ways that are integrated, and it’s the exact opposite of withdrawal. It’s something quite different. So young people, the tension between religious communities and political parties, what is it that we are learning from young people and their disaffection from party politics? Well, I think things are in flux. Again, if we want to talk about climate versus weather, one of the climatological changes that’s taken place over the last 50 years has been a detachment from basically an anti-institutionalism where people no longer feel strong attachments to parties or denominations, or all sorts of things.

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. In the first essay I talk about, you know, in the Christian tradition, the three ways in which they want to change the world is basically evangelism, politics and then civil society.

Don Eberly is the key spokesman for that. Young people are turning to the Eberly model essentially, and these are all good things. They do constructive works in the world. No question about it, but it doesn’t change the frame. So it doesn’t address the frame.

MR. CROMARTIE: John Siniff, you’re up.
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 have a short answer for that and it’s something we can talk about further. 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 alternative. And you know, in conventional terms, if you were to take the third essay and want to reframe it the way Ross reframed some of what I did earlier, one could use Tocqueville language, to get at some of the things that I’m trying to get at in that third essay. And it seems to me to use that language. If there’s a robust Tocqueville alternative.

MR. CROMARTIE: Meaning what?

DR. HUNTER: 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, not beholding to them, not simply an extension of the interests of one side or another. 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’m not looking at the next 3 to 5 years, or the next election.

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. Part of the story of the last 13 months has been that the political culture is bigger than Obama, and that he just hasn’t been able to succeed in that.

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, the climate that you speak to of politicization of everything, and for our purposes of Christianity and religion. All the Christian leaders that we’ve mentioned politically here for the most part
are either dead or we’ve seen their influence wane mightily from James Dobson, Jerry Falwell, Ralph Reed, all the people that we’ve mentioned are really leaders of yesteryear.

And a place like Focus on the Family is arguably the most important Christian right working in the country. We’ve seen, just in the last couple of weeks, the handing of the baton to a new leader there, a new president, who is very self-consciously depoliticizing the organization and I think really sees James Dobson for all of his successes politically, one of his failures being to connect to a younger generation of Christians partly because he was seen as so political.

That speaks to another trend which Amy and some others here have spoken to and that is of millennial Christians, evangelicals in particular, moving away from politics, in massive numbers, but much more likely to sign up for at least years of service and mission trips. And I guess you add some of these trends, and it seems that to maybe equal a change in climate, and not just weather, and I’m wondering how you square those depoliticizing trends with what you see as this broader trend toward politicization.

REIHAN SALAM, Forbes: I actually wonder, and perhaps you do this more in the book, and I don’t want to prejudge, but I wonder if actually you’re giving enough regard to the climate.

So I actually wonder if the disenchantment of the world, you know, (inaudible) actually gone further than maybe the analysis suggests, and another thought is when you were talking about the politics of fear, this goes back to the question of kind of is climate actually the bigger driver. It reminded me of one of my favorite books, Risk and Culture by Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky, and in that book, the suggestion is that actually the reason you have a politics of fear, and this book was published some decades ago, is actually not so much the kind of pervasive dynamics of power, but the fact that actually a society like ours that has to be governed by consent.

And because a society has to be governed by consent in order to actually get the kind of collective action, kind of achieve some kind of political outcome, you have to kind of actually introduce the idea of contamination, the idea of invisible danger. And so, you
know, kind of a (inaudible) emergency weather, you know, kind of we must invade Iraq immediately or, you know, kind of there’s a climate threat that you actually cannot see. You cannot perceive immediately but it exists. So, in a funny way, it’s almost the opposite of your point and actually this is the product of the desire for domination but rather, you know, one could argue that actually it’s baking the cake and 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 mean I wonder if that’s even worse than you’ve just described.

MR. CROMARTIE: Before we go to Lisa Miller, why don’t you, James, take on at least the last three.

DR. HUNTER: Yeah, I’ll do that, and I’ll do it in reverse order. 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, Mary Douglas and Kai Erickson, Emile Durkheim and so on.

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, as I think Prof. Jenkins might suggest anyway. The other point I want to make, concerns institutions. It’s the institutions that are politicized. The individuals are not. Christian Smith, a sociologist at Notre Dame, has spoken about what’s going on in evangelical culture as the growth of a kind of moralistic, therapeutic deism, and he’s absolutely right. So individuals aren’t becoming more polarized.

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 have a very broad climate question. When I’m proposing a story to my editors there is a big why now, why do you want to write about this now, and especially in religion that comes up a lot, and I guess 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 we’re actually born out of time of instability and chaos, not out of time of stability and unanimity. And there has never been any consensus among Christians or Jews about the right way to engage with culture. In fact there’s been great disagreement from Paul going forward about the best way to do that.

And then last I guess I wonder whether even the construction of this as an either or, either we’re productive, agreeing, moving forward Christians, or we’re grabbing for power. Either we care about human flourishing, or we care about who’s on top, is a kind of misconstruction because if you think about the Middle Ages, all the great things that came out of the middle ages, our universities, our cathedrals, our art, our music, blah,
To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World

Dr. James Davison Hunter, Ross Douthat, and Amy Sullivan • March 2010

blah, blah, I don’t need to tell you, also came at a time where who is on top was the driving question of the church.

So that’s kind of a very broad question, but the why now urgency I guess is at the root of it.

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 were worse for Christians. Things are different, definitely different. There are two things that animate my own thinking and my own desire to finally actually put pen to paper is, well, two things.

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. CROMARTIE: Ross, you want to add to that?

MR. DOUTHAT: Is that okay? Quickly, 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 of the book, which is partially an account of how cultures change, but it’s also 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 sort of 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 if our period — 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.

MR. CROMARTIE: Yeah, but we’re looking at that in retrospect. I mean when you were living in England and the Reformation, you were probably having this exact same conversation.

MR. DOUTHAT: I disagree. I mean I think that, yes, they were probably having that same conversation there (like Hans Holbein the Younger, he’s no Fra Angelico, let me tell you ...), but I think actually, no, I think that American — I think you can look — you know, yes, everything is clear in hindsight and so on, but I don’t think you have to go back very far in American history to find a much richer Christian culture, you really only have to go back 50 or 60 years, than the one we have right now.

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 and I think it’s a persuasively articulated concern.

DR. HUNTER: One other thing very briefly, the longest chapter in that first essay is the historical chapter. It goes to precisely these epics, these moments that you’re talking
about. And one other — it’s a shorter little reference, but I do make reference to the contribution to culture of the Jewish community. This tiny minority in America who have made unbelievable contributions to art and literature and to science and technology and medicine through most of the 20th century, and during periods of intense anti-Semitism. So it’s not about the larger cultural context. It’s about what you do as a community.

MR. CROMARTIE: To be fair to Prof. Hunter, we could’ve done three sessions, one this morning, one this afternoon and tomorrow morning on each of these — he calls them essays. They’re like little books within the book is what they really are, but we’ll get it out of him before lunch, all of it.

DR. HUNTER: On the first question very quickly, 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 and taking the Don Eberly route-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 last couple of years around Christmas, led by some young non-denominational pastors. And it’s really taken off across a lot of churches around the world.

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, and more recently around the idea that it’s not really Christmas., you’re not really celebrating Jesus’ birthday if the greeter of Wal-Mart doesn’t say Merry Christmas to you but says Happy Holidays.
The reason I bring it up is because it’s not just, okay, I’m going to decide for my family that I’m going to spend less on gifts and what I save we’re going to use to donate to Living Water International and build wells in Africa. It is that, but it’s also 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. And again, I’m not arguing this is the majority of the younger evangelical generation, but the fact that it exists, it’s taking off, and it grows and moves like wildfire suggests that there is a hunger for some other sort of leadership and some cultural critique that just hasn’t taken place.

**DR. HUNTER:** My impression as a complete outsider is that the Obama White House has recognized that and that there was a strong element of calculation in some of the emphases that the Obama campaign made in 2008.

And as to the specifics of the president going to church, I wouldn’t speculate, but I think more broadly there has been a shift in how the White House is handling that.

**MS. SULLIVAN:** You’ll be shocked to hear I agree with you on that. Particularly if you look at the 2008 election results, it is impossible to conclude that Democrats engaged in more religious outreach and more robust religious outreach than they ever had before had any impact. Because the economy was the number one and the only issue for a lot of voters including Catholics who, you know, we could say came back to the Democratic Party but I don’t think that’s accurate. I think it was just the issues that drove them.

But on the question of the President’s personal faith, I wish it didn’t matter to anyone because I think what the result is from the fact that we still continue to believe that it does matter whether the President is a person of faith, is a playing up of things that don’t really matter and don’t in the end tell us much about a President and about what his or her moral foundation is.

During the Bush years we would hear things like, well, he would start each morning reading *My Utmost for His Highest*. Which is interesting. But it doesn’t really tell me how he gets from there to the policy about the Iraq war. We’re now hearing all sorts of things about the devotional messages that Joshua Dubois sends Barack Obama every morning.
on his Blackberry. Again, interesting. Doesn’t actually tell me about the content or the strength of his faith.

As far as church attendance goes, it’s interesting to me that Obama actually attends church as often and in the exact same place that George W. Bush did. They both go to the Evergreen Chapel at Camp David, a nondenominational chapel that’s actually right now run by a chaplain who is a Southern Baptist and a great nephew of Johnny Cash, I believe. So it’s interesting to me that when the President does go to church, he’s hearing a sermon from a Southern Baptist preacher, which is a little different than Jeremiah Wright.

LAUREN GREEN, Fox News: Dr. Hunter talked about looking out 30, 50 years. I don’t think I’ve heard anybody address this and it is the demographic changes that this country is facing. We expect to see a growth of 100 million, not through the maternity wards but people coming into this country. And I just wonder, will that inform in any way this debate, what changes have we seen. You know, when we look at places like California where we see the test kitchen of how the country is going to change and what do you see when you look out in terms of demographic changes, in terms of Christianity and politics?

DR. HUNTER: There’s no easy answer to that. Big changes are afoot and I’m not exactly sure what it all means. I think Prof. Jenkins is actually going to have a better bead on that than I am. It will affect the weather and the climate. It will affect both.

MS. GREEN: Do you know the religious orientation of these people that are coming? Do you have any data about where they’re all coming from?

MR. DOUTHAT: The one thing to keep in mind is that birth rates do matter, too, domestically. The hundred million isn’t just going to come from immigration. It’s going to come from the fact that the United States has more robust birthrates than the rest of the world — for native-born. And there are differential birth rights: Conservative religious believers have more children on average and Mormons have a lot more. This was also something that went back and forth a few years ago with a bunch of pieces about how this meant that we would see the return of patriarchy and so on as more conservative groups have more children. But then — again, I’m not going to really answer your
question. It’s impossible because then you have to measure — you know, Mormons have really high birth rates but also have high — I’m not sure what the exact word is, but losses, basically apostasy. That’s the word. High levels of apostasy, but I think that’s it’s an important to keep in mind that it isn’t just that you’re going to have a lot more Hispanics which could lead to more Catholics, or it could lead to more Pentecostals because there is a very strong Hispanic Pentecostal community, but it’s also that the populations within the United States will change depending on which groups are having more children.

MR. CROMARTIE: Ladies and gentlemen, we’ve worked our speakers very hard. This session has gone on for almost 3 hours and so I think we ought to give them a hand for all of it.
TRANSCRIPT

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