Religion and Polarized Politics

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Speakers: Marie Griffith, Melissa Rogers, Peter Wehner, Holden Thorp

Provost Holden Thorp:
Welcome, everyone. Wonderful to have you with us this evening. I'm Holden Thorp; I'm the Provost of Washington University in St. Louis. And it’s my great opportunity to welcome you here to another great event from the Danforth Center with Peter Wehner and Melissa Rogers. They’re excited. We’re very lucky that they were able to come here and be with us tonight and talk to us about something very important; it could not possibly be more timely than how to have important dialogues across difference, something that at a university, we spend quite a lot of time focused on. In fact, this week, we’ve had a lot of discussion in our student newspaper about this very topic and that has provoked a lot of, in my opinion, very good discussion going on amongst our students and facilitated to some extent by the administrators about how they can achieve these very same ideals that we’re here to discuss. And, you know, we believe that a liberal education is the most important element is to produce an engaged citizenry, and so we wanna engage citizens who can do the kinds of things that we’re here to talk about tonight. So, thanks to Marie Griffith and everyone who’s organized this important program and with that I’ll introduce the John C Danforth distinguished university professor and director of the Danforth Center on Religion and Politics, Marie Griffith.

[Audience claps]

Professor Marie Griffith:
Thank you, Holden and greetings, everyone. Yes, welcome to tonight's program which we’ve titled Religion and Polarized Politics: Peter Wehner and Melissa Rogers on Revitalizing Democratic Pluralism. Um, I am Marie Griffith and I’m the director of the John C Danforth Center on Religion and Politics, the sponsor of tonight’s event. And I do want to start out by thanking our terrific staff for all of the work that they put into this event. And I also want to acknowledge the Public Interest Law and Policy speaker series at the law school which co-sponsored this event. And let me just remind everyone at the outset to please silence your phones before we begin. Tonight's event was inspired by a previous public conversation between Peter Wehner and Melissa Rogers that took place about a year ago at the center for the study of religion and conflict at Arizona State University, facilitated by center director John Carlson, who is a friend of mine. We had talked before here about bringing Wehner and Rogers here, but John was so enthusiastic about the success of their pairing together that we decided to do the same so thanks also to John Carlson for the great idea and thanks of course to both speakers. They’ve had a long day already; we had a great lunch with some of our undergraduates earlier today, an interview with our online journal Religion and Politics that will be published in a few weeks and a wonderful dinner with our faculty and post-docs. It is no secret that we’re living in a time of extreme political polarization and social mistrust. Our events at the Danforth Center on Religion and Politics have addressed this reality from many angles in the past in hopes of shedding new light on new ways that we might all make our way through this moment and contribute to a more just and peaceful society. And tonight, we are extremely fortunate to have two political
experts with us who are also persons of deep religious conviction and commitment, both of whom have worked directly with US Presidents and other government officials in the White House. Melissa Rogers is a visiting professor and practitioner in residence at the school of divinity at Wake Forest University and is also a non-resident senior fellow in governance studies at the Brookings Institution. She served as special assistant to president Barack Obama and executive director of the White House office of faith based and neighborhood partnerships during the Obama administration. Rogers previously served as chair of the inaugural advisory council on faith based and neighborhood partnerships. And prior to that, she was director of the center for religion and public affairs at Wake Forest Divinity School. She has also served as executive director of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life as well as serving as general counsel of the Baptist joint committee for religious liberty. Her areas of expertise include the first amendment’s religion clauses, religion in American public life, and the interplay of religion, policy, and politics. Rogers co-authored a case book on religion and law for Baylor University Press law which is titled Religious Freedom and the Supreme Court. She holds a J.D. from University of Pennsylvania Law School and a BA from Baylor. Rogers has just written a new book on religion in American public life that Baylor University Press will publish later this year in the fall. No title yet but the book is a guide to the legal rules in this area and a warning about certain threats to religious freedom and pluralism in the United States including attacks on religious minorities and efforts to undermine traditional church state boundaries. And Rogers also makes recommendations to government officials as well as religious and other civil society leaders on navigating these issues so she has a great deal of expertise for us this evening. Peter Wehner is currently a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center. He has written widely on political, cultural, religious, and national security issues for numerous publications, including the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post, the Atlantic, Financial Times, the Weekly Standard, National Review, Commentary, National Affairs, Christianity Today, and Time Magazine. In 2015, he was named a contributing editor for the New York Times, excuse me a contributing opinion writer for the New York Times where he writes a monthly column. And he’s also appeared frequently as a commentator on Fox News, CNN, MSNBC, CBS, and C-Span television. And he’s received this kind of notoriety as a commentator because of his own deep political expertise. He served in the Reagan administration and also the George H.W. Bush administrations prior to becoming deputy director of speech writing for President George W. Bush, so he has served in three republican administrations. In 2002, he was asked to head the office of strategic initiatives where he generated policy ideas, reached out to public intellectuals, published op-eds and essays, and provided council on a range of domestic and international issues and in addition he has also worked on several presidential campaigns. Wehner is author of City of Man: Religion and Politics in a New Era, co-authored with Mike Gerson, who is a member of our center’s national advisory board. He also authored Wealth and Justice: The Morality of Democratic Capitalism, which he co-authored with Arthur Brooks. Wehner’s forthcoming book is titled The Death of Politics: How to Heal Our Frayed Republic After Trump. And this book will be published in June of this year; it offers a defense of politics and its virtuous and critical role in maintaining our democracy and what you must do to save it before it is too late. And most recently, some of you may know, Wehner published an article just last week in the Atlantic that’s gotten quite a bit of attention. The article is entitled, What I’ve Gained by Leaving the Republican Party, in which he writes about the current state of the republican party under President Trump and how he sees politics differently than he did in the past. So, please join me in welcoming Melissa Rogers and Peter Wehner to the stage. [Audience claps]
And what we’re gonna do here tonight is, um, I’m going to ask them some questions in hopes of sort of cultivating a dialogue between the two of you and then in about 45 minutes or so, we’ll open it up to your questions and we have two students who will have microphones walking around so you’ll get ample time to ask questions yourself. But I thought I would just start, obviously I’ve given the outline, the general outline, of both of your careers, but maybe we could just start by each of you saying a few words about your experience in the administrations that you worked for and perhaps focusing a little bit on the ways that you saw religion’s role in that administration, positive or negative or positive and negative. Uh, Melissa, why don’t we start with you.

Melissa Rogers:

Great. Well thank you so much, Marie, and I want to just thank everybody for the invitation to be here. It's such a joy and we’ve enjoyed the day here already and I know tonight will be great. I appreciate Marie's leadership so much and the staff’s leadership and their work. It really is a great resource for us to be able to pull on the Danforth dialogues here as well as the written publications. It's a real jewel that you all have here at your school and I know you know that but I wanted to say it as well. I also wanted to say a word of profound appreciation to Senator Danforth. I have such respect for him; his service to our nation has made such a big difference and I grew up watching him and admiring him and then had just a little chance to work with him on some of his public work, including on protecting church state separation and religious liberty and appreciated his voice so much, coming from a person of deep faith and also a lawyer and a scholar and someone who cares so deeply for our country. So, I want to thank Senator Danforth for both his service, and this chapter of his life in establishing this center. And of course, Pete, I want to thank him for the opportunity, for all that he contributes to our national dialogue and the chance to be with him tonight. It’s such an honor and a pleasure to be with him. So, I want to just tell a little bit about working for President Obama. President Obama, as you know, is a committed Christian, and someone who got his start actually doing community organizing on the south side of Chicago, working out of a little office in a Catholic church and supported by some funds that were contributed to by the Catholic campaign for human development to try to help people on Chicago’s south side to realize greater economic opportunity and safety in their neighborhoods. So, when he got...both because of that experience and his training as a lawyer, and teaching constitutional law, which of course includes our wonderful religious liberty guarantees in our constitution, it wasn’t any surprise to those of us who knew him that he had a keen interest in these issues, both you know throughout his public service, but, uh, they got highlighted through the campaign and then in his service in the White House. And one of the offices that I held, as Marie indicated, was to direct the White House office in faith based and neighborhood partnerships. And many of you probably recall that this was an office actually started by George W Bush in the White House and it’s fairly unusual for a president who comes along after a president like that to hang on to a signature initiative of the previous president, especially when the previous president was one from a different political party. But because of President Obama’s interest in the role that religious groups can play in collaboration with the government and serving people in need, he wanted to retain this office in the White House while putting his own stamp on its activities and we can talk about that in more detail if you wish. But one of the ideas was to run this office in a way that was collaborative with religious groups and community groups that were interested in serving people in need and to do so whether it was through a financial relationship with government or, more commonly, through
a non-financial arrangement with a religious or community group. And just to name one particular example, when the terrible Ebola virus emerged in West Africa, uh, President Obama and his Chief of Staff, Denis McDonough knew right away that religious groups were going to be key toward combatting this terrible virus, toward facing this problem not with fear, but with fact and also with compassion. And so, we immediately worked with religious groups that were, had outposts both in West Africa and some just in the United States, but we dealt with a wealth of issues, including how do we develop safe burial practices for people who had died of the Ebola virus so that we respected religious traditions but also respected the fact that handling the body was the main means of transmission of the Ebola virus. So, we needed teams of medical professionals and religious people to come up with safe burial practices. So, that was one part of the collaboration. Other parts included making sure that people who survived the Ebola virus did not have a stigma attached to them. And so, for example, President Obama met with Dr. Kent Brantly, you may recall, he was one of the people who worked for a faith-based organization, treating Ebola patients and then contracted the disease himself, thankfully, was fully cured and came to the White House to meet with President Obama. President Obama met him, Kent, and his wife Amber, in the Oval Office, and pictures were taken which were beamed all the way around the world and that helped to send the signal that one need not be afraid of embracing Ebola survivors and of course, congregations had a big role in that welcoming Ebola survivors in West Africa back into the pews. So, I say that just to say there were all kinds of collaborations; that’s one of them and it was really truly a great honor to be a part of that work. Also, President Obama knows that religion intersects with public policy and law in countless ways, including in the Federal Executive brand, whether its health policies that have some kind of connection with faith or education involving religious schools or the like. He knew that there were these intersections of religion, law, and public policy. He knew that we needed to always be consistent with religious liberty guarantees and so we looked at those areas of law, policy, and religion and tried to do our very best to honor the law and also to find common ground on some very difficult issues. We weren’t always successful in doing so but that was always an interest of the president in that we try to find common ground on difficult issues in these areas and try to accommodate differing views wherever we could. So, that’s just a little bit of what it was like to work in the Obama White House and I’m happy to discuss more about it a little bit later.

Peter Wehner:
Great. Thank you. Thanks, Marie, for your leadership of this institution, just to echo what Melissa said, that John Danforth is a model of what a public servant should be and this institution is one of the very impressive institutions in public life and its role is more important now than ever and it is an honor to be with Melissa. I respect her a lot. We have done a couple of events together. I would say as a general matter that Donald Trump has divided America but in some particular cases, he has brought people together and for a Democrat like Melissa and a Republican like myself, we’re much closer in the Trump era than we would’ve been maybe in previous eras, so thank you President Trump for that, only for that. [Audience chuckles] Uh, just a quick comment generally about working in the White House and then on the particulars of faith and the role of faith with President Bush and our administration, um, I mean it was a great honor to work in the White House. I was in three administrations, Reagan and George H.W. Bush and then an advisor, senior advisor, in George W Bush White House. There wasn’t ever a time, and I’m guessing it’s the case for Melissa, where you go in there and aren’t struck by the honor of working there and the sense of history of that, that place. I’ve spent most of my life in politics
and I understand it’s a complicated profession but I’m not cynical about it and I don’t think that other people should be cynical about it, because I think that politics matters. It’s got its upsides and its downsides and its bright sides and its dark sides but I would say that finally and fundamentally politics is about justice and justice always matters and so you shouldn’t be indifferent or cynical about that. I’ll also say that my IQ was 80 points higher the day before I went in government and the day I left because it turns out that it’s a lot easier to comment on the mistakes of other people than it is to actually govern, which is a complicated task. President Eisenhower told John F Kennedy just before he became president that all you get when you’re president are the tough ones because all the easy ones, all the easy decisions are taken care of before they get to you. In terms of faith as it relates to George W Bush and our administration, let me take those in order. Faith and in this case Christian faith was, for George W Bush, central to his life. You may recall in the 2000 campaign during the debate they asked various people on the stage who was the most important philosopher that shaped you, and he said Jesus because Jesus changed my life and it was a simple answer and it was an authentic answer. President Bush struggled with alcoholism; he made a recommitment of his Christian faith. He gave up alcohol that day, stayed away from it and his faith grew. And I’ve gotten to know him sense, we’ve stayed in touch after the administration and that is a central part of who he is. In my experience, when people become folks of faith, particularly if they’ve had some kind of a conversion experience over the course of their life, it can have different effects. I think for some people it hardens them, it makes them sometimes more moralistic and deepens their certainty about life and sometimes sharpens the edges. I’d say it had the opposite effect on George W Bush in my experience; I think it softened his edges; I think it made him a more tender person and more empathetic person. Just one anecdote, Scott McClellan who had worked with George W Bush in Texas, and had been close to him and then was press secretary in the White House. And Scott left and it was one of the few quasi-tell all books that came out. It was critical of the administration and to some extent President Bush, and some of the people that worked with Scott in the communication shop were very upset and angry at him because they felt like what he was saying was not true and that it was a betrayal of a trust. And President Bush knew that that was the feeling so he gathered the folks in for a meeting and he said I don’t want anybody to say anything negative about Scott; he’s not a bad guy, he may have been dealing with some difficult issues now and I want you to extend grace to him and that was a message that was sent out and it was a message that was received. In terms in how it animated him and our administration, certainly part of the explanation for the faith based initiative and compassionate conservativism. When he ran on that in 2000, the idea behind it was how do you catalyze institutions of faith like drug addiction facilities and other things, that heal human lives, that heal broken lives, and they do it in part because they are faith based institutions, so how do you support them and still stay within the proper confines of the constitutional limits that need to be abided by. And so, that was part of it, which was he had seen these, um, different institutions within Texas do good work and he wanted to try to help them. And knew that for a lot of people faith was central to their lives and this could help. And probably the most prominent example, I would say, and the most humane, was the global AIDS initiative which President Bush put forward. It was, at the time, a huge increase in the funding and energy that the administration put behind this effort. It was unprecedented in its scale and scope in terms of combatting a deadly disease and the estimates that about 13-15 million are alive today because of that effort. It wasn’t informed only by faith, but I think faith played a role and I know for a fact, having been there at the time, that some of the efforts within the administration, including pushing very hard for the money that it cost,
because there was a lot of resistance at OMB and elsewhere, that tis came from people of the Christian faith because of the belief that this is something that really needed to be done and could be done and it was done well. One other example that comes to mind is what I think is one of the finest speeches that he gave and that was on September 14th, was on the Friday after the September 11th attacks which happened on a Tuesday. That speech got overshadowed a little bit because later that day President Bush went to New York City, and that was when he had the bull horn on the rubble and that was a kind of iconic moment, but there was a National Cathedral event that occurred and the President gave a speech, it was only about 12 minutes long, and it really was I think a kind of speech that used faith in the best way possible which was to try and extend healing and comfort to people. And it was one that, whether you were a person of faith regardless of what faith you were, or not a person a faith, that I think you could draw real comfort from and I think it put a frame around suffering that was not a simplistic frame, but helped give people hope and that is not uncommon in the American experience. You can go to Lincoln, you can go to a lot of people, but probably preeminently Lincoln in American history, who was able to use faith at key moments to try and bring healing to the country and unity to the country.

Griffith:

Mhmm. Thank you. Let’s delve in to some of the difficult issues. So, religion and politics obviously intersect in all kinds of ways in our society we know and always have. Religious liberty has been one of the big topics here and of course Melissa you have just written a book about this, but I wanted to ask both of you, and actually start with you Pete, to just talk a little bit about its role, the sort of ways we’ve been imagining religious liberty or that it’s played out in court cases and what you sort of perceive to be the shape as the Supreme Court has really changed quite recently in terms of its own sort of leanings, um, what issues you see are gonna really take hold when it comes to religious liberty and how best to think about them.

Wehner:

Sure, I’ll go first. Um, but Melissa’s the one who knows this issue much better than I and John Inazu who’s here knows it better than I as well, but ignorance has never stopped me from offering my opinion before so why should it start now? It’s a contentious issue and it’s contentious because I think what we’re facing now are what is often the case for contentious issues in this arena which is competing rights. You have the religious liberty clause and what I think is throughout American history, something of a default position to allow religious institutions to operate the way that they want, according to their faith traditions and customs, and the state ought to stay away from that and let those communities live their lives more or less the way that they want as long as it’s legal and it’s not jeopardizing the safety of the people and the children. But when you have issues of what is perceived as civil rights or civil liberties and they collide with religious liberties, that’s when it gets complicated. And I would say as a general matter, that the issues that are gonna be most complicated and potentially most explosive have to do with religious liberties and sexual ethics. Because you have a lot of institutions, religious institutions, colleges like Wheaton, para-church organizations like InterVarsity, and others, that have a kind of institutional identity and they hold to a belief of sexual ethics that is part of the tradition of Christianity; whether one agrees with it or not that’s a separate issue. If people want to get into it, we’re happy to discuss it. But I’m just saying as a general matter, a lot of these institutions and the people that work there hold these views. And then there’s the issue then that
comes up which is when people are transgender, or gay, lesbian, so forth, if they want to work there or they want to have certain lifestyles that is at odds with what these institutions hold. And they’re not...those institutions don’t hold those views specifically just to gays but they have a view of sexual ethics generally which they hold to, and is that perceived as being discriminatory or not? Is that the kind of discrimination that we think of, you know, in the history of race? And uh, if you think it’s, you know, not allowable like Bob Jones University in the 1980s which banned interracial dating and there were ramifications of that. They lost their tax-exempt status. And if you believe that gay rights is equivalent to civil rights, would that apply here or not? These are really difficult issues I think to sort through and it takes prudent people to try and sort through them. I think it’s easier to make general characterizations of those issues than it is when you get down to some of the particulars and I imagine that the court is gonna have to deal with any number of these cases and we will see what they...what they come up with. But last thing I would say on it is, I think that depending on where one is coming from, each side has an understandable position and I think it’s probably as a general matter, in this debate as in most debates, to try and give the benefit of the doubt to the people you disagree with and assume that they’re acting in reasonable good faith and they come from maybe a different life experience or a different circumstance and they’re trying to work this out. That doesn't tell you how the particular issue should be decided but it might help create a frame in which the discussion takes place.

Rogers:
Yeah, well you know, religious liberty issues, we could take up all the time with religious liberty issues because they’re very complex and interesting issues. I want to start with one that I think is not complex and that is when president, or then candidate Trump called for Muslims to be banned from the United States. That was not a complex issue, that was a clear issue, where he was you know completely wrong and I think a great, that was a great embarrassment to our country in the tradition of George Washington talking about giving to bigotries no sanction and persecution no assistance. So, the standard that Washington set and that so many of our presidents have carried out was horribly tarnished by his candidacy and comments on these issues for which he has never apologized nor retracted his statement. You know, I think about, my mind goes back to the wonderful act of President George W Bush going to a mosque days after 9/11 to stand up for the human rights of everyone, safety for everyone, religious liberty for everyone. As I said to Pete before, I believe he truly saved lives when he made that statement that the nation needed to hear right then. It was an act of courage; he did the right thing and he’ll always be remembered in history for doing the right thing at that pivotal moment. I think President Obama also took great pains to ensure that we would promise everyone equal rights to religious liberty because we all possess equal dignity; we are all of equal worth and every American deserves to have their rights of conscience protected and to feel safe and secure in this country and never be subject to a religious test in terms of whether they can enter this country. So, I just want to start with that issue because that is such a devastating mark on our country's history and unfortunately has never again been apologized...President Trump has never apologized for that statement and that is a real loss and instead has continued to put forward anti-Muslim propaganda and indeed engage in fear mongering on the basis of faith, race, ethnicity, and other factors and been willing to use also violent imagery which I think is a real threat to the safety of people in our country and in other places around the world and that is deeply regrettable and I think we need to hold President Trump accountable for those kinds of statements and
anybody who would fear monger on the basis of factors like faith, race, and ethnicity. That goes across parties certainly. So, you know, and I would add that I think the Supreme Court got it wrong in Trump vs. Hawaii dealing with the travel ban, or Muslim ban. I was sorry to see particularly when the court extended, I think appropriately, uh, a word of caution and correction in the Masterpiece cake shop case to statements that would seem to be not consistent with our tradition of religious neutrality when it came to a conservative Christian and yet did not come down the right way in the Trump vs. Hawaii case when we had far stronger evidence of animus directed toward a particular religious group and I think we can’t say that that policy, the travel ban or Muslim ban, would have been propounded but for President Trump’s position of animus toward the Muslim community. So, I was sorry to see that the court I think got that wrong in the Trump vs. Hawaii case. And there's a lot of work to do in this area; there’s a lot of people who feel that they cannot attend their house of worship without being fearful of being attacked, ridiculed, harassed, or even shot. We don’t have religious freedom in America when we don’t have safety for everyone to go to their house of worship or to wear religious garb in public. And I think this is just such a paramount issue that I hope can bring us together. I mean this is an issue about which we shouldn’t have no argument; we should stand side to side, shoulder to shoulder, and press on these issues very hard, particularly as we are seeing a spike in hate crimes across the country. Um, when we get to other religious liberty issues, and issues of civil rights, I think, you know, as Pete said, they’re complex issues. We have seen that there is a new court now and Justice Kennedy has now taken the place of…or Justice Kennedy has retired. Justice Kavanaugh has taken his place and it remains to be seen how that will change the court. One of the things that I’m concerned about in that space is that I really appreciated Justice Kennedy’s position on, for example, a case known as Lee vs. Weisman, where Justice Kennedy was a key voice and indeed wrote an opinion saying that there shouldn’t be government sponsored prayer on a middle school graduation program because that had the effect of coercing people along religious lines simply because they wanted to attend their middle school graduation ceremony. So, he was a voice that was very sensitive to the Establishment Clause and I really appreciated that because I believe that the Establishment Clause not only protects people who are not in the majority faith, which is quite appropriate, we need to protect everyone’s beliefs and everyone’s religion from government intrusion, but also keeping the government from sponsoring religion protects the religion that might otherwise receive the stamp of government’s approval. Because when the government sponsors prayer, it’s going to pick and choose among religious ideas, embrace some, reject others, and what we’ll be left with I think is not an authentic version of faith but a version of faith that is a creature of the state. And when religion is a creature of the state, it not only distorts faith, but it robs faith of the ability to be a prophetic voice, to call out to the government for correction when it’s needed, to be prophetic and to be a voice of conscience when the government goes the wrong way and needs to be called back; and this is religion at its best obviously. Religion isn’t always playing a productive role, but at its best, religion has been able to call the nation to the better angels of our natures, as Abraham Lincoln so memorably said. So, I’m concerned about that; I’m concerned also, while being a very strong proponent of protection of free exercise, I worry about an overreaching in this area where we would give corporate bosses permission to impose religion on their employees and blow gaping holes in our civil rights laws, because a certain version of religious liberty. So, I think we need to work out these issues. We need to find a careful balance and also, we need to ensure that religious liberty is for everyone, not just for Christians, but for everyone in the United States, and also that it is not...is something that protects maybe more liberal free exercise interests as well as conservative
religious interests. For example, the Trump administration has been very friendly toward creating religious exemptions for, you know, if it’s a contraception mandate which is under the Affordable Care Act, and we can unpack all that later if you wish, uh, giving religious organizations and corporate, even publicly traded companies, exemptions from the requirement of providing contraception coverage for their employees. I would agree about exempting religious organizations; I think there’s more to discuss and certainly questions about how far that should extend into the corporate space, the for-profit space. But, they’re also liberal or more progressive if you might put it that way, free exercise, where, for example, there are religious people who are putting out water in the deserts on the southwest border for undocumented immigrants so that they don’t die in the desert when they’re...when they’re in that space and the Trump administration is prosecuting people who for reasons of their faith are engaging in that kind of humanitarian activity. So, if we’re protecting rights of conscience, and I think we should, although we need to talk about how to do so appropriately in all cases, then I think we need to ask hard questions of this administration, and any administration, um, that is of one political persuasion, are we protecting equally the rights of conscience that would come from a different political persuasion? So, that’s another complicated issue in the religious liberty space.

Griffith:

[Directed toward Wehner] Do you want to comment on any of that or respond to any of that?

Wehner:

Just very briefly, I do think, um, along with Russell Moore, the southern Baptist on this, that conservative Christians who insist on religious liberty for themselves ought to insist on it for others as well. But the attitude that this is for me, but not for thee, is not going to work. Unfortunately, there are a lot of people on the right, conservative Christians, who are very sympathetic to President Obama’s...or President Trump’s Muslim ban and antipathy toward Muslims. But they better be careful about that. One, it’s wrong, I think it’s morally wrong, but secondly, that boomerang can come back and to say that we aren’t going to allow for pluralism and religious liberty for you, but we’re gonna insist on it for me, is, in the end, not sustainable.

Griffith:

Mhmm. Well that sort of leads me to my next question. You know, you both self-identify as Christian, of course very openly and very publicly, um, but you come out of somewhat different traditions, or you’re part of somewhat different traditions. And I’m maybe gonna ask each of you to reflect on your own a little bit. So, Pete, you know when you described George W Bush a few minutes ago, it was very much a sort of, what I think of as a classic Evangelical sort of mode of being, this kind of humility and repentance and this sort of Jesus being favorite philosopher and all that. And you’re I think traditionally have called yourself an Evangelical. Today, people think of white Evangelicals as being just supporting a bunch of Trump policies that don’t resemble Christianity in any way, shape, or form. So, I’d love to hear your reflections on that. And then for you, Melissa, you know, you come out of originally a progressive strand of the southern Baptist tradition and I want people to remember that that exists, or it existed. It once existed, but you left that church when that strand was sort of wiped out a little bit. And um, I don’t know if you consider yourself a part of the what’s getting called the religious left or the progressive Christianity, but I’d love for you to talk to us a little bit, I think those are folks who are often
invisible to the media and to others so maybe just talk a little bit about your world and that kind of religious world. So, why don’t we start with you, Peter.

Wehner:

Okay. Sure, very briefly in terms of my own pilgrimage. I didn’t grow up in a Christian family. Um, I began to explore the issues of faith when I was in high school, end of high school, and then in college. For me, it was a very sort of intellectual and cognitive process. It took a long time. I remember talking to my sister who would become a Christian years before, my oldest sister and saying Patty, this feels like it’s sand in the gears for me. I don’t quite get where this sort of sense of peace and tranquility comes from. Um, but it continued; I had people along the way who were extremely important to me who walked along side of me. I’d say I’m sort of in the C.S. Lewis *Mere Christianity* mode, so I don’t identify with a particular denomination. I’ve been in churches of all sorts of different denominations. And I think probably benefitted from them. At some point it went from the head to the heart for me. Um, and the faith became a source of real comfort to me and at times of suffering in my life, and hardship, the faith is something that I’ve turned to not, interestingly because I think that those problems will get solved, because I’ve actually never believed that that’s the way to interpret Christianity as a guarantee or anything close to a guarantee of lifting the problems, but just as a way...I think the way I’d describe it is to feel like there is a purpose and a meaning, that there is an author to the story. And often you don’t know how it’s gonna be written and sometimes you’re in a chapter and it can be a difficult chapter in life, but chapters aren’t books and that there is purpose and meaning and, in the end, it’s a book that has a glorious ending. Um, so that’s a very short version of my own...my own journey. In terms of where I am now it’s Evangelical Christians, it’s true I associated for most of my Christian life with the Evangelical movement, most of the churches I was in were Evangelical; I backed away from that phrase. First it was the whole Trump phenomenon and then when a lot of Evangelicals rallied behind Roy Moore in 2017, I thought, boy, I gotta get off this train now. The way I put it is if you were an atheist and a leftist and you decided to go into a laboratory and create two figures to discredit the Christian Evangelical movement, you would very likely come up with something that resembled Donald Trump and Roy Moore. [Audience chuckles] And when I talk about this issue, I want to be careful because I have a lot of friends who are Evangelicals, white Evangelicals, who supported Trump. There’s a spectrum. I think sometimes it’s easy to assume that all white Evangelicals are extremely enthusiastic for Donald Trump and it’s more complicated than that. And I’ve always understood the argument, even though I didn’t in the end buy it, of people who were conservative Christians who said I’m gonna vote Trump over Hilary Clinton because I feel like his policies will do more to advance the causes that we care about, which we think will advance the good of country than she would. So, I get that argument. Again, I didn’t vote for him, but that’s something that I thought was a defensible position. What I think is indefensible quite frankly is the enthusiastic embrace of Donald Trump. I would say that his, probably most committed group of supporters right now, is the Evangelical community and I think he knows it which is why he’s not gonna go cross-wise of them. And I think it has just had a corrupting effect on faith. I care a lot about politics but I care more about faith than politics and I think that what's happening now is a kind of freak show and I think the world looks at this and sees a movement that they rightly, in many instances, would say is hypocritical. We’re seeing the weaponization of politics and really the subordination of faith to politics and I think that's a very regrettable thing. You know, my own views on Trump, and I see and would even acknowledge that on certain areas that matter to conservative Christians, he has
delivered. Certainly, on the courts I would say that that’s the case and other issues too. But he’s a person who is, um, not only doesn’t embody in my estimation a Christian ethic; I think he embodies a Nietzschean ethic, that he believes in the will to power that might makes right; he has a contempt and disdain for people who are weak and powerless and takes advantage of them. So, I think the idea that a faith movement would rally around that is finally not supportable. Beyond that I would just say as general matter, I’m very wary about people of faith getting too locked in with political parties. I just think that faith should stand above all political parties and ideologies and stand in judgement of all of them and it was Martin Luther King who said that the church shouldn’t be the master or the servant of the state, but the conscience of the state and there ought to be some kind of prophetic role for churches which is...and people of Christian faith and other faiths which is to speak truths and speak truth to power and to be honest and I just wish...and it pains me that it’s not happening that many of the most prominent Evangelical Christians, and I’m happy to name names, but frankly Ram, and Robert Jeffress, and Jerry Falwell Jr., and Eric Metaxas, and uh...and others, they not only won’t utter a single word of criticism, you know, against the president, but there is sword and a shield and they’re defending him and ironically, they’re defending him on the very grounds that Clinton supporters defended Bill Clinton back during the Lewinsky scandal. I’m old enough to remember that and the argument then from many people on the Christian right was that morality was central to the political leadership, and it didn’t matter how strong the economy was, that presidents, by the nature of their job, are role models whether you want them to be or not and that their actions have radiating effects on the civic and political culture and um, and that wrong doing had to be called out for wrong doing. Um, and at that time, liberals defended Bill Clinton, so everybody’s switched their position it seems and they said you know we elect a president not a pastor and you gotta have grace and people make mistakes, so forth and so on. Now it’s reversed and if you listen to people on the Christian right, they are invoking the very exact arguments that the Clinton supporters did in the late 1990s. So, people see this and they say, oh I see this is all a game; it’s a power game. We get how it goes. You didn’t actually have these convictions. These are just instrumentalities. These are just clubs that you pick up when it’s convenient and you use them to beat the other side if the other side you know has a different view than you. But when it’s your guy that’s under attack, let’s just go ahead and jettison all those convictions. But other than that, I don’t have strong opinions on the subject. [Audience laughs]

Rogers:

Yeah. Well, um, I’m a Baptist, so I’m still a Baptist; I’m just no longer a Southern Baptist. But I grew up with learning the Baptist tradition of church state separation and religious liberty which really had a huge and continues to have a huge impact on my life and I learned what I did not know from any of my schooling but just through, I think Baptist Sunday school lessons, about Baptists being a despised religious minority at the founding of our country. We were the ones who were discriminated against by the establishment in Virginia, for example, in Massachusetts before we had our constitution and the establishments. You know in time, the establishments died out in the states. There were various churches that were established in the colonies and then the states and Baptists were on the short end of the stick in terms of preferences and so we were...we felt the pain of being the discriminated minority and that uh...pastor John Leland, Isaac Backus, others, have written, who wrote about these issues and advocated for old religious liberty were not advocating just for liberty for themselves or for a share of the establishment, but rather that the state was over...it was exceeding its jurisdiction
when it became involved in promoting religion or promoting one faith over another. So, that had a huge impact on me and I always love to quote, there are so many wonderful things to quote from Pastor John Leland who lived at this time in Virginia and Massachusetts, he said the fondest of magistrates to foster Christianity has done it more harm than all the persecutions ever could. So that’s, that’s where I’m coming from. In terms of respecting these very guarantees, at the same time, respecting church state separation and religious freedom allows for religious people, just as my Baptist ancestors did, to play a real role in advocating for the common good and working with government where there are shared interstates. To be sure they’re complex questions here but I think that it in no way implies that religious people should be second class citizens, should not be able to gage with their representatives, should not be able to work with government where there are shared aims. It does mean that religion and government should have some independence from one another as spheres, so that one shouldn’t be under the thumb of the other. They should come from a position of independence to decide to work together or not as the case may be. And so, I kind of...I guess I grew up kind of as a Jimmy Carter, Barbara Jordan, Baptist, and have really appreciated the contribution that they and others have made and see the kind of political and policy views that I have as a way of honoring human dignity and the equal worth of everyone and taking a showing a love of neighbor and that would include you know everything from extending quality affordable health care to everyone, to opening our country to refugees from around the world who are persecuted, of course with all the appropriate security checks which we do have in place, but with the knowledge that our nation can and must be both compassionate and secure. And, um, thinking about climate change from a religious perspective, who will suffer most? The poor will suffer most in climate change and so we have to both protect the wonder of God’s creation and ensure that those who are most vulnerable are not devastated by what we see is on its way and needs to be stopped. Racial justice, um, is another issue that I’ve felt very strongly about and see, you know, want to work on with others in both parties who I think are committed to this issue of course and as well as you know ensuring that people who have not been as privileged as I have been have an opportunity to move up and have equal chances at economic mobility. So, that’s just a little bit about where I’m coming from. I don’t mean to suggest that these goals are the ownership of one political party. I think they’re shared by people in both political parties, but just to explain a little bit of what’s motivating me. And I’ll just close out that...those remarks by saying what I remember Barbara Jordan saying in her wonderful voice, um, when she talked about people of faith being involved in politics, she said we just need to remember that we are God’s servants, not God’s spokespeople. And so, I think that is very much consistent with Senator Danforth’s approach of humility in bringing his faith to bear on public issues. So, I just wanted to mention that as another thing that I always try to remind myself that that is an important rule to live by.

**Griffith:**

Thank you. I’m just gonna ask you all one more quick question and maybe ask you to answer briefly because I know I wanna get to everyone but I just don’t want the evening to pass without asking you this. So, I gather from your comments neither of you are big fans of Donald Trump...I think you know...that feeling is probably shared widely. And, you know, I think folks are really struggling oftentimes with holding on to hope you know in these times and feeling rather helpless, feeling rather hopeless, and I think those of us who are educators have these kinds of conversations with our students a lot at various levels and I just wanted to ask you what you
see...do you struggle with this too? And what do you see as the political grounds for hope? I don’t mean the religious grounds but the political grounds for hope, you know, moving forward?

**Rogers:**

Yeah. Well, uh, I went back...when I was thinking about these issues, I went back to one of my favorite speeches by President Obama which is the speech he made on the anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery marches, the 50th anniversary. And if you recall that speech, it was a lot of instances starting with the Selma marches of course about the hard and bloody, sometimes bloody work, of people and the ongoing work of perfecting our nation, living up to those promises in our constitution and I just pulled on quote that if you wouldn’t mind me reading quickly, President Obama said, what greater expression of faith in the American experiment than this. What great form of Patriotism is there than the belief that America is not yet finished, that we’re strong enough to be self-critical and that each successive generation can look upon our perfections and decide that it is within our power to remake this nation to more closely align it with our highest ideals. So that is a place where I really draw a lot of hope and strength in knowing that this is the ongoing project of America to bring our country more in to line with our founding ideals in their best sense and, you know, President in that speech talked about the role of faith groups and civil society groups and playing this role of perfecting our nation. It is not just the work of government and so I think that's part of the reason where I draw my hope and happy to talk more about that a little bit later.

**Wehner:**

Sure, um, yeah so there is no hope. No...[audience chuckles] just kidding. Um, good night. [Audience chuckles] Uh, yeah, I mean I have given this thought. I’d say several things. It is actually an authentic hope. It's not necessarily an expectation or certitude, but let me give some grounds for it. The first thing I guess I would say is people shouldn’t lose perspective. There’s a tendency to do that and to think that whatever moment one is in is the best or the worst of all time. This country has gone through a lot worse than what we’re in now. You can start with the Civil War and where you know it’s the equivalent today of seven million people having died and the carnage was extraordinary. You can go back to the late 1960s, which you know some people in this audience are at an age where they remember that. I was young at the time, but you had just you know in 1968, you had the assassination of King and Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy, you had the riots that had started in '65 I guess, with Watts, that was spreading, you had the Vietnam war, you had the marches on the Pentagon. People forget...I actually found this in research for a book I’m working on, there were an average of five domestic bombings I think a week or a day in 1971, '72. Um, so this country was really convulsive at that time and great violence and we came out of it and we’ll come out of this as well. The other thing is that sometimes viruses create their own antibodies, in politics as well as in medicine. And I think that that's actually happening I would say. My own sense of reading both research data, seeing what’s happening around the country and in communities, and just anecdotally, that people are seeing what is happening and they want to find a way to fight back against it. You know sometimes, virtues are a funny thing. Sometimes you can take them for granted in the life of in individual or in the life of a nation but when they’re stripped away from you or from others, you begin to understand why they mattered in the first place and then you actually make a commitment to try and uphold them and to advance them and it wouldn’t surprise me that that would happen here as well. Third thing I’d say is we’re a self-governing country; we’re not gripped by forces beyond
our control. Sometimes when I hear people talk, they speak almost as if they are afflicted with some kind of terminal disease of which there’s no cure. That’s not the situation here. If enough individuals change their lives, vote their conscience, take certain actions, that will reflect itself in our political culture and our civic culture and then you think about how quickly things can change. Take, for example, the same sex marriage debate. However, where everyone you fall on that issue, in the early 1990s, it was inconceivable that this country would have same sex marriage today and then really there were two individuals who I would primarily credit for having changed the trajectory of that debate: Andrew Sullivan and Johnathan Rous, who changed the frame from the gay rights movement being a transgressive movement, that is a movement that was an attack on marriage, to saying we revere this institution, we want to be part of it. And now, it’s the law of the land. Or you take something like the #MeToo movement, a movement that nobody had thought about or heard about; I think it’s one of the great social movements of the last 50 or 100 years and this thing kind of organically came up. So, it’s not as if we haven’t had movements that have happened. And so much of this really in terms of our political and civic challenges that we have, you know, depends on what we do in our daily lives and in our communities, our localities. One person who has a commitment on an issue, or a strong view on an issue, can’t make much of a difference, but a lot of people can constitute a movement and that can, that can happen as well. Woodworth has a lovely line in the poem the Prelude that says, what we have loved, others will love and we will teach them how. And, um, part of this is to try and help people love what deserves to be loved. And the last thing I would say is if you’ve never heard it, I’d recommend you go to YouTube to Bobby Kennedy’s speech in 1966 in South Africa. It's called his Ripple of Hope speech. Um, and it’s actually...portions of that speech are by his grave site; as you probably know he’s buried in Arlington Cemetery, just a few feet from his brother. And in it, he said that few people have the greatness to bend history but each of us can change small portion of events and that those events in total shape the history of our time and the history of the generation. And then he said each time that a person stands up for an ideal, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope and those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest galls of oppression and resistance. And he said that in South Africa in 1966, when apartheid was the law of the land; we’re not there yet but the principle holds which is individuals can create ripples of hope and ripples of hope can become currents and currents can wipe out injustice.

Griffith:
Okay thank you both. So, we’ll open it up now to your questions. Unfortunately, I think we probably don’t have time for a follow up, so get your question right the first time. Make it as clear as you can and I want to make sure we get as many people in as possible. So, if you’ll raise your hand high so I can see you, okay, and we’ve got two mics down here. Raise it up again so she can see you. There you go...mhmm.

Audience Question 1:
Hello and welcome to St. Louis.

Wehner:
Thank you.

Audience Question 1:
I have a question for both of you, but they're separate questions. For you who is sitting on my left, I’m sorry...

Wehner:  
Pete...yeah

Audience Question 1:  
Pete...

Wehner:  
Uh huh

Audience Question 1:  
Um, so at one time, the party of Lincoln was the party of civil rights, civil liberty, based on what I studied in my seventh-grade American government class, it was really the party actually. I’m independent, always have been. Um, so will you respond to that, that transition in the party? What happened? And for you, um, there was...you used the term progressive, and so...and then I heard others use the word liberal. Within the Democrat party, and I presume you are a member of, will you really point out distinct characteristic between the two? The liberal and the progressive. You know I have a good idea, but I want you to share your thoughts. Thank you.

Wehner:  
Sure. Yeah, I'll go ahead and go first. Yeah, how did the party of Lincoln become the party of Trump? That is a good question. I'll say several things about it. I guess the first thing is the party of Lincoln couldn’t stay the party of Lincoln because there was only one Lincoln. Um, and he was such an extraordinary figure. I think...when I think about the Republican party today through the context of Lincoln who I think was, in my mind, was undoubtedly the greatest American, the greatest person this country ever produced, there are two ways I view it and the second one I’ll get to which is the context of your question on terms of civil rights and civil liberties. But I’d say the first one, and to me what was one of the things that was so extraordinary about Lincoln, was his capacity to heal the country after the devastation of the Civil War. And the fact that he had the moral...just the moral construct and the heart that was able to view what had happened and in a moment of victory after the South was defeated to essentially indict both sides, and say that both sides had made mistakes. He prosecuted the war with ferocity because he had to and it was the right thing to do and then he said we have to come together and that he didn’t harbor hate in his heart and he was a rare figure with which is the more powerful he became, his biographers will tell you, the more tender his heart became, the more empathetic he became. I’ve read a lot of biographies on Lincoln; my favorite one is by Lord Charnwood; it was actually written in 1917; it’s just called *Lincoln*. And that really touches on that. So, that capacity, the better angels of our nation, that you said at the beginning before the war, his first inaugural, we’re not enemies but friends. And then at the second, with malice toward none, with charity toward all. And that’s in a sense sort of the book end of that. That’s extraordinary. Nobody has ever in their...in American history rivaled that I don’t think or gotten close to rivaling that. But now the Republican party is, to me, in large measure, and again, I won’t insert appropriate caveats because it’s a large party with lots of honorable people within it. But as a
party, because it’s become the party of Trump, I think it’s become antithetical to that. Um, and there not only isn’t that Lincolnian sentiment but there seems to be this willingness and in some cases even eagerness to enflame the body politic and to stoke the ambers of anger and hate as part of the reason why I left the Republican party even though I’m still conservative; I just don’t think it’s a party that embodies the kind of things that I thought it once did and think that it should. And then on this issue of civil rights and civil liberties, I mean it’s a complicated history of course you know, and most people here probably know. So, the Democratic party was really the party of the South, of Jim Crow laws more than the Republican party up until the kind of key moments, ‘64, ‘65, when Lyndon Johnson supported the Civil Rights Act of ‘64 and the Voting Rights Act of ‘65 and he said at the time, I’ve lost the South to the Democratic party and he was right and that began a transition so eventually the South migrated Republican, the North migrated liberal, and now the South is sort of the core center of Republican party. Um, you know, there are legitimate issues having to do with...with what’s the right policy on racial matters, everything from criminal justice to affirmative action to you name it, and I think those are perfectly legitimate debates to have and where you end up on that doesn’t indicate whether you’re racist or not or even if you’re insensitive to race or not. But what has again bothered me is that the Republican party, in my mind, is the main agent because of Donald Trump, he’s president, is the main agent of racial and ethnic inclination and the party that I knew which was not, which I thought I knew in any event, which was not one based on identity politics, but was really based on the idea that we were a creedal nation, that was one of the great conservative I thought insights which was America was a creed; it wasn't...you weren’t identified by your race or your ethnicity; it was not identity politics. That’s just very different now and that is why, on the immigration issue, that is the issue that Donald Trump goes to every time he gets in trouble with his base and I think it’s a proxy for...we were talking about this at dinner...I think it’s a proxy for other issues. Um, because I just think objectively speaking, the issue of undocumented workers, whatever you think, I'm in favor of border security, it’s not as much of a problem as it was twenty years ago, or fifteen years ago, or ten years ago. The apprehensions at the borders is at the lowest rate since 1971, um, so, something is going on here. I happen to think that it is a proxy for issues of lost cultural dominance, some amount of fear, that a lot of white Evangelical Christians who for most of their lives have been in the dominant position, see the country changing, and it worries them. I don’t think it’s all racially motivated by any means. I think for example there’s a sense of changing sexual ethics which worries a lot of people who are conservative Christians and I think there’s some legitimacy to some of those concerns. There’s a sense that I know that I’ve heard from a lot of people who are conservative that they’ve been humiliated and looked down on by cultural elites and I think that a lot of that has gone on too, a sense that people look at folks who hold traditional perspectives of faith and think ah what a rogue, what a fool, and you know, if you’re a gun owner in South Carolina, people look at ya and think, you know, what a sort of second class intellect, what a second class citizen. So, I think that is going on too, but I also feel like there is an issue in which race is something that animates it. And I’ll give you one tangible example. I remember being struck by this. It was back in 2017; it was in that Alabama race. So, Donald Trump had just spoken somewhat sympathetically toward the DACA kids, kids who had come to the United States...their parents were illegal immigrants. They were born here, what do you do with them? Most people I think humanely say you’re not gonna get rid of them. But, um, and he had spoken sympathetically and some of his right-wing base got all jacked up about it and were criticizing him. So, what did he do? It was a Friday night. He went to Alabama. At that point he was weighing in for Luther Strange against Roy
Moore in the Republican primary and so he went to, I think it was Huntsville...he was in Alabama and he gave a speech. He barely mentioned Luther Strange. Do you know what issue he brought up? The NFL players not standing for the National Anthem. Do you know how many players had not stood for the National Anthem the weekend before? Six. This was not a big issue. It shouldn’t occupy the attention of the President, but he decided to raise that issue and he raised that issue because he knew it would provoke a debate and he knew it would energize many people in his base. Again, not all of them, but enough of them. And what happened the weekend after that? Hundreds of players refused to stand for the National Anthem because they had been challenged by Trump. So, that kind of intentional inflammation, especially on the area of what’s the original sin of America, which is race, and the one issue that we’ve just never been able to adequately overcome, I think is, um, inexcusable. And the last thing I’ll say, is it would be grossly unfair to say most Republicans are racists or bigots, but I think it is fair to say that most Republicans are willing to stand and support without dissent, and in some cases enthusiastically support, a man who is president who does stoke racial and ethnic tensions and does it intentionally. And that is a problem and at a minimum it means that the moral reflexes of the party of Lincoln have been dulled to the point of...of almost vanishing.

Rogers:
Um, thank you for your question. I’m sorry because I’m a lowly lawyer and not a political scientist, I’m loathed, I’m kind of reluctant especially knowing that within this room there are people that are very skilled and have probably written dissertations on the difference between, or the distinctions, between the labels that you described for us, of liberal and all that. So, I’m not sure I can be that helpful on that particular issue. I would say, I think there…I’ve been described in a variety of ways, and I think you know most of which don’t bother me...some of which of course do, but I’m certainly, you know, pleased to you know be described by...you know I’ve been described variously as a progressive and certainly you know as a member of the Democratic party, and you know, it certainly doesn’t bother me to be described in either of those ways. I would identify with those labels.

Griffith:
Thank you. More, okay. We got Neil down here. This is one of our minors.

Audience Question 2:
So, thank you both for coming to speak today. So, this question is for both of you, but it’s based on a statement earlier made by Professor Wehner. So, you talked about...you criticized what you called the weaponization of faith in more contemporary politics, say the past five ten years. And one thing I thought was interesting was you mentioned earlier a speech made by George W Bush a few days after the September 11th attacks, in which he invoked his Christianity, his faith, as one of healing, as one of comfort. I believe in that speech he mentioned that Almighty God watches over the United States. However, I kind of want to push back against that because two days after he made that speech, he switched to a more, I think, militaristic mindset motivated by faith in that he said it is kind of the moral initiative of America to rid the world of evil doers and he even called the war on terrorism a crusade, which seems to me kind of divinely or religiously inspired language. So, I guess my question then is whether or not this weaponization of faith is in itself always a bad thing and whether or not religion may be used or invoked for some sort of greater...uh greater cause? For example, establishing solidarity in a
fractured country. Earlier you said that fundamentally politics is about justice, so I guess analogous, is there a fundamental purpose for religion?

Wehner:

Sure, um, I’ll go ahead and...I guess this is directed primarily to me; then Melissa can clean up whatever I get wrong. First thing is tonight you introduced me as a professor. I’m actually not a professor, but it reminds me of a line that Daniel Patrick Moynahan who was a professor, and he was running for Senate of New York and in one of the debates he had with his opponent, his opponent assumed that that moniker would work to his opponents' advantage so he began to refer to him at the beginning of the debate as Professor Moynahan and Moynahan heard that and said, I see that the mudslinging has begun. [Audience laughs] In terms of your question about the weaponization of faith and...well let me first say on the crusade...the reference to the crusade, President Bush used that once. He...I know for a fact that he didn’t use that intentionally to invoke the crusades and when it was pointed out, he didn’t use it. The reason I know it is because he was determined immediately, I mean within hours after the 9/11, and I think his record from what he said at the mosque about Islam being a religion of faith, virtually everything else he said publicly was to try and separate what had happened and not turn it into a religious war. Uh, so it was a term in terms of crusade that one uses without necessarily thinking...that happens and again once it was used once, it was called to his attention and he never used it again. I mean I would say that the weaponization of faith is almost always wrong. That doesn’t mean the use of faith in great causes and even in the cause of military conflict is wrong. When I say the weaponization of faith, I have a particular thing in mind which is to try and use faith as a club in a partisan effort that essentially evacuates it of its purposes and meaning and turns it into an instrumentality and a partisan instrumentality. So, when you do that on either side, whether it’s for a cause I agree with or I don’t, I think that’s a problem. But you know, faith, as an instrument for justice manifests itself at different moments given particular circumstances and there’s no book that you can pull off of a shelf and say well this is how...this is how faith ought to be appropriately used in this particular situation. Nobody really...really knows. Sometimes faith has to be used as an instrument of reconciliation and repair. Sometimes faith has to be used to stir people to righteous anger. So, you can...you look at Frederick Douglas using faith against slavery and say that that was the right thing to do at that right moment. You could also use the example of Lincoln to say that their faith was used as an instrument of healing. Um, you can look at Diedrick Bonhoeffer in Nazi Germany. Bonhoeffer was, by theology, a pacifist, and he changed his views because of something called Nazism and he ended up participating in a plot to try and assassinate Hitler, which failed and Bonhoeffer ended up losing his life at a prison camp because of it. So, you know, life is complicated and different times and different circumstances require different things. And again, it’s not always obvious. I do think that at least as I’ve gotten older um, that one of the things a faith should teach us is a kind of epistemological modesty, a belief, not as a dear friend of mine, who was a huge spiritual figure in my life Steve Hainer said that...he said it to me the last time I saw him before he died...he said I believe in objective truth but I hold lively to our ability to perceive truth and I think that’s not a bad way to look at it. And I think, by the way, that that’s one of the reasons why it’s so important to have different people in your life who have different views than you do and that we have to learn to listen well to people, not just listen to respond because none of us has anything approaching the full view of truth on any given subject. We all come at these issues from a particular angle, a vision based on a particular life circumstance; we’re shaped by different people and different events. And, um, so, you know,
ideally, we all have something to contribute to widen the aperture of life and to see things more, um, more fully and I think faith properly understood makes us more, not less open.

Rogers:
Yeah, just agree and underscore by saying we all see through a glass darkly to use a bit of Scripture so we really need to hear...listen to hear each other and that goes both in matters of faith and also, I think in our American experience right now.

Audience Question 3:
This is a question for Melissa...we’ve left you out. During the course of your remarks, you used the phrase sexual ethics. [Muffled reply from Rogers] I think you did...you said some religious schools have sexual ethics...

Rogers:
I think that was Pete.

Wehner:
No, it was you [directed towards Rogers]

Rogers:
Was it me?

Wehner:
No. [Audience laughs] It was me. I confess.

Audience Question 3:
Alright, putting the two words together was something I haven’t heard ever. I don’t remember hearing anybody talk about sexual ethics. And so, this is religion and politics, an institution that we’re participating here. What role, if any, does the government have in determining what ethics are, particularly as it relates to sexual relations?

Wehner:
Well, go ahead Melissa. [Audience laughs]

Griffith:
Just a small question

Wehner:
You said it... [Directed towards Rogers]

Rogers:
Let’s go back to the tape

Griffith:
Well you know, I think you were referring maybe to the Gordon College. You know, you were talking earlier about some of those things too
Rogers:
Oh, well, I...I think that...I don’t remember using that phrase, but you know, in terms of...I come at it as a lawyer from thinking about civil rights. And thinking about what are the kinds of civil rights that are due to people regardless of their personal characteristics. And so, if I was mentioning it, or mentioning something in that area, I think it was in the nature of ensuring that we are able to protect people’s civil rights if they are LGBT people and protect their own human rights and civil rights.

Wehner:
I’ll quickly..because I was the one who mentioned it. Um, I mean I desegregate your question in terms of what role does government have in sort of imposing morality. You and I may just disagree on this. I think it has a huge role. Government passes laws that embody morality all the time and it may be the most important thing government does. When they pass laws against certain crimes, murder, robbery, or anything, or graft, um, those are laws that embody a moral view. Now, that’s not all government does. A lot of what government does is on taxes and regulation, but as George Will wrote in a marvelous book in 1984 Statecraft as Soulcraft. Um, so, government does take on the job of imposing morality. It has to because that’s what government is meant to do which is to try and provide some kind of enforcement of laws that create much of what the rest of life is about. The debate, and it’s a very serious debate, is where on that line does government fall and what kind of morality should it impose. The American experience as a general matter is that the government should not be imposed to the degree possible, laws that don’t impact other people, and that’s really the product of John Locke, right, who was the...sort of I guess he was referred to as America’s philosopher even though he was European but he shaped the American experience and the idea was limited government. And for the most part, the people would be allowed to live their lives as the way that they want as long as it doesn’t impose on other people. Does government have a role in the realm of sexual ethics? I mean as a general matter, no. I think it’s a wise idea to say, you know, that the government shouldn’t be involved in people’s bedrooms. I think most people appreciate that. I think most of us would agree that banning pornography for children is a good idea. That is a sexual ethic. It’s an exception but I think we could all come up with some areas where we say, yeah, government ought to be able to say that this is not the place that you ought to go. And then it gets complicated if one is talking about sexual ethics in the issue of abortion. And we can, if you want, to go into that issue; there are obviously competing arguments there. I was speaking, by the way, just on the sexual ethics side, that was in the context of religious institutions, okay, that had nothing to do with them having a government role. It was saying look, if you are a Wheaton College or a Christian college, you have a certain view of how sexual life is to be organized and run and they say they’re a private school and they say look if you teach at this school or you’re student here, there’s a code of conduct that we want you to be a part of. If you can’t in good conscience follow that, go to another school. That’s perfectly legit, but we have a certain ethos here that we want to uphold and that’s informed in many cases by Scripture. That, I don’t think government should get involved with unless there are certain extraordinary circumstances.

Griffith:
Well we’re...what’s that?
Rogers: Can I just add on that? That I think that there is, you know, the role of protecting all human rights and civil rights, religious liberty being one of them, LGBT rights being others, and of course there are others on top of that, and so trying to balance those rights in particular spheres and I think it can differ in particular context and spheres is also something that I was referring to that maybe perhaps you were picking up on that as well.

[Muffled reply from audience member]

Rogers: Well I’m glad we got it settled.

Wehner: Boy, I gave him a long-winded answer to the wrong notes...

Griffith: Well, we’re gonna have to leave it at that. I hope you will all join us outside for a reception where you can meet our guests and talk to them out there. Thank you both so much.

[Audience claps]

Wehner: Thanks

Rogers: Thank you.

Wehner: Thanks very much.

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