Conspiracy! Evangelicals, Fear, and Nationalism in the 21st Century

A public lecture by Prof. Anthea Butler, University of Pennsylvania
Introductions by Prof. Marie Griffith and Prof. Laurie Maffly-Kipp, both Washington University in St. Louis
Emerson Auditorium at Washington University in St. Louis
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7:00 pm – 8:30 pm

Griffith:

Greetings everyone and welcome to tonight’s lecture by Professor Anthea Butler, sponsored by the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics at Washington University in St. Louis. I’m Marie Griffith, the Center Director, and I say this every time but it is truly great to see all of you here in this room and also to welcome all of you joining us by livestream or Zoom from home. This is our first major public event in two years and I don’t think we’ll ever take gathering together for granted again. And in fact, we’re so excited to gather with you that we have a surprise gift for you all at the end, at least for those of you here in this room, so please stay tuned for that. We also hope you’ll stay for a reception and book signing with Professor Butler, whose celebrated book White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America will be available in the lobby. We have a couple more events this semester to which I’d like to call your attention. Next Thursday evening, April 14th, we will welcome anthropologist Kevin Lewis O’Neill on the topic “An Island Retreat: Sin, Secrecy, and the Offshoring of Sexually Abusive Priests,” and that will also be at 7:00 in this same room, as well as on Zoom. And on Tuesday April 19th, the Danforth Center welcomes journalist Mark Oppenheimer to speak about his recent book Squirrel Hill: The Tree of Life Synagogue Shooting and the Soul of a Neighborhood. Further information is available on the welcome table outside this room as well as on our website, and we hope all of you will join us for these events as well. And now it’s my pleasure to invite my colleague Laurie Maffly-Kipp to the podium to introduce our distinguished speaker. Laurie is the Archer Alexander Distinguished Professor in the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics and she has served as the Director of Religious Studies as well as the Interim Dean and Vice Provost for Graduate Education here at WashU. Prior to joining the Center, she taught for 24 years at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She is a renowned scholar in several areas of American Religious History, including African-American Religious History, Religion in the Western United States, and Mormonism, among others.

Maffly-Kipp:

Good evening. It is my distinct pleasure this evening to introduce our guest, and my dear friend, Anthea Butler. Professor Butler is the Geraldine R. Segal Professor in American Social Thought and Chair of Religious Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. Her research and writing spans African-American religion and history, race, politics, Evangelicalism, gender and sexuality, media and popular culture. She’s also the recipient of numerous honors and a driving force behind several important public initiatives. She was awarded a Luce/ACLS Fellowship for the Religion, Journalism, and International Affairs grant in 2018-19 to investigate the Prosperity Gospel and politics in the American and Nigerian contexts. She was also a Presidential fellow at
Yale Divinity School for the 2019-2020 academic year. Currently, she co-directs the Henry Luce Foundation-funded Crossroads Project for black religious histories, communities, and cultures. Finally, she is also the current President of the American Society of Church History, one of the oldest professional guilds in our field. Some of you may know Professor Butler more from her public engagement in social media, print, and television. She is an op-ed contributor for MSNBC. Her articles have also been featured in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, CNN, NBC, and *The Guardian*. She has served as a consultant to PBS series, including Billy Graham, The Black Church, God in America, and Aimee Semple McPherson. For all her titles and accolades, however, Anthea is quite simply a force of nature and a scholar who can speak truths that cut through much of what passes for academic rhetoric. We were trying to remember, earlier today, just how long we had known one another and when we had met. While neither of could recall exactly, I believe it must have been some time in the late 1990s when Anthea was in graduate school. Even at that time she was sought after as a conversation partner because she could talk about race, religion, and politics in ways that few other people would; the woman does not mince words. She brings to her work a unique mix of deep generosity for religious communities of all stripes, a biting wit, and a willingness to hold people to account when necessary, something I have a feeling she will do with us this evening. Anthea also brings her own real-life experience from very different worlds to bear. First, from her research and experience in African-American Pentecostal communities, she had intimate knowledge of the politics of Black church spaces, including, I should note, wonderful stories about female dress requirements in particular churches. That part of her life informed her first book project, *Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World*, in 2007. Second, from her traversing of White Evangelical spaces and her deep friendships with people that live in those worlds, she brings an empathy, tempered by a commitment to truth-telling. You may not always agree with Anthea, but you know exactly what she thinks. Moreover, you know that her shots are not cheap ones but are grounded in understanding and a commitment to sustaining relationships across the political spectrum. She wants us to think better and to view our current political and religious tensions from new vantage points. She has certainly helped me to do that. Those goals are on full display in her most recent book, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America*, as well as her contribution to the 1619 book, *A New Beginning*, and I suspect we will hear more about them tonight but I will let you experience them for yourselves. It’s now my great pleasure to welcome Professor Anthea Butler here to talk about “Conspiracy! Evangelicals, Fear, and Nationalism in the 21st Century.”

Butler:

Honestly we really could just leave now because Laurie has given me this incredible welcome, and I feel like “what do I have to say?” Right, I don’t need to say anything else. Thank you all for coming. This is really lovely. This is the first time in two years that I have spoken to a group of people in front of me and not on, you know, some kind of “thing,” so that’s great.

And hello everyone out there in Zoom-land! This is how you’re used to seeing me, you haven’t seen my legs in two years; it’s probably good that you haven’t. So, thank you Laurie for that wonderful introduction. Thank you, Marie, for inviting me. I have known these two lovely professors and women for a very long time and they are good friends as well as other people in the Center, Leigh Schmidt and Mark Valeri. Everyone in the Center has just been wonderful, and
I just want to talk about the Center staff, Debra especially, who have been really gracious to me. So I just want to say thank you, first of all. And then, to begin, how about that...

This is not going to be an easy talk tonight, but I think it is a talk you need to hear. And it is a talk about where we are right now. January 6, 2021 was a defining moment in American history. It was the first time that the capital had been stormed by a large crowd of people since 1814. While other attacks at the capital have happened, most notably bombings and the shooting of five congressmen in 1954, 1/6 marked the first time that an attack of this magnitude occurred. And while we are still processing, at least I am anyway, what this might all mean for America. I want to single out a particular moment that I think encapsulates what I will be talking with you about this evening. And that is the prayer in the Senate Chamber. I am going to play this main clip for you, and then I want to talk about its meaning and how this connects to conspiracy theories and Evangelicalism today.

**Video Clip:**

Amen! Let’s all say a prayer! Thank you heavenly father for this opportunity. This opportunity to stand up for our God-given unalienable rights. Thank you heavenly father for giving the inspiration needed to these police officers to allow us into the building to allow us to exercise our rights. To allow us to send a message to the traitors, the communists, and the globalists that this is our nation, not theirs, that we will not allow the American way of the United States of America to go down. Thank you divine and omnipresent and creative God for filling this chamber with your white light of love, with your white light of harmony. Thank you for filling this chamber with patriots that love you and that love Christ. [Inaudible]. Thank you divine creative God for surrounding us with your divine omnipresent white light and protection, peace, and harmony. Thank you for allowing the United States of America to be reborn. Thank you for allowing us to get rid of the communists, the globalists, and the traitors within our government. We love you and we thank you in Christ’s holy name.

**Butler:**

Amen. They did end with Amen, I just cut it badly. The leader of this prayer, known colloquially as QAnon Shaman, was Jacob Chansley, who was recently sentenced to forty-one months in prison for his role in the insurrection, said specific words in his prayer that, to the normal listener, would not appear to be part of a conspiracy, but they were. The words that he spoke about globalists, communists, and the like, all resonate with things we hear every day, but we might not know where they come from. His prayer is an imprecatory prayer, a prayer designed to move God to make things happen, to speak on behalf of things he felt were evil. “Commanding Jesus,” according to his words, to be in the Senate Chamber to fight against the “tyrants,” “communists,” and “globalists,” he called his fellow insurrectionists “patriots.” He called on the “white light” of love to fill the Chamber. And he, like everyone else in the room, thought they had God’s favor because they had successfully broken into the capitol.

Now, on one level, we know that this is all wrong. It is wrong because in the breach of the capital building, people died, politicians and staff had to be evacuated alongside the Vice President of the United States, all because it was a certification for Joe Biden’s presidency. In no short order, people began to call this, within twenty-four hours, an attempted coup. Moreover, and this is crucial to my talk tonight, it marked the moment that prayer wasn’t just a prayer, but a
prayer for insurrection. A prayer for overthrow. And a prayer that sounded like an Evangelical prayer. It was a mash-up of several different beliefs that are held by these insurrectionists; they are held by politicians, church members, and many other people who believe conspiracy theories in America. And they are held by Evangelicals.

What I want to talk about today is how Evangelicalism has changed and where we are now. This is not a talk to denigrate Evangelicals, this is not about trying to put them in a certain spot, this is about telling you the truth. And so, while many may disagree with me, I think what we can agree on is that this is a moment for this particular movement in American religion that bodes ill. That is trouble. And one of the reasons why I wrote the book, which came out before 1/6, was because I already saw Evangelicals in trouble. And I had friends that I couldn’t be friends with anymore because they had decided to move into a very radical space. Their God, that they prayed to, was not the God that I thought we shared. But it wasn’t really just about God, but it was about the ways in which they thought they were doing the right thing, but were willing to embrace things that were not legal, that were not part of civic engagement, and that were harmful. And so, out of all this, what I realized was that Evangelicals, both traditional ones and cultural Evangelicals, and I will talk a little but about that, have embraced conspiracy theories in part because of their support of Donald Trump, fear of demographic and social change, and the embrace of conspiracy theories such as “Stop the Steal” and QAnon.

The appeals you hear, from both religious figures and politicians about pedophilia and child pornography, are QAnon beliefs and talking points that have made their way into the mainstream because of disinformation, a robust, viral, and vicious media system, and the proliferation of organizations outside of local churches that have enormous social reach and political connections. While this may be all surprising to some, it is not something that happened because of the election of Donald Trump. It happened because of a longer history of conspiracy theories surrounding Christianity. Whether there was an antisemitic trope about eating babies, or what Catholics do and how they have a fealty to the papacy, or to the Illuminati, many Evangelicals are hearing variations on these conspiracies today from people who are not just coming at them from the church pews, but from Facebook, through Twitter, through social media channels, and through, unfortunately, the recent hearing for Ketanji Brown Jackson, through the mouths of politicians. What’s happened? Why are we in this space? We are here in this space because of the proliferation of Christian nationalism. When I was a grad student, I remember reading a book by Michael Barkun, which was about the rise of the racist right. And this was about the regular kinds of people that we used to think about, Storm Front, all these groups that were white identity groups that espoused some kind of Christianity. And that’s true, but what has taken their place is something more dangerous. Something deeper. It is sitting next to you in the pew at church. It is the person who is bagging up your groceries. It might be a friend of yours. But now, you can be a Christian nationalist who believes in conspiracy theories that have no place in either the Gospel or any place else. So, while I’m not out here talking about how I want to reform Evangelicalism tonight, what I am here to talk about is to help you understand and hear what is being said, and also to understand the space that this religious group is in, and the people who are outside of it too.

What has happened is you have a confluence of Christian nationalism. And so we have to think about what the definition is, so I want to read a couple of definitions and then I’m going to talk about how I said it in the book. So one of the people that I’ve been working with, two of them actually, are Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry, both sociologists. Their definition of
Christian nationalism is at heart: Christian nationalism fights to preserve a particular kind of social order. An order in which everyone, Christians and non-Christians, native-born and immigrants, whites and minorities, men and women, recognize their proper place in society. In other words, this is about hierarchy and about hierarchies that are not supposed to be broken, hierarchies that are important to the way that people feel both in a nostalgic sense, and most of the time this is harkened back to the 1950s, or in a way in which they believe in a kind of biblical authority – men over their wives, God over the church, and also, this is important, certain kinds of men over other kinds of people. That’s one. Katherine Stewart, who is author of The Power Worshippers, says that Christian nationalism relentlessly promotes a message that the world is divided between the pure and the impure, insiders and outsiders, and assures their followers that if they conform, they will be on the inside, and I think that’s important; this is about making a community but a different kind of community. At gatherings of people who believe in Christian nationalism, loyalty is a test of truth and supporting the right candidates is a key to the path of spiritual salvation. In other words, it’s not just about receiving Jesus Christ as your savior anymore; it’s about how are you going to show yourself true to the Gospel? If you vote for the right candidate, if you support God’s candidate, or, in the case of the 2016 election, the King Cyrus, who was Donald Trump. Now, at the end of my book that you will see tonight, I say that Evangelicalism is not simply a religious group at all. It is a national political movement whose purpose is to support the hegemony of white Christian men over and against the flourishing of others. Now, that may sound very stark, but when I think about Christian nationalism and I think about the people who support that, no matter what color they are, they think about a certain kind of hierarchy. Men are on top of it and it’s also very political. And so while we have had years of talking about Evangelicalism, from the Moral Majority to Ronald Reagan to Christian Coalition to the Promise Keepers to what happened after 9/11 to all of these different people and the ascension of Donald Trump, what I think has happened is that Evangelicalism is not simply a religious group but it is a political movement, and we haven’t wanted to talk about that. We’ve talked about the ways that Evangelicals move throughout society to do kinds of political things, but we don’t want to admit that the ways in which they’ve used morality have been both, as I talk about in my book, as a shield to protect them from anybody thinking that they were after power, but also as a bludgeon to make sure that the public does not get out of line and that the kind of beliefs that they have are important.

Now, while we can think back to a time when Evangelicals used to say “Oh, you know, we’re going to get rid of somebody if they have sexual sin,” or whatever. Now that’s not the case... sexual sin is not a disqualifier. None of it is a disqualifier anymore. It is a disqualifier if you are somebody else, if you are outside of the camp. If you are inside of the camp, that’s a different story all together. The other part of this is that Evangelicals have embraced conspiracy theories about race, government, money, and all of these things tie into certain kinds of Evangelical beliefs. But now they are coalescing around white nationalist beliefs that threaten American democracy. So, we have these kinds of messages that happen, and the kinds of messages that happen, that make Evangelicals embrace these kinds of things, are very important. How do we get here? What does this mean for democracy, where we are in 2022, with an election coming this fall and the 2024 Presidential election? I think it means several fore boarding things. One, is an increase in QANON, nationalist, and white supremacist language that is used by mainstream politicians and religious leaders alike. We heard some of this last week, we hear it from certain kinds of republican figures all the time, whether they are government officials, legislators, senators, others, and people who are outside of that, so that’s very important. It’s a realignment
of educational systems in America, from K-12 to university life. We can think about this in terms of the recent things that have happened with book bannings, school board captures and others, the fights about masking in schools. These have been very virulent kinds of things that have happened. Or, we can think about the ways in which we don’t talk about the nation’s history anymore. I happen to have a chapter, The 1619 Project about black church, which is historically straight forward but you know you can’t talk about slavery because that’s a bad thing now, and you basically can’t talk about certain kinds of historical things. We’ve fought battles like this before, but now it’s growing. You also can’t say “yay, you can’t do this, you can’t do that” but actually, the most important one, which I won’t get to tonight but am happy to ask questions about, is vaccine pushback and COVID restrictions, because that’s the new iteration of what is happening in terms of public health. And so, what we have to ask ourself is this question: how have Evangelicals changed? Well, I think there are several reasons how they’ve changed. One is the embrace of conspiracy theories such as QAnon that intersect with Evangelical beliefs. They intersect with beliefs about the end times. You know, Evangelicals, if you are a certain age, remember movies like “Left Behind” or “Thief in the Night,” other kinds of things where people would talk about the return of Jesus Christ. But first it was going to be a tribulation, maybe you get rapture, right. Demonic activity. This is something that is outside Evangelicalism for the most part but I think we are going to talk about it tonight because I need to talk about Pentecostals. Child abuse, some of you are old enough to remember, and this was right before I went to graduate school and lived in California, the McMaster case where you had people who thought about Satanic abuse, and all of this was false, but this created a huge stir within the country. And conspiracy theories about the government; the government is out to get you, they’re going to put a chip in the vaccine, all of these kinds of things. So, that’s one way that Evangelical belief systems embrace these kinds of things.

The second is the embrace of white supremacist talking points and beliefs – Critical Race Theory (CRT), Black Lives Matter repurposed from a statement about trying to save black lives in terms of Black Lives Matter meaning you are a terrorist or whatever, right? CRT is actually, as one of my friends so aptly put it, is a way to code somebody black, or the biggest one that I did not put on [the slides] is “being woke,” and you’re probably hearing this a lot. There are actually conferences for Evangelicals right now about “wokeness,” whatever that is. I don’t know, you have a hard time sleeping, you don’t really want to be woke, right? Well there you go. Individuality is not just about personal sin, but about how you manage the “truth.” “Do your own Research” is a big thing in QAnon. You might have heard this about people who talk about the vaccine; “Oh, I did my research. I’ve looked at everything I needed to look at, and as a result I’ve decided that it’s not for me or I’ve decided that it’s for me,” right? And so this idea about individualism takes on a whole new meaning; it’s not just that you’re an individual, you are better than the doctor, you are better than the scientist, you are better than anyone else, you’re better than me. It doesn’t matter if I went to school and did 6 years of graduate school; you know better than I do because you read the literature. And so I started noticing this in social media like 2011 and 2012. I was like “what’s going on?” because people would just question a truthful fact that you put down that’s historical but it didn’t matter because they had already done the research and you were wrong.

This is important: Pentecostalizing of Evangelicalism. Folks, Evangelicalism, as I said to somebody today over dinner, is not Calvin Seminary anymore. It is something else. Evangelicalism does not sit on the same kind of premises and theological premises that you would expect because they have embraced certain kinds of beliefs that come out of
Pentecostalism and charismatic movements. I’m going to talk about that in a minute in terms of an article that just came out today. These kinds of beliefs in spiritual warfare, Dominionists who are going to take over these 7 areas of power, theocratic beliefs that America doesn’t need to be just one Nation under God but it needs to be a country that is fully Christian, it does not need to be Egalitarian and thinking about other religions and it’s not like when everybody came over who decided “well, I want to get rid of the state religion from England, so let’s go over and be in some place where we can actually worship.” Yeah, you need to be Christian.

Authoritarianism as a Christian worldview. It’s very interesting to hear the kinds of conversations about Authoritarianism that tie into certain kinds of Biblical beliefs and how people interpret them. In order to say “yeah, that’s going to be okay if we have a King or Emperor” but I really thought that was a thing that we were fighting about in 1776, but that’s what people want now.

Republican Party has turned into Republican Religion. I saw this coming from a while back, and I used to tell it to people and they would laugh at me and they were like “No, it’s not that bad. This is just about money, it’s about politics.” No, no, no, no. They’re a religion. And now that they’re a religion it has changed what Republicans really do and how they think and how they walk in lockstep, except for a couple of people who end up stepping out of that, and we can talk about Mitt Romney later because I think he’s an example of every now and then stepping away to do something else. Church and state; there’s no separation, folks. For them this is together, and it’s together in a certain kind of way and it’s together very importantly for them.

And then finally this is for all my folks who are either in the audience or watching right now: the Bebbington quadrilateral doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter because that is an assumption about thinking theologically about what it means to be an Evangelical but now what we realize is that people are not thinking about this in a theological way, they’re thinking about it in a cultural or political way. And so that fact of the matter is they don’t even know nor care. They can say that they’re born-again or anything else, but, you know, they’ll say “yeah I believe in the cross and all this other stuff, but I don’t believe in anything else”. So let me give you an example of how this misunderstanding is happening now, and it’s in the New York Times today, a great article called “The Growing Religious Fervor in the American Right: ‘This is a Jesus Movement’”. Well, yeah, it’s a Jesus movement if you’re thinking about the Jesus movement being like the ‘60s and early ‘70s, but these rituals of Christian worship are embedded in conservative rallies, and this is how they have the bottom line, “as praise, music, and prayer blend with political anger over vaccines and the 2020 election.” Great article if you want to just read it for what it is, but unfortunately, it’s not telling you the truth. The people in this article are parts of certain kinds of groups. They are people who are connected to Dominionist groups and others, and if you look at this simply as “they’re just worshipping God and hoping that Donald Trump comes back,” you have missed the point, you have missed the plot. And you’ve missed the plot because you don’t hear the language that people are saying it in, you’re not tuned to that ear. So while I respect the two authors in the New York Times, they didn’t talk to anybody who does this on a regular basis, they didn’t talk to the scholars or either of the journalists who could tell them what they’re listening to. And so I want to quote somebody who is a friend of mine today, Peter Montgomery, who works for People for the American Way. He’s been watching things for this for over 25 years, so he has seen all the movement. He said “This is what’s not mentioned in the article: Christian Nationalism, Dominionism, even note Che Ahn, who was a pastor I knew when I was in Seminary, who was involved in the Toronto Blessing, which is a whole other kind of thing
that you can ask me about afterwards, is quoted rattling off the Seven Mountains of Power, which is about Dominionism, the centrality of Evangelicalism and the ‘stop the steal’ movement and January 6, politics of spiritual warfare rhetoric, and the accompanying denunciation of political opponents as Satanic or Demonic, and this is true, we used to hear this in the ‘90s with Bill Clinton and Hillary Clinton. This erupted again in 2016, but now anybody who disagrees with this thing is labeled as demonic. The embrace of violence as righteous. The praise music is the least of our problems, even though it’s painful when subjected to hours of it at a time. Not as Peter, because he goes to all these meetings. But here’s the thing: even the praise music is militaristic. “Jesus come and take over this world,” “Jesus bring your power down,” “Jesus give us power.” And so I wish this was just about praise music and people getting together, but let me talk to you about a praise leader who did this, Sean Feucht, who traveled around the country during coronavirus and held meeting with people who were unmasked and violated local health laws to bring people together to worship. This isn’t simply about praise music, it’s about religious righteousness, it’s about what they believe. That is the kind of thing that they should think about in terms of what the government should do for religious groups and how they felt that these boundaries broke through their religious freedom. And so while these articles will tell you this one thing and you think “man, I’m reading about this and I’m understanding it,” you are not understanding it to the fullest extent that you should, and neither are the writers who are missing the plot and missing the point. Before 1/6 happened, there was a Jericho March in D.C. back in December. That was the setup. You had praise and worship music all day long. What is a Jericho March, for those of you who don’t know your scriptures? When Joshua went to the Battle of Jericho and marched around seven times and the walls came down. That Jericho March was the way they set up, with praise and worship and preaching, to get ready and to rally people up for 1/6. So if you think about this naively, you will miss the point about everything that is happening right underneath your nose.

Alright, so we’ve got two charts here. I want to talk about these charts for just a minute. There’s two charts; one says “White Americans with warm views of Trump more likely than those with cold views to adopt an evangelical identity between 2016 and 2020” and the other chart talks about “more White Americans began identifying as evangelicals then stopped doing so.” You’ve been told a story in the press: “oh, people left evangelicalism because they were, you know, disgusted with Trump.” No, that’s not what happened. More of them came in and not only did more of them come in, they started out as people who were not even in evangelical churches and began to call themselves evangelical because they saw what Donald Trump was doing for evangelicals. So this is serious. This is the Pew Research Center, people, this is not some made-up thing. Evangelical became a different kind of appellation over these few years; it has become a political kind of thing, first of all, and secondarily it’s about White identity. If you’re outside, I used to call these people, when I was working on a book that I had to leave behind about Sarah Palin, “NASCAR Christians,” they love Jesus, they love the flag, they went to NASCAR, they watch football, they watch sports, and maybe they were “C and E Christian,” you know Christmas and Easter but they didn’t go to anything else. And so these people came in. So while we had all these articles that said “oh, African-American evangelicals left. Latino evangelicals are feeling uncomfortable, White evangelicals who are progressive are leaving,” that’s a little piece. The rest of these people came flooding in because they knew that this was the place to be because they were gaining political power. The thing that I like to say about this is that, unfortunately for Democrats, Donald Trump gave evangelicals what they wanted. He paid off the bargain. He said he was going to do things, he gave them judges, he gave them judges
across the country. Everything they wanted they got. Why wouldn’t they like him? And so that’s the hard thing you have to hear.

Alright, let’s look at this chart a little bit: “White Evangelical Identity and church Attendance PRRI,” this is from the Public Research Institute and if you know Robert Jones’ “White Too Long” book, this is what he has as his institute. Predictive probability: White Evangelical Identity and church Attendance. That strong line that says “frequent church attenders” that is going up, these are infrequent church attenders going down. But the more frequent church attenders were more likely to embrace Christian Nationalism. So, what’s happening here? They’re hearing a message. They’re hearing it in these particular spaces, in their churches. So one of the things I thought was always funny, and I wish we had more time, if this was a classroom kind of setting, sorry, if this was a classroom kind of setting, I would have shown a clip from First Baptist Church of Dallas, Robert Jeffers, when he made for the 4th of July, a whole choral rendition of “Make America Great Again.” You can find it online. And it’s great, you know it sounds very patriotic and everything else, and this was played in the church on the 4th of July. It used to be in the church on the 4th of July, but some people got uncomfortable if you just had an American flag and you played the Pledge of Allegiance or whatever. No, no, no, no, he made a song of a whole political thing for Donald Trump. That is really important.

So, they way in which these things are happening, is that these messages are being reinforced, that they are hearing, they’re bringing people into Christian Nationalism. So, you can hear people say things like 1/6, like “God called me here,” you start to read the transcripts of the people who ran into the Capitol, and they’re like “this was Jesus.” There were crosses alongside, you know, along a whole thing where you could hang somebody. You know, so while they’re breaking into the Capitol they’re also, you had John 3:16 signs, praying in the Senate chamber, all of this stuff. But these are church people, not people who don’t go to church. There are Pastors who were arrested. That’s a whole other talk, too. There’s a great piece by Peter Manseau in the Washington Post that you can go back and look for where he traces a young man who’s a part of a church in Kentucky, to his radicalization, to the day he walks into the Capitol with one of these popular culture Christian shirts on to wreak havoc because he believes that that’s what God has called on him to do. But it’s not only that, it’s about how people think about what they think America should be. Now, I want to play this clip right here for you, it’s about a minute, and then we’ll talk about it.

Video: One Nation Under God – Michael Flynn:

A lot about from different people today I think when we talk about faith, there’s something shaking, okay? The ground underneath us is shaking and it’s shaking because there is a time, and you have to believe this, that God almighty is like involved in this country because this is it. This is it. This is the last place on earth. This is the shining city on the hill, this is the city on the hill. The city on the hill. The city on the hill was mentioned in Matthew, okay, it was mentioned in Matthew. And then a guy by the name of Winthrop mentioned it again in 1630. In 1630, okay, before the country was formed. And he also coined the term New England, we’re going to this “New England,” this new world he was talking about and he talked to the people there about this thing called the city on the hill. And then Ronald Reagan, a couple hundred years later, again, talked about it as the “shining city on the hill.” And they’re talking about the United States of America. Because when Matthew mentioned it, in the Bible, he wasn’t talking about the physical ground he was on. He was talking about something in the distance. So, if we are going to have
one nation under God, which we must, we have to have one religion, one nation under God and
one religion under God, all of us together, working together. I don’t care what your ecumenical
service is or what you are. We have to believe that this is a moment in time where this is good
versus evil.

Butler:

There’s a lot to unpack here, but first of all I’m very interested in the fact that America
showed up in Matthew, right? I mean, that’s a stretch, right? It’s a little bit of a stretch that
Matthew saw down the pipe and it was going to be America. That’s number one. Number two is,
you know I really would love to have a conversation up here with Mark Valeri about how
Winthrop has been used in all these different ways and “City on the Hill” has turned into the
catchphrase from Reagan but now he has repurposed it into something else. But then finally what
he says is that there’s this one nation and it should be one religion and all your ecumenical stuff
can go out the window. That’s serious. He got in so much trouble for this. This was a huge
backlash back in November, but it’s important to talk about the context he gave this speech in.
The context is that he was in Cornerstone Church in Texas, which was the former church where,
he’s retired now, from John Hagee. John Hagee’s son is over that church right now, and this was
a whole meeting from Clay Clark’s “reawaken America tour,” there’s all these tours that are
happening about how to reawaken America and all this stuff. This is a cottage industry, folks. I
could walk out of here tomorrow and I could tell you that I could open up a place and make a ton
of money, but that’s not what I’m doing, okay? I’m just telling you about it. There were several
luminaries that, you’ll know these voices, you’ll know that My Pillow CEO Mike Lindell was
there, disgraced political operative Roger Stone was there to provide the event with a legitimate
dose of illegitimacy, as they say in Rolling Stone, Alex Jones was there growling at the attendees
that the devil’s reign on this planet is coming to an end and that Bill Gates and Hillary Clinton
and Barack Obama know that they chose Satan and they are going to fail. So, here’s this way in
which people are being demonized and put in this other kind of camp, right? And then there’s the
usual “Let’s Go Brandon” stuff, and then Sean Feucht, who I just told you about, was there
because he’d just lost a race for a seat in the California legislature, he had just lost and so he
showed up at Cornerstone. Now, Cornerstone, if you don’t remember, has been a big church in
terms of these kinds of things. Back in the 2008 election, John Hagee’s old tapes came out where
he said “God needed a hunter and that’s why Jews were going to be killed” and John McCain
had to give up the endorsement that Hagee had given him, and that put the church in a lot of
trouble. The bitter piece about this church is that they also have, so you got to figure out how
we’re doing antisemitism on one hand and Christian United for Israel, or CUFI, on the other
hand, which is a Christian organization that works with Israel on different kinds of things and
supports that, but they support it just because they believe Jesus is going to come back over there
and then all these people who need to get saved will become Christian. So, these are connections
that are happening for people and you can livestream these things, you can watch them, but, even
more importantly, what they are doing is spreading a certain kind of message. They’re
instantiating this Christian Nationalism and this is happening in so many different ways that you
have got to figure out where this is coming from, but it’s not just that. It’s QAnon. This is a
picture from Dallas, Texas, not that far away from where John Hagee’s Cornerstone Church is.
You’re probably thinking “oh, this is a normal woman with Trump stuff on,” but there’s
something different about that sign. What do you see? “JFK Jr.” Last time I checked, he died in a
plane crash, but QAnon folks, and a particular branch of QAnon, believed that he was going to come back on Dealey Plaza in this past November, physically. He was going to resurrect. And this phrase “where we go one, we go all,” that is from QAnon and this particular leader who is doing things right now called Michael Protzman. There are a group of people who were out there every day in November. They’ve now decamped and gone to Arizona and some other kinds of places, but they haven’t given this up. This is like, for the American religion folks out here, this is like the Millerites standing on the hill in 1843 and then they come back in 1844 and nothing still happens. But, can’t tell people anything. They have tons of prophecies, there are ways in which they read scripture or read these messages that come from Q, alright? QAnon is a belief that arose on the internet in 2017 from an anonymous post on the 4chan board. I knew about 4chan because 4chan was running all of these different kinds of scams and abusing women on social media since back in 2011, 2012. But, they ramped this up and somebody who was posting from there who, people sort of think they know now but they’re not quite sure is this person, has posted all these different kinds of things about what was going to happen, the coming storm, and I’ll talk about some of these phrases in a minute, but this is the kind of QAnon beliefs that are not just the ones that people are receiving in the pews but people are actually leaving their families and everything else to follow after a guy that is also known as “Negative48.” He’s antisemitic and he has followers to believe that JFK Jr. is going to come back and he and Trump are going to clean the world out of pedophiles and the secret deep state cabal. Now, you’re probably going “I’m really lost right now.” Don’t worry, most of us who try to study this are always scratching our heads, too. But the other part of this that’s really important is that regular people fall into this; they fall into it for very innocuous ways. Some of this they do because they have people who are on Instagram who post things about this through either they’re talking about yoga, or other things, and then they fall into a very deep space about seeing these kinds of things: you’d get friends, your friends and you talk about these conspiracy theories, you have these QAnon talking points, and some of these talking points are now showing up with people like Ted Cruz, you know, your Senator from this state, Josh Hawley, that’s right, Josh, hope you’re listening tonight, and others who picked up these phrases because it’s really easy. There’s phrases you can say that are going to bring people into this, right? And so the ways in which this has infiltrated Evangelicals is really important to understand because it’s not now just simply about language, it’s about different kinds of things. So, for instance, words like “the deep state”: people can say “the deep state” and say “Oh, we think that Joe Biden and other politicians who are democrats are doing a shadow government, and it’s not the government that you see, and this is about the Illuminati, which is just the same thing as old beliefs about this, okay? Or people who follow after the rules of the pandemic: you might be sheepy, you are people who follow after everybody. “The storm” is a political apocalypse that will include the mass arrest of deep state figures and liberation of children that are held captive, okay? So, there’s been talk about there’s tunnels underneath the White House and every place else where they’re keeping children for sex abuse, okay? Or for sex trafficking and all of this kind of thing. “Pizzagate,” if you remember the man who went to the pizza store in D.C. and they had targeted this place, that was part of that kind of conspiracy, okay? Or you’re thinking about being red-pilled, you know this is from the Matrix if you watched it; the red pill is the way to get Q awareness or indoctrination into Q. So, this is the realization that you are liberated from all of the things that people are telling you. And so while all Evangelicals don’t believe this, you hear these kinds of phrases about “there’s going to be a coming storm” or “there’s this other kind of deep state” or “there’s a cabal of people in which, you know, think about this,” and so you have to understand that part of
this is about really deep things that are conspiracy but then there are conspiracies like “stop the steal.”

Now, here’s a chart. This is from Samuel Perry and Philip Gorski, and I would just encourage you to look at their new book that’s just out this coming week and I’m sorry I forget the title, Sam forgive me, but you can look it up it’s on Amazon, and he has another great book with Andrew Whitehead “Taking America Back for God”. But this [chart] is a predicted projection of percentage of Americans who believe the 2020 election was stolen from Trump across Christian Nationalism and Race. So, the big chart that is going up, up, up, you know, and they have a seven-item scale about “how do you measure Christian Nationalism?” Are whites up at the top, you have Hispanics, and then you have black people down here at the bottom, obviously they’re trending a lot lower. So, there are tons of people who are white who believe that 2020 was stolen. The moment that this started to be talked about, it was a QAnon talking point, brought up by Trump and then brought up by others, reinforced by a whole slew of people he had around him, and so when you hear his talks right now, he is still talking about “the election was stolen”. You’re going to hear something in a minute where for some people Joe Biden is not President, okay, and that does not exist. It’s fake. Look at this: “Major Religious Groups Most Likely to Believe Tenets of QAnon Conspiracy.” One is “the government, media, and financial worlds in the U.S. are controlled by a group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who run a global child sex trafficking platform,” so that’s blue, this green is “there’s a storm coming,” that’s QAnon, “soon that will sweep away the elites in power and restore the rightful leaders,” and then “because things have gotten so far off track, true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country,” this is the line that should scare you, okay? So, all Americans are on top, White evangelical Protestants here in the middle, 25% believe the media and everything, 26% “the storm is coming,” and then 24% means that “we’ve got to resort to violence.” What is interesting is that Hispanic Protestants are right up there with everybody else. Now, why is that? Lots of them are Evangelicals, too, and they are hearing these same messages. So, while there was a whole bunch of surprise in the Democratic party about how many Latinos voted for Trump, I’m like “You’re not paying attention.” You’re not paying attention where people are in church, you’re not paying attention to these major leaders who are running mega-churches in places like Florida, Texas, Arizona and California who are leaders who are tied in with white evangelical leaders who are talking about the same things. And then we have Mormons down here at the bottom and I thought it was really interesting about Mormons, and Laurie might want to say something about this, but they were the ones who were more willing to resort to violence than to believe the first two. So, we can talk about all of this and say “Oh, these are people who are just saying things and whatever,” but what is happening is that our tracking and the way that sociologists and others are polling, whether that’s Pew, whether that’s PRRI, whether that are individual sociologists that are running those polls, the fact of the matter is that something really deep is happening here and something is happening that we have to pay attention to because if we don’t, we’re going to miss a trick.

Here’s the next [chart]: “Predicted Percentage of White Americans Who Believe Various Conspiracy Theories Across Christian Nationalism.” So, if we look at the top here in this topmost corner of the chart “the government, media, and financial worlds are controlled by Satan-worshippers and pedophiles,” okay, “storm is coming,” and then COVID. So, COVID is way up here, you know, “the government is hiding what it knows about the origins of COVID-19,” so you imagine this whole talk about “this came from China,” “the China virus,” remember all that that happened at the beginning of the Pandemic, all that. There were all of these things
that happened, again pegged against the Christian Nationalism scale, right. So, here’s the thing: all of these things are tied into QAnon, Christian Nationalism, regular Christian beliefs all coming together, alright? So what does this mean? And this comes to the hard part, okay? It means several kinds of things. Number one, what it means is that we have a very interesting scenario going into 2022. Where you saw conference that Michael Flynn was at, and I am going to show you somebody in a minute, what you have is a system, a closed system of people who are beginning to be listened to in different kinds of ways. So the kind of signaling that happened when they had the Senate hearing for the Supreme Court hearing for Ketanji Brown Jackson, this is about, oh, it’s not just about her, we need to get this out as a way to get our messaging out. It’s something that you could hear. The regular person who did not pay attention to this, but might have paid attention, who follows Ted Cruz on Twitter or Facebook or one of those things, could hear all the crazy things that he asked her about Ibram Kendi’s children’s book about race. That book sold off the shelves, by the way, I’m like “God I wish one of them would sell my book,” I could sell a whole bunch of books, right? But, that never happens and this is really interesting, that’s fine. So, he mentions that there were all these kinds of questions that were really incisive. One of the questions that really drove me crazy, I think it’s worth talking about, is when Senator Lindsey Graham asked her where she went to church, how she went to church, what her beliefs were, and they did that in retaliation because that was one of the questions that came up when Amy Coney Barrett went through a year or two ago. Now, he asks those questions in a very different way. The way those questions were asked to her were about wanting to find out if she went to a black church or white church, I want to find out what kind of church you’re going to, I want to find out what kind of places... because what it does is it sets up a difference. If you are outside of this kind of Evangelical world view, and you don’t have the same kinds of pastors or beliefs, you are not one of us. You are not worthy to be here. Why did you give these kinds of sentencing guidelines. You gave these kinds of sentencing guidelines because that’s what the law says if you are a judge. You have a set of guidelines. No, no, no, no, no, that was about pedophilia. There are all these kinds of ways these things come out in certain kinds of ways. Let me talk to you about somebody else that has been a big figure in the last few weeks. We’ve got a person who has a tent set up outside of Nashville, Tennessee. He has been burning books. Not only has he been burning books but he has been casting out demons. He put somebody out of his church because he said that they were witches. But he has become a huge figure on the scene on all of his QAnon beliefs. Part of what he is preaching is, and I just went blank for a minute because I forgot his name, so sorry, part of what he is preaching, though, is about this QAnon theory, but it is couched in Pentecostal things. And so, there is a clip where they were asking people after the service “well, do you think that this is right?” And they were like “Oh yes. This is true. There are witches in our midst. They are this, they are that.” And I’m like this is like the Salem Witch trials all over again. This is how you other people, people who are outside of your political belief system or ideas. And so now what we have is a sense in which not only are pastors doing this, but this is happening at political rallies. So this is from the “Save America” rally this past weekend.

“Save America” video clip:
Together, so we pray. Father in heaven, we truly believe that Donald J. Trump is the current and true president of the United States. You have raised him up for this season of time to be used to be part in saving a nation. Bless and protect him and his family from any physical, spiritual
attacks and may his voice stir the people to righteous action, to bring godly men and women into elected office. In Michigan and across America, we declare he will be back in office soon, very soon. In Jesus' name, amen. We pray, we pray the fraud in the 2020 election will continue to be exposed and the election decertified. In Michigan, the battleground state in our nation. In Jesus’ name.

Butler:

Jesus is real busy right now. Now, I say that facetiously, but this was just this past Saturday, folks. Now, I wouldn’t have included this, but I thought I needed to just let everybody know that this is what people pray. This is a pastor who was invited to pray before Donald Trump came on. You saw everybody raising their hands and lifting up like this was a service. He still says that Trump is the president, and that he’s going to be back in office soon. Number one, what does that tell you? That means that probably something might happen again. I hate to say that, but there’s a very high possibility that we could see another kind of mini-insurrection, but it might not be mini next time. That’s number one. Number two is he is spouting basically what is this belief of QAnon, that he’s going to come back and clean up things and he’s, you know, we’ve got this fake president right now, but that this election was a fraud. This fraud language has continued. It didn’t stop. It’s never stopped. And what you hear every time you even pay attention to this is that you hear, “Oh Trump is still talking about this” but it’s not just that. Trump and all the people who love Trump really believe this. They really do believe that this was a fraudulent election and that he’s still president but that, you know, Mar-A-Lago is the new White House and that he’s still doing things. This is conspiracy theory, folks. This is what he spread. And he spread it in a very deft way, so that this would continue to undermine democratic processes. Now, you’re probably thinking “Why would they want to do that?” because honestly people who are underneath kinds of hierarchical systems don’t really want democracy in that way. They don’t want democracy. They want a way that the world is ordered. They want certainty and a lot of what has happened in evangelical history is not just about theology or about great things and all of that, it’s about certainty. How can we be certain we’re going to heaven? How can we be certain that the world is going to work a certain way? How can we be certain? And so these kinds of beliefs help people to have certainty about what is going to happen.

There’s a way in which to think about this that brings together history, that brings together cultural history, that brings together thinking about conspiracy theory, and we can talk about that as well, but it’s also about people who are looking for a sense of purpose in the midst of a very confusing time. The pandemic didn’t help; it actually made things worse. People could just stay home and watch all of this. It wasn’t that you were in your regular normal church. You might have been watching somebody else. So there were all these media ecosystems that are falling in to make somebody be able to get up and pray like this and get shown on One America network or Fox News or whatever and nobody blinks an eye. Nobody questions that this is not true. So that’s my 45 minute thing. I’m going to wrap up here really quick. Let me show you one more thing. Notice that this says “Save America,” right. Saving America Tour! This is Charlie Kirk. He was just here a couple of nights ago on Sunday night at Grace Church. This is a large evangelical church in St. Louis. You can find his whole talk online. I did not know this until a
couple of journalists called me and said “I would like you to give a quote on this.” And I’m like, “you’re kidding. He was in St. Louis? I might have come early just so I could be in the back of the church but they’d probably want me out.” But Charlie Kirk spoke for an hour and a half. There was a worship service that opened this up. If you don’t know who Charlie Kirk is, this Saving America tour is funded by that group right there, Turning Point USA. This group came into being in part to train young, college-age people to be able to fight against these kinds of things that they saw happening on college campuses around the country. So they have a very robust system of people all around the country. They probably have one here. And they are in part helping to think about people voting republican or, you know, putting professors like me on a professor watchlist that he created that was a big stink for a lot of people. Or, you know, attacking people in the media. But Charlie Kirk has started something new. In addition to all the turning points he has, and the turning points where they’re talking to K-12 educators about how to change the culture of the classroom, he started a Saving America tour back in August that is about preparing and prepping people for the 2022 election in the 2024 election cycle. This is a way to talk about what they thought would be Christian Civic Engagement. So one of the things that he talks about is how are you going to go talk about this from your pulpit, and so there’s a lot of way in which every election cycle we always talk about pastors who say things that they shouldn’t say in front of their constituents and their parishioners, and this is like oh, this is going to trigger the IRS, but he talked about a whole way you could do this and not have to worry about it. So that was one, or you know, here are the various steps. You could go this route where you just tell the IRS I’m doing this and I don’t care. You can talk about it this way or you can be very cagey about it and talk about it this way, but just know that there’s no wall of separation. That was that old Danbury letter that Thomas Jefferson is writing back in the day. They didn’t like Jefferson much anyway. So, let’s ignore this. There’s no wall of separation and I was going to say unfortunately, that I kind of agree with Charlie Kirk. There is no wall of separation. Not in America anymore. It’s just all religion and politics, all the time, but in ways that we didn’t expect. So what does all of this mean? It means a lot of things, but it means number one that evangelicals are not the evangelicals you used to know. These are people who are, you know, some of them are in good churches and pooh-poo all of this stuff, but a majority of them believe it, whether we’re talking about Southern Baptist Convention people or non-denominational folks or Pentecostals who consider themselves to be evangelicals. They’re feeding into different streams of religion right now, and scholars, and especially journalists, need to pay attention to this because if you don’t pay attention to all the streams, you will write an article like you did in New York times where you think this is a nice worship service of people being gassed up for 2022. And I’m like, no it’s not that. It’s a lot more. So that’s one. Second is that how the media has really influenced all of this and how the talking points are moving back and forth between religious worlds and political worlds. They are seamless now. You don’t even see a difference. The kind of things that Ted Cruz or Josh Hawley or anybody else says right now, or Marjorie Taylor Greene or anything else, these are things that people say in churches. And so there’s a very big appeal now. For republicans, it’s always been this way, but especially now to come up to these religious places and run things like this in churches, or the thing that happened at Cornerstone with General Flynn, second. Third, we have a problem about conspiracy. Part of it is the ways in which we talk about how Facebook runs and moves; how it picks up the algorithm to
show you the exact thing. If you look at one of these things, you’re going to get 20 of them the
next day. 20 pieces of disinformation. And so it’s very hard to escape this and it’s not like what it
was when Google first started, where you can tell people no, that’s not real and this is real and
you would talk to your students about what you could use and what you couldn’t use. Now, it’s
like a morass. It’s very hard to tell the truth from the lie. It’s very tough to do. The other part of
this is that we are moving very rapidly into what I would call a theocratic state. How are we
supposed to talk about now a separation of church and state and appreciation for other religious
groups in this country, freedom of religion when religious freedom means religious freedom for
a certain group of people and not for everybody else. That is troubling. That is not what this
country has been about. And finally, I think the thing for me that is the most important and why I
want to do as many talks as I can, not because I think it’s great to run around but because I want
to send a warning. Democracy is in peril. If you didn’t know that the day they broke in, 1/6, I’m
telling you, you’re in trouble. Because it’s not just in America, it’s everywhere else. Russia-
Ukraine is a religious war. We are talking about problems within the Orthodox Church in Russia
vis-a-vis a broken-off Ukrainian Orthodox church. If you think about this in India, it’s about
things that are happening between Hindus and Muslims. If you think about Brazil, it’s Bolsonaro
and his connections to evangelicals. If you think back a little bit further, and go back in history
that was early 2010s and beyond, if you think about Anders Breivik and Utoya, and what
happened there on that Norwegian Island where he killed over 70 people, that manifesto that he
did was all embedded in conspiracy theories and things that he read from evangelicals and
religious people here in America. So this is not just an American problem, it’s a worldwide
problem. It’s just that our problem here is that our systems are breaking down, whether we’re
talking about voting, education, all those things, and this is changing. As fast as you can pay
attention to everything that’s happening around the world right now, it is very difficult to keep
up with all these things, and you look up one day and things are gone. And they’re away from
you and you wonder where democracy went, and you didn’t appreciate it because half the people
don’t know what civics are. So I want to end with something that I finished watching last night
in my hotel room. It was a whole series on Ben Franklin and they’re going to say now you’re
trying to give a plug to the University of Pennsylvania, yeah yeah. And the plug is that, you
know, I walk by the Ben Franklin statue every day in front of College Hall and there’s another
Ben Franklin statue on campus but we won’t talk about what students do there but anybody
who’s at Penn knows. But he had some words to say about the new constitution. I was really
struck by this last night and I thought, I had one ending, and I thought I wanted to say this
because I think it’s really important. He said two things. He first talked about when George
Washington became the first president. He said “The first man put at the helm will be a good
one. Nobody knows what sort may come afterwards,” he said. But that isn’t the full quote. What
he said after that was this: “the executive will always be increasing here as elsewhere until it
ends in a monarchy.” Ben Franklin was really prescient about a lot of things. He was not...it’s
very hard to get a fix on him because he’s such a polyglot in certain kinds of ways and there are
things to admire about him and there’s things not to admire about him. Like, you know, him not
seeing his wife for a very long time or having slaves. There are things that are problematic. But I
think he’s prescient. And we are sliding towards that moment where it might just be a monarchy.
We had a monarchical family in the White House from 2016 to 2020. They behaved like one.
Second thing was, in this story about Elizabeth Powell who meets Benjamin Franklin after the new constitution is done. In his journal, it was only 26 words about this thing that gets really misquoted about if it’s a republic if we can keep it. What he really says is something very different. Powell says to him “Well doctor, what have we got? A republic or a monarchy?” He said, “A republic if you can keep it.” And so the question was about whether this is going to be a republic or a monarchy. These folks want a monarchy. They don’t want democracy. They want to be the ones at the helm of everything and it is embedded in religious belief. And so the question is, is this going to happen to us? Are we going to lose what we had before? I’m the last person, trust me, that you would think is going to be sitting here talking and fighting for American democracy. I have had ancestors who are slaves. But I want to tell you here today that if this democracy falls, we are in trouble. We are in big trouble. And so it is incumbent upon, whether you’re on zoom listening to this or you’re out in the audience or you think I’m just full of it, think about what this will be if we are a theocracy instead of a democracy, and a theocracy run by people who believe in conspiracy theories that profligate at such a rate that it’s hard to keep up with them. I’m for democracy. I hope you are too. Thank you.

And all you people on Zoom land, if you want to yell at me on twitter, you can, but I won’t see it until tomorrow. Don’t be shy.

**Audience Question 1:**

Hi, I was a student here a long time ago and I grew up in Oklahoma and I have a lot of evangelical relatives and one or two watch Fox News constantly that’s the only channel they watch. But I have an observation that you invent the truth, you recast the truth. That’s what’s going on, and talking about education, when I was in high school, I was very interested in American history, but I never learned about the Slave Bible until, I don’t know, 10 years ago. So you just invent the truth it’s not what the King James Bible came out with. You just rewrite it. So that’s what’s going on. Human beings are very good at reinventing the truth, whether it’s Putin or a slave holder in the south so all these digital medias, they just reinvent the truth, so it’s a truth echochamber.

**Butler:**

It’s a truth-bending chamber too.

**Audience Question 1:**

So thank you for your lecture tonight, I appreciate it. I’m just letting you know, I do believe democracy is at risk. Thank you.

**Butler:**
Thanks so much for your comments. I think, you know, one of the things that has happened to people is, you know, talking to people today saying I wish somebody.... I know there are studies about Fox News and you know, communications networks. But it’s also the way in which peoples’ minds get re-imagined, almost rewired in a certain way. They listen to and hear things in a certain way. It’s also true with discourse, too. The ways in which people talk about things or they fight about things. You can’t have an intellectual argument about something, or even just a regular argument about something without it getting really vitriolic. So I think that’s part of what’s happened too. It’s degraded our conversation.

**Audience Question 1:**

Can you mention a few words about the Slave Bible and its history?

**Butler:**

Oh yeah, I didn’t talk about that. But let me say this about the Bible. I mean, part of this is, at the beginning of my book, there’s a whole chapter about...kind of lying this out from the 19th century viewpoint. About how you look at slavery, so there’s a clip that happened right when I was writing the book that happened with a pastor in Atlanta. I talk about this right at Chapter 1. And he says a phrase that’s also part of a slave holder who also wrote religion things about slavery. And he says, you know, this benefited white people so much and this was the right thing to do or, as I like to talk about, at a religious college in Texas, so you can guess where this is, that the Young Republicans group said slavery was ordained by God, and this was not a bad thing because it helped people become Christians. I always tell people in my class “if you say that, you get an automatic F.” If you write this down on an essay, you will get an F. And that’s a problem. So, this Slave Bible is you’re not going to give people things. I mean, half the time, you don’t have a lot slaves who can read in the first place, but you’re only going to say certain kinds of text. You’re only going to talk about Onesimus, who comes back to his master, or you’re going to say “slaves are obedient to your masters.” So, if we talk about how, and there are other people more qualified than me to talk about this, we talk about biblical criticism that didn’t really exist then, right, it comes later. And we talk about the ways in which people interpret the Bible, when then you can interpret the story of Ham and seeing his father’s nakedness and say, well, he’s cursed, and he’s cursed because he’s black. And then people still believe this. I got a story at the end of the book about this. There’s a guy who meets a very famous black evangelical, Trillia Newbell, and basically tells her “You’re not really human.” After hearing her in a church. Why wouldn’t she be human? Well, because she’s black. He learned that somewhere in a church, unfortunately. Because that’s the first place you get all this stuff. So this is to carry forward and I talk about this in the book about how you know you have people who talk about the family in a certain way in the 19th century which carries forward into the 20th or you talk about, you know, criminals in the 19th century that carries forward into the 20th and 21st. These things are all connected. They’re not different. And I think this is what we’re having so when you get to Fox News, it’s not like Tucker Carlson or anybody’s like you talking about history. They’re talking about certain kinds of talking points and certain ways in which you see the world and to
reinforce certain kinds of beliefs. And when your evangelical friends are listening to it, I guarantee their pastor is too.

**Audience Question 2:**

This is about running into a QAnon person and how can one engage or act civilly or be tolerant of one who expresses QAnon views?

**Butler:**

This is a hard one, and I’m going to tell you why this is hard. Because people who are in this have embedded themselves into something. And so this is not, you know, this is not cult deprogramming that you can do in a day. This is not something, but you can actually start to tell people, “Why do you believe this?” But this is really like this. You can engage them in a conversation. Now, they may be very mad at you. And they might not want to receive it, but you have to begin to sort of think about what are the ways I can poke holes with this with some reality. Even if that’s a very simple reality. So, for instance, I’m going to talk about COVID because I think that’s a good one. COVID started off where it was like, you know, this thing came about because it was the 5G towers that everybody put up for the phones. And then it became you got a chip embedded in you, which is back to the old 1970s stuff about when the barcodes came out, how that was the mark of the beast. And so there’s these ways in which these things are repetitive in conspiracy theories. The problem with QAnon is that they are shifting always. So you might talk to a QAnon person last week, and they tell you a few things, and this week, because there’s a new thing that’s been put up on the boards, or a new revelation, it’s like revelation is happening over and over and over again. So we can talk about revelation and religions and lots of religions have this, you know, Pentecostals do, Mormons believe in it, all this stuff. But these are revelations that come out of certain kinds of ways of being. So there’s a way in which I think it’s called Gematria, where you can do numbers and certain messages that came out, so people would think that when Donald Trump was saying certain things, he really was saying something else. So he might say something about, you know, the Fed did this. And they reinterpret it by doing the numbers to the letters of what he said, and they see something else. So this is why I’m saying to you it’s hard. I mean, the things that I’ve read about, people who have come out of it, have come out of it because they had a serious event happen or they’ve had people turn against them, or finally something triggered them to make them realize that this was not true. It’s broken up families. There were people who were at the Dallas thing that they’d left their family behind. They’ve gotten divorced. They’ve sold their stuff. They are following everybody. So this is where I say to you to be, on one hand gentle, but on the second-hand firm, and to say “well, how do you believe that this is true? How do you know that this is true? Where do you see this? How does this work out? Do you know that there are not these kind of tunnels under the White House?” I wish I had a formula for you. I would be doing it too.

**Audience Question 3:**
Alright, thank you so much for your talk and for joining us here and welcome back out into the world. Many different questions, two spring to mind. One is, I agree with you, this is really critical and really quite scary to hear you and to think about the turn from and the pivot from democracy to theocracy, so I’m kind of curious about what you think we can do, whether it’s confronting people at a micro level individually who hold these beliefs or talking to students in a classroom. What do you think we can do to turn the tide and spread truth against that?

Butler:

I think with students, one of the things I think is really important is to be A, patient, and B, here’s some material. Here’s some things to read, come back and talk to me. You’ve got to spend time with people. It’s the same thing with the QAnon guy. You’ve got to spend time with people because you can’t do this because there’s a lot at stake for people. You lose a community if you step out of this stuff, and this is comfortable community, I mean, who wouldn’t want to be around Charlie Kirk who has a ton of money? And you have a ready-made community if you are somebody on the outside. You feel together with those people who were there on 1/6. You can talk to each other, you can do all this stuff until you have to pay the piper, right. And the other thing, the other part of your question was about what we can do on the outside, not just talking about people. I think one of the things you can do that is really important right now is to, wherever you find yourself politically, is to start writing to your congresspeople and everybody else who keeps saying this crap all the time. Because you’ve got people here in the state of Missouri that are just reprehensible. I’m sorry, you do. And I’m sure they’ll be talking about me tomorrow. But, you know, this is horrible. And you need to also press other leaders who are not into this and say “why are you not doing X?” Why are you not doing this? You need to get involved in your school board. Listen, there’s a template here that is happening, so I’ll use school boards as an example to talk about masking. People have taken over school boards now to, you know, rescind masking orders in school board things and people who are just regular school board members have been followed, harassed, spat upon, you know, tried to be killed, threatened with their lives. You’ve got to show up for stuff like this. You cannot take a backseat if you are an engaged member of your community and you got kids or something, you need to make sure that you are engaging in the political process and I’m here to tell you that “Don’t Boo. Vote.” is not enough. It’s just not enough, I’m sorry. When Michelle Obama and all them tell this stuff, I’m like this is wonderful, but you know what, you got to be watching the gerrymandering. You’ve got to be watching the ways in which voting laws have changed. You need to watch the ways in which all this stuff has happened and you can’t just tell people go wait in line for 12 to 14 hours to go vote. What you need to be doing is to make sure you’re working at a polling place, you’re there when, you know, other people come because they’re going to come, they’re organized. They’re much more organized than you, got a lot more money, they’re going to be at the polling place trying to threaten people. This has happened in Texas, where you’ve got the chicanery like what just happened in Texas with an election in Houston, where they said “we don’t have enough paper to print out the ballots.” So you’ve got to start calling that stuff out, and I mean, it’s a lot of work but you’ve got to pick your battles and figure out what you’re going to do. On this other level, let me talk about this from a religious piece, because I think this is really
important. You have pastors of all stripes talking to like this stuff in pulpits across the nation. And I’m not saying this is just a white thing, this is an everybody thing right now where we have people who are buying into these conspiracy theories and they look like you and I. And you’ve got to start calling that out. There are some pastors who are just about the money, and this is a big money maker. You can make a bunch of money doing this thing because you can sell merchandise, you can get people to give you a continuing contribution, but you’re also being funded by billionaires, so you’ve got all the money in the world. What are you going to do? What is your pastor saying? What is your religious leader saying? Where are the ways in which they have embraced these kinds of things and you hear them, you know, endorsing a candidate that is a candidate that is spouting off QAnon kind of stuff. Learn how to hear that, and if you hear that, then you have to decide how am I going to confront that person? Am I going to walk away? Am I going to talk to people in the congregation about it? These are the choices you have.

**Audience Question 4:**
Hi Dr. Butler, thank you for this stirring talk. I wondered if you could say a little about how you see the infiltration of these ideas in nonwhite communities. I’m familiar with the PRI statistics, so I knew about the Latino protestants and how a lot of these theories have gained traction. I’m guessing part of it is the Pentecostal connection but just generally, I just wondered if you could say more about how you understand that phenomenon in different, I’m going to guess, nonblack communities.

**Butler:**
I’m going to talk about this with Che Ahn, because Che Ahn came up in the…

**Audience Question 4:**
Yes, I’ve been following him. I don’t know anyone who’s doing work on him, at least scholars.

**Butler:**
Yes. Well, I kind of do. I’ve not ever written about him, but I know about him. And I know about him from very long ago back in the ‘90s. So I know that you know he got involved with Vineyard stuff first then he went to Toronto Blessing, as you know if you know anything about him. Then he’s kind of been underneath the radar. Then he popped back up, which I thought was really interesting, and started talking about Seven Mountains and Dominionism and this is how I knew Sarah Palin was getting ready to do something, because a few months ago, the two of them were together. And they had this big talk and it was online, and everything, and I was like “Oh, Che Ahn and Sarah Palin here we go” because most people didn’t even know Sarah Palin was in on all of this. She was part of the whole group in Alaska that were – I can’t remember the exact name of it – they were Dream something. So while she was going to a regular Pentecostal church
and then moved into this non-denomination church Windwalkers, that’s what it’s called. Windwalkers was a prayer group that prayed about spiritual strongholds everywhere. And so one of the women who was in Windwalkers did a prophecy over her and this is all stuff that’s kind of out there that we have to dig for a little bit. And they predicted that she was going to be this person, and so I think that this thing that happened with Che Ahn where she sort of says, paraphrasing again, that I’d be willing to run, I’d be willing to do this, this provides the opportunity for her. So 10 minutes before the closing, she puts up her stuff. Now, why Che Ahn? Che Ahn has lots of interesting history and is connected to lots of Asian Americans and connection to other Asians around the world because of the charismatic movement. So these things move, they don’t stay static. You can watch anybody from anywhere in the world. You can hear these prophecies and these prophetic kinds of things fall into very well conspiracy theories about Trump and everything else and about how Christians need to take dominion or you need to save America. But that’s part of all of this stuff, so when you’re a person who is from an ethnic community, you can either feel outside of that camp or you can buy into it as part of your history too. Now, this is where it gets sticky and people may not like this, but I think it’s part of the way you buy into whiteness. Because you’re buying into something that’s going to give you power, and what is the clearest thing that can give you power in this particular iteration? Whiteness. So you move into that, so you know were Trump had Mark Burns and all these guys around him, and he had, I called it the D-List, because I didn’t know at the beginning what was happening, he just had all these people who I didn’t think were very big like Paula White. They were big in some circles, but not in others, and then they ended up being elevated because he was really smart. He didn’t go after the normal kinds of things. Those guys all came around him afterwards. You know, like Franklin Graham and everybody else. He started off with these neo-Pentecostals and Pentecostals and charismatic people. So Che Ahn’s part of that, but it’s a kind of unique part because those are the people who are more embedded in the Seven Mountains, dominionist theocracy kind of belief, which does not seem to be on the radar screen of very many people right now, but this language is all over everything. So I don’t know if that answered what you wanted to hear.

**Audience Question 4:**

Oh, it does. Thank you.

**Audience Question 5:**

First of all, thanks Dr. Butler, it’s good to see you. I have a question about what I call situational Christianity. So what we see, if we look at President Trump as an example and some of the missteps, to put it lightly, that he took, whether it’s women outside his marriage or things he said about different people, different groups, and so forth. Yet, people will still elevate and almost excuse him, well okay, we know that you’ve done certain things out of wedlock or had children out of wedlock. We know that you have said disparaging things about women, people with disabilities, etc. etc., but that’s cool because we’ll forget about that. You’re an exception. You’re ordained by God. So, what do you attribute to, again that situational Christianity, you cool this
time but not on other stuff and, related to that, when we look at the insurrection on January 6, just the fervor, the belief that we are doing this, some of the people who stormed the wall, and so forth. What is it? Is it a lack of feeling like I’m part of a group?

Butler:

You’re trying to look for all these fabulous explanations. I got a simple one for you, okay? It’s morality for you but not for me. And I say that in the book very strongly. And let me tell you why. There’s kind of a trajectory to evangelicalism. You need to read Kristin Kobe Du Mez’s book for the other side of this, which is Jesus and John Wayne, because if you read our books together then I think it gives you a nice picture about why this has happened. One of the things I think is really interesting is that when Donald Trump ascended there was an obvious thing that the press thought: this guy said all this bad stuff, he said everything racist, how can they receive him? It didn’t matter. And if you paid attention to something like what Jeff Sharlet discovered in The Family, then you realize that God’s man does not have to be a Godly man. He is just God’s man doing what God wants him to do. God has anointed him. So it doesn’t matter if he’s the worst person. You know there’s an easy way to explain this away. Look at David—he was God’s man but he looked at Bathsheba and said “I want her. I’m gon’ kill her husband.” This is biblical, okay, hello, this is the hard part. So you used the words “situational Christianity” and I’m not fussing at you. But, what situational Christianity? What Christianity? These are Christianities right now. It’s not one Christianity and everybody else is wrong. That’s where you mess up. Because once you think that there’s one way to be, they’re always going to prove to you that there is not. Okay? So this way of forgiveness, I think of Ted Haggard. When Ted Haggard messed up, he was the president of the National Association of Evangelicals, big church in Colorado Springs, he ended up sleeping with a man. And the way that the man who slept with him found that out was that he saw him on a special and he was talking about Satan on The History Channel, I think it was. And this whole thing, he fell apart, and he tried to come back, and they didn’t let him come back. And that was, what, in the ‘90s? I’m trying to remember when this was exactly. And then you now you have Trump, who had three wives, and three sets of kids, but listen, when they came on stage, they were all behaved. This was perfect. It didn’t matter. They modeled the family. It didn’t matter what kind of family. He’s rich, he didn’t know. He’s a baby Christian, that was one of the things that was said about him at the beginning of all this—he’s a baby Christian, he doesn’t understand all this. So there was a lot of latitude for him and so when you start to talk about how did they pick these figures out, it’s because they believe God picked them out. It’s because they have some kind of divine imprimatur that God put a finger on that man and he became president. And so that was easy for them. And then if you have this person give you what you want, you don’t have to worry about what they did that was terrible. And they chose you and you are important, rather than the Mexican rapist and everything else that he said, right. So there were these people, that people always thought were the most interesting people in the Trump era were the ones who voted for him but they got deported. Because those were the people who believed the hype but didn’t realize that the law was going to turn against them. Because they thought, you know, surely this does not mean me, I’ve picked God’s man. And then, you know, you end up having your family separated. There
are several stories like this. So I think when we make these assumptions about Trump or whatever other leader and where you hear the republicans talk about pedophiles and everything else right now, which is Q Anon talking points, somebody had a thing on Twitter where it was all the sexual things that had happened with different congresspeople. You know Matt Gaetz, that’s a story right now, there’s all these other stories, right? And I think this is really interesting because the same people who are screaming about pedophilia and everything else, I’m like you might have to deal with your party. So this is where I think we get caught up in going “why are they doing this?” That’s not the question. The question is “what are they getting?” And once you understand it’s about what they are gaining and getting in society instead of why are they looking like they’re not Christians, you understand this a lot better. Because what you just said to me...and this is not wrong, I’m just saying it’s a thing in which you really believed what evangelicals said. You believe them when they talk about immorality. You believe them when these preachers talk about “I’m pro-life” and then you’ve got these people in the camp giving people abortions. It’s called sin. Sin. I don’t want to get old-school Pentecostal in here or Calvinist, but it’s the truth. So we try to keep making excuses for this but there’s no excuse. It’s what people are doing for power. Once you understand that, it’s a lot easier.

**Griffith:**

I know we could keep going, and there are probably more people with questions out there, but we’re going to have to call it to a close. Thank you so much to Professor Butler, that was fantastic. And I told you all at the beginning there was going to be a surprise at the end, and that is for anyone who would like a copy of Professor Butler’s book, you can receive a complimentary copy per household, for individual or if there’s two of you, per couple, per household, out there and she’ll be signing copies as well. I would only say, if you don’t mind me saying, she’s visiting her parents tomorrow, she’s traveling to visit them, so we would ask if you come up to the table, to please wear your mask and just be respectful of her space. But, please, you can get a ticket from one of the students handing them out in the back, take it out to the cashier at the book table, and get a free copy of the book for her to sign, or not to sign if you want to take it home. Enjoy the reception and one round of final thanks to Professor Anthea Butler.

**Butler:**

Thank you all for coming out. I know it’s a big deal to come out to public things, I’m really appreciative, and thanks all of you who watched online tonight.

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