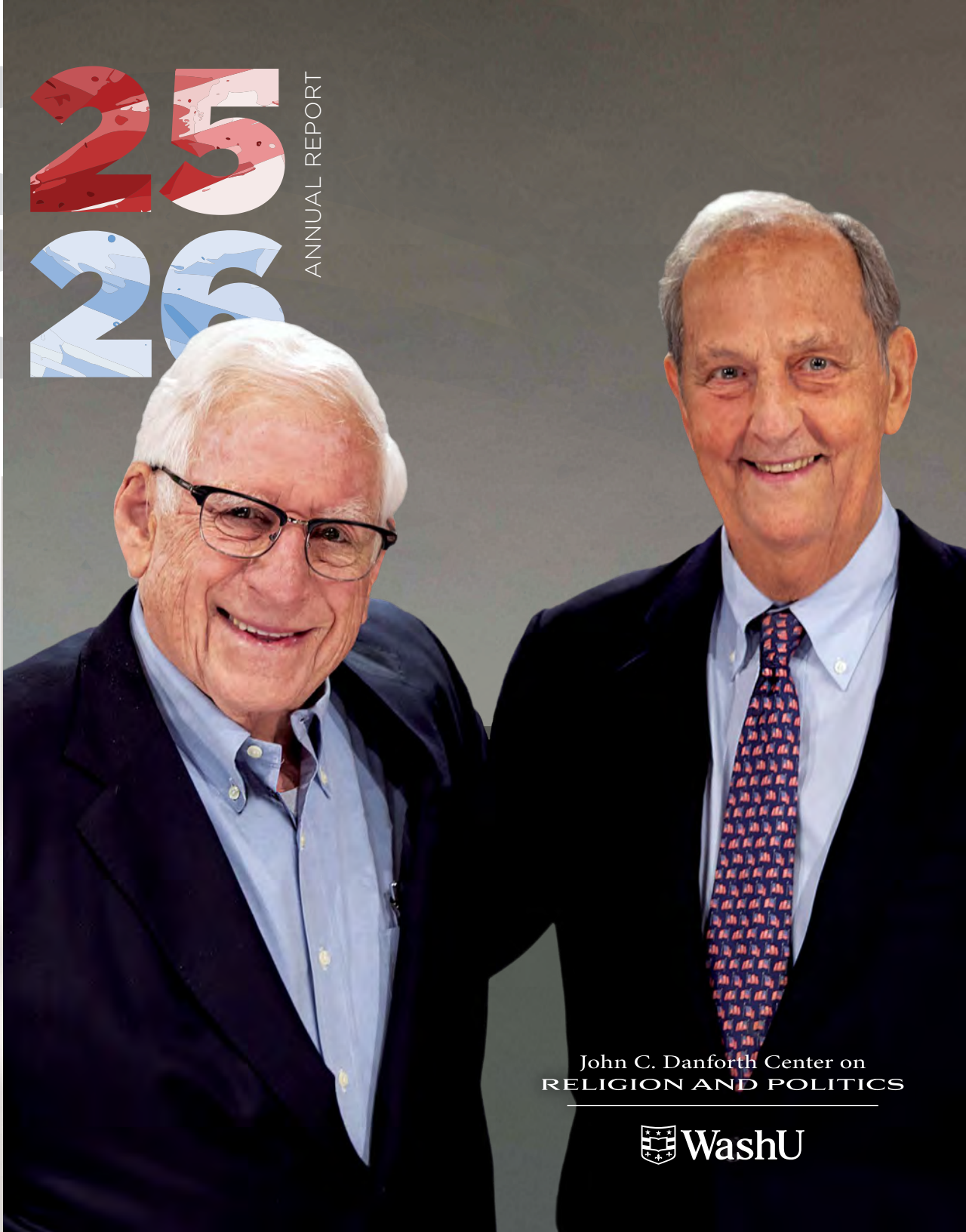
2025 2026

ANNUAL REPORT



John C. Danforth Center on
RELIGION AND POLITICS

WashU

John C. Danforth Center on
RELIGION AND POLITICS

OUR MISSION:

The Center serves as an open venue for fostering rigorous scholarship and informing broad academic and public communities about the intersections of religion and U.S. politics.

On the cover: Former U.S. Senators John Danforth and Bill Bradley held a public discussion at WashU in February 2026.



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Greetings from all of us at the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics.

At the close of my first year as Director, I am amazed again at my extraordinary colleagues and honored to join in their work. Year after year, the Center's faculty serve the wider academy with award-winning scholarship, invited lectures, and packed classes. Through their labors, the Danforth Center continues to bolster the important work of understanding American religion and politics in historical and contemporary terms.

This year, we celebrate the promotion of Tazeen Ali to Associate Professor. Her research deepens knowledge of Islam in America, engaging both scholarly and non-scholarly audiences with examinations of politics and culture. We also welcomed a new faculty member, Ryan Burge. In his books, his "Graphs about Religion" Substack column, and his frequent appearances in national media, Ryan analyzes reams of data to offer fresh and surprising insights into American religion and politics.

Our public event schedule in 2025-2026 opened with Ross Douthat and Philip Zuckerman discussing the merits of religion itself. From there, we explored race and democracy with the inimitable Ta-Nehisi Coates, hosted a Catholic-Jewish dialogue, and turned in spring to the nation's 250th anniversary of 1776. To further reflect on those national origins, we created a class with a series of speakers—now available to the public through our website!

We were especially honored this year to host a public dialogue between Senators Jack Danforth and Bill Bradley, who reflected on their friendship across political lines and challenged all of us to find a better politics now.

At the Danforth Center, we pursue scholarship that drives deep, projects that reach wide, and dialogues that seek greater understanding. While our faculty have long advanced this mission, I close with

particular gratitude to the staff who have supported their work and made it all possible. Their dedication sustains the Center. And for fifteen years, no one has kept it running so consistently, so smoothly, and so beautifully as Debra Kennard. Debra has been a stalwart champion of the Danforth Center from its founding moments forward. This year marks her last. As she retires, we close an era in which her hand touched everything the Center accomplished.

Thank you, Debra, for all you've done.

With gratitude,



Abram Van Engen
Stanley Elkin Professor in the Humanities





Fannie Bialek lectures on early American political thought for the “1776, Then and Now” course in spring 2026.



Research and Teaching

ADVANCING EXCEPTIONAL RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP is central to the academic mission of the Center. So too is the promotion of outstanding teaching in the classroom. The objective in both areas is to provide critical context and careful reflection on the intersections of religion and politics in the U.S., past and present. We attend closely to the conflicts produced by religion and politics as well as the actions they inspire in our citizenry, and we hope our readers and students gain a deeper comprehension of these enduring influences in American life.

Courses

Coursework in the Center provides a foundation and structure for students to engage in critical reflection, research and scholarship, and analytic writing.

Courses cover a wide spectrum of topics related to the intersections of American religion and politics, ranging from economics and politics in the British colonies to persistent and contemporary issues such as nationalism and globalization, gender, race, and religious freedom.

The collective focus of the curriculum is the cultivation of research and interpretive skills necessary for practical analyzation and response to important issues that shape society and culture in the United States.

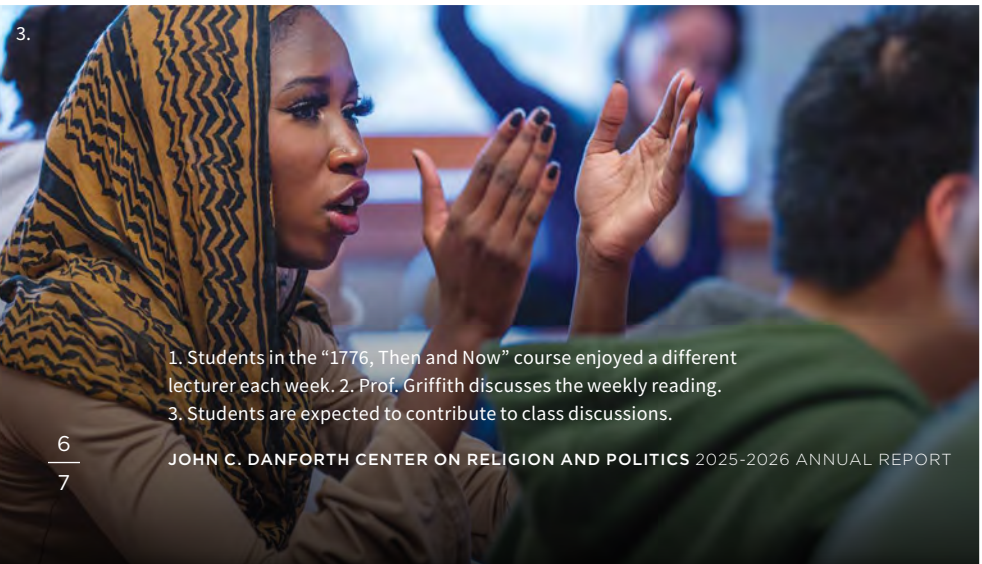
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1. Students in the “1776, Then and Now” course enjoyed a different lecturer each week. 2. Prof. Griffith discusses the weekly reading. 3. Students are expected to contribute to class discussions.

Fall 2025 Courses

Religious Freedom in America
John Inazu and Mark Valeri

Religion and American Society
Marie Griffith

Islam in America
Tazeen Ali

Between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.: Religion and the Politics of Freedom
Tazeen Ali

American Holidays: Religion, Politics, and Ritual in American Culture
Leigh Eric Schmidt

American Non-Christian Churches
Jesse Lee

Love and Friendship in Religious Thought
Fannie Bialek

Topics in American Politics: Religion and Politics in the United States
Ryan Burge (for Political Science)

Spring 2026 Courses

1776, Then and Now
Abram Van Engen

Love and Reason
Fannie Bialek

Native American Religion and Politics
Zara Surratt

The Abuse Crisis in Modern Christianity
Marie Griffith

Horror, Hell, and Monsters
Laura Simpson

Race, Religion, and Migration in the Pacific
Chanhee Heo

Muslims in the Media and Popular Culture
Tazeen Ali

Spiritual but Not Religious: The Politics of American Spirituality
Leigh Schmidt

The Ethics of Vulnerability
Fannie Bialek

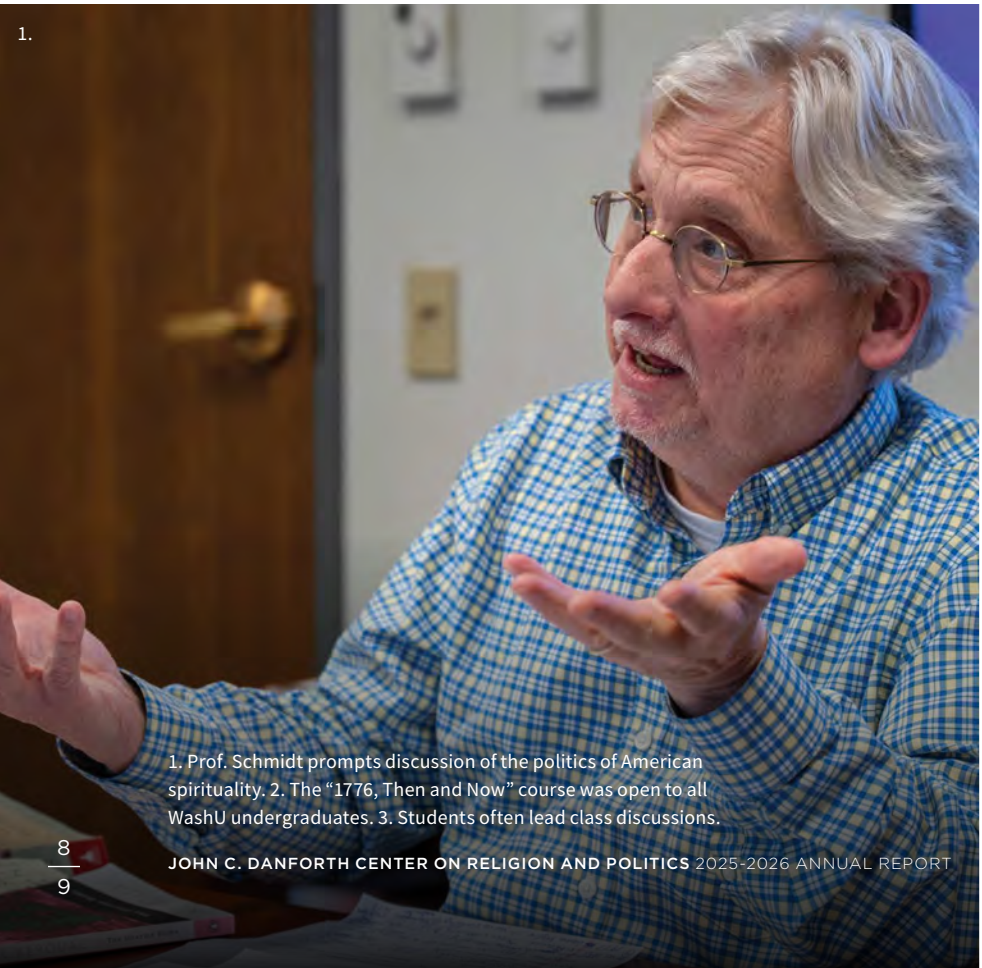
Spiritual Memoir
Mark Oppenheimer

Religion, Politics, and Public Data: Telling Stories With Numbers
Ryan Burge (for Political Science)

Undergraduate Minor

The Religion and Politics minor provides an opportunity for sustained exploration of the ways in which religion and politics have intersected in American culture, in both historical and contemporary terms.

As part of the minor program, students may examine any number of issues, including church-state relations, religion's role in shaping gender and sexuality debates, religion and electoral politics, public conflicts over religion and science, and religion's entwining with reform movements of diverse kinds. The Center's minor enrolls students from many disciplines, including natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities; whether pre-med, pre-law, or pursuing futures in education, business, or the arts, our graduates report their studies are enriched by our curriculum. Students with our minor have gone on to a variety of successful careers, including law, medicine, academia, business, and non-profit organizations.







1. Prof. Schmidt prompts discussion of the politics of American spirituality. 2. The "1776, Then and Now" course was open to all WashU undergraduates. 3. Students often lead class discussions.

Colloquium

The John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics sponsors an ongoing colloquium to foster discussion of new scholarship in the broad domains of American religion, politics, and culture. It is a research-oriented workshop that aims to build a multidisciplinary community among students, fellows, and faculty, all drawn to the intellectual questions that animate the Center's work.

2025-2026 PRESENTATIONS

Four Axioms for Religion and Literature
Abram Van Engen, Danforth Center on Religion and Politics

Difficult Subjects: Religion, Education, and the US-Japan Security Alliance
Jolyon Thomas, University of Pennsylvania Religious Studies

Oxford Handbook Chapter: Asian American Religion, Race, and Law
Jesse Lee, Danforth Center on Religion and Politics

Asian/American Religions Across the Pacific
Chanhee Heo, Danforth Center on Religion and Politics

Curating Carceral Violence: Prison Museums and the Art of Secular Civic Formation
Laura Simpson, Danforth Center on Religion and Politics

Poverty Porn or Settler Accountability?: Assessing Boarding School Coverage in Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Medias
Zara Surratt, Danforth Center on Religion and Politics

***Working-Class Muslim Masculinity in Britain: Criminality, Solidarity, and Patriarchy in BBC's* Man Like Mobeen**
Tazeen Ali, Danforth Center on Religion and Politics

The Dirty Bicker: Princeton, Its Jews, and the Scandal of 1958
Mark Oppenheimer, Danforth Center on Religion and Politics

"Women's Negotiated Place in the ABCFM's Capitalist Matrix," Draft Chapter 1 in Christian Capitalist Ambitions: How Protestant Missionaries and Women Educators Exported American Progress
Miriam Levin, Case Western University Department of History

Are We Really That Polarized?
Ryan Burge, Danforth Center on Religion and Politics

Friendship as an Ethic of Care
Fannie Bialek, Danforth Center on Religion and Politics

Chinese Religions in the Minds of English Protestants, 1650-1750
Mark Valeri, Danforth Center on Religion and Politics



How did the United States come to be, and what does that origin story mean for us today?

The Danforth Center offered a special one-time course to explore that question by examining the American Revolution during its 250th anniversary. The class examined the founding of the United States from multiple perspectives and points of view, as well as the continuing relevance and consequences of those events. What happened, how did it happen, and why does it still matter?

Renowned professors from Washington University in St. Louis and around the country participated to show how scholars in multiple fields discuss American independence. The course is now available on the Center's website at rap.washu.edu.

Watch the whole course or individual lectures at our website: RAP.WASHU.EDU

Why Revolution?

Early American Political Thought
Fannie Bialek (WashU)

The International Context of the American Revolution
Kathleen DuVal (UNC)

The Environments of 1776
Hester Blum and
Rachael DeWitt (WashU)

Why did the colonies declare independence?
Peter Kastor (WashU)

Religion and the Secular

Religion and Revolution
Mark Valeri (WashU)

A Secular Republic? Irreligion, Revolution, and Enlightenment
Leigh Schmidt (WashU)

Islam and the Founding Fathers: Religious Liberty and National Belonging (Thomas Jefferson's Qur'an)
Tazeen Ali (WashU)

Seeking Freedom and Independence

African American Political Thought in the Age of Revolution
Tamika Nunley (Duke)

Slavery and the American Revolution: Afterlives of Slavery
Sowande Mustakeem (WashU)

Women's Definitions and Declarations of Independence
Lorri Glover (Saint Louis U)

Establishing Rights

Free Speech and Judicial Independence in the Age of Revolution
Andrew Martin (WashU)

The Right of Assembly in our Democratic Experiment
John Inazu (WashU)

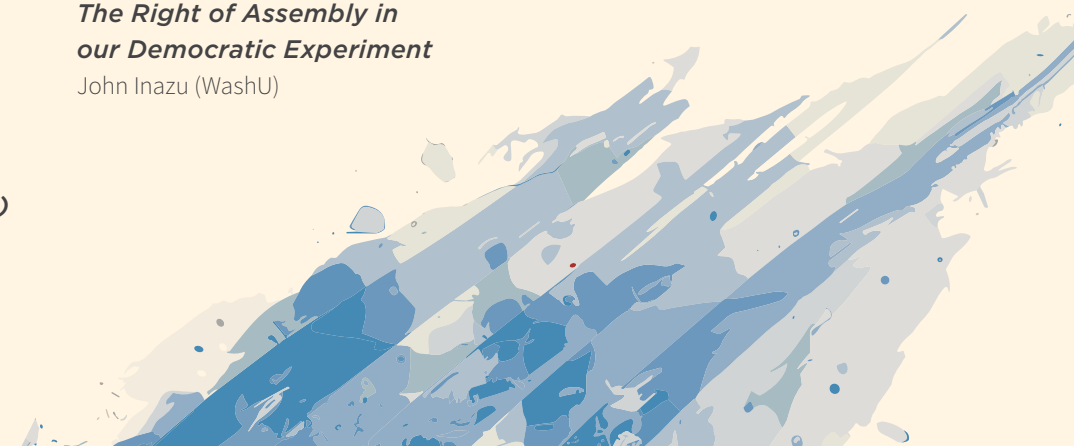
Memory and Meaning 250 Years Later

The Declaration of Independence Today: Why an Old Text Still Serves Us Now
Danielle Allen (Harvard)

Remembering the American Revolution through the Years
Eddie Glaude (Princeton)

Thomas Jefferson and America's Liberal Mission Statement
Jeff Pasley (University of Missouri)

Origin Stories and National History
Abram Van Engen (WashU)





Political philosopher Danielle Allen delivered a Danforth Distinguished Lecture for the Center.



Public Engagement

ENGAGING A WIDE RANGE OF CITIZENS BEYOND THE UNIVERSITY has been one of the Center's manifest aims since its founding in 2010. Public events have offered an important way to meet our commitment to disseminate the work of scholars and thinkers, from the Center and beyond, that explores the intersections of religion and politics and fosters civil debate and robust discussion among persons holding diverse and even divergent viewpoints.

Communicating scholarly ideas through more popular writing is another of the ways in which we've sought to have a public impact.

Should Everyone Be Religious?

Ross Douthat and Philip Zuckerman

Opposite page: 1. Douthat offers his opening commentary. 2. Center faculty member Mark Oppenheimer moderated the event. 3. Audience members continue the conversation with Zuckerman after the public event. 4. Attendees enjoy the debate-style dialogue. 5. Douthat draws on material from his recent book to make his case for religious belief.

For searchers caught between doubt and belief and for believers struggling to reconcile faith with contemporary assumptions about science and progress, Ross Douthat's recent book* Believe: Why Everyone Should Be Religious, *shows how religious faith makes better sense of reality than skepticism or disbelief. This debate-style event featured New York Times columnist Douthat in conversation with Pitzer College professor and well-known atheist author Philip Zuckerman.

Faculty member Mark Oppenheimer moderated the discussion between the two guest speakers.











OCTOBER 16, 2025



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A Conversation with Ta-Nehisi Coates

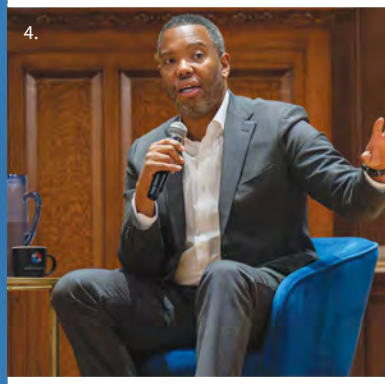
Ta-Nehisi Coates and Elizabeth Hinton

Opposite page: 1. Hinton listens to Coates's response to her opening question. 2. Coates discusses the dangers of violent resistance to the resistor. 3. Hinton probes Coates's ideas on mining oppression for wisdom. 4. Coates explained his experiences visiting Palestine. 5. People filled Graham Chapel to hear the dialogue.

This Danforth Distinguished Lecture featured award-winning author and journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates in a wide-ranging public conversation with Yale History Professor Elizabeth Hinton.

Coates holds the Sterling Brown Endowed Chair at Howard University in the English department. His bestselling books include The Water Dancer, The Message, and 2015 National Book Award winner Between the World and Me. Hinton's research focuses on the persistence of poverty, racial inequality, and urban violence in the 20th century United States.


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OCTOBER 22, 2025

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Courage and Faith: Nostra Aetate at 60 and the Future of Catholic-Jewish Relations

The Most. Rev. Archbishop Mitchell T. Rozanski and Rabbi Noam Marans

Opposite page: 1. The St. Louis Archbishop points to a history of interfaith partnership. 2. Rozanski thanks the Center's Mark Valeri, who hosted the event. 3. Suwalsky and Marans embrace at the conclusion of the supportive conversation. 4. Marans leads a global interfaith outreach and advocacy organization.

Nostra Aetate is a declaration of the Second Vatican Council issued on October 28, 1965 that concerns the Catholic Church's relationship with non-Christian religions. The document, which means "In Our Time," repudiates anti-Semitism, rejects the charge of deicide against the Jews, and affirms the Church's shared spiritual heritage with Judaism and respect for Islam and other religions.

This event brought together several St. Louis organizations to reflect on the 60 years since the declaration and how to embrace the future. The Most. Rev. Archbishop Mitchell T. Rozanski and Rabbi Noam Marans, Director of Interreligious Affairs at the American Jewish Committee (AJC), joined together in a conversation moderated by Fr. David J. Suwalsky, St. Louis University's VP-Mission and Identity.

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FEBRUARY 5, 2026



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The Bible and the Bard: How Conservative Protestants Made Shakespeare "Secular Scripture"

Jillian Snyder

Opposite page: 1. Snyder answers audience questions. 2. Fellows, students, and St. Louis community members attend the talk. 3. Mark Valeri introduces Snyder. 4. Attendees continue the conversation with Snyder after the event. 5. Audience members ask questions after the formal presentation.

Professor Jillian Snyder of the University of Notre Dame presented a lecture investigating how Bob Jones University drew on a long-forgotten vision of Shakespeare with roots in the early American conservative Protestant imagination. She explored how this "bardolotry" laid the groundwork for the controversial history of Bob Jones University's Shakespeare program.











FEBRUARY 9, 2026







Recovering America: Keeping Our Republic in an Age of Broken Politics

Bill Bradley and Jack Danforth

Opposite page: 1. The Senators enjoy a shared story from their days in the Senate. 2. Danforth welcomes an audience question. 3. Bradley gets the joke. 4. A crowd fills the auditorium for the conversation. 5. Abram Van Engen asks the Senators for advice to citizens who want to strengthen democracy.

In an era when American politics feels more broken than ever, two of the most respected voices of a different political age came together for a timely public conversation. Former U.S. Senators Bill Bradley and Jack Danforth reflected candidly—and personally—on how we got here, what has been lost, and what can be recovered. Drawing on stories of bipartisan friendship, faith, compromise, and public service, they explored what politics looks like at its best, what it means to be "a republic, if you can keep it," and how ordinary citizens can help heal a fractured nation.

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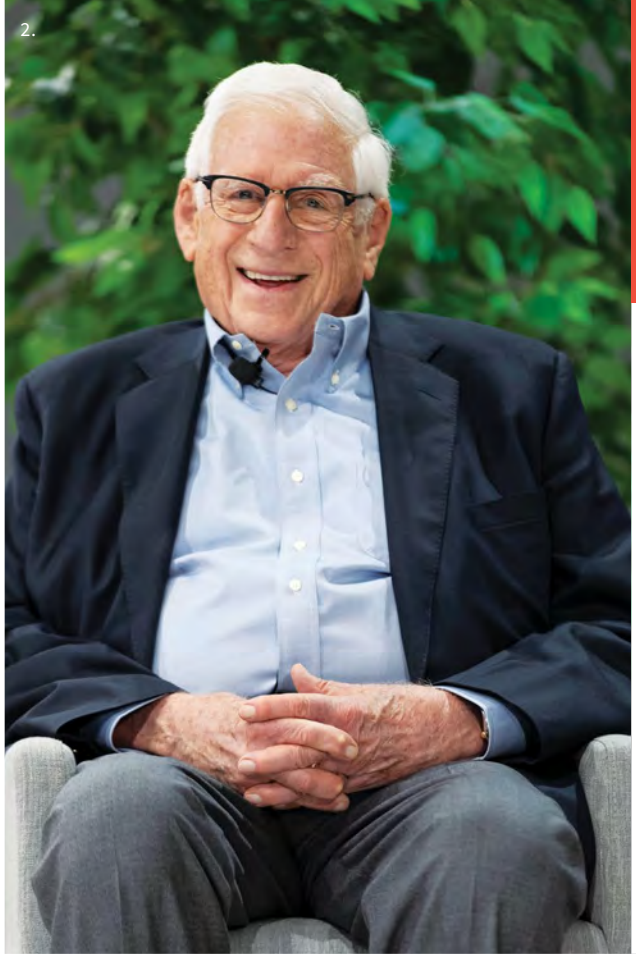
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FEBRUARY 25, 2026

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Remodeling Minority: Asian American Religion and Politics Reconsidered

Russell Jeung, Bradley Onishi, and Dheepa Sundaram

Opposite page: 1. Sundaram answers an audience question. 2. Audience members discuss the presentation. 3. Jeung describes the work of "Stop AAPI Hate." 4. The audience included other scholars and students. 5. Onishi reflects on another panelist's comments.

Many Americans currently find themselves wrestling and renegotiating their place in the American political landscape, and Asian American religious communities are no different as categories of race, ethnicity, generation, and religious tradition have become less stable and capable of predicting political affiliation or participation.

This public panel discussion featured experts of Asian American religion and politics to reflect on the place of Asian American religious identities and communities in the current political climate. Panelists were Russell M. Jeung, Professor of Asian American Studies at San Francisco State University and cofounder of Stop AAPI Hate; Bradley Onishi, scholar and cohost of the podcast Straight White American Jesus*; and Deepa Sundaram, Associate Professor of Hindu Studies, Critical Theory, and Digital Religion at University of Denver.*











MARCH 26, 2026



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How Race Shadows the Nation's Anniversaries

Eddie Glaude Jr.

Opposite page: 1. Bialek shares Glaude's forthcoming book with the audience. 2. Glaude poses for a picture with students. 3. Glaude emphasizes his response. 4. Community members filled the auditorium for the talk. 5. Glaude signs a book for Rev. Traci Blackmon.

One of the nation's most prominent scholars, Dr. Eddie S. Glaude Jr., is the James S. McDonnell Distinguished University Professor of African American Studies at Princeton University. This talk centered on themes in his book* America, U.S.A.: How Race Shadows the Nation's Anniversaries. *In this book, Glaude presents a groundbreaking analysis of the vicious cycles of American history and the country's enduring refusal to face its true nature—especially at the moments when national anniversaries steer us back toward the mythology meant to disguise the truth.











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APRIL 9, 2026

Imagining Early American Jews

Michael Hoberman

Opposite page: 1. Hoberman discusses his lecture with an attendee. 2. Miriam Levin queries the lecturer. 3. An audience member shares her personal experience with the group. 4. Hoberman presents his research to an engaged crowd. 5. Hoberman responds to audience questions.

Professor Michael Hoberman delivered a lecture on his latest book,* Imagining Early American Jews, *which explores popular interpretations of early Jewish history in the U.S. Hoberman is a Professor of English Studies at Fitchburg State University.


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APRIL 13, 2026

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The Declaration of Independence Today: Why an Old Text Still Serves Us Now

Danielle Allen

Opposite page: 1. Allen spoke to a capacity crowd in Graham Chapel. 2. Members of the WashU Board of Trustees welcome Allen. 3. Provost Mark West introduces the evening's program. 4. Otto Brown discusses his civic engagement work with Allen while she signs her book for him. 5. Tazeen Ali poses a question collected from the audience.

This special Danforth Distinguished Lecture brought political philosopher and democracy champion Danielle Allen to St. Louis for a public lecture in conjunction with the Center's special course "1776, Then and Now."

Danielle Allen is James Bryant Conant University Professor at Harvard University. She is also Director of the Allen Lab for Democracy Renovation at the Harvard Kennedy School and Director of the Democratic Knowledge Project, a research lab focused on civic education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. She is a professor of political philosophy, ethics, and public policy as well as a seasoned non-profit leader, democracy advocate, tech ethicist, distinguished author, and mom.











APRIL 16, 2026



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ARC
Religion, Politics, Et Cetera

EDITOR
Mark Oppenheimer

DEPUTY EDITOR
David Sugarman

EDITORIAL INTERNS, 2025-2026:
Caroline Coffey, Ben Esther



Arc: The Podcast launched as the audio adjunct to the online journal and features interviews with thoughtful people, as well as discussions of what's in the magazine, tips on what to read, watch, and listen to, cool music, and more.

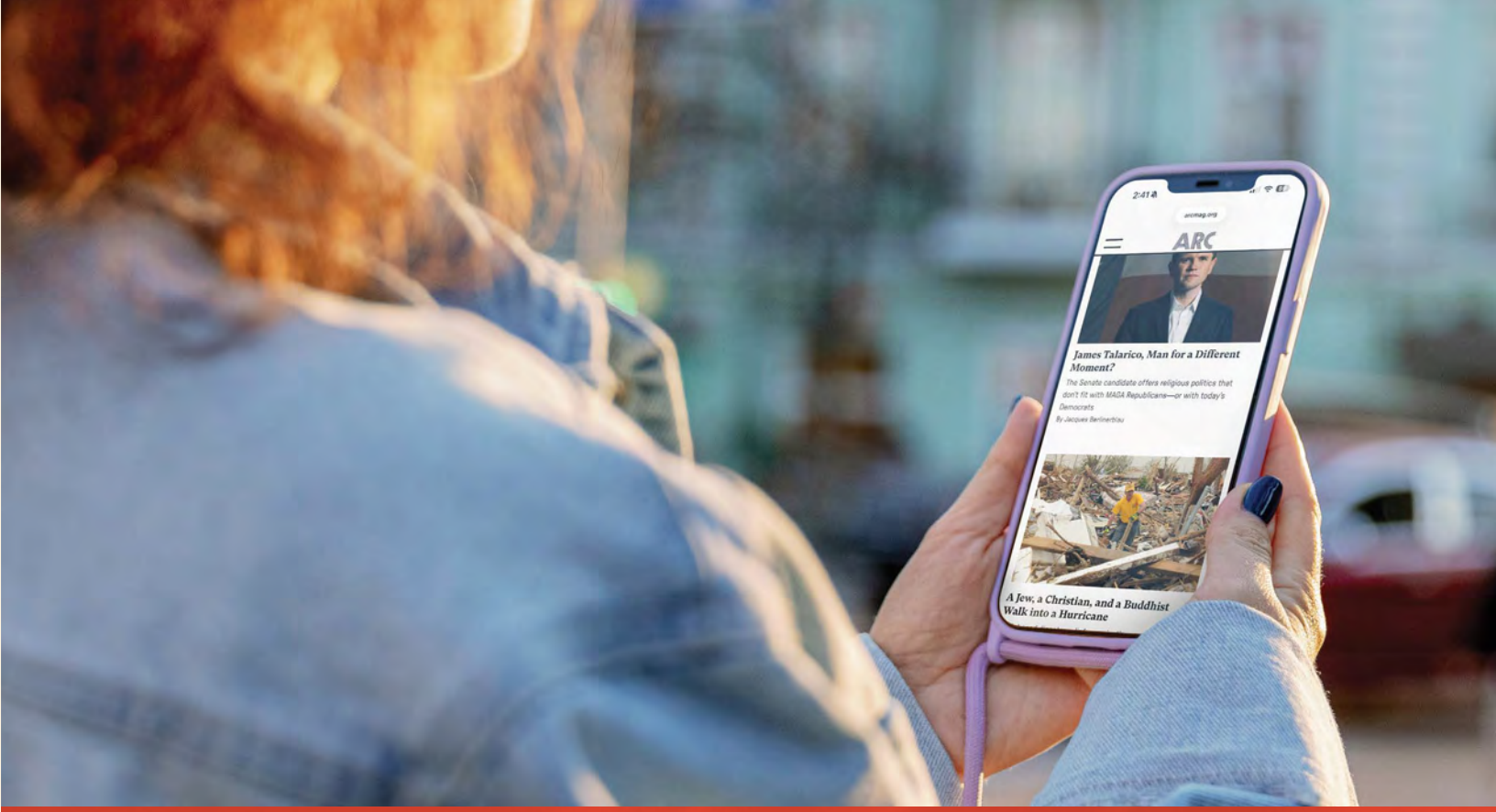
Online Journal

An important project of the Center, *Arc: Religion, Politics, Et Cetera*, is an online journal covering American religion, politics, and culture.

Arc: Religion, Politics, Et Cetera was the relaunch (under a new name) of the Center's former journal, *Religion & Politics*. Since beginning publication in September 2024, we have achieved our mission of providing a forum for writers from inside the academy and outside, of all (and no) partisan leanings. Besides running articles and essays, we have launched a successful podcast and hosted events in New York City and St. Louis (with an event upcoming in Washington, D.C., in October 2026).

A SELECTION OF OUR BEST ARTICLES FROM THE PAST SCHOOL YEAR WOULD INCLUDE PIECES BY:

- *Leading historians like* **Jon Butler, Phil Zuckerman, John G. Turner, and Catherine Brekus;**
- *Literary criticism by* **Paul Berman, Blake Smith, and Stephanie Burt;**
- *News reportage from* **Kimberly Winston, Maggie Phillips, and the Center's own demographer, Ryan Burge**

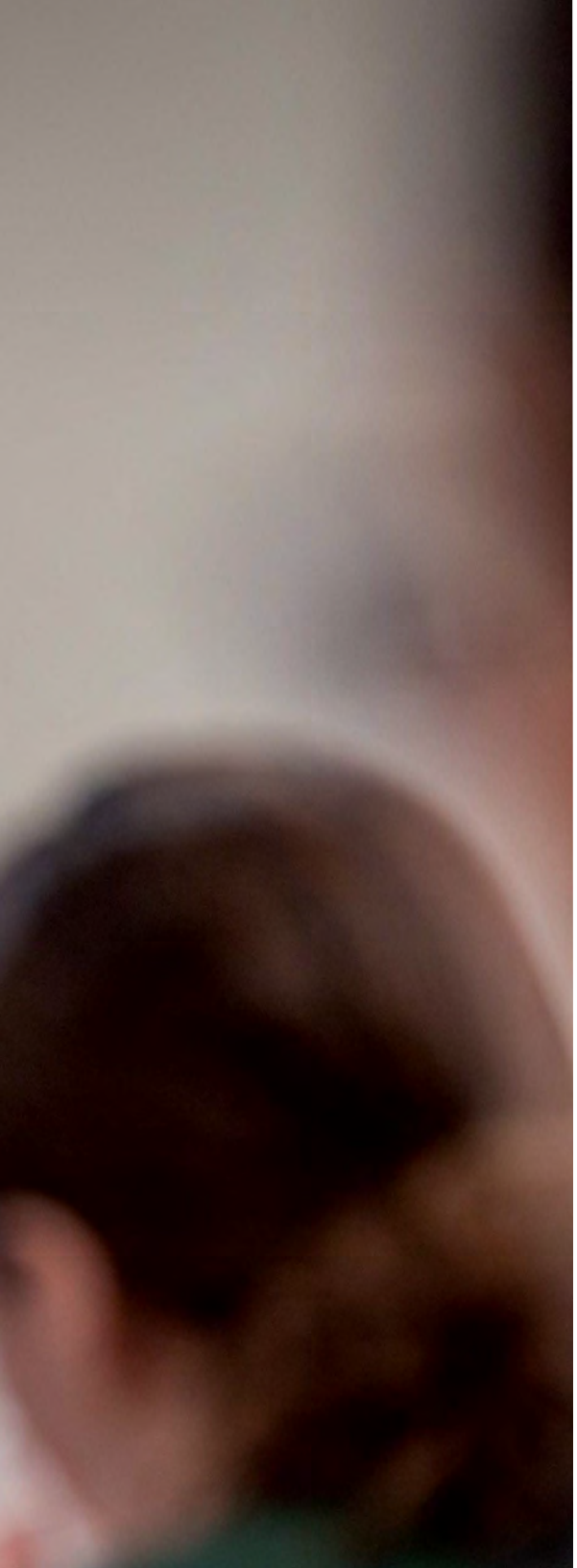


> We will publish writers from inside the academy and outside, and besides writing we will offer audio stories, and video, and photo essays. As for that Et Cetera in our new title: it's to open space for writing or other art that is not obviously about religion or politics, but which on deeper inspection has something to teach us about religion or politics, or about the messy, intriguing space where they interact.

MARK OPPENHEIMER, EDITOR



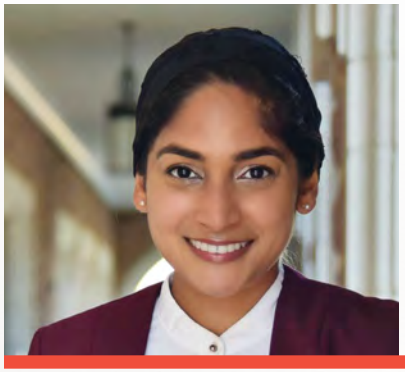
Ryan Burge teaches "Religion, Politics, and Public Data: Storytelling with Numbers" in spring 2026.



A GROUP OF OUTSTANDING SCHOLARS AND TEACHERS, academic associates, trusted advisors, and talented staff guides the Center's work toward its goals.

Our faculty represent some of the foremost scholars in their fields, and our postdoctoral fellowship program supports exceptionally promising early career scholars who teach and pursue major research projects while in residence. The Center is enriched by fostering intellectual and collaborative opportunities among Center faculty and fellows, as well as across the wider university and beyond.

People



Faculty

TAZEEN M. ALI

Assistant Professor of Religion and Politics

Professor Ali's research and teaching focus on Islam and gender, race and religion in the U.S., and Muslims in popular culture. Her first book ***The Women's Mosque of America: Authority & Community in US Islam*** (NYU Press: November 2022) is the first full-length scholarly account of the phenomenon of woman-led mosques that have been emerging across North America and Europe since 2015, and it analyzes how American Muslim women negotiate the Islamic tradition to cultivate religious authority and build gender-equitable worship communities.

She is currently writing a book on narratives of masculinity, racism, and sexuality in entertainment media produced by American and British Muslims, tentatively titled ***Muslims on Screen: Racism and Sexuality in Anglo-American Islam*** (under contract with NYU Press). Ali frequently writes for public audiences with her work appearing in Public Books, *Arc: Religion, Politics, Et Cetera* (formerly *Religion & Politics*), *The Conversation, Middle East Eye,* and *The Maydan.* She also serves on the advisory board of the National Museum of American Religion.

Ali earned her Ph.D. in Religious Studies with a graduate certificate in Women's Gender, and Sexuality Studies from Boston University in 2019. She was a visiting postgraduate student in Islamic Studies at the University of Edinburgh from 2017 to 2018. Prior to that she obtained a master's degree in Islamic Studies from Washington University in St. Louis and her bachelor's degree with honors in both religion and biology from Lehigh University. Competitive fellowships and grants from The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, the Boston University Center for the Humanities, and Center for Islam in the Contemporary World have supported her writing and research.



Faculty

FANNIE BIALEK

Assistant Professor of Religion and Politics

Professor Bialek's research and teaching focus on contemporary religious ethics and political theory with an emphasis on feminist thought, Christian theology, and modern forms of power critique. Her first book project, ***Love in Time,*** argues for a consideration of love as a relationship to uncertainty, instructive for the vulnerabilities of interpersonal relationships and political life. Her next book will consider Abraham Joshua Heschel's 1951 book ***The Sabbath*** for contemporary democratic politics. She teaches one of the Center's gateway lecture courses for undergraduates, "The Good Life between Religion and Politics," among other courses in religious ethics and political thought.

Her appointment with the Danforth Center on Religion and Politics follows her position as Lecturer with the Religious Studies program at Washington University in St. Louis for the 2016-2017 academic year. She was Visiting Assistant Professor in Religious Studies at Brown in 2015-2016.

Bialek earned the Ph.D. in Religious Studies from Brown University in 2016. She earned a bachelor's degree in religion, *summa cum laude,* from Princeton University. Competitive fellowships from the Center for the Humanities at WashU, the American Association of University Women, the Cogut Center for the Humanities at Brown, and the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women at Brown have offered support for her research.

Bialek also leads a summer program for St. Louis-area high school students to study political thought, generously funded by the Teagle Foundation's Knowledge for Freedom Program.



Faculty

RYAN BURGE

Professor of Practice

Ryan Burge is a professor of practice at the John C. Danforth Center at Washington University in St. Louis. He will teach undergraduate courses through the Department of Political Science. Burge is a political scientist whose research focuses on the impact of religion on American life, especially politics. His popular Substack newsletter "Graphs about Religion" has tens of thousands of subscribers and is read millions of times annually. He is a well-known data analyst with work appearing in *The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal,* and *POLITICO,* and he has been featured on *60 Minutes.*

He previously served for 13 years in the political science department at Eastern Illinois University, where he was also the graduate coordinator. He earned his undergraduate degree in history/political science from Greenville University and his M.A. and Ph.D. in political science from Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. Following his doctoral work, he served as a postdoctoral fellow at the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute, where he advised on polling and data analysis.

Dr. Burge is the author of five books. His debut, ***The Nones: Where They Came From, Who They Are, and Where They Are Going*** (Fortress Press, 2021), explores the dramatic rise of non-religious Americans and offers explanations for this seismic cultural shift. His next book, ***20 Myths about Religion and Politics in America*** (Fortress Press, 2022), addressed widespread misconceptions about religion, politics, and their intersection. In 2023, he collaborated with pastors Michael Graham and Jim Davis to write ***The Great Dechurching: Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?*** (Zondervan). Based on three original surveys, this work investigates the reasons behind declining church attendance in the United States. In 2024, he published ***The American Religious Landscape: Facts, Trends, and the Future*** (Oxford University Press), an accessible, data-rich overview of religious groups including Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, Hindus, and atheists. His most recent book, ***The Vanishing Church: How the Hollowing Out of Moderate Congregations Is Hurting Democracy, Faith, and Us*** (Brazos, 2026), examines religious polarization and its broader implications for American society.

Burge served as a pastor in the American Baptist Church for over twenty years.



Faculty

R. MARIE GRIFFITH

John C. Danforth Distinguished
Professor in the Humanities

Marie Griffith is the John C. Danforth Distinguished Professor in the Humanities at Washington University in St. Louis. She served for 12 years (2011-2023) as the director of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics and the editor of the Center's journal, *Religion & Politics*. Her research focuses on American Christianity, including the changing profile of American evangelicals and ongoing conflicts over gender, sexuality, and marriage.

Professor Griffith obtained her undergraduate degree at the University of Virginia in Political and Social Thought and her Ph.D. in the study of religion from Harvard University. Before moving to Washington University in 2011, she served as professor of religion and director of the women and gender studies program at Princeton University, where she was awarded the President's Award for Distinguished Teaching; and later as the John A. Bartlett Professor of New England Church History at Harvard. In 2015 she was appointed a Distinguished Lecturer for the Organization of American Historians.

Griffith is the author or editor of seven books. Her first, ***God's Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission*** (University of California Press, 1997), examines the practices and perceptions of contemporary evangelical women. Her next book, ***Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity*** (University of California Press, 2004), explores the history of Christian-influenced attitudes and practices related to embodiment in modern America; while ***Moral Combat: How Sex Divided American Christians and Fractured American Politics*** (Basic Books, 2017) traces conflicts over sexual morality, feminism, and gender in American religion and politics. Her latest book, ***Making the World Over: Confronting Racism, Misogyny, and Xenophobia in U.S. History*** (UVA Press, 2021), urges a re-reading of the nation's history that opens up greater complexity than our stock narratives. These books, along with her three edited volumes—***Women and Religion in the African Diaspora: Knowledge, Power, and Performance*** (co-edited with Barbara Dianne Savage, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), ***Religion and Politics in the Contemporary United States*** (co-edited with Melani McAlister, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), and ***American Religions: A Documentary History*** (Oxford University Press, 2007)—exhibit Griffith's varied research interests. In addition to her books, Professor Griffith has published numerous scholarly articles, book chapters, and essays.

Griffith is a frequent media commentator and public speaker on current issues pertaining to religion and politics. She is currently writing the first in-depth comparative history of the clergy sexual abuse crises within American Christianity, focusing on the U.S. Catholic Church and evangelical groups such as the Southern Baptist Convention.



Faculty

MARK OPPENHEIMER

Professor of Practice and Executive Editor,
Arc: Religion, Politics, Et Cetera

Mark Oppenheimer joined the Center in May 2024 and brings a wealth of experience in journalism and academia. He has taught at Stanford, Wesleyan, Wellesley, NYU, Boston College, and Yale, where he was the founding director of the Yale Journalism Initiative. From 2010 to 2016, he wrote the "Beliefs" column, about religion, for *The New York Times,* and he has also written for publications including *The New Yorker, The Nation, GQ, Slate,* and *The Wall Street Journal.* He created *Unorthodox,* the world's most popular podcast about Jewish life and culture, with over 7 million downloads to date and the podcast *Gatecrashers,* about the history of Jews and antisemitism at Ivy League schools. He has also hosted the podcasts *Antisemitism USA* and, from the Leo Baeck Institute, *LBI Presents.*

Oppenheimer is the author of five books, including the co-authored ***The Newish Jewish Encyclopedia, Squirrel Hill: The Tree of Life Synagogue Shooting and the Soul of a Neighborhood*** and, most recently, ***Judy Blume: A Life.*** He is currently working on a study of an antisemitism scandal at Princeton in 1958.

Oppenheimer holds a Ph.D. in religious studies from Yale.



Faculty

LEIGH ERIC SCHMIDT

Edward C. Mallinckrodt Distinguished
University Professor in the Humanities

Leigh Eric Schmidt is the Edward C. Mallinckrodt Distinguished University Professor in the Humanities at Washington University in St. Louis. He joined the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics in 2011. From 2009 to 2011, he was the Charles Warren Professor of the History of Religion in America at Harvard University; from 1995 to 2009, he taught at Princeton University where he was the Agate Brown and George L. Collord Professor of Religion and served as chair of the Department of Religion; and, from 1989 to 1995, he taught in the Theological and Graduate Schools of Drew University. He has held research fellowships at Stanford and Princeton and also through the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Council of Learned Societies, the American Philosophical Society, and the Guggenheim Foundation. In 2015 he was appointed a Distinguished Lecturer for the Organization of American Historians.

Schmidt is the author of ***Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment*** (Harvard, 2000), which won the American Academy of Religion Award for Excellence in Historical Studies and the John Hope Franklin Prize of the American Studies Association; ***Heaven's Bride: The Unprintable Life of Ida C. Craddock, American Mystic, Scholar, Sexologist, Martyr, and Madwoman*** (Basic, 2010); ***Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*** (HarperOne, 2005), which appeared in an updated edition from the University of California Press in 2012; ***Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays*** (Princeton, 1995); and ***Holy Fairs: Scottish Communions and American Revivals in the Early Modern Period*** (Princeton, 1989), which received the Brewer Prize from the American Society of Church History. In addition, Schmidt has served as co-editor with Sally Promey of ***American Religious Liberalism*** (Indiana University Press, 2012), co-editor with Laurie Maffly-Kipp and Mark Valeri of ***Practicing Protestants: Histories of the Christian Life in America*** (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), and co-author with Edwin Scott Gaustad of ***The Religious History of America*** (HarperOne, 2002). ***Village Atheists: How America's Unbelievers Made Their Way in a Godly Nation*** (Princeton University Press, 2016) examines how atheists and freethinkers have fared in American public life. His most recent book, ***The Church of Saint Thomas Paine: A Religious History of American Secularism,*** was published by Princeton University Press in November 2021.

Schmidt earned his undergraduate degree in history and religious studies from the University of California, Riverside, in 1983 and his Ph.D. in religion from Princeton in 1987.



Faculty

MARK VALERI

Reverend Priscilla Wood Neaves Distinguished Professor of Religion and Politics

Mark Valeri came to Washington University from Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, where he served as the Ernest Trice Thompson Professor of Church History beginning in 1996. His prior appointment was in the Religious Studies department at Lewis and Clark College. He has focused his research and writing on the ways in which religious ideas shaped political and economic affairs in seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century England and America.

His latest book describes how Anglo-American Protestant descriptions of other religions, and conversion from one religion to another, changed from 1650 to 1765: ***The Opening of the Protestant Mind: How Anglo-American Protestants Embraced Religious Liberty*** (Oxford University Press, 2023). It received the 2024 Philip Schaff Prize from the American Society of Church History. ***Heavenly Merchandize: How Religion Shaped Commerce in Puritan America*** (Princeton University Press, 2010) received the 2011 Philip Schaff Prize from the American Society of Church History. It was also shortlisted for the 2011 American Academy of Religion Award for Excellence in the Historical Study of Religion and selected as one of *Choice* magazine's Outstanding Academic Titles for 2010. The book analyzes social transformations in the American economy from the early 1600s, when Puritans argued that personal profit should be subordinate to the common welfare, to the 1740s, when Christians increasingly celebrated commerce as an unqualified good. Previous publications include ***Law and Providence in Joseph Bellamy's New England: The Origins of the New Divinity in Revolutionary America*** (Oxford University Press, 1994), which won the Mackemie Prize from the Presbyterian Historical Society; ***The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 17: Sermons and Discourses, 1730-1733*** (Yale University Press, 1999); ***Practicing Protestants: Histories of Christian Life in America, 1630-1965*** (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), co-edited with Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp and Leigh E. Schmidt; and the co-edited ***Global Neighbors: Christian Faith and Moral Obligation in Today's Economy*** (Eerdmans, 2008). His publication list includes many book chapters, journal articles, and essays.

Valeri has received several fellowships, including an Andrew W. Mellon fellowship, a National Endowment for the Humanities fellowship, an American Council of Learned Societies grant, and a Lilly Endowment faculty fellowship, as well as the 2017-2018 *Los Angeles Times* Distinguished Fellowship in the History and Culture of the Americas at The Huntington Library in Pasadena, California. In 2027, he will be a visiting Beaufort Fellow at St. John's College, Cambridge University.



Faculty

ABRAM VAN ENGEN

Stanley Elkin Professor in the Humanities

Abram Van Engen is the Stanley Elkin Professor of the Humanities and Director of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics at Washington University in St. Louis. He is appointed as well in the English Department and served that department as chair from 2022-2026.

Van Engen writes and teaches on religion and literature, with a focus on early America and its many afterlives. He is the author of ***Sympathetic Puritans: Calvinist Fellow-Feeling in Early New England*** (Oxford University Press, 2015), which engages the history of emotions to examine how a theology of sympathy shaped community and literature in New England. His second book, ***City on a Hill: A History of American Exceptionalism*** (Yale University Press, 2020), won the Peter J. Gomes Memorial Book Award and the Jaroslav Pelikan Prize. The book offers a cultural history of John Winthrop's 1630 “city on a hill” sermon, “A Model of Christian Charity,” tracing its rise from obscurity to its place as a cornerstone of American exceptionalism, showing how national narratives are both constructed and contested.

More recently, Van Engen’s work has turned to poetry. His recent book ***Word Made Fresh: An Invitation to Poetry for the Church*** (Eerdmans, 2024), was named the Best Book of 2024 in Culture, Poetry, and the Arts from *Christianity Today.* That book draws from his award-winning podcast, *Poetry For All,* now entering its sixth year. Most recently, Van Engen has published ***Anne Bradstreet Now: Modern Poets Respond*** (Oxford University Press, 2026), combining his interest in puritans with his love of modern poetry.

Van Engen earned his Ph.D. and M.A. from Northwestern University and his B.A. in English and Philosophy from Calvin University (2003).

Faculty Affiliate for Teaching



JOHN INAZU

Sally D. Danforth Distinguished Professor of Law and Religion

Courtesy Appointment



CASSIE ADCOCK

Associate Professor, Department of History; Associate Professor of Religion and Politics (by courtesy)



Dr. Chanhee Heo teaches a class as part of her fellowship at the Center.

Postdoctoral Fellows



CHANHEE HEO

Chanhee Heo is a postdoctoral research associate at the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics at Washington University in St. Louis. She received her Ph.D. in Religious Studies with a minor in History at Stanford University. Her current book project, "Thy Kin-dom Come: Imagining the First Christian Nation in the East," examines Korean migrants' evolving ideas of race and religion as they traversed the Pacific from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century.



JESSE J. LEE

Jesse Lee studies the relationships between religion, race, law, language, and Asian American identities. His dissertation is titled "American Amida: The Buddhist Churches of America, Religious Incorporation, and Translation." He received his Ph.D. in 2024 from the department of religion at Florida State University.



LAURA SIMPSON

Laura Simpson earned her Ph.D. from the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Villanova University. Her research focuses on the American prison museum as a site of religious and political formation, with a particular interest in how practices of carceral storytelling can both reinscribe and subvert linear understandings of time. Her book project engages the narrative and curatorial work of the Sing Sing Prison Museum in Ossining, New York.



ZARA SURRATT

Zara Surratt earned her Ph.D. in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her dissertation is titled "'Those Who Wear Black Dresses:' Indigenous Students, Catholic Immigrants, and Belonging at St. Francis Indian School" and examines Catholic participation in Federal Indian Policy during the late 19th and early 20th century and the concurrent experiences of Native American youth.

Staff



DEBRA KENNARD
Associate Director

Debra Kennard has responsibility for Center administration, communications, events, and donor relationship support. She earned her B.A. in journalism from Indiana University and her M.A. in non-profit management from Washington University in St. Louis.



SHELLEY MITCHOM
Assistant Director

Shelley Mitchom joined the Center in April 2026 as assistant director. She brings a wealth of WashU administrative experience, and she will supervise all staff operations in the new academic year. She earned her B.A. from Fontbonne University.



SHERI PEÑA
Administrative and Academic Coordinator

Sheri Peña coordinates the Center's financial operations, curriculum, office administration, and a variety of other support functions. She earned her A.A. at Washington University in St. Louis.



HANNAH PIERCE
Event Specialist

Hannah Pierce manages the Center's events and meetings. She earned her B.A. in Mass Communication and Psychology from Texas State University.



DAVID SUGARMAN
Deputy Editor, *Arc* magazine

David Sugarman is Deputy Editor of the online journal. Sugarman earned his Ph.D. in English from New York University, where he focused on American literature.

Student Assistants (2025-2026)

Zyla Dillon, Jake Hyman, Isabella Jimenez, Ryan Kravitz, Natalia Leon-Diaz, Alison Ren, Sonja Wagner

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Since its founding, the Center has benefited from an advisory board of nationally prominent leaders from the fields of American religion, politics, education, law, journalism, and business.

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William G. Tragos
Co-Founder and Former Chairman, TBWA Worldwide

Supporters

THE DANFORTH FOUNDATION

The John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics owes its existence to the tremendous generosity of the Danforth Foundation, founded in 1927 by Mr. and Mrs. William H. Danforth. The Foundation's commitment to funding St. Louis-based initiatives is well known, and in 2009 it announced a major gift of $30 million to Washington University to establish the Center. John C. Danforth, former Senator from Missouri and U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, was particularly engaged in the Center's founding and remains a member of its national advisory board. This gift reflects Sen. Danforth's specific interest in religion and politics, as well as his dedication to his city, state, and nation.



Sen. John C. Danforth and Mrs. Sally D. Danforth

Sen. Danforth established in 2016 a distinguished professorship to honor his wife, Sally Dobson Danforth, and the important role she has played in his life and the lives of their children. Sen. Danforth is a retired politician and Episcopal priest, a partner with Dowd Bennett LLP in St. Louis, and an active member of the Center's national advisory board.



Dr. William B. Neaves and the Rev. Priscilla Wood Neaves

In the fall of 2012, William B. Neaves, an emeritus trustee at Washington University in St. Louis, established a professorship in the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics in honor of his wife, Priscilla Wood Neaves (1945-2019). The Rev. Mrs. Neaves was a former Methodist minister with a personal interest in the role of gender in religion and politics. In addition to this generous gift to the Danforth Center, the couple donated Wood Neaves's library containing books on gender and religion to Washington University's Olin Library.

Supporter Listing

Gifts given in the 2025-2026 academic year are indicated in red (through 06/15/26)

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Elena Kravchenko teaches undergraduate students in “Thinking About Religion.”



Looking Forward

AS WE PLAN FOR THE 2026-2027 ACADEMIC YEAR, we are especially aware of the importance of continuing our scholarship on religion and politics and bringing it to bear on contemporary issues. We hope you will continue to support and be engaged with the Center as we do our work.

New Faculty in 2026-2027



J. KAMERON CARTER

Carter's research interrogates the intersections of religion, race, and political theology. His most recent book project ***Whiteness: A Political Theology*** is forthcoming in 2026 from Yale University Press. He earned the Ph.D. from University of Virginia.



KAMBIZ GHANEABASSIRI

GhaneaBassiri's teaching and research intersect Islamic Studies, American religious history, and Middle East Studies. He is the author of ***A History of Islam in America,*** among other publications. He earned the Ph.D. from Harvard University.

New Postdoctoral Fellow



CARLOS RUIZ MARTINEZ

Carlos Ruiz Martinez earned the Ph.D. from the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Iowa. His research focuses on the relationship between federal immigration agencies and religious people and institutions in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.

Fall 2026 Courses

Religions of St. Louis: Communities of Faith and Action Across the Region

The Politics of Religion, Crime, and Punishment

Solidarity and Silence: Religious Strategies in the Political Sphere

Stories from the Mortuary: New Ways to Read and Tell Religious History

Thinking about Religion

Topics in Religious Studies: Religion in the Kitchen

Topics in Political Science: Religion and Politics in the United States

2026-2027 Events

What does it mean to practice citizenship? How do we imagine or reimagine citizenship through the individual behaviors and collective deeds that enact it? How does our shared history, culture, and political activity shape the ideas and actions taken in its name?

In 2026-2027, the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics will offer a series of events addressing "The Practice of Citizenship." The program will examine how people understand and inhabit citizenship, from daily interactions with neighbors to specific acts of political participation. Through lectures, panels, symposia, and workshops, the series will explore how citizenship has been diversely understood, enacted, and challenged over time. Drawing inspiration from scholars and public voices joining us from across disciplines and contexts, we'll seek to understand how individuals and communities can cultivate citizenship that sustains democratic life.

This series invites audiences to deepen their understanding of citizenship not just as a concept, but as an ongoing set of practices shaped by history, culture, and collective action.

The Practice of Citizenship

OCTOBER 1, 2026
Philip Deloria

OCTOBER 7, 2026
Eric Liu

OCTOBER 14, 2026
Christian Nationalism panel discussion

OCTOBER 19, 2026
Doris Kearns Goodwin (cosponsor)

OCTOBER 28, 2026
Erica Chenoweth

NOVEMBER 12, 2026
Nikole Hannah-Jones (cosponsor)

JANUARY 25, 2027
Rebuilding Trust: Faith and Medicine

FEBRUARY 1, 2027
Citizenship by the Numbers

FEBRUARY 25, 2027
Jonathan Sheehan

Additional Fall 2026 Events

SEPTEMBER 24, 2026
Haleh Liza Gafori on Reading Rumi in our Present Times

OCTOBER 5, 2026
Washington, DC event on AI and Religion


1.


2.


4.

Opposite page: 1. The Center makes top public thinkers and scholars accessible to the public. 2. Postdoctoral fellow Laura Simpson teaches a course on "Horror, Hell, and Monsters." 3. Mark Oppenheimer teaches a seminar on spiritual memoir. 4. Community members are always welcome at Center public events. 5. Small class sizes give students opportunity for sustained contributions to class.




thru the show


3.




5.



John C. Danforth Center on
RELIGION AND POLITICS

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