Illiberal Liberalism? The Fate of Religious Freedom in the Public Square

October 27, 2015

In partnership with the Institute for Studies of Religion
About the Religious Freedom Project

The Religious Freedom Project (RFP) at Georgetown University’s Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs is the nation’s only university-based program devoted exclusively to the analysis of religious freedom, a basic human right restricted in many parts of the world.

Under the leadership of Director Thomas Farr and Associate Director Timothy Shah, the RFP engages a team of international scholars to examine and debate the meaning and value of religious liberty; its importance for democracy; and its role in social and economic development, international diplomacy, and the struggle against violent religious extremism.

The RFP began in 2011 with the generous support of the John Templeton Foundation. In 2014 that support continued, while the project also began a three-year partnership with Baylor University and its Institute for Studies of Religion under Director Byron Johnson.

For more information about the RFP’s research, teaching, publications, conferences, and workshops, visit our website at http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/rfp.

About the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs

The Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University, created within the Office of the President in 2006, is dedicated to the interdisciplinary study of religion, ethics, and public life. Through research, teaching, and service, the center explores global challenges of democracy and human rights; economic and social development; international diplomacy; and interreligious understanding. Two premises guide the center’s work: that a deep examination of faith and values is critical to address these challenges, and that the open engagement of religious and cultural traditions with one another can promote peace.

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In recent years, several issues have polarized the American people, including same-sex marriage and Obamacare’s HHS contraception services mandate. Discussions on these topics are naturally heated, but some fear that they have taken an illiberal turn and argue that religiously-based viewpoints are being met with increasing intolerance.

On October 27, 2015, the Religious Freedom Project, in partnership with Baylor University’s Institute for Studies of Religion, convened three thought leaders to address these complex issues from different points of view: Kirsten Powers, a renowned journalist and USA Today columnist; Russell Moore, president of the Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission; and Phil Zuckerman, a professor of sociology and founder of the nation’s first secular studies university department.

In a conversation centering on Powers’ recent book The Silencing: How the Left is Killing Free Speech, the three articulated their varying perspectives and debated the premise that religious contributions to American society are no longer welcome. Their disagreements were vigorous but civil, and each brought us closer to understanding the state of religious freedom in our society.
TIMOTHY SHAH: Good afternoon, everyone. I am Timothy Shah, the associate director of the Religious Freedom Project at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs here at Georgetown University. We are delighted to be organizing this event through our strategic partnership with Baylor University’s Institute for Studies of Religion, represented this afternoon by Byron Johnson and Thomas Hibbs. I could not be more pleased and proud to moderate what promises to be a vigorous conversation. It is entitled “Illiberal Liberalism? The Fate of Religious Freedom in the Public Square,” and it features Kirsten Powers, Russell Moore, and Phil Zuckerman.

Hosting this kind of vigorous debate, especially with people of very different views, is precisely what a great university like Georgetown and an initiative like the Religious Freedom Project are all about. Religious freedom is not pretending that we all agree. It’s not pretending that we all basically have the same views about life’s biggest questions, whether they’re moral, spiritual, or metaphysical. It’s not pretending that we agree about perhaps the biggest question of all: whether there is or might be an ultimate order of reality, a divine being that gives purpose to the universe. Rather, in the view of the Religious Freedom Project, religious freedom simply affirms that everybody should be free from coercion in matters of ultimate truth. No matter who you are, where you are from, or what your religious background is, you should not have to face coercion or retribution as you explore, embrace, and express what you
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Kirsten Powers

reason and judge to be the truth about religious questions.

This crucial principle is eloquently expressed by the Second Vatican Council’s Declaration on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae*. The Religious Freedom Project will be commemorating the declaration’s fiftieth anniversary in just a few weeks at an international conference in Rome. *Dignitatis Humanae* affirms that “in no other way does truth impose itself than by the strength of truth itself, entering the mind at once gently and with power.” If religious freedom holds us to that demanding standard of creating an open and non-coercive environment in which individuals can seek the truth—an environment that allows the truth, as *Dignitatis* says, to impose itself in no other way than “by the strength of truth itself”—then we are forced to observe that much of the world is in pretty sorry shape, at least as far as religious freedom is concerned.

Just think of the horrible religious persecution perpetrated by the Islamic State against Yazidis, Christians, and many Muslims in Syria and Iraq. This is genocidal persecution that should be getting far more attention, especially from those who could do something about it. We read about rising religious coercion and hostilities against Muslims in Burma, China, and parts of Africa; against Hindus in Pakistan and Bangladesh; and against Jews in Europe, as noted in the very discouraging International Religious Freedom Report released by the State Department just a couple of weeks ago.

But what may be even more discouraging is that Western countries, including our very own United States of America, do not seem to be immune to these negative trends. Consider just one objective indicator. The Pew Research Center collects data on religious freedom trends around the world, including in the United States. Since 2009, it has collected data on government and social restrictions on religion. In 2009, both government and social restrictions on religion in the United States were at low levels. But the very latest report that Pew released just a few months ago showed that these restrictions have climbed considerably since 2009, and have now reached “moderate” levels. “Moderate” may not sound bad, I realize; but what it means is that now, according to Pew, the United States ranks somewhere in the middle range of the nearly 200 countries analyzed in the report.

For a country that traditionally prides itself on its respect for religious freedom—a
that has traditionally ranked religious freedom as the first freedom and has accorded priority to religious freedom in the very first words of the very First Amendment of the Constitution—the fact that the United States is in the middle range of some 200 countries is pretty shocking. It is especially shocking when one considers that the Pew report does not paint a very positive picture about what’s going on in many of those 200 countries, and how rapidly these conditions have deteriorated in the course of only six years.

That raises a very serious question. What is happening with respect to religious freedom in our country? Is there a growing problem with our respect for the fundamental freedom of religion and related fundamental freedoms of speech and expression? If there is a problem, what are some of the causes or explanations? What can we do to reverse the slide that seems to have occurred in America’s respect for these basic freedoms?

In recent years, several issues have polarized the American people, such as abortion, the HHS contraception services mandate, and same-sex marriage. Naturally, discussions on these topics are difficult and heated because they involve very different views of basic moral issues. But some fear that these controversies and discussions have taken an illiberal turn as religion-based viewpoints are being met with increasing intolerance. Religion-based viewpoints are increasingly dismissed and stifled as products of animus, bigotry, and irrationality.

That brings us to today’s discussion. We have a magnificent panel to explore the potential impact of the phenomenon of illiberal liberalism on religious freedom and on the role of free expression in a liberal
democratic society like ours. Is the desire to shut down debate on controversial issues leading some Americans to abandon the liberal value of the free exercise of religion? Are some self-declared liberals—who are traditionally in the vanguard of defending rights to dissent and the rights of unpopular groups to express unpopular opinions—trying to close down debate, rather than open it up? Is the inevitable result an even further decline in the health and vigor of religious freedom and other basic freedoms in America?

To engage these important, difficult, and necessary questions, I am delighted that we have on stage three individuals who have all made outstanding contributions to the American debate about politics, culture, and the proper role of faith in public life. I should add, in the spirit of religious freedom and open debate, that they have made their impressive contributions from very different perspectives. They represent very different points on the American political and religious spectrum.

Kirsten Powers really helped to make this discussion possible. She’s written a New York Times bestseller that will be the focus of much of our discussion today: The Silencing: How the Left is Killing Free Speech. In addition, Kirsten helped to make this panel even more religiously diverse by exercising her religious freedom and switching from one ecclesial community to another in just the last couple of weeks. In fact, Kirsten, this may be your first public appearance since you joined the Catholic Church. When I made a similar decision a few months ago, someone told me, “Welcome to the world’s largest dysfunctional family.”

[Laughter] We’re here at America’s oldest Catholic university, so it’s appropriate to welcome you into our dysfunctional family. Thanks to you, we have 33 percent more religious diversity in our panel. [Laughter]

Besides having recently exercised her religious freedom, Kirsten has many claims to fame. She’s a USA Today columnist and a Fox News contributor. The Washington Post has called Kirsten “bright-eyed, sharp-tongued, and gamely combative,” and Mediaite deemed her Fox News’ “liberal to be reckoned with.” Prior to her career in journalism, Powers was a political appointee in the Clinton administration from 1993 to 1998, where she served as deputy assistant U.S. trade representative for public and media affairs. She later worked in New York’s Democratic politics, including as press secretary for Andrew Cuomo’s 2002 governor’s race and as a consultant to the New York State Democratic Committee. She was also vice president for international communications at

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I’m also delighted to welcome Russell Moore back to Georgetown. Reverend Dr. Russell Moore serves as the eighth president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, the moral and public policy agency of the nation’s largest Protestant denomination. A widely sought commentator on culture, Dr. Moore has been recognized by a number of influential organizations. The Wall Street Journal has called him “vigorou, cheerful, and fiercely articulate”—so, along with Kirsten being “bright-eyed, sharp-tongued, and gamely combative,” we’re in for a lot of fun. [Laughter] The Gospel Coalition has referred to him as “one of the most astute ethicists in contemporary evangelicalism.” An ethicist and theologian by background, Dr. Moore is also an ordained Southern Baptist minister and the author of several books, including one just released a few months ago: Onward: Engaging the Culture without Losing the Gospel. He blogs frequently at his website, RussellMoore.com, and hosts the program Questions and Ethics, a wide-ranging podcast addressing listener-generated questions on the difficult moral and ethical issues of the day.

Finally, we’re delighted to have Phil Zuckerman back at Georgetown. Phil is a professor of sociology and secular studies at Pitzer College in Claremont, California. Phil is the author of several books, including Living the Secular Life; The Nonreligious; Faith No More; and Society without God. He’s also edited several volumes, including Atheism and Secularity and The Social Theory of W.E.B. Du Bois. Phil’s books have been translated and published in Danish, Farsi, Turkish, Chinese, Korean, and Italian. In 2011, he founded the nation’s first Secular Studies Department, an interdisciplinary program focusing on manifestations of the secular in societies and cultures both past and present. It entails the study of non-religious peoples, groups, thoughts, and cultural expressions.

With that, we’re going to begin our conversation. I want to just set the stage by reminding us that almost 30 years ago: Politics have replaced religion as a person’s primary identification in American society. So if you want to belong, you can’t deviate at all from the liturgy of your political worshipping community. You try to find the farthest edge of your political group—either left or right—where you are still accepted in the family and not a black sheep or a heretic.”

Russell Moore
ago, Allan Bloom wrote a monumental book called *The Closing of the American Mind*. And a few months back, Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff wrote a widely circulated Atlantic article called “The Coddling of the American Mind.” Whether the American mind is being closed or coddled, it seems that a growing number of observers worry that American debate on key issues—especially big moral, religious, and political ones—is being stifled or silenced.

Kirsten, you wrote *The Silencing*, a whole book on this very subject, and one of the reasons why we’re here today. From where you sit, Kirsten—as a longtime leader in the world of politics and journalism, where you’ve observed the dynamics of American discourse—what is happening to the American mind and American discourse today? Can you illustrate what’s happening with some concrete cases?

KIRSTEN POWERS: Thanks for having me here. It’s so nice to be with all of you. I wrote this book because when I wrote a column for *USA Today*, I noticed that people were being silenced in some new incident almost every week. So I asked myself, “Are they just isolated events? Do I just think that it’s happening all the time because I’m interested in this topic, or is this something that’s really happening?” I started talking to different people, including Greg Lukianoff, who runs the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), the preeminent organization that is fighting for free speech rights on campuses. What I really found was that it was so much worse than I thought it was, and that it wasn’t happening just on our campuses.

We talked a lot about the coddling of American minds on campuses. But the same thing is happening in our broader
culture as well. It’s worse on campuses, for sure; there’s no question about that. But let’s remember where the people on campuses are going to end up. They are going to end up in our culture. A lot of universities are teaching students that certain views are off limits and that you shouldn’t offend certain people. But it’s a one-way street; it’s only certain people who can’t be offended. For example, let’s say a pro-life student says, “Well, it offends me to see a pro-choice demonstration.” Nobody is going to care about that. But when the pro-choice person says, “I feel unsafe because there’s a pro-life group on campus,” that is taken very seriously.

Even though my book isn’t explicitly about religious freedom, there is overlap. Indeed, a lot of the issues concerning religious freedom are deemed to be off limits and are silenced. “The debate is over,” as they say, especially regarding those beliefs that are held by religious people. It usually involves opposition to same-sex marriage or abortion. These views are treated as if they are actual attacks. When you hear someone express one of these views, it’s as if they have created harm or committed an act of violence.

There are so many examples. At Marquette University’s teacher training, a PowerPoint slide showed two students talking about their opposition to same-sex marriage. A third student overhears this and is offended, and subsequently reports this conversation to the administration. The slide says this was handled properly! Universities are turning students into informants against each other, even when they are merely having a conversation or expressing a point of view that someone else doesn’t find acceptable. That’s just one example. There are pro-life groups at Johns Hopkins University who are denied university status because they’re creating an “unsafe environment.” They’re making people feel threatened and unsafe.

I could just sit here all day and tell you example after example. Rather than saying, “I disagree with you so let’s debate it,” liberals respond by demanding silence. They say, “We don’t want to hear about it. You’re not going to talk about it. If you do talk about it, we’re going to call you a bigot. We’re going to report you to the authorities. We’re going to make you a social outcast.”

TIMOTHY SHAH: This is not what we think of as the grand liberal tradition, is it? We think of John Stuart Mill and On Liberty as vigorously welcoming a debate between diverse points of view. We think of the late Christopher Hitchens, who enthusiastically engaged points of view that he vigorously disagreed with but also respected. What happened to this grand liberal tradition? How did we get to illiberal liberalism, Kirsten?

KIRSTEN POWERS: This is the paradox. You don’t have to go back to John Stuart Mill. You can go back to the free speech movement in the 1960s that was founded at Berkeley by liberals. Ironically, you have Berkeley students today saying that they want to have Bill Maher’s commencement speech cancelled because he said something that they thought was insulting to Muslims. The administration actually overruled them and said, “No, we are the birthplace of free speech. We are not going to do that.” But the irony is just lost to the
students. Maher is an absolute ideologue on every liberal issue, and yet when he deviates on this one issue, he almost gets disinvited from a university.

Yes, we have definitely come a very long way from the liberal tradition. I’m not just referring to classical liberalism, but American liberalism, like the one represented by the American Civil Liberties Union. Not that long ago, the commonplace view of liberalism was that debate and dissent were critical to a flourishing society. We had to tolerate other views, and the best way to respond to a view that you disagreed with was to out-reason the person, not to silence them.

TIMOTHY SHAH: What do you think is the cause of that? Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt talk about certain trends on campuses that silence debate, using terms like “micro-aggression.” There are new theories out there about social psychology that seem to be part of the problem. What are some of the factors contributing to this movement?

KIRSTEN POWERS: I wrote this book as a journalistic endeavor to establish that this silencing of debate is, in fact, happening. I discovered that so many people I talked to, particularly liberals, would say, “Well, this is not really happening. You are just cherry-picking examples.” But I have footnote upon footnote that show concrete examples that this is happening.

I don’t have an absolute explanation of why this is happening, though I have a lot of theories. My ultimate theory is that liberals do it because they can, because they are so dominant in our culture, especially in the areas where we’re having...
public debates like the academy, the media, and the Internet. There are no checks and balances; they are not being held accountable. When you have little ideological diversity—when you have group-think, or a bunch of people who are all thinking the same way—you get totalitarianism. That is essentially what this is. If you give conservatives control over everything, the same thing would happen. It is just human nature. You do it because you start to believe that you are always right.

Liberals don’t think they are doing anything wrong. They are doing it for the good of the students, because they shouldn’t be exposed to things that offend them or hurt their feelings. It’s related to what Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt say about the “care ethic”—how liberals think that everything is about caring for marginalized groups. Liberals have been imbued with this ethic, and that makes them more sympathetic when liberals complain.

**TIMOTHY SHAH:** Phil, I want to bring you in to this conversation. You are a self-described secular liberal. You are the founder of a secular studies program. You teach in a liberal arts college. You’ve been a proponent and practitioner of vigorous but also respectful debate about deeply controversial topics, including religious ones. From your point of view, is Kirsten right? Is there a problem on our campuses, even campuses such as yours? Are we witnessing an intellectual silencing or closing down of open debates on the kinds of topics you write and speak about?

**PHIL ZUCKERMAN:** Yes. I’m feeling a little bit awkward in this room. [Laughter]

“I’m not quite sure how to act here. Everybody loves a good villain, so I don’t know if I should start saying controversial things so that you can call me the enemy, or if you want me to be really polite. But that is not as fun.” —Phil Zuckerman

“The liberal folks that I know are very much fighting a moral fight. We grew up horrified by the Vietnam War… To us, it looked like an immoral and genocidal American atrocity… Whether we were fighting for the rights of women, homosexuals, African Americans, or Southeast Asians, we felt that our causes were moral.” —Phil Zuckerman

Kirsten, I read your book twice. I read it about a month ago when I first got it, and then I read it again yesterday on the flight here from Los Angeles. I read it with a pen in my hand. It is very provocative and accessible. It was a pleasure to read, and I wasn’t ripping it to shreds like I thought I would.
In my circles, you just have to say “Fox News” and your blood starts to boil. [Laughter] Before I came to Washington I told my students, “I’m going to have to cancel class. I’m going to be discussing a book with this person from Fox News.” All of my students asked, “Can we watch it?” [Laughter] I thought I would be disagreeing with much of the book, and I gave myself a month to prepare.

TIMOTHY SHAH: You sharpened your dagger.

PHIL ZUCKERMAN: Yes. Every time I agreed with something that Kirsten wrote, I would write a little “A” with a circle—oddly like the anarchist symbol. It was page after page of “As.” I found myself in the end thinking, “Oh, no, I agree with 90 percent of what she says here.” Keep in mind that I work in a very, very liberal college among the Claremont Colleges in Southern California. So I’m in a liberal college, in a liberal nook, in a liberal blue state. It doesn’t get any more liberal than that, except maybe in parts of Vermont or in Eugene, Oregon. [Laughter]

Yes, my politics and my atheism are very much a part of me. Yet I actually strongly agree with you, Kirsten, that this is happening. This is happening at college campuses and universities. I’m ashamed of it. I’m angered by it when I see Bernie Sanders speaking at Liberty University and the polite warm experience he had there, and how strongly it contrasts with George Will being uninvited from Scripps College, which is across the street from my office. So I have seen this first-hand. I have seen it taking place at my own campus. You are on to something here. It is upsetting and disturbing. That is my agreement. But if you want me to disagree, I can.

TIMOTHY SHAH: Well, thanks. We can all go home now. [Laughter] We’re ending a little early.

PHIL ZUCKERMAN: At some point, I can hopefully get to my critiques. But I would agree with what you said. Coming from inside the liberal circle, I think there is a silencing going on. But the liberal folks that I know are very much fighting a moral fight. We grew up horrified by the Vietnam War. We saw it as a bloody conflict against Vietnamese who had nothing more than bicycles. To us, it looked like an immoral and genocidal American atrocity. We looked at what was happening to African Americans with horror. We felt that the civil rights movement was a moral movement, and we supported it. We wanted to change the way that women were being mistreated. Whether we were fighting for the rights of women, homosexuals, African Americans, or Southeast Asians, we felt that our causes were moral. There were power dynamics at play that were harming and hurting people, particularly racial, sexual, and other minorities who didn’t have power.

I think a lot of professors, academics, and students feel that they’re fighting the good fight by combating racism, sexism, homophobia, or religious oppression, especially in a society that squelches disadvantaged folks who can’t run for public office or marry their spouses. But what do you do if you’re an upper or middle-class privileged individual in
America and you get to an elite university like Mount Holyoke or Vassar, where the administration is already working to combat these injustices? When the folks in power aren’t greedy capitalists or warmongers—when the school president is a liberal woman and the professor is an anthropologist with beads around her neck—where are you going to fight that good fight? You’re going to have to find it where you can. I think these students and professors are looking for anything that makes them feel as though they’re fighting the good fight. When they’re protesting George Will or Ayaan Hirsi Ali—who’s my hero—liberals think they are fighting the same fight of a generation or two earlier.

These liberals are mistaken, and there are horrible consequences. I totally agree that free speech and rigorous debate are at the heart of the democracy and the society that I want to live in. I applaud Kirsten’s attention to this trend. It is so important.

TIMOTHY SHAH: Well, in the interest of an open debate, we want to hear your critiques as well. Give us those. Where did you think Kirsten’s story wasn’t quite right?

PHIL ZUCKERMAN: I’m a sociologist, so I like data. The worst kind of data is anecdotal. We all have anecdotal evidence for everything. When I was a kid and something strange happened, my dad would say it was a “one in a million” occurrence. You know that phrase. The odds of something happening once in a million times are amazing. Well, we have approximately 350 million Americans in this country. That means that every day a “one in a million” thing occurs in our wonderful country—every day. I felt
like this book is anecdote after anecdote after anecdote. If you're standing in an airport reading this book, after the fourth anecdote you're going to think, “Wow, this is a serious threat.”

I did a Google search last night because I wanted to write a book called, *The Devastating: How Priests, Pastors, and Rabbis are Threatening America*. In just five minutes, I found that on May 15, 2015, an Orthodox rabbi in the D.C. area was caught secretly filming women as they undressed for mikvah. Reverend David Fink of Albany, Oregon, was recently arrested for second-degree assault. He beat his son with a wooden bat until he was unconscious. Reverend Ronald Tovar was recently arrested in Placentia, California, for three counts of illegal sex with a minor. And it just went on and on. Every day some clergyman is perpetuating some crime like swindling money. Now, I can write a book like that and after the fourth anecdote that person in the airport might think, “Wow, this is a really scary phenomenon.”

That’s my biggest critique. Anecdotes are powerful and dramatic; I couldn’t read the UC Santa Barbara anecdote and not flip out. But the data—for example, your statistics on universities disinviting speakers—now that’s convincing. The rate that they’re disinviting public speakers has skyrocketed. The vast majority are liberal lefties disinviting conservatives. To me, that kind of data is irrefutable, and so I hang my hat on that.

My second critique was the phrase “illiberal liberalism.” It made me think of the Christian right. In my opinion, the Christian right is not very Christian. When I read the teachings of Jesus—and I read everything Jesus said—I find that the Christian right violates much of it. Who is more likely to own guns in this country? Who is more likely to support wars or the death penalty? Strong evangelicals are more likely to support these things. When I look at Jesus’ teachings and I compare them to the viewpoints of Phil Robertson from *Duck Dynasty* or Anne Coulter, there is a huge disconnect.

So yes, liberals are being hypocritical. You bet. They are silencing debate when they should be the ones most vigorously championing it. But when I compare the Christian right to the teachings of Jesus, the “prince of peace” who preached nonviolence—with his sayings like “live by the sword and die by the sword” or his call to take care of the poor, the sick, the hungry, and the homeless—I don’t see the Christian right championing those causes. So I think the bigger story here is the hypocrisies that exist on both the right and left. Kirsten certainly pointed out what’s happening with the liberals, and I agree with her. But we need to do better on both sides of the aisle.

**TIMOTHY SHAH:** Russell Moore, I want to bring you into the conversation. First, I welcome you to comment on anything you’ve heard from Kirsten and Phil. But I also want to ask you a few questions. Are we, in fact, seeing the silencing that Kirsten is talking about? And what are the implications for religious freedom? In your view, is religious freedom a particular casualty of this silencing? Then I want you to comment on something that Phil
referenced. Is there any significance in the fact that a secular, socialist, same-sex marriage advocate like Bernie Sanders can go to a proudly evangelical university like Liberty and be welcomed with warmth and openness to debate? Are free speech and other academic freedoms more at home in proudly Christian universities than in secular ones? If so, why is that the case?

RUSSELL MOORE: First of all, as much as I appreciate our atheist friend giving us the teachings of Jesus here today, I would say if there is anyone in America who equates orthodox Christianity with Ann Coulter, then I’d like to correct your misperceptions. [Laughter] Christianity is much broader than that.

This silencing is influenced by a number of factors, including the micro-targeting of tribes, rather than simply an argument between different groups. It also has a lot to do with the fundraising and motivations of elite activists. Imagine if Martin Luther King, Jr. had been motivated to tap into his constituency in order to talk about how awful Ross Burnett and George Wallace were. He would have had a very different kind of discourse. Not only did he speak prophetically against Jim Crow, but he spoke persuasively to people who were segregationists or caught in the middle of the civil rights struggle, and offered a vision of America that included them. He envisioned a moral America that is quite different from what we are experiencing right now. We are living in a world where argument has become, for the most part, a means of tribal identification. When I make an argument, I affiliate with these people and not those other people. When you’re unable to distinguish between the dignity of a person and their argument, it can turn into a really dangerous phenomenon. When this happens, persuasion is replaced by power.

We’ve talked a lot about silencing on campuses and at universities, and it is right to be preeminently focused on the left. But we also have the same situation happening on the right. Just this week I have been dealing with a pastor in a community where there is great hostility toward the construction of a local mosque. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve seen people wanting the government to zone a mosque out of existence. In this particular case, the pastor is appealing to his community on the basis of religious freedom, as well as the need to be a witness of the Gospel to Muslim neighbors. You can’t use the power of the state to turn people into Christians. It will only drive them out of town or turn them into pretend Christians. From an evangelical understanding, therefore, state coercion does not do anything. In this particular situation, a group of people on the right has a particular sort of power, and they are trying to leverage it as a kind of protection. It’s a racket there. In this situation and others, the real conservative is the person who stands up for the religious freedom of Muslims.

The same thing happens on the left on college campuses. In order to really be identified as a progressive, free-thinking, forward-directed person, you have to join the crusade against the right. If not, you’re somehow out of the tribe. Think of Germaine Greer, a feminist theorist and thinker who is in a great deal of trouble. She had an honorary degree taken from her because she made the argument that Caitlyn Jenner is not a woman. She said that
as a feminist theorist, she does not think that gender can be changed. You are free to agree or disagree with her. But the reaction on the left is not simply disagreement; it is like a fundamentalist response to a heretic. On most secular college campuses, the left has the power to do this.

But there are exceptions, like Liberty University inviting Bernie Sanders to speak. Both parties deserve credit for the risks they took. People in Bernie’s constituency could have thought he was selling out to crazy fundamentalists by talking to them. Liberty took the risk of having donors or others wonder how they could invite a socialist to speak to the students. I think the reason for Liberty’s decision goes back to Jerry Falwell, who founded the university. Falwell invited Ted Kennedy and others to speak because he thought his university would not be threatened by dialogue. From the very beginning of Liberty, there has been a kind of confidence—some would say bravado—that shows the university is unthreatened by alternative viewpoints. No one at Liberty believes that if Bernie Sanders comes and makes his case, then the school will see thousands of students become socialists or pro-choice. They have enough confidence in their own ideas to allow this kind of dialogue to happen.

In addition, there is a sense among evangelicals that they are no longer a power center or majority in American life. I don’t think that was ever a reality, but it was a dangerous attitude for evangelicals to have. It caused many evangelicals to forget their tradition of religious liberty or to apply religious liberty inconsistently. But now there is a clear sense that evangelicals are not a power center or a majority. They can be part of majorities, but they are going to be collaborative majorities—defined issue-by-issue—that enable evangelicals and others to get back to their roots of religious liberty. I welcome that development.

**TIMOTHY SHAH:** I want you to respond to what Phil Zuckerman pointed out: namely, that if liberals are guilty of hypocrisy, people on the right are guilty of hypocrisy. If there’s a growing problem with tribal identification on the left, is there a growing problem with tribal identification on the right?

**RUSSELL MOORE:** Sure.

**TIMOTHY SHAH:** What is the reason for that? Is this part of our larger problem of polarization? You referred to the community that wants to prevent the construction of a mosque. We’re hearing
flagrant expressions of prejudice and hostility directed at Muslim Americans by prominent political figures, including candidates for president. If there’s a growing secular, anti-religious prejudice, is there also a growing bigotry, prejudice, and even opposition to religious freedom among religious people? What do we do about that?

RUSSELL MOORE: I don’t think there’s growing hostility on the right, but there are problems. Those problems are ameliorated because the right currently is not in control of the key culture-making sectors of American life. It goes back to this tribal identification question. Politics have replaced religion as a person’s primary identification in American society. So if you want to belong, you can’t deviate at all from the liturgy of your political worshipping community. You try to find the farthest edge of your political group—either left or right—where you are still accepted in the family and not a black sheep or a heretic.

We’re seeing people move to those edges on both sides. For instance, not only is Paul Ryan now considered to be too weak and ideologically squishy for some people, but even the House Freedom Caucus is now considered to be too weak and squishy for many talk radio hosts. That problem then trickles down through our culture. We have a problem on the right and the left, but the left is primarily in charge of culture making right now.

TIMOTHY SHAH: Kirsten, I want you to pursue the same theme of how religious liberty may be a particular casualty of these social trends. Many of the cases of illiberal liberalism you described in your book seem to target religious individuals and groups. These cases result in a severe shrinking of religious freedom. In the book you argue that part of this is a function of a lack of religious diversity. In fact, you explain how in your journalist and political circles you rarely meet conservative Christians.

Is there a strong streak of intolerant secularism running through the illiberal liberalism you described and critiqued? If so, from where is that coming? Is it getting worse? Is this a function of broader trends we see in America, including growing religious disaffiliation?

KIRSTEN POWERS: Intolerant secularism is a product of a lack of intellectual diversity. I spent most of my life as an atheist or agnostic. I went back-and-forth between the two and lived in a very liberal bubble. Everybody thought exactly the way I thought. None of my friends were believers. I had all sorts of stereotypes about evangelicals. Even though I had never met an evangelical, I was sure I knew exactly what they were like. I was not even aware that I was being intolerant.

To Phil’s point, I think that liberals really see what they’re doing as being quite righteous, and they don’t have any framework to understand religious belief. Religious belief is very complicated, even for people who are knowledgeable about it. I’ve been a Christian for 10 years, and I’m still learning every day. It’s almost like you’re speaking Japanese to somebody. Nonreligious liberals really don’t understand what you’re talking
about. I can relate to it because I used to not understand it. If someone were to say to me, “I believe this because it’s in the Bible,” then right away I was lost and confused.

It’s very hard to have a really deep conversation with someone because our culture has become very secular. A lot of people do not grow up with religion, or, if they do, it’s not a very robust religion where they really understand why they believe what they believe or how to articulate it. That breeds disconnect.

I’ll use an anecdote from David French. He’s an evangelical Christian who was on the admissions committee at Cornell Law School. He told me a student application came up before the committee. After looking at it, he thought, “Well, this is a slam dunk. There’s no reason we should even be talking about this. What’s the problem?” Then he looked at a note, which said, “We don’t want this Bible thumper on campus.” The student had gone to some sort of Christian undergraduate school. It was quite clear that he was an evangelical. When it came time for David French to speak—after everybody had already weighed in and said they didn’t want him because he was an evangelical—he said, “Look. If you think this guy is bad, then I’m a fundamentalist." [Laughter] The committee was absolutely chagrined and embarrassed. The whole room changed because they knew and respected him. He didn’t fit the evangelical stereotype. Because of that, they ended up admitting the student. If David French had not been there, that student probably wouldn’t have gotten in. So a lot of liberal intolerance is based on misunderstanding.

But a lot of liberal intolerance happens because Christians often act badly in the public square, too. Not all secularists have bad ideas about Christians because they’re out to get Christians. Christians have helped create their own image. Ultimately, though, secularists’ ideas might change

“My ultimate theory is that liberals [shut down debate] because they can, because they are so dominant in our culture, especially in the areas where we’re having public debates like the academy, the media, and the Internet. There are no checks and balances; they are not being held accountable. When you have little ideological diversity—when you have group-think, or a bunch of people who are all thinking the same way—you get totalitarianism. That is essentially what this is. If you give conservatives control over everything, the same thing would happen. It is just human nature. You do it because you start to believe that you are always right.”

Kirsten Powers
through more intimate relationships with actual Christians.

TIMOTHY SHAH: Phil, you have been a proponent of humane and tolerant secularism. You started a secular studies program. How do you try to encourage a kind of secularism that is open to debate and respectful engagement with religion? What are the tools or ideas that you encourage your fellow liberal secularists to adopt that differ from what you’re seeing in your part of the country right now in the Claremont Colleges?

But I also want you to comment on the idea that a lot of your fellow liberals feel like they’re on a moral crusade. Of course, some of this is related to the growing intensity with which our culture has debated same-sex marriage. Given that we are a society in which people disagree deeply about that particular issue, how can you, as a proponent of liberal secularism, foster respectful debate about that issue, as well as other issues?

PHIL ZUCKERMAN: That’s a big question. First, I just want to thank you, Russell. I appreciate the way you articulate the tribal dynamic and how that affects ideas and ideology. I think you’re spot-on—it’s very sociological. I also do, again, agree with Kirsten. I’m sorry to agree so much. [Laughter]

I think there were three parts to Tim’s question. First, how do I encourage humane openness to faith among the secular heathen? [Laughter]
TIMOTHY SHAH: Yes, or in secular studies.

PHIL ZUCKERMAN: You bet. Well, number one, I would tell everybody to read Strength to Love by Martin Luther King, Jr. It’s very hard to be down on Christianity after reading that book; I don’t know how anybody could. I think there is a lot of truth to what Kirsten says about interacting with other people. I actually studied religion for half of my career, because there was no way to study secularity. There was no framework, so you had to study religion. I studied Orthodox Jews for my dissertation, and I spent two years in Scandinavia studying Lutheran Christianity, which is a mild form of secular humanism.

RUSSELL MOORE: I agree. [Laughter]

PHIL ZUCKERMAN: Believe it or not, I’ve been invited to many Episcopalian and liberal Lutheran churches. I was just invited to Goshen College in Indiana—the bedrock of Mennonites. Quakers have invited me a lot, too. They don’t do a lot of talking there. [Laughter] Even my in-laws are evangelical, born again Christians who get up at 5:00 a.m. every morning to read the Bible. My father-in-law is a deacon at his church. I agree that when you actually interact with people, it’s impossible not to see the humanity in the other. Whenever I start to get angry about something I read in the news that’s religion-related, I just remember the church service I had in Solvang, California. It was a beautiful experience. I even went to an Episcopalian summer camp for nine years. Many religious people are good people whose hearts are in the right place.

I think hostility is toxic. Writing a hundred years ago, W.E.B. Du Bois said that the vast majority of humanity are people of color. So if you hate people of color, you numerically hate humanity. I’ve always felt that way about religious people, too. The vast majority of humans are religious. So if you hate religion, you hate humanity. Getting to know people of different persuasions—ethnic, political, and religious—can help us overcome this hostility.

As for the curmudgeons, what can you do? I don’t know. People project all their fears onto a group, whether it’s black people, Muslims, atheists, or evangelicals. That’s just a social-psychological dynamic that is rooted in fear and insecurity. It must be deeply rooted in some kind of insecurity or people wouldn’t react so ridiculously.

TIMOTHY SHAH: How about same-sex marriage?

“We are living in a world where argument has become, for the most part, a means of tribal identification. When I make an argument, I affiliate with these people and not these other people. When you’re unable to distinguish between the dignity of a person and their argument, it can turn into a really dangerous phenomenon.”

Russell Moore
PHIL ZUCKERMAN: I’m totally in favor of it. This is where there is a big difference in how I understand secular morality and religion. I know there are a lot of religions here, and I don’t mean to lump everybody into one category. But when you don’t believe in an invisible rule giver—a magical invisible deity who makes planets and the ringworm and whatnot—and you don’t have that as a source of morality, then you’re left with a secular morality. It’s about treating people the way you want to be treated. That’s pretty much it: Treating people the way you want to be treated. It boils down to that. It’s not a laundry list of do’s and don’ts.

But when I look at a lot of religious articulations of morality, it’s a lot about obedience to a higher power who tells us how to live. If that higher power says something, you follow it. It doesn’t matter if that deity tells you to kill your son; you kill your son. That’s how it works. If I remember correctly, that’s the story of Abraham and Isaac.

When I see same-sex marriage and consenting adults, I follow the same rule of secular morality: I would want to marry the person I love, and that right should be given to any consenting adult—end of story. The only opposition to that that I see comes from religious voices. I don’t know of any secular-organized voice that speaks out against gay marriage. To me, it is a fundamental human right. And while I’m not going to dehumanize or castigate those that oppose it, I’ve heard their argument and I don’t sympathize with it.

The larger question that comes out of this issue is: What do we do when groups fundamentally disagree about a principle that’s deeply moral? Same-sex marriage is not a disagreement about who should get coffee after the meeting. This is a deeply moral issue. I think we should listen, understand, and try to find some common area of agreement. But at a certain point, we must respectfully disagree. Respectful disagreement is so key and so crucial. That’s where I think my liberal and secular friends, family, and colleagues are failing. We need more of this respectful debate.
TIMOTHY SHAH: I want to bring Kirsten and Russell into this very issue, because it does seem we are having an increasingly hard time as a society having amicable disagreement about same-sex marriage. We saw what happened to Brendan Eich, an enormously qualified and a well-regarded executive at Mozilla, who within a week was forced to resign simply because he made a donation to support the Proposition 8 campaign in California in 2008. We’ve seen similar instances of this sort of intolerance when someone who holds a different view is not treated with equal respect. How do we deal with that, especially given Supreme Court opinions about same-sex marriage? Many people who disagree with the Court decision are considered to be rude or bigoted. How do we move beyond that, Kirsten and Russell?

KIRSTEN POWERS: One thing I am legitimately mystified about, Phil, is that you said secularists are able to have amicable disagreements with Muslims on certain issues, but they’re not able to do that with Christians. I really don’t understand that. In fact, when people were debating the issue of baking cakes for same-sex weddings, there was a conservative comedian who went to Dearborn and talked to a bunch of Muslim bakers. He went from one to another and said, “I’m gay. I’m getting married. Will you make the cake?” And one after another, they each said, “No, we won’t.” Now, if these had been Christian bakers, they would have been on the cover of the New York Times. So I’m wondering why we’re able to have amicable, respectful disagreement with Muslims for having this view, but not with Christians.

PHIL ZUCKERMAN: I really love that part of your book. I absolutely agree that while those on the left critique, mock, or deride Christianity, Islam gets a free pass. This is so strange. If you care about women’s rights, human rights, and gay rights, then Islam is really much more problematic and devastating—sorry to paint Islam with a huge brush. As an atheist, the Muslim world appears pretty grim. Where on planet earth is the death penalty meted out to atheists? It’s only in 24 Muslim countries. Where have human rights flourished the most? In Christian nations. Where is tolerance the greatest? In nations rooted in Christianity. I see Christianity as a great friend to secular culture, and I see Islam as much more of a threat. I’m not talking about my Muslim neighbors or Muslim individuals that I happen to sit next to on an airplane. I’m talking about the doctrines and those with power to enforce those doctrines in the form of sharia law.

The question you’re asking, though, is why. This was brought up in the debate between Ben Affleck and Sam Harris on Real Time with Bill Maher. I know what keeps me from critiquing Islam on my blogs. It’s just fear. I’ve got three kids. I know that I can say anything about Christianity or Mormonism without living in fear—which is a testament to Christianity and Mormonism. That’s wonderful. Thank you. I can write all kinds of things on my blog.

RUSSELL MOORE: Like criticizing Ann Coulter. [Laughter]

PHIL ZUCKERMAN: Yes. But I would never write the same things about Islam
that I do about certain religions—Judaism, Christianity, Mormonism—simply because of fear. I was living in Denmark when those controversial cartoons of Muhammad were published.

The second thing is—and this is no excuse but we really need to understand it—that a lot of white liberal secularists have this view that American colonialism was bad. American imperialism was bad. We messed up in the Middle East. We supported the crushing of the bones of Palestinians under the Israeli boot. We divvied up the Middle East, and we still wreak havoc all over the place. They identify Islam with the Third World, with the oppressed peoples, with people of color—and they just don’t want to criticize it.

I’ll end on an anecdote. My own daughter heard me say something critical of Islam around the dinner table. Maybe I was reading Ayaan Hirsi Ali. My daughter, who’s more left-wing than me—vegetarian, feminist, very into transgender rights, et cetera—said, “You’ve got to watch that, Papa. There’s a wonderful Muslim girl in my school who wears a scarf, and I feel very sorry for her. I feel like she’s scared at school. I feel like she’s a minority. People look at her weirdly.” My daughter’s empathy was with this minority student, who was a minority in many ways—skin color, headdress, and religion. I said, “Oh, of course, Ruby, I’m not critiquing this individual young woman. It’s so wonderful that you’re her friend. You should protect her and defend her. I’m talking about the doctrines of Islam as I see them playing out in certain geopolitical arenas. But for this individual, I absolutely support her.”

There’s a dynamic in which liberals still see Muslims as minorities, at least in the
United States. They don’t understand that Islam has power. According to Pew’s recent data, by 2050 Islam will be the most dominant religion around the globe. But there’s a sense of wanting to identify with the underdog. It really is hypocritical and contradictory, because they don’t understand the fundamentalist doctrines that Islam stands for. It stands for everything against a liberal world: freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of sexual orientation, et cetera.

RUSSELL MOORE: One of the things that I found with some of the more doctrinaire secularists in this country is that often there’s a back-story that affects them psychologically. There’s a real or metaphorical “daddy issue” involved here, where you have someone who has had a negative experience with Christianity or pseudo-Christianity. It seems as though the Roman Catholic Church is the aggressor or evangelical Christianity is the aggressor. One is able to act as David against Goliath in a way. They simply don’t have the same visceral response to Islam because they have not encountered Islam in a place of power.

When we come to issues like same-sex marriage, one of the problems we have as Christians is—as Kirsten mentioned—when one quotes the Bible as justification, an entire wing of people shuts off. Many Christians—evangelical, Roman Catholic, and others—have overreacted to that by not speaking about creedal authority, biblical authority, or issues of religious responsibility. Instead, they use entirely secular arguments in a way that cannot communicate exactly what is at stake for people in our religious communities.

You mentioned the HHS mandate. I found that there are many secular friends who assume there is really a back-story for the Little Sisters of the Poor. The Sisters have ulterior motives. They can’t figure what it is, but it must be about money or power. They don’t really understand that these nuns really believe they’re going to stand before the judgment seat of Christ and give an account for the way they stewarded their resources. You don’t have to agree with them. But you should understand that when you force them to violate these conscience-based beliefs, you’re doing violence to the very core of who they are.

We need to have more conversations about our differences—and not just in those places where we can agree. When I say, “This is what I believe the Bible teaches” and “This is what I really think happens to me after death,” and when the Muslim person does the same thing, then I think we can begin to have more of that conversation, rather than simply finding the area where we agree. We need to use arguments that the other person can understand. There’s an important place for that and we need to do it. We need to have a dialogue about what religion does and what religion is.

TIMOTHY SHAH: Well, in the interest of broadening and deepening the conversation, I invite you all in the audience to join the conversation.

PETER GLUCK: Thank you. My name is Peter Gluck. I’d like to ask a question to each of you at a very practical level. Say a person runs for a public office that entails issuing marriage licenses. The person is a conservative Christian. The Supreme
Court—you know where I’m going with this—hands down a decision that says marriage equality is the supreme law of the land. This person, in the interest of pursuing her freedom of religion, refuses to perform her duty. Is she within her rights or not?

TIMOTHY SHAH: Let’s start with you, Phil.

PHIL ZUCKERMAN: I am all for individuals adhering to their own consciences. I think that’s the greatest duty we have. If a state tells me to do something that violates my conscience, I should listen to my conscience. If a teacher or a deity tells me to do something against my conscience, I’m going to stick with conscience. I applaud and respect anyone who is willing to break the law, even go to prison, for what they believe. That’s the right way to live.

That said, if my daughter goes to the DMV to get a driver’s license—where my tax dollars pay the clerk to issue that license—and the person behind the window says, “I’m sorry, I’m a Muslim and sharia law forbids women from driving. I cannot issue this driver’s license to your daughter because she has female genitalia, and I can’t violate what Allah has taught me in the Qur’an,” I believe that person should follow their own conscience and quit their job. They’re being paid as a public employee by public taxes to issue a driver’s license.

If Kim Davis in Kentucky feels that issuing a marriage license to people of the same sex violates her religious conscience, then she should quit the job or go to prison. She cannot take away my right to that license. Similarly, if you don’t want to go off to war because it violates your Christian conscience, then don’t go to war and suffer the consequences. I would be proud to do that. I’m all for Kim Davis adhering to her conscience, but she should get a new job. The law of the land requires her to issue that license as a paid employee of the state. Kim Davis followed her conscience rights, but not her in legal duties.

RUSSELL MOORE: This country has a long tradition of accommodating conscientious objectors. Phil mentioned the military as an example. What have we done as a country? We said there is a place for those who are conscientious objectors, pacifists by conviction. We don’t force them to serve in places of combat. That doesn’t mean that we don’t fight wars, but it does mean that we accommodate their consciences. We find other ways for them to serve outside of combat.

The same thing is true when it comes to issuing marriage licenses. We can accommodate conscience without turning this into some sort of a district-by-district culture war. There are many states that have done that. North Carolina has found a way to balance conscientious objectors while still issuing marriage licenses. We have a unique situation in Kentucky, however, because the state did not prepare for a post- Obergefell America.

Same-sex marriage is a very new reality in American life. I object to it. I’m not for same-sex marriage. But even if someone supports it, we have to acknowledge that its legalization happened nationwide in
June of this year. We ought to give states time to be able to work through how to balance conscientious objection with carrying out the law. We can do that in respectful ways.

TIMOTHY SHAH: Kirsten.

KIRSTEN POWERS: I was not particularly sympathetic to Kim Davis’ argument. People were not getting married by the power of her authority. That’s clearly the government’s authority. I don’t think anybody, even if her name is on the certificate, would confuse whose authority was making them a married couple.

That said, I do agree with Russell about accommodation. Religious freedom is a balancing issue. First you need to look at the situation; if you can accommodate it, then you should. If I went into the DMV and a Muslim clerk said, “I can’t serve you because you’re not covered,” is that okay? It’s okay if there’s somebody else who can serve me. If you can find another person to do the job, then we should accommodate that conscientious objector, even though he offends me. I don’t think that women need to cover themselves. In my understanding of the Qur’an, I don’t think it says that. But it doesn’t really matter what I think.

We always talk about the cases we find personally offensive, so those are the people that we have to test our principles against. We have to ask, “What’s the principle here?” The principle is we respect people’s right to believe what they want to believe. If we can accommodate it, we will accommodate it. We will not ask people to violate their conscience even if we think they’re wrong.

PENNY STARR: Hi, I’m Penny Starr from CNS News. My question dovetails the previous one. Kim Davis was elected to office to do a specific job. When we talk about individuals out in the world, however, that are baking cakes or doing photography, it is a very different thing for the government to target them. That is at the core of people’s worries. It seems like the government is targeting people operating their own businesses in the public square who have a religious objection to providing a service for something that would violate their conscience. Can any of you comment on that?

“On every social scientific study we have, Americans dislike atheists, not Christians. Atheists come in last place after Hindus, Muslims, and homosexuals. And look at our government… We have seven states that bar atheists from serving in public office in their state constitutions. Can you imagine state constitutions that bar God-believers from serving in public office? It’s unthinkable.”

Phil Zuckerman
RUSSELL MOORE: I agree with you. Part of the problem is that we are using Jim Crow analogies in false ways when it comes to the debate over same-sex marriage. We do not have a state or culturally-imposed denial of public accommodations. We’re having skirmishes over whether or not people should be coerced by the government to use their creative gifts for speech that they don’t agree with. That’s wrong.

Again, as Kirsten said about the Muslim clerk, I don’t have to agree with the photographer about whether or not he is personally involved in the event that he’s photographing. We have other ways of dealing with this other than fining him out of existence if he says, “If I use my creative gifts in this way by setting up the scene and setting the picture here, then I’m going to be violating my conscience.” We’ve seen time after time that people have been essentially run out of business. Their livelihood is taken away from them because they refuse to violate their consciences.

We can accommodate that, and I think we should. We should not force a Quaker pacifist to participate in a military celebration, and we should not force someone who conscientiously objects to same-sex marriage, as I do, to use their creative gifts in order to speak in favor of same-sex marriage.

TIMOTHY SHAH: Phil, any thoughts on this?

PHIL ZUCKERMAN: I’m going to pass. It’s very hard for me. It’s tricky. I think I agree with what Russell just articulated, but I honestly don’t come down on either side.

TIMOTHY SHAH: Kirsten.

KIRSTEN POWERS: It’s a very hard topic, but I do think there’s a difference even in a situation involving a government employee. If you go to the DMV and someone has a religious objection, then there’s somebody else who can provide the service to me. But if you have a bakery, then nobody is going to provide the service if the owner opposes my request. The government has an interest in ensuring that people in the public domain will be able to walk in to any business and be able to order whatever product they provide. The gay couple is not asking for a gay wedding cake. They’re going in to the store, opening the book, looking at the cakes, and saying, “I want this cake. I want the cake that you sold to everybody

“No one at Liberty believes that if Bernie Sanders comes and makes his case, then the school will see thousands of students become socialists or pro-choice. They have enough confidence in their own ideas to allow this kind of dialogue to happen.”

Russell Moore
else.” Then the baker says, “No, I won’t do that.” But once you’re in the public domain, you’ve kind of agreed to do it. Your business promises it will do it.

Russell and I have disagreed on this before. Of course you shouldn’t be forced to participate in any event that you don’t agree with. But until we started having this debate, I didn’t know a single person who thought that the person who baked their wedding cake participated in their wedding. [Laughter] Truly. It is like asking the florist what they think about your wedding. The florist thinks, “I don’t know.” You know what I mean? Nobody asks the florist to participate.

The photographer is a harder issue because they are somewhat of a participant. They go to the wedding and probably put the photos on their website. It’s more clearly an artistic expression, so that’s a harder case from a legal perspective.

Truthfully, I hate this topic because we just go around in circles. I don’t think it’s necessary for Christians to say “no” to protect their conscience. Again, Russell and I disagree on this. In any case, most gay people I know have told me, “I would just go to another bakery.” It is sad that this has become the thing we talk about because it’s not really the biggest problem. It is a religious liberty issue we’re facing. However, we do have numerous situations where people are fined $125,000 or more. Frankly, it does not matter what I think about whether or not this florist using her creative gifts is culpable. The issue is whether or not the state can use its coercive power to violate what a person believes in their conscience. Is there a reason for the state to use its coercive power to integrate schools and to desegregate public accommodations? In Jim Crow South, you bet. Do we need the coercive power of the state to come in and to say to this little florist in Washington, “You’re either going to have to be using your creative gifts in this way, or you’re out of business”? I don’t think so.

FAITH MCDONNELL: This has been wonderful. I’m Faith McDonnell from the Institute on Religion and Democracy. You talked a lot about the left and secularists not really understanding evangelicals or conservative Christians. I remember Nick Kristof writing about how amazed he was that it is religious conservative Christians who are really at the forefront on things like global sex trafficking prevention in Sudan and human rights in North Korea. Dr. Tom Catena is a recent example; Nick Kristof wrote about how he risks his life working in the Nuba Mountains of Sudan.

You’ve said that the left is in charge of culture making. So my question is: How do we change that situation so that the culture respects and acknowledges that there are two sides that are doing good things?

RUSSELL MOORE: You’re right that many people in American culture tend to view evangelicals in terms of a caricature of a 1980s television evangelist. There are
many ways that we have contributed to that, but that’s not the reality. There is a limit to how much we can do. There’s a certain kind of progressive secularist who, like Nick Kristof, is open to seeing what good is being done. But there’s another sort of secularist progressive that honestly perceives those things as being threatening in and of themselves.

I’ve been involved in good things like the orphan care movement, foster care, and adoption for a long time. You have one wing of the secular left that will say, “Oh, these pro-life people. They only care about babies when they’re unborn. They don’t care about them after they’re born. If they did, they would be adopting them.” Well, sure enough we are involved in the foster care system. And then that very same wing says, “Look at how subversive these people are. They’re adopting these children in order to indoctrinate them into Christianity.”

So there’s a limit to what can be done. The main thing as an evangelical is we have to be faithful in all of the ways that we’ve been called to be faithful, and we have to be the sort of people who know how to engage in dialogue with and persuade those who disagree with us. Even if they don’t ever come to agree with us, they should understand what we’re talking about.

We live in a cultural ecosystem where that’s very difficult to do. Too many leaders just want to talk to their own people in order to get support and applause, rather than engage people who disagree with them. We have to get over that.

TIMOTHY SHAH: Kirsten, do you want to comment?

KIRSTEN POWERS: What Russell said is exactly right. There are some people
who just don't want to hear disagreeing voices. In public debate, I see liberals who sincerely care about poor people but at the same time say things like, “Well, we shouldn’t have government funding of religious groups.” I want to respond, “Do you know that Catholic Charities serves 10 million people every year?” I’m not sure that they even know that. They don’t understand that a large portion of charity funding comes from government contracts with religious organizations.

There are some people who don’t want to hear it. Frankly, there are some progressives who would say, “I don’t care how many people religious organizations serve. I’d rather have the government doing it, anyway.” They actually want to get the Church out of it. And there are other people who don’t even know or understand that Catholic Charities is actually providing a different service than the government provides. The government would not be providing the kind of personal interaction with people that Catholic Charities provides.

To the extent that we can try to raise awareness, people who do care should try. But I think Russell is right. There’s a limit. At some point, you can’t persuade some people.

PHIL ZUCKERMAN: Please understand that most of us secularists recognize that religion does a tremendous amount of good in the world. I am on the side that says that often, and I do get flak from more hard-nosed secularists. But there’s no question in my mind that religious people on so many levels are doing so much good in the world. Just look at the food banks; look at who’s helping the poor, the homeless, and the hungry; look at who’s at the forefront of peace missions, and who goes to the most dangerous parts of the world. There’s no question about it. I’m grateful for religious organizations.

But I have to insert something here. We’ve been talking a lot about tolerance and intolerance. We do have some data on this, though it’s not the best data. On every measure of tolerance, every psychological study will show you that secular people are far more tolerant of views they oppose than more religious people, particularly evangelicals. Sorry, Russell. You can ask an evangelical, for example, whether they support an atheist coming into their high school and speaking to their children. And then you can ask an atheist the same question about an evangelical speaker. The atheists are far more accepting of religious people. If you ask evangelicals if they would like an atheist to come and speak at their high school, they say, “No way.”

When your child is questioning God’s existence, what would you recommend they do? Would you say, “Go and talk to everybody and read a whole swath of things,” or would you say, “Go talk to the pastor”? Atheist parents are far more likely to say to their children, “Go and talk to the priest. Talk to the rabbi. Read the Qur’an. Make up your own mind.” That’s what being secular is all about. The more strongly religious you are, the more you fear those other views and don’t want your children exposed to them.

I’m going to wave the flag for free thought here. I have never met an atheist who was afraid of a book. But I can’t tell you
how many times I have met students, colleagues, and friends who see a book and say, “Oh, I couldn’t bring that home.”

**KIRSTEN POWERS:** Wait. Hold on. Do you know what’s happening on campuses with books that are being banned? Liberal professors don’t want *Huckleberry Finn* being taught. There are books that are scary to them and their students. They have trigger warnings for books about colonialism.

**PHIL ZUCKERMAN:** But Kirsten, have you seen the data on professors’ support for trigger warnings? I think it’s 9 percent of all university and college professors that support them.

**KIRSTEN POWERS:** Of course the professors don’t support them. The people that are supporting them are the students. I’m sure you’ve read the *New Yorker* article by the Harvard law professor who wrote that trigger warnings are now all across the country. Teachers are not teaching rape law because they’re getting so much blowback. There are demands for trigger warnings. Students claim they’re being traumatized merely by studying rape laws. I disagree with the idea that liberals are not afraid of any books. I don’t see that as being true.

**PHIL ZUCKERMAN:** I was talking about my personal experience with the first girlfriend I ever had, whose mother was mortified that we were reading *The Stranger* by Albert Camus. Her mother said, “We don’t read those kinds of books. That’s existentialism and we are Christians.” My personal experience is that a lot of Christians are afraid. At graduate seminars, I remember reading a book by David Persuitte that shows how the Book of Mormon is a plagiarism of the Book of Hebrews by a man who was living at the same time as Joseph Smith in Palmyra. This evangelical Christian I knew loved this book. But when I said, “I’ve got a lot of books on the history of Jesus as well,” he said, “Oh, no, I can’t go there.”

I hear what you’re saying, that there are these censorship things going on. I deplore that. But my experience with all these social-psychological surveys is that atheists and secular folks are far more likely to accept and be open to views they disagree with than more strongly religious folks. And of course, if you’re a more moderate, United Church of Christ-type believer, then you are kind of right in the middle of that scale.

**KIRSTEN POWERS:** It’s incredible to me that you’re saying secularists and atheists would actually be open to evangelicals. I don’t know a single secular person who’s completely open to evangelicals. Most of my friends aren’t even friends with evangelicals, let alone allow them to be in a conversation with their students.

**RUSSELL MOORE:** I want to touch on the examples you used of children being told by their parents to go and explore everything. Well, of course an atheist is going to say that to his or her children because there’s nothing eternal at stake. There’s something quite different about rearing a child with certain age-appropriate understandings and values compared to dealing with college students or adults.

**PHIL ZUCKERMAN:** Russell, I just have to say that this is now the second ad hominem attack. The notion that we atheists all have daddy complexes and that
we would expose our children to anything is just incorrect.

RUSSELL MOORE: But you just said that an atheist is more likely to do that, and I’m saying of course that would be natural if you don’t believe that there is life after this life.

PHIL ZUCKERMAN: Well, I meant to say something different. Forgive me if I put it poorly.

TIMOTHY SHAH: We have time for a few more questions.

NAPP NAZWORTH: I’m Napp Nazworth with the Christian Post. My question is for Phil. One of the things from my perspective that’s really closed down debate is the analogy between traditional marriage supporters and racists. I heard you bring up that analogy as well. At one point you’re saying we want open debate and dialogue. How do you think about that in terms of racists versus traditional marriage supporters? Would you have a racist come to your campus to explain why they think racism is such a great thing versus the traditional marriage supporter, or do you think there is something significantly different about those two? If so, from your perspective, what is that difference and why is it important as far as sharing your views in the public square?

PHIL ZUCKERMAN: I personally would not invite a white supremacist to campus, but I would fight to the death their right to speak on my campus. I’m a radical, fundamentalist free speech advocate. I believe all views should be heard and discussed on the merits of their arguments and debated and

Penny Starr asks a question from the audience
“…yes, liberals are being hypocritical. You bet. They are silencing debate when they should be the ones most vigorously championing it. But when I compare the Christian right to the teachings of Jesus, the “prince of peace” who preached nonviolence—with his sayings like “live by the sword and die by the sword” or his call to take care of the poor, the sick, the hungry, and the homeless—I don’t see the Christian right championing those causes. So I think the bigger story here is the hypocrisies that exist on both the right and left.”

Phil Zuckerman

presented with evidence to the contrary. I’m absolutely, completely, 100 percent in favor of any kind of free speech to take place, especially on our campuses. I’m fanatical about it. You name it—Holocaust deniers, Nazis, whatever—they have a right to speak, and I would defend that right to the death. We need rigorous debate and challenges.

NAPP NAZWORTH: Is there an important difference, then, between the racist and the traditional marriage supporter in terms of the respectability and moral status of the view?

PHIL ZUCKERMAN: I don’t know. It depends if I had my coffee. [Laughter] That’s a hard question to answer. I would have to know where that person is coming from. I’d have to understand their arguments. Both are speaking against human dignity. Both are treating people the way they wouldn’t themselves want to be treated, so I disagree with them both. Is one morally worse than the other? I don’t know how one parses those things out. I would have to take it on a case-by-case basis and hear their arguments—what they’re saying and why.

You’ll all jump down my throat here, but let’s look at the Pew data. When Americans are asked, “Would you be happy or unhappy if your child married someone of the following,” atheists came in last place. When Gallup asked, “Would you be willing to vote for the following as president,” atheists came in last place after Muslims. That means Christians did not come last when people were asked those questions. In every survey about who Americans despise, it’s not Christians.

You can’t be an atheist. Even Barney Frank came out as homosexual in the 1980s, but atheists could not come out as atheists. We have seven states that bar atheists from serving...
in public office in their state constitutions. Can you imagine state constitutions that bar God-believers from serving in public office? It’s unthinkable. It’s like we’re living in alternate universes on this panel. In my opinion, if you’re an atheist, good luck running for public office.

**KIRSTEN POWERS:** I’m sorry if you feel like we’re jumping down your throat.

**PHIL ZUCKERMAN:** That’s alright.

**KIRSTEN POWERS:** We’re just having a vigorous debate. But I think at the same time your likelihood of being a tenured professor at Harvard, Yale, Stanford, or Princeton is exponentially higher by about 100 to 1 if you’re an atheist rather than an evangelical. And those are the places where culture is being defined.

**PHIL ZUCKERMAN:** Do you have data for that? I just cited studies. Can you cite a study?

**KIRSTEN POWERS:** I am not citing a study. But I’ve talked to evangelical professors and asked them how many evangelicals make up their faculties. Do you want to say 3 to 1 or 4 to 1?

**PHIL ZUCKERMAN:** I’m not comfortable putting a number on it.

**KIRSTEN POWERS:** I feel very comfortable saying that it’s a vastly, vastly higher probability that if you are an atheist, you’re going to be tenured at a major university than if you’re an evangelical. We’re talking about definers of culture.

In regard to voting, I don’t actually consider it intolerance if you don’t vote for an atheist. It’s as if someone says they’re not going to vote for a Catholic or an evangelical because they just disagree with them. You’re allowed to do that. If I believe as a Christian that there is a higher power and that you want somebody who is in touch with that higher power—or at least believes that humans aren’t the ultimate arbiters of everything—I’m open to the idea that that’s intolerance. But it doesn’t strike me as obviously intolerant or hateful.

My whole family is atheist. I love my family. It’s not intolerant to say that if I had children, I wouldn’t want them indoctrinating my children with the things that they believe any more than they would want me indoctrinating their children with the things I believe. I have a right in my immediate sphere to educate my children the way I want to educate them and to vote for the people that I want to vote for.

But I’m open to your critiques. It’s a fair point that atheists are not always treated with respect. They should be treated with respect. I did not know about the laws barring them from holding office. That’s completely unacceptable.

**TIMOTHY SHAH:** Well, as painful as it is, we have to bring the discussion to a close. There may be a lot of silencing going on, but there wasn’t a lot of silencing on this panel. [Laughter] We had vigorous debate and disagreement, but it was friendly and civil. It was truly extraordinary. Thank you, Kirsten Powers, Russell Moore, and Phil Zuckerman.