News Item

5/23/2024 – Intersections Launch Webinar: Religion and the Future of Democracy | SSRC

June 22, 2025

In addition to the full recording, this article provides a transcript of "Religion and the Future of Democracy," a webinar held by the SSRC on May 23rd, 2024 to inaugurate the official launch of Intersections*. The transcript has been lightly edited for clarity.*

Panelists:

Pratap Bhanu Meha: Laurence S. Rockefeller Visiting Professor for Distinguished Teaching at Princeton University

David T. Buckley: Associate Professor of Political Science, and Paul Weber Endowed Chair in Politics, Science & Religion at the University of Louisville, where he serves as the Director of the Center for Asian Democracy

Melissa Deckman (Moderator): CEO of the Public Religion Research Institute

Molly Laas: Director of the Religion and the Public Sphere Program at the Social Science Research Council

Transcript

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Dr. Molly Laas: We might wait a couple of minutes to let people filter into the room. Well, I think of the interest of time, I will just go ahead and get started. So, hello! And welcome to our webinar on religion and the future of democracy. I'm Molly Laas, the director of the Religion and the Public Sphere (RPS) Program at the Social Science Research Council (SSRC).

00:01:12

We are here today for two purposes. One is to listen to Dr. Bhanu Mehta, Dr. Buckley, and Dr. Deckman speak about the role of religion in contemporary democracies around the globe. But, before I hand the floor to them, I'd like to take the opportunity to introduce a new platform for religion and international affairs that we are launching today.

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Intersections is a digital platform that curates scholarly research at the convergence of religion and international affairs. Its mission is to act as a resource for researchers, policymakers, media professionals, and the wider public by highlighting scholarship on the changing role of religion in the world. By doing so we hope to promote broader understandings of religion in public life across the globe and recognize the critical impacts of religious beliefs and practices on discourse and policy.

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The platform is a free resource that the Social Science Research Council has developed, leveraging the infrastructure of SSRC's Research Area Mapping Platform (RAMP) initiative which you can learn about more on our website. The project is generally generously sponsored by the Henry Luce Foundation. And, as I continue to thank people, I'd also like to thank Dr. Ajlai Basu (who's the program officer for RPS) and Torrese Arquee (who is the program associate for RPS) for all of their work and putting together this website. Please do check it out. It's a very great resource. So, thank you very much to both the Luce Foundation and to Ajlai and Torrese.

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So, a major role of *Intersections* is to serve as an accessible repository of 16 years of research on the role of religion in global affairs that was sponsored by the Luce Foundation. The Henry R. Luce Initiative on Religion and International Affairs (HRLI), was launched in 2005, and it introduced an essential shift in scholarship and public discourse by acknowledging the significant influence of religion on foreign policy and global matters over its tenure. The initiative awarded 223 grants to academic, public policy, and media organizations.

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Many of these outputs are currently on the *Intersections* site. You can find them under the Projects tab on the *Intersections* homepage. Here you can see a glimpse of a project that Dr. Bhanu Mehta worked on. It was a special issue of the *Studies in Indian*

Politics journal on religious populism and the future of democracy. But we also invite you to take a look at all of the other projects available on the site. So HRLI-sponsored workshops, documentaries, photo essays, online resources, and podcasts among other things. SSRC wrote overviews of all of these projects and put links to them on the website. You can click through and see the full project including links to documentaries and other and other resources.

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Dr. Molly Laas [*continued*]:

It is our intention that having the HRLI projects collected on *Intersections* will preserve this important work and allow it to reach new audiences. These outputs are browsable by type and by contributor, so it's possible to get a great overview of the kinds of work that HRLI supported and benefit from learning about the important ideas and insights generated by these grantees.

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At the same time, *Intersections* will be more than just an archive of this work. We have been using the technical capacities of the Research AMP platform to build out some features for the site that will allow us to create new content that will capture the insights of this growing field. We've organized this content into four research topics: Climate Futures, Religion and Democracy, Religion in the Digital Age, and Policy Focus. The research topics structure the extant content but are primarily designed to categorize new work that we will be publishing over the next year.

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For example, we have published literature reviews (what we call field reviews) for each of our research topics. The intent of the field reviews is to create an overview of the field as a whole and provide an accessible way into this research topic. So you can take a look at them. They've got an overview of the research topic and links to citations. You can kind of build out your understanding of this field, and these field reviews make use of an additional special feature of the intersection site which is a public Zotero library integrated into it. The library contains a body of scholarly work that relates to the research topic. So, if you click a citation in a field review, you can gain access to all this other work and can make broader connections in the field.

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And a final feature I'd like to draw your attention to is our Profiles section. Here was where we have a list of profiles of the HRLI grantees, which is an opportunity to show their biographies, the work they've contributed to both HRLI and the *Intersections* site, and to have their contact information in case you might want to ask them further questions, or to, or to get in touch with them to collaborate. So, this is a quick way to get access to the vast body of expertise brought together by the grant program, and we will continue to update the Profile section as we build connections with more scholars working in the field.

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So, what I'd like to underscore by drawing your attention to these different parts of the

Intersections website is that our aim here is not just to uplift the HRLI body of work, but also to link it in a very direct way to the wider field of religion and international affairs. You may come to the *Intersections* site wanting to know more about a particular HRLI grant. But through the links and connections we've built into the site, you can see work on other work on the topic or other work by the grantees, and in this way gain access to more information than you would just by looking at a single page on the site.

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I will also say that we are planning essay series in the coming year on Religion, Civic Engagement, and Democratic Renewal; Religion and Energy; and Religion and Agency in an Age of Digital Mediation. We will likely start publishing these essays in the summer. So please do watch the space.

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So, without further ado, I'd like to introduce our distinguished panelists.

Dr. Pratap Bhanu Mehta is the Lawrence J. Rockefeller Visiting Professor for distinguished teaching at Princeton University. He was previously Vice Chancellor of Ashoka University and President, the Center for Policy Research in Delhi. He has published widely in Political theory, the history of ideas, Indian constitutional law, and politics in India. He is the author of *The Burden of Democracy*, which came out from Penguin in 2003, and he has produced several edited volumes. His forthcoming work looks at philosophical ideas about religion in twentieth-century India. Dr. Bhanu Mehta

is also a Fellow of the British Academy, and was a Social Science Research Council Fellow in 2020.

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Dr. Molly Laas [*continued*]: Dr. David Buckley is an associate professor of political science, and the Paul Weber Endowed Chair in Politics, Science, and Religion at the University of Louisville, where he serves as the Director of the Center for Asian Democracy.

Dr. Buckley is currently finalizing two book manuscripts. *Blessing America First: Religion, Populism, Foreign Policy, and the Trump Administration* (which is forthcoming from Columbia University Press) documents how the Trump Administration's populism changed the place of religion in US foreign policy bureaucracy. The second, with Stephen Brook, traces the role of grassroots, religious institutions in protecting communities from the intense violence associated with Rodrigo Duterte's drug war in the Philippines.

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Dr. Buckley was a Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellow in 2016 through 2017, serving as a senior advisor in the State Department Secretary's Office of Religion and Global Affairs. His research focuses on the comparative relationship between religion and democracy. And Dr. Buckley was also a dissertation fellow at the SSRC.

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Last, but not least, is our moderator, Dr. Melissa Deckman, who is the CEO of PRRI and a political scientist who studies the impact of gender, religion and age on public opinion and political behavior. Prior to joining PRRI, Deckman served as the Louise Louis L. Goldstein Professor of Public Affairs and Chair of the Political Science Department at Washington College. Dr. Deckman is the author of *Tea Party Women*, which came out from NYU Press in 2016, which examined the role of women in conservative politics. Columbia University Press will publish her latest book, *The Politics of Gen. Z: How the Youngest Voters Will Shape Our Democracy* this September. Dr. Deckman's commentary and research about politics has appeared in the *New York Times*, CNN, MSNBC, and *the Washington Post*, among other outlets.

00:09:44.190: I don't want to take too much more time before we can get straight to the conversation, so I will thank you all again and pass it to Dr. Deckman.

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Dr. Melissa Deckman: Thank you so much, Molly, for that wonderful introduction, for inviting me here. I'm really looking forward to this conversation this morning. Congratulations also to the SSRC team and its launch of *Intersections*. It's a beautiful website. I encourage everyone to please take a look at it. It's a wonderful resource for scholars who study religion, democracy, and a variety of areas where religion has an important facet to helping us understand trends in society.

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So, I wanted to actually give you all the lay of the land a bit with respect to an overview of where this conversation is going to go. This year, of course, 2024 is a critical one for the future of democracy. As a political scientist, I can tell you. You know that the growing threats of authoritarianism, nationalism, and polarization, have never been more fraught, and religion, certainly, plays an important part in those trends that we're seeing both here in the US and abroad.

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And so today, we're going to take a deeper dive into the role that religion plays in both hindering democracy, but also, perhaps, fostering democracy as well, by focusing on the research of Pratap and David more specifically, and including some data that we have collected here at Public Religion Research Institute on Christian Nationalism in particular. So we're going to talk about those two threads. We're also going to talk about avenues that might be fruitful for research for scholars who are interested in how religion intersects with democracy. And, if time permits, hopefully, we'll have a chance to answer some questions that we invite you to ask on the Q&A feature of the Zoom link here.

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Dr. Melissa Deckman [*continued*]: However, I think we're going to first start with a discussion of the concept of religion—specifically, how the historical transformation of ideas about religion are speaking to the current moment and the challenges we're seeing here and abroad with respect to democracy. And so, to get us kicked off, I'd

actually want to have Pratap maybe start to talk a bit about how he sees changing ideas about religion, the nature of religious authority…all of those sorts of things interacting with our concerns about democracy today. And then we'll hear from David.

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Dr. Pratap Bhanu Mehta: Thank you, *Intersections,* for this great honor and opportunity, and it's a privilege—and frankly, a little intimidating—to be amongst such distinguished panelists and audience.

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So, what I thought I'd do is maybe spend three or four minutes setting some historical context for this contemporary discussion about religion and politics. And one way of doing it is to ask the following question rather than just define religion (I mean definitions—only historical things can be defined, as Nietzsche once said) is to ask the questions: "What functions does religion perform in our politics?," and "How do we look at those functions over kind of long arc of history, maybe the last 300 to 400 years?" And I want to make three points, essentially: one about the state, one about democracy, and one about, in a sense, the moral psychology of religion.

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So the point about state and religion is going to be very simple, obvious to probably most in this audience. If we ask the question, "How do we distinguish or draw the line between the religious and the non-religious?" Or, "What do we think the antonyms of

religion are?" I mean, you know, in the ancient world religion was contrasted with superstition. For example, that was one of the principal antonyms for somebody like Lactantius.

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The answer to these questions is not at all actually obvious. We often think of religion, and the secular (or whatever its opposite or its other, is meant to be) as already preconstituted spheres. And then the question, the political question, is: what's the relationship between them? Our principal metaphor of talking about it? Right? What is the relationship between Church and State? [This] sometimes gives this impression that there is something called the State, and then there is something called the Church. And then, what is the appropriate relationship between them, right? But the fact of the matter is that the line between the religion and the secular—or religion and whatever that other is by which you want to characterize this kind of [realm] outside of religion—in the modern world has almost always been drawn by sovereign power itself.

00:14:23.670: The distinction between the religious and the secular is actually itself a function of the rise of sovereign power and where that sovereign power chooses to actually draw that line. So even when we say "separation of church and state," the terms of that separation, right—what properly belongs to the state, and what properly belongs to the church or religion—are actually set by the state. And in the modern world (and this is why I think this conflict is kind of endemic), the demands that the state places on its citizens inevitably expand right. The state wants to combat religion

as a form of social power, because religion as a form of social power sometimes traps individuals within religion under conditions of unfreedom, and how much unfreedom of individuals a state will tolerate will in part depend on how much a state thinks a religion actually structures the civic standing of citizens.

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Dr. Pratap Bhanu Mehta [*continued*]: So, for example, in India, there's recently a very big case, where there's a temple [Sabarimala Shrine] where menstruating women are not allowed entry at certain points during the year. And the Indian Supreme Court decided that this practice actually impugned not just equality of women in terms in terms of religious practice but actually impugned their civic standing and thought it fit to intervene in this case. That's just one example, right? In some ways. So, at one level, I think the fundamental question of a modern society [is] "what are the terms in which citizens relate to each other?" will always mean that there will be a conversation between religion and the State—and, as Dr. Buckley's wonderful research has shown us, there are different models of thinking about that conversation.

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I think the second one, which is (I think) more consequential—at least in contemporary India—has to do with the transformation of religion into nationalism. So, there is a particular challenge that arises internal to democracy, and the challenge is the following: a democracy requires a *demos* (some conception of the people), and historically, almost all societies have had to debate this question: Who gets to be a

member of this *demos*? Right? And historically, frankly, a lot of these questions were decided on ethnic criteria, on majoritarian criteria. Think of the exclusions of Catholics and Jews in eighteenth / nineteenth-century England. So, a whole range of exclusions built into the constitution for *demos*.

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Now, in the modern world (as it happens in many societies, right?), there is an attempt to argue that the fundamental identity of the *demos* has to be constituted by some form of identity. And the form of identity that is readily available (or at least sought to be mobilized) happens to be, in a sense, a religious identity. But it's a religious identity in a very peculiar sense. It's not a religious identity that's concerned with, you know, sort of ideology, eschatology, belief, perhaps even conception of justice. It's simply membership in a particular religious group where that religious group is understood as a kind of ethnic identity. So think of Hindu nationalism, for example; think of Zionism as an example—the two paradigmatic examples in some senses. [Think] of the transformation of religious identities into a form of ethnicity that is then mobilized in the service of nationalism. And some of the biggest conflicts that we are seeing around the world are around the mobilizations of these kinds of ethnic identities.

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These ethnic identities have a deep connection to democracy, because in democracy demography becomes very important, right? I mean, unlike in many other political systems, democracy is a numbers game. And in the process of institutionalizing

democracy, particularly in societies that are diverse, the natural question arises: What if there are majorities and minorities, religious majorities, and religious minorities? What forms of power-sharing will be appropriate under conditions where you have these kinds of majorities and minorities? Right? And so a lot of the conflicts (again, one can think of modern India) are actually structured around this question of what is the appropriate kind of representation that allows power sharing between religious communities? And Hindu nationalism (to give sort of a one-line summary) basically says India is actually a Hindu nation; the idea of who a Hindu is defined by kinship and blood relationship, a kind of form of ethnic identification; and it says that the dominant identity of India is understood in terms of its history in terms of who gets to be a legitimate member and whose cultural representations are privileged will be largely Hindu. And that, of course, generates conflicts of all kinds.

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And the third and final one (which is something kind of internal to religion itself) is [that] all religions, as we know, have historically been internally contested. And one of the things I think we experience in the modern world is a kind of internal crisis of religious authority. Every religion has gone through its own kind of Protestant Revolution, as it were. (By “Protestant” I just mean a splintering of authority within religious structures of different kinds, right?) And, often, the state is actually asked to adjudicate intra-religious competition. Often, the state is brought in, because, in the process of this intra-religious competition, a very simple question arises: How do religions benchmark their identity? What is it to be a Hindu? What is it to be a Muslim? Sometimes, what is it to be a Christian? (Or you know, you can kind of fill in the

blanks).

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Dr. Pratap Bhanu Mehta [continued]: And that process of benchmarking—a particular belief, a particular practice—that process of benchmarking produces certain kinds of exclusions (in some cases the demands for, let's say, blasphemy laws). And the state is always asked to adjudicate the identities of religions in actually, very, very, very particular ways. And, I think you're seeing in democratic politics mobilization around all three of these questions.

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Dr. Melissa Deckman: Thank you, Pratap. I actually wanted to turn the mic over now to David for some of his thoughts about changing conceptions of religion and how it helps us understand threats that we're facing in terms of democracy.

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Dr. David Buckley: Yeah. Well, I maybe I'll just pick up on the last point that Pratap actually put on the agenda for a couple of minutes, and then let us move forward. This question of religious authority, right? And how it's changing in the contemporary period. I mean, I think that we've learned so much across the social sciences and religious studies about the complexity of religious authority, contestation between different spheres—particularly as the grassroots, more lived religion perspective might interact with more hierarchical approaches to the study of religious authority. And,

you know, the SSRC has been involved in supporting a lot of that work. I think we've made a lot of progress there. One area where I see some potential for really interesting future research that I know has started is how some of the contemporary challenges to democracy might kind of endogenously be changing the nature of religious authority in certain contexts.

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And, to give just one example of that, I'll talk briefly about some research that co-authors and I did recently on Christian nationalism and support for violence. We found—maybe unsurprisingly, in light of a lot of the other research that's out there—that there is kind of an overall relationship in public opinion between Christian nationalism and support for forms of political violence. But, actually, what we found when we pushed a little harder is that this relationship really only exists when Christian nationalism is combined with other forms of conspiratorial or victimhood politics that we see growing in the American context in different sectors, but especially in new sectors of the right. And, to me, this raises questions about how traditional conceptions of clerical religious authority might be intersecting with newer trends in religious political authority—tied to disinformation, tied to conspiratorial thinking, tied to perceived victimhood—that are present in traditional congregations, sure, but (as I think many of us are aware) are perhaps most present and most actively being generated on social media through digital communication tools of different kinds, right?

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And so, I think a major task, for those of us who are interested in the relationship between religion and democracy, moving forward is trying to continue to wrestle around with how the current challenges facing democracy might also be, kind of at the same time, redefining the nature of religious authority within domestic contexts nationally, but also transnationally, as we can talk about a little more later.

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Dr. Melissa Deckman: Yeah, let's definitely pick up on that theme a little bit later in the context of Christian nationalism. I think that links to conspiratorial thinking, to disinformation, to the role of political and religious elites, and also fomenting some of these ideas and concerns and challenges, is really important to bear in mind. I want to return, though, to a larger conversation about the role of religion in hindering democracy. And I think here Pratap's work clearly [focuses] on the threat that Hindu nationalism poses to democracy—and really, what I think heretofore had been viewed as maybe a modern success story in terms of democracy, of having a pluralistic democracy with multiple faiths represented and its inhabitants being active in in the *demos*, to use your term, Pratap. So, what can you tell us about your research in terms of the threat that Hindu nationalism is posing in terms of trying to dial back some of the democracy and constitutional protections within India?

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Dr. Pratap Bhanu Mehta: So a couple of things, and picking up on David's point about victimhood, which is actually very central to this conversation, which is that

religious groups become a threat to democracy when they deeply internalize some kind of narrative of victimhood, for the most part. But this sense of victimhood has many different sources. Sometimes it's a legitimate sense, I mean, minorities can sometimes genuinely victimize, right? But there are two structural features that are actually leading a lot of Hindu groups, a lot of Hindu organizations, to be almost in a permanent state of victimhood.

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One structural feature which I think is common to a lot of our democracies is this kind of strange, demographic anxiety that even majority religions have—that somehow they will, in a sense, be overrun demographically by members of other regions and other groups. And it can actually sometimes take very, very concrete forms. Great replacement theory in India debates over, for example, decline of fertility rates, and a lot of the agenda of Hindu nationalism, in a sense, actually stems from this demographic kind of anxiety.

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But there's a second aspect of this victimhood, which I think is more complicated—and, again, may lend itself to coming at a comparative analysis—which is, it is the case that in the modern world more and more of our lives are effectively structured by secular institutions. So even Hindus now—hopefully, thankfully—will not argue, "Let's reinstitute a kind of ancient Hindu division of labor." Or, "Let's restructure India's economy on some kind of, you know, traditional Hindu lines," right?

And what that does is that it often gives the sense to believers that the domains over which they are exercising sovereignty are actually shrinking.

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There's almost, you know, almost like a Protestantization of religion that is kind of being confined to belief, or private practice, or limited forms of public expression. But it really can't, in a sense, structure large parts of your public life, right? And I think that this structural feature sometimes leads religious groups to believe that they are under a kind of permanent assault from something called secularism, from something called modernity, right? And, as I said, this is a permanent structural feature, because I think these are in a sense deep under undercurrents about the nature of the modern state, the nature of the modern economy.

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Now, what Hindu nationalism does, effectively, is it draws on these two currents and then adds a third one (which is what gives its antidemocratic potential such virulence). It basically argues that India was partitioned in 1947; that partition was, in some senses, a failure of secular nationalism—the Congress Party's dream of creating a multireligious India where all religions could live on equal terms and also protect individual freedom. And, essentially what it wants to do is it wants to complete the logic of 1947 and say that in 1947— despite the fact that India was divided (the creation of a Muslim homeland in Pakistan and [in addition to] India)—India still chose to be a secular liberal representative constitution.

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And in that sense, at the core of internationalism is actually a deep resentment and hatred of Muslim minorities. Partly those minorities are seen historically as responsible for the partition of India. And partly, in a sense, Hindu nationalism wants to mimic the logic of that partition by saying that, "If you actually did that partition on ethnic lines, let's follow it to its logical conclusion." That if Pakistan is a Muslim state, India needs to be a Hindu nation. And, the model they draw on—and I think this is the important point to underscore—is nineteenth-century European nationalism.

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Dr. Pratap Bhanu Mehta [*continued*]: The argument is that almost every nineteenth-century state in Europe (that, you know, emerged after the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire, the states that emerged after the dissolution of Ottoman empires)—each of those states had some kind of majoritarian ethnic identity at the core. And that India, in some senses, should follow that path. And by not following that path, by trying to create this incredibly innovative experiment of multi-religious accommodation, India's actually weakened its power and has actually failed to give Hindus their due as the majority in the nation.

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Dr. Melissa Deckman: Thank you. Pratap. David, did you have a response to Pratap's comments? Or maybe you wanted to share more of your thoughts from your own research, say, in the Philippines…

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Dr. David Buckley: Yeah, well, no. Just—

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Dr. Melissa Deckman: …that might fit into this conversation?

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Dr. David Buckley: Yeah, I mean again, just briefly, I think it's important to note that what Pratap just described in the Indian context is something that we're seeing on a kind of comparative basis, right? And not only does this seem to be bubbling up in isolated cases, but there's evidence that there is kind of transnational learning going on in some of these, whether you want to call them illiberal religious nationalists, or religious populists, or whatever term you want to use; that there is a kind of… it's too strong to [say] that this is a set network, but there's clearly a diffusion of some of these ideas of religious, ethnic, national homogeneity, bringing strength and the need to push back against transnational attempts to limit our cohesion as a political community.

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You can see this relationally in ties between Christian nationalists in the United States and those in places like [Jair] Bolsonaro's Brazil right, or [Viktor] Orbán's Hungary. But it's not just Christians talking to each other internationally, right? I mean, we've seen some of these interesting ties involving some in the Hindu nationalist movement

even, and certainly the relationship between Orbán and the Israeli government—one, that he cultivates in defense of religious freedom, while also identifying as a religious nationalist and an illiberal democrat. Right? So, I think there's just a lot of work to be done in tracing those international dynamics as well. I know that Peter Mandaville and co-authors have started to look at some of that. And then I think that's a very fruitful international area for future research, too.

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Dr. Melissa Deckman: Wonderful. We'll speak a little bit more about how this is manifesting, perhaps, in the US context in just a few minutes. But, I want to actually shift the focus a bit to thinking about how religion can foster democracy. I think there are lots of examples in the US context with respect to going back to the Tocquevillian argument about churches being vital for fostering civic engagement and participatory elements in the nineteenth century, but I want to turn to David's work, too, because I think your work on the role of Catholic Church (in particular, in the Philippines) has really been fascinating and reminds us that religion moral authority can be used in ways that, in fact, trust or support democracy. So maybe you could share a little bit about some of your findings with respect to how religion can foster democracy in the Filipino context.

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Dr. David Buckley: Sure. Yeah, happy to. The Philippines is, is such an interesting place to study religion and democracy, because at a fundamental level, if the audience

knows one thing about religion and Philippine democracy, it's probably the kind of mythology of the 1986 People Power revolution when the churches, especially the Catholic Church—but not only the Catholic Church—played a part in bringing hundreds of thousands of Filipinos into the streets to more or less peacefully bring down the [Ferdinand] Marcos dictatorship and restore democracy—one of the poster children of third wave democracy. And there's a lot of evidence of that, right? It was a very interesting period. But, I think that the question in the last decade or so has been, can religious institutions still play this role? And to what extent is this possible? Religious influence— and, again, particularly the Catholic Church's influence—was called into question in the decades after the People Power Revolution. Probably the most prominent example of this was a piece of legislation that was eventually pushed through in 2013 that came to be known as the Reproductive Health Law.

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This was a law that was pushed through by President [Benigno] Aquino [III], the inheritor of the legacy of Cory [Corazon] Aquino in the People Power period but against the wishes of the Catholic hierarchy in the country. And so, at the time there were a lot of questions. Does this mean that religion's influence in Philippine politics is kind of broken and that nobody needs to be afraid of the big, bad Catholic church anymore? Right? This came to another level with the campaign of eventual President Rodrigo Duterte in 2015 and 2016. Probably most famously: while on the campaign trail, Duterte cursed Pope Francis right for causing traffic during his visits to the country. You might think, "Well, how could this possibly be the case? Was this political suicide?" Right? But no. Duterte, ever the populist, had a very keen sense that his kind

of rhetoric here would be perceived as anti-elite and critical of those who take advantage of the broader people for their own benefit.

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Duterte comes into office, of course, and brings real threats to democracy and human rights in the country. And so what I (working especially with co-author Steven Brooke) have been trying to do is to look at what capacity, if any, religious institutions might have had to stabilize democratic institutions during this period. And to kind of, overall, sum up the argument that we're going to be making in the book is [this]: the model of 1986 doesn't appear to be on the table anymore. In other words, there were national-level statements critical of Duterte, critical of human rights abuses from different religious leaders. And yet, Duterte exited office with his popularity still overwhelmingly intact. And the popularity of his drug war, the kind of cornerstone policy of his administration, is still relatively robust (as far as we can tell in public opinion data). But, at the same time there's actually pretty extensive evidence that at the local level, at the grassroots level, religious institutions and the committed actors within those institutions were able to offer at least a measure of community protection from the localized dynamics of violence in the case.

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And there are a couple of ways we could think about this. One is that the infrastructure, the guts, of organized religion in the country remains more present than most social sectors in the communities most subject to violence in the urban poor

communities where violence was most intense. And also the moral authority of religious leaders in those communities was perceived to be significantly higher than the authority of secular human rights groups who perceived themselves as actually lacking the deep community ties in those neighborhoods that they needed to operate on their own.

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It's also a story that foregrounds the complexity of religious authority. We find, of course, of male clerics playing a very important role in this (given the Catholic context). But also [we find] religious sisters from women's religious orders as well as just average Filipinos—particularly widows left behind by the violence— as eventually becoming extremely important, not just as a target of charity, but actually as a source of community reconstruction—and maybe even accountability efforts—in their empowerment.

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So, it's an ambiguous case. On the one hand, there has been very limited accountability for any of this violence. The health of democratic institutions in the country is still really under question. But, at the same time, I think that the counterfactual (if the Philippines had not had this kind of agency exercised on the part of some local religious actors) is that, actually, democracy would be in even worse shape. Right? And there would have been more violence; the health of institutions would be even weaker. It's not an easy triumph story, but I do think that it's one of the

continued importance of religion's role in stabilizing institutions in tough times.

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Dr. Melissa Deckman: Thank you. Pratap, I'm just kind of curious. This wasn't on our run of show, but thinking about the ways that religion can be used to foster democracy, is there any indication in India of groups that are working in a pluralistic way where they're trying to essentially reach out to other groups and foster a more multi-religious attempt to impact elections and democratic gain. I know (for example, in the US) there's a long history of that sort of interreligious pluralistic idea. But, is there any sense that that's happening in India, or is it being actively suppressed?

00:39:15.510

Dr. Pratap Bhanu Mehta: So, this is (I think) kind of the worry about modern India, right? Because, at one level, the phenomena that you described is the structure of religious activity, if not the intention of religious actors themselves. Historically, actually, India has been pretty supportive of democracy, at least in three ways. One is the internal pluralism of religions. So, enough cross-cutting cleavages; enough internal denominational freedoms, right? In a sense, both allow the creation of particular kinds of social capital, but they kind of attune people to diversity in some ways. And that was historically one of the arguments made about Hinduism—at least the way it kind of functions in democracies. Right?

00:40:08.565

The second was a kind of dominant strain of Hinduism (you know, associated even in the national movement with figures like Gandhi, but actually much more widespread. You know, older forms of organization like Ramakrishna Mission, Swami Vivekanada, and stuff. But there was a clear kind of ideological commitment, in some senses, to at least a certain kind of religious toleration. In fact, the claim was that the distinctiveness of this civilization is actually going to be toleration, I mean. You know, you can argue about that claim, but the aspiration was actually very self-consciously central to their kind of ideological identity in some ways.

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And the third (I think) interesting thing is—particularly in the case of Hinduism—which is precisely because it has no single book, no single overarching hierarchical structure, historically—is that, in some sense, the way questions of how to reform Hindu religion, and so forth, were actually settled democratically—I mean through the aegis of electoral politics, and in the Indian Parliament, and in the state. So the Indian story, actually, was predominantly that. And, it wasn't a question of individual groups being committed to democracy but just the structural and institutional context actually made them very propitious for democracy.

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What we are seeing right now—and this is actually unprecedented (I sometimes say, Hindu nationalism is the first real colonization of Hinduism) —is, you have this phenomenon going in reverse. You have the ideological centrality of Hindu

nationalism, and the core of that ideological centrality is the glorification of power and violence. In fact, their entire theodicy of religion is that Hindus have been victimized for thousands of years precisely because they embraced, you know, these nonsensical ideologies like Buddhism and Gandhism, and all this kind of peace-loving stuff. So the centrality and legitimation of violence as an instrument is actually relatively new—and there are groups working against that. But, I think it has to be said, with some alarm, that the balance has shifted.

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Dr. Pratap Bhanu Mehta [*continued*]: I think the second thing which this particular government has managed to do (and it's, again quite a remarkable phenomenon) is that it has actually managed to align a lot of disparate crosscutting Hindu denominations into one overarching political structure. So, when Prime Minister [Narendra] Modi, for example, inaugurated the Ram temple…I mean, it was almost meant to be a show of Hindu unity in some ways. And I think one thread you're seeing in religious politics across the world is, previously, religious denominations used to take pride in defining themselves against the State, right? That this is a domain in which the state should not interfere. Now, religious denominations want to increase their power using state power. You're seeing that with the church in Hungary. You're seeing that in Russia. That's a new phenomenon. It's a kind of reversal of that traditional denominational suspicion that I think Hindu groups, in some senses, had to the state.And I think the third thing which I think is, again, unprecedented is [this]: I have to say, at least in my lifetime, that I have not seen the kind of dissemination of

hate against minorities (particularly Muslims) being normalized. Not just amongst religious circles, but this kind of strange overlap between religion and nationalism. So, in some senses, what's happening in India right now is actually going against the grain of a lot of its twentieth-century trajectory. I mean, these tendencies were always there. But, in some senses, they were considered the subordinate clause in the modern Indian story, not the main clause.

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Dr. Melissa Deckman: Yeah, I think that's actually a nice segue to talk about Christian nationalism in the US context, because I think we are seeing some very unprecedented and troubling trends with respect to the promotion of political violence here in this country; with respect to really heightening sort of language that is trying to clearly make distinctions between in-groups and out-groups (with the out-groups being, of course, religious minorities and, often, people of color and other marginalized groups in society). And so, if we could just take maybe four minutes to look at a couple of slides I put together here at PRRI. What we do is we collect lots of data. We interview thousands and thousands of people annually to get a sense of what Americans are thinking and looking at trends with respect to religion and politics. And so, I'm going to just share a few slides with respect to our work on Christian nationalism as a way to conclude this part of the conversation.

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One of the things that we've been really chronicling, especially since the events of

January 6th and the attempted insurrection at the US Capitol, is the extent to which Americans are subscribing to Christian nationalist ideology. And so, this data comes from our American Values Atlas. I encourage folks to go online and to look at this data. You can kind of play around with it and get a better sense of all the information that we have available on this topic and many others. But in terms of measuring Christian nationalism: in the last year we interviewed more than 20,000 Americans about their attitudes on a variety of issues that I think can be linked to what we call the propensity to hold Christian nationalist views. And so, we ask Americans the extent to which they agree that God has called Christians to exercise dominion over areas of society; the extent to which Americans think that we should declare America a Christian nation; that identity in terms of being an American is linked to being a Christian, and all of these sorts of things. And so, our scale is one that is multi-faceted.

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And what we do is we take the answers to those questions, and among Americans who strongly agree with all those five tenets, we classify them as being adherents of Christian nationalist ideology. So, roughly 1 in 10 Americans agree with these notions of Christian nationalism. We also find, though, an additional 20% of Americans are sympathetic to those views. They might not strongly agree with all of the questions that you saw earlier, but there is a propensity to be largely sympathetic to those views. About 37% of Americans we categorized as completely rejecting those statements that you saw a little bit earlier. And so, an additional 30% are very, very skeptical of most of those statements that we asked Americans to respond to.

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Dr. Melissa Deckman [*continued*]: As you might not be surprised to learn, there are clearly some partisan elements of who is likely to espouse Christian nationalist views. Republicans are three times as likely as Democrats to be either adherents to or sympathetic to Christian nationalist views. Views of Trump also are linked pretty strongly to a propensity to adopt Christian nationalist views as well.

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One of the things that's unique about our data here is, with more than 20,000 interviews being conducted last year, we're able to look at the relationship of Christian nationalist views within the fifty states compared to, for example, its links to the percentage of Americans voting for Donald Trump. And there's a very clear correlation you can kind of see—a perfect correlation, statistically.

00:48:05

As average scores on the Christian nationalism scale increase in all fifty states, you also see that those were the states that were more likely to have voted for Donald Trump in 2020.

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So, what does this mean with respect to democracy and support for democracy? And this is getting back to some of Pratap's earlier points on violence. One of the things that we've asked pretty consistently (and that's the last several years) is the extent to

which Americans—if you look at the right hand of your screen—say that because things have gotten so far off track, true patriots might have to resort to violence. Now, 19% of Americans nationally last year agreed with that sentiment (that's pretty troubling in and of itself). But clearly, Christian national adherents are more than twice as likely to agree with that statement.

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On the left part of the screen is a question that really gets more into thinking in terms of the apocalypse. And we used this question to measure QAnon as well (American proclivities to adopt QAnon theories). And so, 54% of Christian nationalists adherents and an additional 45% of sympathizers believe that "a storm is coming that will sweep away elites in power." So there is sort of a religious imagery with respect to Christian nationalism that we see in our data.

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And, last but not least—just to share one other data point—we routinely asked Americans about their support for religious pluralism in this country. And, we asked Americans last year in a survey whether or not they would largely prefer the US to be a nation made up of a variety of people belonging to a wide variety of religions, or would they prefer, essentially, for the US to be a Christian nation. It's very clear that Christian nationalists are far more likely to say that the US should really be home to Christians by and large (primarily) versus most Americans who actually advocate for and believe that we should be a nation that belongs to a wide variety of religions.

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And so, I just was curious as to David and Pratap's views on some of the findings that we have here at PRRI and what they think their studies of other comparative examples (in terms of nationalism and its growing threat to democracy) [add to these findings]. How does it speak to what's happening in the US? Or, is the US context something that is unique (with respect to challenges of democracy and the role of religion in challenging democracy).

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Dr. Pratap Bhanu Mehta: I mean, these are fascinating—and a little bit disturbing—findings. So, I think there are obviously a couple of common themes that jump out, right? I think (1) the sense that Christian nationalists have that Christianity is beleaguered in some ways or the other, right? And I think the interesting question, comparatively, is diagnosing where the sense of being beleaguered comes from. You know? It obviously, clearly, has a values dimension to it. That religious adherents feel that they're living in a cultural environment where they can no longer control the kinds of values people live by or express. That's one element to it. Is there something else to it? I think that's the first thing that jumps out to me, I think—that sense of being beleaguered.

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The second thing that jumps out (and this is, again, a big change we see in India as well) which is that it used to be the case in Indian democracy (maybe it'll change again

with the election, we hope) that actually religiosity, or expressions of religiosity, did not tell you practically anything about electoral behavior and voting behavior. Right?

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Over the last fifteen years that began to change. At least [according to], the few studies we have, and the data we have isn't as good, in some ways. But, actually, expressions of religiosity began to be more correlated with support for the BJP [Bharatiya Janata Party] in some ways. So, in a sense, that part is an identification—and an identification of religion with particular political party projects—actually growing stronger. So those are the two obvious things that kind of jump out at me. But David, I'm sure, has more things to add.

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Dr. David Buckley: Sure, just briefly. Melissa, it actually really resonates with some of the trends that I try to document in this book (on religion in the State Department and Trump foreign policy) that I have coming out in a bit: this kind of two-faced attitude towards existing institutions. On the one hand, a sense that institutions should be under our control, right? And so, when that's possible, [there exists] a willingness to actually use those institutions from time to time. But, also, when institutions are not functioning as they should be, [there is] a willingness to either disregard them, or you've even kind of actively confront them, right? And, potentially, even with violence. I think that that resonates with some of what we saw, for instance, in religion and Trump administration forum policy.

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On the one hand, there were times, actually, when the Trump foreign policy bureaucracy seemed to work with religion quite closely. (Think about the ministerials on international religious freedom, right?). Those were large, bureaucratized events. That was not an anti-institutional moment. That was a moment when the organs of the state were acting as they should be (quote, unquote right?). But at the same time—in instances where elements of the alleged deep state [*frames the words "deep state" with air quotes* gesture] were not behaving as they should be—turn against it quite actively, and even receive a kind of moral endorsement in that [opposition] from some of the religious loyalists around the Trump administration. We saw very supportive statements, for instance, of Trump in some of the classified document investigations not just from his political loyalists, but from his Christian nationalist loyalists, right? And so, I think that really resonates with that sort of two-faced attitude towards how you confront existing American institutions that you guys [at PRRI] are seeing in some of that data.

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Dr. Melissa Deckman: Yeah, I think those are all really good points, and I'm really excited to read what your book has to say. But, clearly, with Christian nationalism as a threat (and the Trump administration and the Trump campaign disregarding any sort of free and fair election if it doesn't really suit the results that they're looking for), I think that's one the biggest threats that we're facing in 2024. And clearly, I think the Trump campaign—and many Republican leaders—have already said that if the election

is not won, it's going to be disregarded. Right? That is a pretty alarming state of affairs, certainly.

00:55:06

Dr. Melissa Deckman [*continued*]: So we have just a few minutes (about five minutes). And so [we have] a couple of questions to get to, and maybe some final thoughts from both of our panelists here. And I know that Molly wanted to kind of summarize a few things for us at the very end. So, we have one question: "To what degree do you see modern religious institutions serving as incubators for learning about democratic decision-making, governance and leadership?" So, either Pratap or David: To what degree do you see modern religious institutions serving as incubators for learning about democratic decision-making or governance? I'm thinking, of course, that just get back to the very kind of very classic Putnam —

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Dr. David Buckley: —Yeah, kind of Tocquevillian. Right?

00:55:49.020

Dr. Melissa Deckman: — Churches, Tocquevillian …—

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Dr. David Buckley: —Does the Tocquevillian-Putnam argument still operate, right? So, you know, the very concrete example of this would be domestic citizen election

monitoring in the Philippines, mostly done by a group called the Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting. This group mobilizes hundreds of thousands—hundreds of thousands—of citizen election observers in national elections, mostly through religious congregations. They're organized by congregations; they're trained in congregations; and then, they are deployed to polling stations. This is kind of the classic Tocquevillian argument (I think) about learning citizenship in our local community associations, which may often be religious in nature.

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I guess the question I would have is whether those kinds of citizen initiatives are capable of pivoting away from the electoral procedures of democracy to some of the more diffuse threats to democracy that we're facing. (Like the undermining of judicial independence, right? Or efforts to revise constitutions, right?) And I think, there, maybe the evidence is—or the jury is—still out. But, absolutely, a lot of that work goes on at the grassroots in the Philippine context (and, I think, elsewhere) for sure.

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Dr. Pratap Bhanu Mehta: So, if I can just add a couple of thoughts to that, right? So, the two ways in which you can actually think of certain kinds of religious politics and religious mobilization helping the cause of democracy… I mean, historically, religions have been a great source of social reform, you know. Think of the abolitionist movement. In India, there have been religious-based movements against caste, which is still, one could argue, probably the biggest structural challenge in some ways, right?

So, there are at least forms of religious movements that can actually produce egalitarian mores (or more egalitarian mores that are actually more compatible with democracy). I think that's that.

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The place where I see tension the most is actually the tension between freedom and religion. So, you can get a lot of mobilizational energy in religious groups. Actually, in many societies, religious groups are the only social spaces women are allowed. [Religious spaces] are actually great sites of their kind of publicness, which in other ways might not be allowed. So, there are certainly all kinds of democratic agency that different sites of religion can actually mobilize.

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I think the place where I am a little bit wary is when it comes to saying, "Okay, will this mobilizational energy stand in the service or cause of individual freedom?" Because it can, actually, easily be turned also to suppress difference and individual freedom. So, it's the tension between freedom and political agency that I think comes out a lot more in this mobilization. Which is quite compatible with saying that they are also the source of incredible virtues of a different kind.

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Dr. Melissa Deckman: Well, I think we're going to have to have that be the last word. This hour has certainly flown by. We had a couple of other questions that,

unfortunately, we couldn't get to, but I would encourage the questioners to please look at the research that David and Pratap are doing now; look at our website at PRRI (we have all kinds of data in the US context about the growing threat of Christian nationalism in the US). And I wanted to turn it over to Molly for some final thoughts before we end.

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Dr. Molly Laas: Great. Thank you so much, Melissa. I just would like to, first, thank the panelists—Melissa Deckman, Pratap Bhanu Mehta, David Buckley—for being here and sharing their valuable insights with us. I'd also like to thank the Luce Foundation again for funding the *Intersections* platform. And, I just want to remind everyone to please visit the *Intersections* website, where we hope to have more information about this topic and about other topics in the religion and the public sphere broader world. So again, thank you so much. And so, I will close it out now. Bye-bye.