

Democracy in Danger

S1E3: God's Country

Will Hitchcock [00:00:03] Hello, I'm Will Hitchcock, professor of history at the University of Virginia.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:00:07] And I'm Siva Vaidyanathan a media studies professor and director of UVA's Deliberative Media Lab.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:13] And from the University's Democracy Initiative, this is Democracy in Danger. So far on the show, we've talked to a couple of scholars about right wing media in the United States and about populist autocrats in Latin America and the threats they pose to democratic governance. Well, this time in our effort to make sense of the challenges facing liberal democracy, we're going to explore Christian nationalism in America.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:00:39] Will, one of the most interesting features of American politics these days is the allegiance between white evangelical Christians and President Donald Trump. You know, he is a person who's bragged about molesting women. He has a record of public behavior that that one would think religious people would recoil against and find deeply troubling.

Will Hitchcock [00:01:03] Yeah, it's utterly baffling that the Christian right would be so enthusiastic about a figure as unreligious as Donald Trump. But observers have said, look, Christian leaders are savvy and they figure the issue is not Donald Trump's morality. The issue is, will he carry out an agenda that they have crafted?

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:01:22] Yeah, exactly. And, you know, you get the sense these days that it is as much about white evangelicals using Donald Trump as Trump using evangelicals. And that's something I think our guest today will have a lot to say about. We're joined today here in Charlottesville by Matthew Hedstrom, who's a religious studies professor and American studies professor and a colleague of ours at the University of Virginia. He is a specialist in the history of religion and culture in the United States.

Will Hitchcock [00:01:50] Matt, it's great to have you on Democracy in Danger.

Matt Hedstrom [00:01:53] Thanks so much, Will and Siva, for having me here. It's a real pleasure.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:01:57] Well, Matt, you are historian of Protestantism in the United States. And I'd like to start out with a question about that. How do you explain the strong support among white Christian conservatives in America for this president?

Matt Hedstrom [00:02:15] Yeah, this is the question that has been kind of perplexing me and my colleagues in this field for four years now. And, you know, when I think about it, ultimately, I think we all make compromises when we vote. Right? There are no perfect candidates. And so in those compromises, we're not so much betraying our values as we're revealing them. What are we willing to compromise and what not? What do we prioritize? And here when we look at white evangelical conservatives and their support for Trump I think we see that access to power is probably more important than personal purity or piety - than the character of the president. This, of course, is quite different than what they were saying in the 90s during the Bill Clinton era. But ultimately, I don't think

evangelicals are unique in this at all. I mean, when I vote, I'm actually more interested in the public actions of the people I vote for than in their private lives or their personal behavior. So, you know, I don't think I don't think they're unique in that sense. And when Trump talked about Supreme Court justices and he put out his list of justices, they looked at that and they said, yeah, that's what we want.

Will Hitchcock [00:03:30] Matt, before we get too far into our conversation about the evangelical community and its role in our politics today, can you just walk us through the fault lines that run through the evangelical community on race? We're talking principally about an ideology that has emerged from white evangelical conservatives. But there is a black evangelical community that may or may not align at all with these ideas and principles. How attentive to that divide should we be as analysts and scholars?

Matt Hedstrom [00:04:04] Well, on the one hand, I think we need to be centrally attentive to it. We can only talk about white evangelicals when we talk about, say, support for Trump, because, of course, the number of African-Americans who support Trump is extremely low. And in fact, there's some debate, even whether at this point the term evangelical can properly be applied to the black church. There are many African-American Protestant Christians, for example, that if you were to go through a kind of theological checklist, would line up very consistently with the tenants of their white evangelical coreligionists. And yet they don't use the term evangelical because it has been so thoroughly co-opted by a certain political agenda. You know, the old saying that 11:00 a.m. on Sunday is the most segregated hour in American life remains - and it remains within American evangelicalism profoundly.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:05:01] The name of the show is, is Democracy in Danger. It's not Democrats in danger, it's not about American politics and its partisan nature, per se. So we're curious about sort of a larger question, and that is the relationship between elements of these political trends, and the commitment to democracy that this country has had, maybe has now, maybe might not have in the future. And, you know, some analysts of this contemporary religious dynamic have used the term Christian nationalism to describe a new kind of political ideology that that seems to have taken root among evangelical Protestants or white evangelical Protestants. So does this term Christian nationalism work for you? What does it mean? Is it a useful way to talk about what's going on now and what are its implications for democracy?

Matt Hedstrom [00:05:59] Yeah, big, big questions. I'm actually quite taken with the term Christian nationalism. I might even prefer a related term that some scholars have tried to put forward, but hasn't quite gotten the same traction. And that is the term Christian-ism, you know, kind of borrowed from Islamism, which to me is a way of really framing this as a political ideology in sort of religious terms or maybe with some theological elements then fundamentally a sort of version or variety of Christianity. But if Christian nationalism is the term that has currency, I'm perfectly fine with it. But when I hear the term Christian nationalism, what I think it means most fundamentally is simply the idea that the United States is, or has been, or ought to be a Christian nation. And this can take a variety of forms. It can take a kind of theological form. You know, this very old idea that the United States has received some sort of divine blessing, that it has a divine mission in the world, that American success, prosperity, military might, is evidence of this divine blessing and are the tools to be used for this divine mission. Kind of more narrowly, there's the related sense that government in the United States should privilege Christianity and American public life. And this shows up in, you know, Christmas displays on public land or Christian language from politicians. It shows up in the so-called religious freedom agenda. This is

about sort of Christianity in American public life. And there are extreme forms of this that are really highly theocratic. They're sometimes called dominionism. This idea that Christians should have dominion. It calls for a fuller ratio of the separation of church and state.

Will Hitchcock [00:07:52] Matt, I'm curious, in your use of the term Christian-ism and dominionism, these are terms that are trying to get at the heart of this religious political ideology. Where do these advocates of these ideas want to take the country? What is their vision? What's the end state? I mean, a theocracy in America is kind of hard to imagine, but is there a kind of social or political order that these voices are searching for?

Will Hitchcock [00:08:21] So I would agree with you that a full-fledged theocracy sort of, you know, Iran 1979 is kind of hard to imagine in the United States. It's not what keeps me up at night. But there are those we should be clear who that is their end goal. And they're out there. But more than that, I think it is an effort to, as I said, kind of keep Christianity in a privileged place or renew or augment its privileged place in American public life. That's a fundamentally kind of illiberal sensibility. It's not a notion of the equality of all citizens. It's that there are some citizens are more equal than others. And I think there are ways in which that could very realistically come to be. Lastly, though, I would say that Christian nationalism has become powerfully - and I think this is very important to understanding support for Trump - a kind of identity, a tribal identity. "We are Christians and this is our country." This 'take America back' language. And this is how it gets so closely tied up into questions related to race and immigration kind of clash of civilizations. It has occurred to me and other observers regarding the immigration debates that we're seeing now, that those folks coming from Latin America and the United States tend to be more Christian than the average of the white American population. In other words, if you're concerned with the Christian character of the United States, you should want more immigration from Latin America. And yet, of course, we don't see that among the Christian nationalists. And I think that really gets to how centrally race is not only just sort of bound up into these ideas of Christian nationalism, but in some ways maybe even more important than just kind of purely the Christian identity of the country. And I would say also in this kind of traditional ordering of society that is highly patriarchal, and so this is in a way, another way that we can explain that sort of tolerance for Trump's sexual conquests and swagger and all the rest. You know, for some, I think this is not a bug, but a feature. Right? This is a display of a kind of patriarchal authority that they see as related to the way in which society should be properly ordered.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:10:47] So if humans are supposed to have dominion - power over the earth and all of its resources - right? It's been granted by God for our use, right? That raises some pretty interesting implications for things as broad and as important as climate policy, right? Are we are we supposed to be burning the gifts that God gave us, and that he put deep into the earth? And I I also wonder about the implications for enlightenment habits of thought on which Democratic or Republican ideology is founded. Right? Or we're supposed to, in a Democratic republic, be able to have deliberations and debates with some level of trust and empiricism, some shared sense of evidence. And, you know, a direct appeal to authority, a direct appeal to scripture as an argument ender seems to be incompatible with that. Are we seen with the rise of a very muscular, articulated Christian nationalism or dominionism a real threat to those habits of mind in public life?

Matt Hedstrom [00:11:58] Yeah, so I would make a distinction between dominionism and Christian nationalism more broadly. I think that dominionism is a kind of particular subset

of Christian nationalism. The most extreme version of Christian nationalism and the dominionist, they would say simply that they would make a theological argument about human nature. They would say human nature is fundamentally sinful and flawed. Human reason is therefore unreliable as a guide to proper life, both as an individual and as the proper ordering of society. And therefore, the only true guide is God's revealed word. And so, therefore, you know, all of these things that you talk about in terms of the Enlightenment and the kind of robust civic debate based on reason and evidence, these are these are false paths because they rely on faulty instruments, those faulty instruments being human beings and human reason. And fortunately, we were not left alone with those devices. We have God to guide us. You know, you're right to say that it's fundamentally contradictory to the very nature and premises of our kind of constitutional order and our small r Republican values.

Will Hitchcock [00:13:12] Matt, I want to turn to an event that has been on everyone's mind during this extraordinary summer of 2020. We saw recently armed guards using rubber bullets and pepper spray to clear peaceful protesters from Lafayette Square in front of the White House so that President Trump could do a photo op with a Bible in his hand while standing in front of an Episcopal church. It was such an extraordinary confluence of images and it was horrifying and shocking, but also just very strange. Can you help us unpack that? What did President Trump think he was doing? How did his audience of Christian nationalists read that event, in your opinion?

Matt Hedstrom [00:13:58] In in a certain sense I came away from watching that, both sort of horrified and somewhat encouraged. And I was horrified simply by the display of violence and by the notion that this is the president of the United States who thinks this is a good thing to do and also encouraged that, by and large, I think it failed. There were some leaders on the sort of Christian nationalist right, if we want to call it that, who applauded it - those people who are most thoroughly in sort of Trump's "camp". Again, it made me think about the kinds of compromises that political actors are willing to make and what those compromises help us understand about what are, kind of, central values and what are more peripheral values. And in this case, what I see is that those who celebrated what Trump did, I think fundamentally were pleased with the very things that horrified many of the rest of us and that was the display of, in his word, domination. Right? This display of authoritarian muscularity. The violence, I think, was actually part of the appeal here. Here is somebody who is willing to take decisive action in defense of religion. It was actually part of the stagecraft that for these constituencies, for the kind of Christian nationalist constituencies, is actually what worked. And much of the rest of it, you know, the kind of religious stagecraft was kind of a mess. I mean, it's pretty odd to see Donald Trump trying to appeal to his conservative religious base by defending a very progressive Episcopal church. You know, a church with a strong social justice agenda also standing there very awkwardly holding a Bible that seemed like a foreign object to Trump. I noticed maybe not many others noticed, but I noticed it was a version of the Bible, the revised standard version that came out in the 1940s, and that for decades, fundamentalists and evangelicals have thought with a terrible translation because it was all full of modernist scholarship. So the religious dimensions of it were really kind of off base. And yet that didn't matter. The folks who cheered him on didn't really care about those things. What they cared about was the display of authority, the display of power, the violence. And you know that that's pretty alarming to think that those were the things that were actually appealing about it.

Will Hitchcock [00:16:30] Matt, we have recently talked to Federico Finchelstein about populism and fascism in Latin America. And the echoes were so strong between what

Federico was talking about in Latin America and the images that Trump clearly wanted to push on the public. He was trying to define himself as a singular figure of authority, and he was trying to reinforce the cult of personality, to reinforce the notion that he commands the power to decide whether to let those protesters protest or to sweep them away in a hail of rubber bullets. There was something shocking about the way in which he leaned into this muscular use of force. And look, frankly, that's drawn from the fascist populist playbook. Now, he may not know that, but he has an instinct for the stagecraft of authority - power - as you describe it, I think is really quite alarming.

Matt Hedstrom [00:17:21] Yeah, absolutely. And, you know, again, I come away from it basically encouraged because I think that that played to elements of his base. But those elements are still a decided minority in American life.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:17:38] Matt, if I could ask you a bit about Trump's own dabbling in theological influence, if you maybe too strong a way of phrasing it. When Trump was a young man, he attended services led by Norman Vincent Peale, who is best known for his, you know, multi decade bestseller, *The Power of Positive Thinking*. And so much of what we see in Trump's rhetorical style reflects this absolute belief that if you think it, it can happen. And if you just keep pledging that there will be a COVID19 vaccine by December, then it will happen. Is that still a major part of American civic and religious life, or is Trump's expression of it vestigial?

Matt Hedstrom [00:18:33] It is central to American Christianity and to American religion and kind of American popular culture. I think this is so important to understanding Trump. You know, Peale was more than anything else, the preacher to salesman. Much of his income came from giving speeches to sales conventions. And what is Trump throughout his whole career? He's nothing but a salesman. And so I think understanding Peale and the power of positive thinking is vital to understanding Trump. And there are strong links between Peale's kind of liberal Protestant version, theologically liberal Protestant version of positive thinking and the more Pentecostal inflected prosperity gospel. And many of Trump's religious advisers and many of its most ardent supporters, people like Paula White, come from the Prosperity Gospel tradition, which has a similar notion of kind of name it and claim it, wish it into being, and it will come into being. Now, these may seem like kind of fringe ideas in your question was how central are these ideas in American life? I would say this is basically the theology of Oprah Winfrey. This is basically the theology of American self-help. So I think these ideas are extremely widespread and pervasive. And Trump is very much in tune with some cultural currents.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:20:00] Matt, know, I'm curious about if I could ask you to dig a bit deeper historically on this story as well. Because I think about all the varieties of American Christianity and all of the ways that it has contributed through its struggles, its activism, its theological shifts and splits to an enriching and expansion of the cultures and practices of American democracy. I think about how much the story of religious liberty is informed by the experience and struggles of the Mormon Church. I think about the ways in which abolition movements were in many ways led by different Protestant leaders. I'm, of course, struck by the influence of Protestantism on the civil rights movement, the influence of Protestantism on the rise of American popular music and all of its, you know, small D democratic glories. What does American Protestantism offer us today as perhaps an enrichment and expansion and a deepening of a culture and practice of American democracy?

Matt Hedstrom [00:21:17] Yeah, thanks for that question. I would add to your list. You know, I'm working now on a book about American religion and the United Nations, which is really sort of a book about how Americans have thought about and fought about what it means to be a citizen of the world. And I'm struck again in that book by how central American Protestants were in their kind of ecumenical organizing, which was very much a transatlantic enterprise. How important that was to laying the groundwork for so much of the transatlantic international cooperation that resulted in the United Nations. And so one thing I would add to your list is that American Christianity has contributed a global sensibility to Americans. I mean, and that goes back to the 19th century with returning missionaries. Many Americans first learned about peoples and places all around the world through church networks. And there's pretty good historical evidence that many of these returning missionaries brought with them changed racial sensibilities. Surprisingly, many of them came back as fervent anti colonialists and anti-racist because of what they had seen overseas. So, yeah, there's a long history of American religion in American Christianity contributing to kind of a robust democracy. And I would say to kind of liberal values broadly and, you know, it's a question of when we think about the religious right. We've been talking about things like dominionism, which I think are fundamentally illiberal. What does that look like in our contemporary politics?

Will Hitchcock [00:22:52] Matt, speaking of liberal values and illiberalism, I want to get your read on something that's just happened that I think our listeners are going to be curious about hearing your views on, and that is the Supreme Court decision in *Bostock v. Clayton County*. So in this case, the court, which, as you know, as a conservative majority just ruled that workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity violates the Civil Rights Act. And I'm wondering how Christian conservatives view this decision. How do they place it into their understanding of the Christian nation that you've just been describing?

Matt Hedstrom [00:23:33] Yeah, it may be a little bit early, of course, to be able to give a full answer to that question. But broadly speaking, I think it fits into narratives of decline that are often tied into the court. These go back to the seminal cases of the 1960s that remove mandatory Bible reading or prayer from the public schools and then goes through the *Roe v. Wade* decision. And on and on. And the court seen as one of the central instruments of the decline of American religious values, of the loss of the United States identity as a Christian nation. And I think this case, it was shocking to some because of the conservative majority. But these religious conservatives have a paradigm to put that in. And that paradigm is the dangers of the court. And I think, if anything, this will renew their central focus on the court in their politics and in their voting. We can look at some of the liberal justices and their ages and think of what a second Trump term might mean. Probably two more appointments. And that's going to motivate a lot of folks to get out and vote.

Will Hitchcock [00:24:46] Matt Hedstrom, thank you so much for joining us today on Democracy in Danger.

Matt Hedstrom [00:24:51] It was a real pleasure, thank you.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:25:09] Will, you know what's really interesting about this conversation we had with Matt? He has brought real historical sophistication to what is often presented as a very flat, purely transactional relationship between a white evangelical Christians and Donald Trump. And I think, you know, many people make the mistake of crying hypocrisy when looking at this allegiance. You know, I think we can see

from what Matt has brought to us that it's a much more deep and interesting phenomenon. And I think more importantly, we have to remember, this isn't just about what happened in the election of 2016 or what will happen in the election of 2020. What Matt is bringing up are some deep historical, cultural, religious and political trends that are likely to influence the health of democracy in the United States for many decades.

Will Hitchcock [00:26:11] I agree, Siva. I mean, I think Matt really showed us that the increasing strength and influence of the Christian right is not something that has just occurred. It's been going on for 50 years. And it is, in fact, a major source of illiberal trends in our democracy. But this is by design. You know, white Protestant evangelical conservatives have been working to advance their agenda, to bend U.S. culture and politics away from a secular, humanistic vision of America. And they want to put Christianity at the front and center of American public life. And I think Matt is telling us that Christian nationalists really do want to erase the divide between church and state.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:26:54] Well, we also learned from Matt, and we always have to remember, that there is a wide range of approaches to politics among white Christian conservatives in America. And so it really takes an attention to specificity and detail to make sense of the moment. And also, I think we can see that American evangelical Protestantism has simultaneously enriched and strengthened and broadened American democracy and has at times threatened the very operational foundations of American democracy.

Will Hitchcock [00:27:32] In a way, we can see that we should welcome more voices, more arguments in the public sphere from a variety of religious perspectives for sure. But when we talk about Christian nationalism, there are winners and there are losers. And, you know, as Christian conservatives have played a more influential role in public policy making, we can identify the people who are on the short end of the stick, nonwhite people, immigrants, LGBTQ Americans, even people who want to organize our society around science and empiricism are suddenly put on the defensive. So this is a debate with real policy implications for the shape of our democracy on our society.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:28:18] Absolutely. It's also important to remember that Christian nationalism and its various forms exists beyond the United States as well. It is a strong force in Brazil and we've talked about Brazil before on this series and we will talk about it again. It is a growing force in Italy. It is a phenomenon in many of the Eastern European nations, including many of the former Soviet republics. Christian nationalism in an Eastern Orthodox version is tremendously powerful in Russia. So, you know, a lot of the themes and practices that we see again in the United States and we refracted through Donald Trump because he's so unavoidable, are present in other contexts, in other places, in some places with greater political effect and power, in other places with minimal effect and power. But it's a really fascinating trend. I think it's safe to say that Christian nationalism around the world is better defined, better articulated, and in many cases stronger than it has been in many decades.

Will Hitchcock [00:29:36] That's it for this episode of Democracy in Danger. On our next show, Erica Lee will join us from the University of Minnesota, where she studies the history of xenophobia in the United States.

Erica Lee [00:29:46] Actually, politicians have found it expedient to demonize foreigners as a way of mobilizing voters, where immigration may be just one item in a larger agenda. And then in passing anti immigrant laws.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:30:05] In the meantime, let's keep this conversation going. Are you an evangelical Christian? What do you make of this idea of Christian nationalism? And do you consider it a threat to democracy in the United States? We want to hear from you. Please shoot us a tweet @UVAm medialab, or you can visit us online. Go to MediaLab.Virginia.edu. There you can find show notes, some links to related news and lots more about the state of democracy in the United States and around the world.

Will Hitchcock [00:30:37] You can subscribe to democracy in danger or wherever you get your podcasts. And if you like what you're hearing, or even if you don't, leave us a review and some stars.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:30:46] Today's episode was produced by Robert Armengol with help from Jennifer Ludovici. Support comes from the University of Virginia's Democracy Initiative and from the College of Arts and Sciences. Democracy in Danger is a project of UVAs Deliberative Media Lab. The show is distributed by the Virginia Audio Collective from WTJU Radio in Charlottesville. I'm Siva Vaidyanathan.

Will Hitchcock [00:31:12] And I'm Will Hitchcock. See you again soon.