

## **Democracy in Danger**

### **S4 E10 Crisis of Faith**

**Will Hitchcock** [00:00:03] Hello, I'm Will Hitchcock.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:00:04] And I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:00:06] And from the University of Virginia's Deliberative Media Lab, this is Democracy in Danger.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:00:12] Will, across the United States, we've seen a remarkable array of new laws, especially dear to religious conservatives. Abortion restrictions in Mississippi and Texas and now Idaho. From Florida to Montana, we've seen rules on how educators can teach about racial and sexual identity. We've seen a flurry of limits on voting itself, often with the blessing of white evangelical leaders who say they're worried about election integrity.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:00:43] Siva, you remember when we just started the podcast, we invited our colleague Matt Hedstrom.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:00:47] Yeah, yeah.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:00:48] So Matt, Matt said that the Christian right was kind of achieving its zenith of influence in American political life, thanks to, of all people, Donald Trump, a notorious philanderer and immoral person. Now in Matt's telling, Trump was embraced by the Christian Right because he was the vehicle, however flawed through which the Right could finally realize its objective of creating a white, Christian, patriarchal form of government in the United States and maybe, maybe in the West generally. So Trump and the Christian Right found that they share this disdain, this this loathing, maybe even for democracy. And the word they used and that Matt kind of keyed up for us was dominion. Dominion over the natural world, dominion over the political world. So I'm lying in bed at night these days and I'm asking myself, is this vision winning?

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:01:40] Yeah. Look, while white Christian nationalism certainly seems louder and perhaps even meaner than it has in years, this is not exactly my area of expertise, right? I can only tell you things are loud and things are mean. But luckily for us, we've invited someone to be with us this time who does research on this question and thinks a lot about the role of white evangelicalism in American society. Anthea Butler is a historian of religion at the University of Pennsylvania and the author of the acclaimed book *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America*. She joins us on the line today from Philadelphia. Anthea, welcome to Democracy in Danger.

**Anthea Butler** [00:02:23] Thank you, Siva. Thanks, Will.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:02:25] Well, let me throw Will's question to you, because I can answer it. Now, you write in your book that evangelicalism is much more than a religious movement or even a range of spiritual affinities. Rather, you write, it is a nationalistic political movement whose purpose is to support the hegemony of white Christian men over and against the flourishing of others. Now, that sounds to me like the very essence of an anti-democratic movement. Would you unpack this for us and tell us where this politicized evangelical right came from, where it's going, and how are they doing?

**Anthea Butler** [00:03:04] Well, they're doing pretty well, given everything that's happening. That's number one. So all the reports of the religious Right's demise are greatly exaggerated. And what you have is the intersection of lots of things. Some of it has to do with evangelicals and morality. Some of it has to do with the way that evangelicals organize not just in churches, but in political action groups such as Focus on the Family and Family Research Council that have been lobbying for decades on the Hill. And everybody has ignored all of this, but there's a lot of money behind it. Also, there are many people right now who believe that they need to bring in the kingdom by espousing dominionist ideas like Matt talked about. And I think that's really important to think about. And then finally, I think the thing that people don't really consider very much is that Donald Trump was just the inheritor of a lot of things that were happening prior to him. So, while you might think of Donald Trump as the one that gave them everything, which is true, lots of people had to go before. And as I like to say, and I hate to bring her up, but I will, Sarah Palin is the mother of them all in a certain sort of way. And that 2008 campaign was more important and more dangerous than a lot of people thought it was.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:04:18] Whoa, that's cool. I got to jump on that. Tell us why Sarah Palin is the mother of the, of the most recent iteration of this evangelical racism.

**Anthea Butler** [00:04:26] Well, because part of what happened was that when John McCain picked Sarah Palin for his running mate, he had a huge problem. Evangelicals didn't really like him. What people really need to understand was that she was the one that came up with lamestream media, death panels, all of this thing. And so while we tend to think of her as being, you know, not that smart and from Wasilla, Alaska, and she didn't really do much as a governor, what she did was made it easier for politicians to become popular and reality TV show figures. I mean, you don't get Trump without having Palin. Trump was just a guy with a loud mouth. But what she did was make it okay for somebody like her who, you know, was okay – not really okay, but just okay as a governor – to become a kind of a social figure that also became a political figure and just had the right timing to not win the election, but to come in with the Tea Party and everything else that everybody forgets about. But doesn't remember that that was a big driving force of where we are right now, and opened the door for lots of people like Marjorie Taylor Greene and, you know, Boebert and a bunch of other politicians who are know-nothings but get a lot of money and a lot of power and a lot of media airtime.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:05:44] Let me take you back to an even earlier sort of foundational moment in this, in this sometimes mythical narrative. So the evangelical Right likes to point to Roe v Wade, 1973, as the moment when they suddenly began to organize against the ruling in Roe v Wade that made access to abortion legal. You tell a different story that really the case that people should be focusing on, that historians and analysts should focus on, is Green v Connally. Now, in that case, 1971, the courts upheld an IRS rule stripping tax exempt status of private Christian schools that were basically set up as segregation academies. Now, tell us a little bit about that history, because here again, you're pointing us to a new direction to think about how we got here.

**Anthea Butler** [00:06:29] Mm hmm. Yeah, I am. And part of that new direction will give him the credit where he is due. Randall Balmer wrote about this in Politico a few years back, and I sort of picked up on it as a way to think about how to open up this door. We have to think about what happened in Brown versus Board in '54. Basically what you had were people who were upset about integration. They started segregation academies where they had, you know, all white students go Christian schools and all of this. And so when you get to Green versus Connally, Green versus Conally is about how are we going

to pay taxes because we don't want to integrate and they don't want to pay taxes. And this was a huge reason why people were able to mobilize in the 1970s. And you have to look at figures that are there, like Paul Weyrich, which helped this happen, which bring together certain elements like mailing lists and all of this stuff to galvanize people to not so much be thinking about Roe versus Wade, but to think about what's going to happen to their organizations when they have to pay taxes. And I think this is the part that everybody misses about evangelicals and right wingers and politics, is that they tend to think about these as moral issues. But the morality is hiding the quest for power, the quest for authority, and the money that is behind all of this. And if you follow the money, you'll understand what's really happening.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:07:43] Right. And white supremacy is all about power and authority, right? The ability to dictate how society should be structured and who should benefit from the fruits of everyone's labor, right? So let's talk about the connections between the white evangelical Right and white supremacy. Now, of course, the earlier story is one of white evangelical or at least white Protestant partnership with the efforts to maintain slavery.

**Anthea Butler** [00:08:12] Evangelicals were slaveholders. They were participants, eager participants. Not only eager participants, but eager participants enough to change their meaning of scripture to fit slavery.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:08:24] Okay. So you might say that was chapter one. This is chapter two that you've described with Green versus Connally. What what are we in now? What is chapter three like? What is the role of white evangelical movements within the effort to maintain and extend white supremacy?

**Anthea Butler** [00:08:40] We're in another phase. We're in the second redemption, as Barbara calls it. And I think, you know, Reverend Barbara's right. I think we're in another redemption period in which they want to claw back everything that has been given in terms of civil rights and the democratic process, they want to take that back. And for them, this is where you see the campaigns about books against CRT. Just recently looking at the state of Florida, where they are taking even math books away because they're too diverse. I mean, I don't understand how math is diverse. It's just ridiculous. But these are campaigns that are old campaigns. This is the thing I think people need to understand is everything that we're seeing today is not something new. It is a reboot for the time. So whether we're talking about books or, you know, pro-life movements and trying to be anti-abortion and cutting down the laws, cutting down voting rights, all this stuff, all of this is of a piece. We have seen this before. But what annoys me greatly is the press acts like they're so surprised about this, first of all. And it's secondarily that nobody remembers history. And I think if you have a historical mindset about this, which is why this book, the way that I did, you have to understand that this is a huge history for evangelicals. It's not something that happened yesterday. It's a 200 plus year project they've been on.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:09:59] You know, as a historian, I'm fascinated by thinking about how historians are going to write the history of the Obama presidency and in particular, its legacies. And I just wonder, you know, what did the Obama presidency do to the religious Right? Now, there's one school that says it made them go absolutely crazy. There's another school of thought, that says well but remember, the Tea Party emerged as this kind of, you know, small government, low budgets, you know, low taxes kind of movement. Was that all just a rhetorical mask for fundamental racism?

**Anthea Butler** [00:10:29] Well, I wouldn't say it was a rhetorical mask for fundamental racism. It was just the outgrowth of fundamental racism that was already there. It's a different way of saying it. This is, it's always been there, but it was genteel before you could hide it behind campaigns like the Bush campaign in 2000, where he accused John McCain of having a black love child. Or you could hide it the way his father did with the Willie Horton campaign in '88, right? You could hide it in certain subtle ways. Reagan did it, everybody did it, right? But you know what I think the Obama presidency did was not only make them crazy, but make them realize that, oh, this is the end. We are not going to be able to get anything. We've had a black president. We could have a woman. We have got to stop this. This why you got Donald Trump. Because they needed somebody who was over the top to take them over the top. And that is exactly what he did.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:11:20] Right. Well, you know, the two Democratic presidents before Barack Obama, we have to contend with, were both Southern Baptists from former slave states. And in one case, Jimmy Carter was a professed segregationist for the early part of his political career and then, like made the turn, turned against his mentor, Lester Maddox, made the turn toward being integrationist, towards supporting civil rights at great risk, and then played a very interesting role in the maybe delay of party realignment, right? Maybe deferred party realignment for four years or so, right? Because he seemed to speak the language of the white evangelical movement and at the same time seemed unthreatening to those who supported civil rights. And then, you know, Bill Clinton has its own story. Reflect on that. Reflect on how national politics intersected with these grassroots movements.

**Anthea Butler** [00:12:18] Well, let me just put it to you this way. These are both Southern boys. They know how to present themselves. They knew how to do the game and played this political role so that they could get black voters. To me, this is like one of those things where I'm like, this is not something that you need to, like, really think deeply about. It's about the ways in which people act in the South. There is this kind of politeness of race that, you know, you don't have to go into really bad races. This is what's different about right now and what Donald Trump as a northerner did not understand it. You didn't have to go to the nth degree to be really rascally racist, right? You just can, you know, maybe just step it up and have the politeness on top. So what I think about, you know, Carter and Clinton, I think about two men who knew how to navigate Southern mores and they knew how to be political in that way, where they could garner black votes even if they didn't have their racial politics all together right, right? You know, we had the thing about Clinton and, you know, the Predator thing and all of that stuff that came up during his, you know, time in office. So I think what we see from there to now is a sense in which people have sort of taken off the veneer of what covers up the racism. And it's just straight up racism, right? That's not you know, this is what Trump has let loose.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:13:41] So, I mean, the big transition here is Reagan, right? Who was not there. He didn't, well, maybe he had a finer sense of how to do the Hollywood version of the dog whistle, right? And at the same time, he presented himself and he put forward that myth of colorblindness, right? This notion of like I am opposed to certain policies because they actually are racist, right? And he pushes that. And, you know, look, we're talking about a divorced, largely secular figure, a person who doesn't walk the walk, live the life the way that Jimmy Carter did. A person who doesn't actually go to church, a person who doesn't, you know, much like Trump, doesn't sound like them. And yet they flocked, right? The white evangelicals flocked a way from Carter to Reagan. And, you know, Clinton won back a few of them. But what a change. How do you explain Reagan in this role?

**Anthea Butler** [00:14:37] Well, Reagan did go to church. I actually was at a church service that Reagan was at Bel Air Presbyterian. This was after he was president, okay, while I was in seminary. And it was a really interesting this is I think by the time this happened, he was already a little bit into the Alzheimer's. So he wasn't like his normal self, I would say. But the thing about Reagan is this, Reagan knew how to signal really well. So when you open up your campaign in Philadelphia, Mississippi, right near where Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman are murdered, and you talk about states' rights in your speech. Well, then you're just giving a big signal to everybody else, no matter where you're from, that, hey, I'm about white people, but we're going to pretend that this is colorblind. So all those pictures of Nancy Reagan with Mr. T and all this, he knew how to take those kinds of black figures who were very important in sort of the Southern California realm and put them as a part of his campaign. One of the most important people I think that applies to you is the Reverend E.V. Hill, who was a black pastor in Los Angeles, who was very much, you know, part of Reagan's campaign and part of how he presented himself to the public. And E.V. Hill was from Texas, very black, conservative, Baptist preacher. And that helped him to make this sort of colorblind thing while he's making all these horrible policies in the eighties. There's a reason why we had the best rap music ever in the eighties was because of, you know, Ronald Reagan with all his terrible policies for African-Americans.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:16:06] Right. Well, I'm glad we agree on the musical question. That is very good.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:16:10] Can I ask a question just generally kind of situating this conversation in the history of politics and religion? I mean, most sects like to pretend that they are somehow above politics. But to the analyst, the historian, it's obvious that religious leaders have always been political. I mean, you can't think of the history of the Catholic Church without thinking about temporal politics. Should we be surprised to find white evangelicals deeply involved in politics as much as anybody else coming from any church or temple?

**Anthea Butler** [00:16:40] Yeah, I don't think we should be surprised. I mean, I think that, you know, if you could think about what's going on in Myanmar, other places where people are saying, well, Buddhist are supposed to be, you know, peaceful and all this stuff, like haha you just got fooled, right? And it's very clear that politics and religion go together. I mean, it was political for Jesus, right? Wherever you think about the story of wherever you locate yourself, I mean, you got to deal with the Romans, you got to be political, right? And, you know, he's a political prisoner who ends up dying on a cross because of that, since we're doing this right after Easter, so let's talk about, you know, Christianity being political at its core, right? So I think this idea about, you know, religions aren't supposed to be political or something that's just, you know, a smokescreen to hide what's really going on. And I think that for evangelicals, this dance that they have done has done them a great service. It's allowed them to amass a tremendous amount of power in the American scene while pretending to be the moral arbiters. Now, I don't think that anybody thinks that after the 2016 and the 2020 election cycle anymore, I think that's gone. But up to that time, they were able to pretend that this was really the case. And now we know it's not. The question is, now what happens next?

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:17:48] So let's, let's flash to the painful recent past. In 2015, we saw the horrific slaughter of nine people at a Bible study at a black church in Charleston, South Carolina. Now, their murderer was a white supremacist, quite open about it, quite easily recruited into it. He was ultimately convicted of hate crimes and murder and faces a

death penalty. Now, now, this this massacre put all sorts of renewed attention on the problem of the Confederate flag. And we were all so shocked. And yet it only took a few years for this sort of set of ideas – what we thought at the moment was latent white supremacy – bursting through to achieve almost normal status in American daily life. It turned out the legacy of that slaughter in Charleston turned out to be the exact opposite of what we thought it was going to be at the moment. How do you reflect on that?

**Anthea Butler** [00:18:53] Well, see, I never thought it was going to do that. So that's number one. Let me say that up front. And number two, what happened the day before, Siva? You know what happened the day before? Donald Trump came down the escalator and announced his candidacy for president.

**Siva Vaidhyathan** [00:19:06] Oh, my God.

**Anthea Butler** [00:19:07] So it's no surprise that that happened the day after. And it's no surprise where we are now. I mean, I think one of the things about that event, which was really very difficult for me, based on what I write about and study, is that these things have happened over and over and over again. If you study anything about, you know, African-American religion or history, you know that more than nine people have died in churches because of churches being burned, you know, lynchings, all of this other kind of stuff, right? So what was appalling about that day was that they gave this kid, he was a kid back then, a hamburger to eat while he's in the car, and they took him alive when so many other black people have just died for breathing and, you know, move the wrong way in a car. So, you know, I think for me, it may seem like a watershed moment, but it's just one in hundreds of thousands of moments in America that have happened that have had no response.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:20:06] Well, no kidding. Can I just switch gears? Because I'm curious about something that you wrote about international affairs, about Russia, Ukraine and I want to bring it back into the story of American evangelicals. So it wasn't that long ago you wrote that white evangelical politicians and pundits are Russian leader, Vladimir Putin's biggest fan base. And I, you know, my head's already aching and now I'm trying to figure that one out as well. What is it about Putin? Is it his hostility to homosexuality? Is it his dominionist control of ancient Russian imagined empire? What is it about Putin that has drawn in evangelicals? And, you know, where does this map on the political spectrum? Conservatives used to hate Russia. Now they seem to love him. What is the work that evangelicalism is doing here to bring these forces together? I guess that's what I'm asking.

**Anthea Butler** [00:20:59] Yeah. I mean, the work that it's doing is basically work that has gone on for years. So evangelical organizations, for instance, went to go and adopt babies in Russia, right? So that was the reason – we want white babies. Okay, so that's, that's one thing. The second thing is, is that Putin is a strongman. They like strongmen. I think this is what's hard for everybody to understand is like everybody thinks, oh, evangelicals must love the meek and lowly Jesus. No, they want Jesus with the bullwhip in the temple, okay. And Putin shirtless, riding a horse, you know, looking all crazy is an idea about masculinity like Kristen Kobes Du Mez says, that matches up with, like, Braveheart, right? Even though he's sucking in his stomach the whole time. So basically, you have to think about the ways in which they're together with Russia and other countries in the Eastern Bloc that are very conservative, you know, like Moldova and others, because they have some shared issues about family, the aversion to homosexuality, aversion to same sex marriage, all of these things. Plus, inherently, they are about whiteness, okay. They don't want the other. And you can see that in Russia and how they're behaving with Ukraine. So

what's interesting to me is that just a couple of weeks ago, Franklin Graham was in Ukraine having an Easter Sunday service with the choir and everything. And so to think about that hypocrisy while he's been photographed with Putin and supporting Putin and all of this is just mind boggling to me. But people receive that as though he's being a very good Christian. But I see it as the hypocritical way to get himself some play in the news.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:22:34] Well, Anthea Butler, thank you so much for joining us on Democracy in Danger.

**Anthea Butler** [00:22:40] Thanks for having me.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:22:51] Anthea Butler is the Geraldine R. Segal Professor in American Social Thought and chair of Religious Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. She's the author of the 2021 book *White Evangelical Racism*, and earlier of *Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World*. You've probably also seen Anthea on TV, she's a frequent contributor on MSNBC.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:23:14] Democracy in Danger is part of the Democracy Group Podcast Network. Visit [DemocracyGroup.org](http://DemocracyGroup.org) to find all of our sister shows. We'll be right back after this message from our friends.

**Roberto Armengol** [00:23:28] Hey, Democracy in Danger listeners. You've probably noticed that this season we've been asking not just what's wrong with democracy, but also how to make it work better. Well, if you like that, you'll also appreciate a podcast we've been listening to called *How Do We Fix It?* with hosts Richard Davies and Jim Meigs. Each week, they invite experts to talk about how to make the world a better place. It's informative and playful. Check out *How Do We Fix It? Practical, constructive solutions aimed at bringing us closer together, not farther apart.*

**Will Hitchcock** [00:24:10] Siva, we are right now in an Alice in Wonderland world. The Left has often been the advocate against powerful interests for freedom of speech. But no, now, the Right has figured out a way to say it's the Left that is closed minded and the Left that wants to shut everybody up. The Left has often historically been the advocate for racial justice and equality and for recognizing racism and trying to deal with its horrible social consequences. But no, now the Right has said you're the racists, because all you can talk about is race. All you see is color. And that's where we are. And, you know, and so when we talk about democracy in danger, a lot of what's happening is a rhetorical jujitsu that the Left is constantly being subjected to.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:24:54] Yeah, you know, and of course, you and I both remember this rhetorical jujitsu coming from the mouth of Ronald Reagan, and I think he scrambled American politics. I think we're still living with the legacy of his capture of white evangelicals, the surprising capture. His capture of white working class voters of all religions.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:25:16] You know, Reagan is, of course, for me, given my age and my generation, you know, the beginning of all the problems. But one of the thing that's interesting is that new scholarship has been seeing what comes after Reagan, not as designed by Reagan, but actually as a break from Reagan. So Pat Buchanan and his anti-immigration campaign of the early 1990s is actually turning its back on the Reagan legacy. You can see from Pat Buchanan all the way to Sarah Palin, a new Right that isn't really

Reaganite. Of course, they praise Reagan, but they actually turn their back on much of his, his legacy.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:25:48] And Reagan was an internationalist, right? Reagan supported NATO. You know, Reagan supported arms treaties, right? All of these things, they know. Look, in reality, of course, they would be appalled and they are appalled by many of the things that Reagan promoted. But the rhetorical move, the rhetorical jujitsu, I think owes a lot. And that, I think, is because the Pat Buchanans of the world, the the Paul Weyrichs of the world, right? The evangelicals, they were all whispering in Reagan's ear and he was learning from them.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:26:17] Well, one thing that Anthea points out, though, is that Reagan was still saying the racist part quietly, whereas what's been happening since Pat Buchanan and the nineties on the new Right is that they've been saying the quiet part out loud. And I think she's saying, look, racism and evangelicalism have found each other in a public embrace now. And there's really no secret about it because, after all, why should they be secret about wanting patriarchy and white dominion? Because that's what they, that's what they preach from the pulpit every Sunday so why not run on that ticket as well? And I think that's what she's suggesting, is the moment we're in now. Well, that's the end of the sermon today faithful listeners. Next week, we're going to take a closer look at the culture wars in the classroom.

**Natalia Petrzela** [00:27:05] Education about race and sex and gender might question sort of conventional morality about these things, encourage kids to make their own decisions. And that really, in a moment of great political turmoil, hits a nerve.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:27:20] Also coming up, shows about the health of journalism in America, the criminalization of migrants at the U.S. border, and an update on the calamity in Ukraine.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:27:30] For show notes and much more, visit us on our web page, [DinDanger.org](http://DinDanger.org), and give us a holler on Twitter. Tag us @dindpodcast. That's D-I-N-D podcast.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:27:41] Democracy in Danger is produced by Robert Armengol. Jennifer Ludovici is our associate producer, Sidney Halleman edits the show. Our interns are Denzel Mitchell, Jane Frankel and Elie Bashkow.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:27:54] Support comes from the University of Virginia's Democracy Initiative and from the College of Arts and Sciences. The show is a project of UVA's Deliberative Media Lab. We're distributed by the Virginia Audio Collective of WTJU Radio in Charlottesville. I'm Will Hitchcock.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:28:09] And I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan until next time.