Welcome
Msgr. Joseph G. Quinn
Vice President for Mission and Ministry

Moderator
E.J. Dionne
Washington Post Columnist, National Public Radio Commentator, and
University Professor at the Georgetown Public Policy Institute

Panelists
Harvey Cox
Hollis Research Professor of Divinity at Harvard University
Author, The Secular City and The Future of Faith

Molly Worthen
Assistant Professor of History, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Author, Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism

Ross Douthat
New York Times Columnist
Author, Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics

JOSEPH QUINN: Please join me in welcoming our panel as they arrive. They have waited for you a long time, and we have waited for them to come and join us this evening.

I am Msgr. Joseph Quinn. I serve in the Office of University Mission and Ministry as Vice President. It’s a delight to be with you tonight, for a very special reason. The reason really is right in the front of your programs. If you have your program, take a look. You will see something you haven’t seen on it before. That top line above the front cover indicates there is a newly added name. Let me tell you the reason why.

Let me go back a little bit. This marks the tenth year for the Center on Religion and Culture. That is enough reason to celebrate. But we are delighted that to celebrate that occasion with us tonight, we have the cofounders and co-directors, who retired in the last two years, but have left their mark beyond our being able to tell.

Say thanks with me to Dr. Peter Steinfels and Dr. Margaret O’Brien Steinfels. Please stand.

[Applause]
Ten years ago, the notion of a center on religion and culture at Fordham was just the spark of a timely idea. It was awaiting articulation and definition, which was undertaken by its two rightful stewards over the course of that next decade. I think all of us know that under their leadership there were scores of events that were produced of a relentlessly stunning quality, as has been said time and time again, so much so that many of you, our wonderful neighbors in particular, continue to come and join us — our students, our faculty, our staff — intrigued by the questions that have been put out there to stir our minds and to stir our hearts.

All of it has resonated to the great benefit and the honor of Fordham University. It has ensured that the vital connection between religion and culture has been and will be continually substantively appreciated and indeed nourished here at Fordham.

On the occasion of Peter and Peggy’s retirement some two years ago — a slow process, we’re happy to say, because we didn’t want to let them go, a gradual move towards the door — and the fact they are here tonight tells you we don’t want to let them go and we keep hanging on — at the time of their announced retirement, our President, Father McShane, announced this. He said, as an expression of his own esteem and that of the entire Fordham community, the Fordham Center on Religion and Culture will be home to a series to be known as the Peter and Margaret O’Brien Steinfels Lecture on Catholicism and Culture.

The annual lecture series, as this esteemed panel evidences tonight, will be composed of individuals of the highest caliber, notables in the humanities, in the sciences, the arts, public life, and the church, people who are uniquely positioned to enrich and energize the public conversation about the intersection of religion and culture.

Indeed, that is the case. As these last ten years have taken us through one question after another, each intriguing, each captivating, so we continue to do so — and ten years later, probably even more so than at its founding.

So it is with a grateful heart that I thank them again tonight, Peggy and Peter. I know they were expecting us to rename the building, but it’s the lecture series that is going to bear their name. We are delighted that it will be carried out in that fashion.

We are so honored by their years of service, selfless, tireless, and always kind, and always in the best of Ignatian and Jesuit traditions, by making us think, prompting us to reflect, and prompting us to be a people of greater resolve and deeper gratitude.

So with a grateful heart, join me in saying thanks to them again, Dr. Peter Steinfels and Dr. Margaret O’Brien Steinfels, for all they have meant to us.

[Applause]

Now I am happy to call to the podium to introduce our program tonight the current director — and, we hope, long-term director — of the Center on Religion and Culture, Dr. James McCartin. Please welcome Jim.

JAMES MCCARTIN: Thank you, Monsignor. Welcome to you all once again.

I don't want to delay the main course very much longer, but I do have to just add a few brief words of my own to our Vice President of Mission and Ministry’s words.

Not only have Peter and Peggy Steinfels been outstanding public intellectuals and public
Catholics, but, in a more private way, they have also been mentors and friends to me, and I think that can be said for many of you out there in the audience tonight. I am eternally grateful to the Steinfelses for having brought me to the Center and to Fordham. It gives me great delight to express in just the simplest words, on my own behalf and I think on behalf of many of you, a pure thank-you to Peter and Peggy on this occasion.

We are here also, as you know, not only to honor the Steinfelses, but to think deeply, and maybe even have our minds changed, about the knotty and slippery concept of “the secular.” So much ink has been spilled, so much breath expended on this topic, and yet somehow I feel sure that tonight, amid the back-and-forth of this outstanding panel, you will come away much the wiser.

To move things in that direction, allow me to introduce to you this evening’s moderator, E.J. Dionne. You have seen and read him in so many different venues that I imagine it may be hard for you to imagine a world without E.J. Dionne and his always-astute, ever-ready commentary. He writes, as you know, for The Washington Post and for Commonweal. He is a regular on National Public Radio. He has written five books, including one called Souled Out: Reclaiming Faith and Politics after the Religious Right, not irrelevant to our topic tonight.

E.J. Dionne teaches at Georgetown University. He is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. He is, above all this and many other distinctions, a devoted friend of Peter and Peggy Steinfels.

Please welcome E.J. Dionne.

E.J. DIONNE: That was lovely, thank you. I particularly appreciate the last line, because I am a Peter and Peggy Steinfels delivery vote, as they used to say in the streets of Chicago, where they grew up.

I just want to say what a joy this is for me this evening. Today has been a real kind of full-circle day for me, because I realize that it was thirty-six years ago this September that I met Peter at a lunch with Harvey Cox and our editor at various moments, Alice Mayhew of Simon & Schuster, whom I met with before I came here. This was thirty-six years ago. I was on strike from The New York Times and wanted to write for Commonweal. And I can assure you, I wasn’t doing it for the money. It was the beginning of a relationship with Commonweal.

Peter and Peggy — I think there are a lot of friends of theirs here — are two of the most remarkable people I have ever met. Just two things I want to say about them, and then I will introduce Molly, whom I have always wanted to meet, actually.

The first is, there are many people you read for various kinds of enlightenment. I have always told Peter and Peggy that I read them or talk to them to find out what I think. It’s only after they say it that I suddenly realize this is what I should have been thinking in the first place.

The other thing is, there are many people who write religion who write a lot about the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. Peter and Peggy actually perform the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. I was misdiagnosed, happily, with something when I was a foreign correspondent, and these folks put me up and put up with me, which is not easy, for about two months in their apartment. I got all better, and I will tell you that I think of that as the first miracle of Peter and Peggy Steinfels. So when they come up for
canonization, just remember I said that.

Lastly, I also became friends with Gabrielle Steinfels. She was so nice to join us tonight, their daughter. Let's give Gabrielle a hand.

[Applause]

She put up with this strange guy who was in their spare room. Bless you for that.

I will have more to say about Harvey and Ross. We were talking about important spiritual events. Tonight, thanks to Harvey Cox, you will witness the conversion of Ross Douthat into a liberal. I just feel it. Harvey taught both of us — or tried to anyway — Ross twelve years ago, and in my case, it was over forty years ago. I hate to admit that.

Molly Worthen — I was so excited, because I have been reading Molly, as many of you have, for a long time. She has made enormous contributions. It’s so great to open up your Week in Review and see a Molly Worthen essay that is so thoughtful about religion, religious life, the way believers think. She is such a refreshing presence in this world.

She teaches history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She has written widely on religion and politics, from Slate to The Christian Century. Her first book was a biographical study of Charles Hill, a top advisor to some of the most important figures of twentieth-century diplomacy, including Henry Kissinger, George Shultz, and — I love to say his name — Boutros Boutros-Ghali.

But it is her most recent book that touches directly on the topic we are exploring tonight, Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism, a book that highlights the irony of twentieth-century American evangelicals both decrying the advance of secularism and, without fully realizing it, baptizing much of the secular worldview.

Her lecture tonight, “In Secularism We Trust? The Fate of Religion in the 21st Century,” is really great. I sneaked a peek. We read the early draft. You are going to enjoy it. It will draw on research for that book and give us a grand tour of how we got to where we are today and what we should expect as the century rolls on.

So I give you a scholar and obviously a prophet, Molly Worthen.

MOLLY WORTHEN: Thank you so much, E.J., for that really kind introduction.

I want to just ask you to forgive me. I have a little bit of a cold, and I'm also seven months pregnant, so I am not at my most vivacious. But I am confident that the excitement of this topic and this crowd will carry me along.

I just want to add my thanks to Peter and Peggy Steinfels and the Center on Religion and Culture, for really being one of the very few places in the country, I think, that can yank academics out of our ivory towers and pull journalists out of the news cycle and bring us together to reflect on the bigger picture, which is what we are going to try to do this evening.

Tonight our task is to think about a pretty fraught subject, and that is secularism and secularization. These are words that, depending on your perspective, may fill you with either dread or great optimism and relief. But I think, no matter how you react, we can probably agree that these words describe some kind of complicated and important change
in the role of religion in our society and in the individual worldview, something like that.

But before I dig into that a bit, into what secularization is and what it means, I want to say a little bit about what it is not. Secularization does not mean the brand-new, modern appearance of atheism and indifference to organized religion. Historians of the Middle Ages have found all kinds of evidence, often quite hilarious evidence, of clergy complaining about impiety at all levels of society throughout the centuries. I just picked a couple of my favorites.

In the eleventh century, the English monk William of Malmesbury just went on a tirade about aristocrats who insisted on hearing mass in bed. Here's what he had to say: They didn't go to church in the mornings in a Christian fashion, but in their bedchambers, lying in the arms of their wives. They did but taste with their ears the solemnities of the morning mass, rushed through by a priest in a hurry. Some towns were much more inclined to use their cathedrals for indoor markets and grain storage than for worship.

A little bit later, here is the historian Gerald Strauss talking about German Lutherans in the sixteenth century. He says, “Nothing seemed to avail against widespread absenteeism from divine service. There was near-universal blaspheming, widespread sorcery. In some villages one could not find even a single person who knew the Ten Commandments.”

So it seems that unbelief and indifference have been around pretty much as long as religion has. But it does seem like in recent decades these things have been gaining ground, right? Well, maybe. We can get into that.

But the second myth we should dispense with is this notion that the art of predicting the death of God, or at least the demise of institutionalized religion, is a new pastime. There is a very long tradition of prophets proclaiming the doom of traditional Christianity. In 1733, the English theologian Thomas Woolsten wrote that Christianity would be extinct by the year 1900. In 1822, Thomas Jefferson very famously prophesied that “there is not now a young man living in the United States who will not die a Unitarian.”

I love that line.

We can pretty safely say that these predictions did not pan out. Later observers, like all savvy end-times prophets, learned to be a little bit more vague in their predictions. So in 1966 we have the sociologist Peter Berger predicting that by the year 2000, religion would still be around, sure, but believers would be reduced to huddling together in tiny splinter groups.

What are the lessons here? First, prophecy is a risky business. Second, anxieties about the role of religion in our world are just in no way new. We are part of a long tradition in what we are doing here today.

What this means for us is that we have to think carefully about how to define the term “secularization,” and we have to handle this matter of historical change with some caution. The sociologist José Casanova has suggested three ways of thinking about secularization, and a lot of scholars have kind of cottoned onto his definition. I’m going to boil it down for you.

The first way, he says, we can define this term is to think of it as referring to change in individuals’ beliefs about the world, so a shift from a supernatural worldview to wholly
materialist explanations for everything — disenchantment, to put it into one word.

The second way to define secularization is to think of it as the retreat of organized religion from a position of authority in the public square to something that is really more your private business that you cannot expect to be honored by society at large — in other words, privatization.

The third definition is what Casanova calls differentiation. What he means is when religion comes to just be one worldview among many that you cannot take for granted. This last definition is the one that the Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor dwelled on at some length in his recent book, *A Secular Age*. What really interests Taylor is the way in which the conditions of belief have changed — that is, the modern shift from a collective identity embedded in an enchanted universe to what he calls the individual buffered self. And what he means by that provocative term is the self that gets to sit back and make choices, that can kind of opt in or opt out of religion, that is no longer, as he puts it, open and porous and vulnerable to the world of spirits and powers.

Now, no civilization has been without unbelief and ideological pluralism. These have always been facts of life. I think what is new in our era is the degree of change and the global circumstances of that change. I want to suggest to you three signs that these processes that I have just cribbed from Casanova are indeed the present and future of America. Then I will give you three reasons why this may be the case. Then I will try to wrap up my Trinitarian approach with three questions that I have about what it all means.

The first sign that secularization is happening is the decline in church attendance. I know that just a few minutes ago I told you that, as a general rule, attendance figures by themselves cannot actually tell us very much. Pastors should not be nostalgic for a pious pre-modern Arcadia that probably never existed. The fact is that church attendance has actually gone up and down in American history. Historians know, for example, that the revolutionary era was notoriously impious. I mean, we're talking membership rates of like 10 percent, far lower than today.

But unlike earlier dips, we cannot rationalize the current five-decade-long decline by pointing to structural and demographic explanations that worked in the past. Maybe we can get into that a little bit in the Q&A. So what are we looking at? What is the situation right now?

Church attendance on a given weekend seems to have peaked at around 40 percent in 1965. It has been declining ever since, to under 30 percent in recent years, although pollsters will tell you that people always lie when you call them and say, “Did you go to church this week?” So we should probably cut those numbers in half. That is probably a bit more accurate.

But this is a slow decline, obviously. This is not a cliff. The political scientists Robert Putnam and David Campbell have suggested that at the current rate, it will take a couple of centuries for American church attendance to drop to Western European levels. But it is unlikely that we will rebound from this slump. As the sociologist Mark Chaves put it, there is nothing, no indicator that traditional religiosity is going up.

The second sign of secularization is the rise of this category known as the “nones,” n-o-n-e-s. In prior eras, most people who didn’t go to church would probably still tell you they were Christian. But the thing about these people, the nones, is that they tell pollsters that they do not identify even with any religious tradition. Most of them say they are not
atheists. They seem to fall into that problematic “spiritual but not religious” category. It is at least problematic for scholars, because we have no clue what to do with these people.

It’s certainly true that some of these spiritual nones study spiritual texts and participate, in a serious way, with religious communities and in religious conversations. But I would wager that many, probably most, of them do not. Their growing numbers probably signal the weakening of organized and personal faith. Russ Douthat might call them “apostles of pseudo-Christianity,” to borrow an evocative phrase from his recent book.

But I suspect Harvey Cox will probably disagree, because he has suggested that people who have stepped outside traditional institutionalized church are actually the ones who have it right. He writes, “Christianity is not a creed and faith is more a matter of embodiment than of axioms.” In other words, the nones might be prophets of a new anti-creedal, anti-hierarchical “age of the spirit,” to use his phrase, that is actually closer to apostolic Christianity than the intervening 1,900-some years have been. I hope maybe we can get into this a little bit in the discussion.

The third sign that, to me, suggests the advance of the secular worldview at the expense of organized religion is the shift that we have seen in recent decades in mainstream American opinion and law on matters of human sexuality. This shift has moved decisively away from the traditional teachings of the Abrahamic faiths.

Now, I want to be totally clear here. I am not saying that Christians, Jews, or Muslims who embrace gender or gay equality cannot be pious members of their religious communities. From a historian’s perspective, no organized religion has a fixed reference point of doctrinal purity. They are all historical creatures, constantly in motion, constantly coevolving alongside the cultures they live in.

However, the mainstream acceptance of gay marriage, for example, does defy the teachings of the largest, most established religious communities in this country — the Roman Catholic Church, the Southern Baptist Convention, the Assemblies of God, the Mormons; you could go on. And to the extent that individual members are defying their leaders on this question, then we are seeing evidence of the decline of those institutions’ authority, not just their authority over social conventions, but their authority over the individual consciences of their own members.

The churches themselves are recognizing this. Traditional Christians are increasingly trading the language of the “moral majority” for the term “moral minority.” They are embracing the rhetoric of religious liberty as a way of defending opinions that they know more and more Americans view as bigotry.

Why is all this happening? For a long time, it looked like the U.S. was an exception to the general pattern of the developed West. For almost as long as scholars have been able to measure religious observance with some degree of accuracy, it has been higher in the U.S. than in Western Europe. We had some special things going for us, I think: the competitive, free marketplace of religion established with the First Amendment; the unusual mix of immigrants who came here, many of whom were motivated partly for religious reasons; the role of religion in the racial conflicts of this country. There are a number of features of American exceptionalism that might help explain this.

But now it does look like our statistics are carrying us slowly back into the Western post-Christian fold, because these exceptional features of the American story turn out to not have been exceptional enough to resist three major trends in Western civilization.
I will start with the big doozy and then I will add two other reasons. And I’m not trying to be exhaustive here, just kind of suggestive.

The big reason is far larger than religion. The decline of religious observance and authority is part of a massive civilization-wide decline in institutions in general. It is not just churches and temples that are losing members. It is Rotary and other civic clubs, labor unions, even, some scholars have pointed out, the traditional heterosexual, childrearing, churchgoing family.

These are some of the trends that Robert Putnam wrote about in his famous book *Bowling Alone*. In that book, to account for our increasing social flux and isolation, he pointed to factors like suburbanization and the rise of television. To that list we should probably add the rise of the Internet, which I think has exacerbated this trend.

The only institutions that have been consistently expanding are the national state and multinational corporations. This is important. Corporations have a way of devouring communities, of leaving individuals more atomized and alone than ever before. As the state expands into more and more areas of our lives, it is inevitable that we begin to see more conflicts between government mandate and private religious liberty, as we are seeing now in the fights over the Affordable Care Act. For generations, the Protestant establishment in this country largely shaped the state. Protestants, at least, didn’t see much conflict. They saw primarily the actions of a righteous, God-fearing government. But with the decline of that Protestant establishment, we are seeing a head-on clash between the values of secular enlightenment, liberalism, and traditional religion. So that’s the first reason, this big-picture decline of institutions.

The second reason for the uptick in secularization is that we have gotten better at taking the edge off mortality, you could say — that is, the physical suffering that for thousands of years has driven humans to seek consolation outside material existence. We can date the rise of modern medicine to the late nineteenth, early twentieth century, the discovery of germ theory in the 1870s, major advances in vaccines in the 1890s, Alexander Fleming’s discovery of penicillin in 1928. All these things led to a drastic drop in untimely mortality in the West, and more reason to turn to your doctor instead of your priest. We should probably add the relative decline in violence in our time.

We just have no concept of the physical pain and fear that our ancestors lived with on a daily basis. This is a very simple but profound thing.

As a corollary, we have medicalized sin. Over the twentieth century, Americans grew less inclined to see physical suffering as a sign of God’s wrath or testing or as a symptom of our innate human depravity. We have become a therapeutic culture — and this is a point many, many commentators have made — in which almost any sin, no matter how terrible — it’s not really the sinner’s fault. All sinners are victims of some kind — of poverty, of a rough childhood, of brain chemistry imbalance, what have you. So maybe we are losing our felt need for the explanatory power of theology because we have come up with alternatives.

The third reason I want to mention is a growing sense of the moral failure of organized religion. Russ Douthat has written about this at some length in his recent book *Bad Religion*. I am not just talking here about sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. I am also talking about problems like rising income inequality, persistent racism, prejudice against LGBT people.
Are people really blaming churches for all of this? America does, relatively speaking, lack the long history of anticlericalism that you see in Europe, so organized religion has probably enjoyed greater moral prestige for longer here. But over the past few decades, that prestige has declined. Sure, churches played a huge role in the civil rights movement in this country. But there is now a growing sense, I think, that organized religion has shirked moral leadership in the most important social challenges of our own day.

To be frank about this, historically, times when the church has stood up and taken real risks for the suffering and the oppressed — these are really more the exception than the rule. But as organized religion’s institutional and political power wanes, moral witness is one source of serious authority that does remain, if churches seize it. I think you can see this in the media frenzy around Pope Francis. People are hungry for that.

You may have noticed one reason that I have not cited, and that is the so-called new learning — Charles Darwin and evolution, higher biblical criticism, this sort of thing. I think that the impact of new scientific and historical discoveries on faith is important, but almost certainly exaggerated. Faith and reason have been clashing and coevolving since the dawn of time. Rational logic is only one part of how you come to your worldview. Study after study has confirmed that humans are wired to reject evidence that in any way contradicts our preexisting assumptions. It’s just how we are.

My sense is just that most people who have left the church have not done so because they woke up one morning and were suddenly convinced that they are descended from apes.

I want to end with three questions that have been on my mind as I have worked through these issues.

The first is, what does all this mean for politics? Perhaps we can see the culture wars as, in some sense, a battle over American secularism, between those who see it as this creature of Satan and those who welcome it and celebrate it. But the lines are really not all that clear. Barack Obama is almost certainly a secular president, but I wouldn’t say that his two victories have been some kind of referendum on American secularization. Many of his most ardent supporters, like African-Americans, are statistically more likely to be pious Christians than other groups.

If the Christian right is on the verge of fading away, as so many pundits have suggested for years, you would not know it from the recent midterm election results, certainly not in my state of North Carolina, I will tell you that.

My second question is, what insights can old-fashioned theology bring to this secular age? In many ways, the story I tried to lay out for you is a deeply theological story. Protestant assumptions still guide the way most Americans think about culture and politics, the definition of religion, the public square, all these things. This country is still evolving along a historical trajectory that you can probably trace back to The Ninety-Five Theses. In the culture wars, the internal contradictions of Protestantism are front and center.

I swear, I am not just trying to score points with you guys by beating on the Protestants. We all know that the Reformation — its roots lie in at least 300 years of reform and conflict in the Catholic Church. So it’s everyone’s problem, right?

But here is what I mean. On one side, conservative Americans’ views on sexual morality stem from their ideas about authority, often their anxieties about authority, and a distrust of human nature that is rooted in the Christian, but particularly in the Protestant,
emphasis on humankind’s irreparable depravity. Yet that other fundamental principle of
the Reformation, freedom of conscience, has found an extreme expression in America’s
free marketplace of religion, in our obsession with individual liberty above almost all else.
Pollisters’ growing tally of these nones — in many ways, this represents the triumph of
individual conscience as the ultimate authority.

The point is that in all of this change there is a lot of continuity. There also may be a
growing opportunity for Catholic intervention in the public square, because Catholics so
often defy the categories of the culture wars. Catholic social teaching offers a long
tradition of reflection on the role of the church in a pluralistic society, thinking about the
common good, the mystical body of Christ. This tradition has got to be a dialogue partner
for secular liberals and libertarians, who often have a very hard time articulating goods
beyond the level of individual autonomy. E.J. in particular has been pretty bullish about
the possibilities of sort of an intellectual alliance between Catholics, liberal evangelicals,
mainline Protestants, and sympathetic non-Christians.

My final question: How does the global context change how we should think about faith
in America? We live in a global religious economy. Organized religion may be in retreat
across most of Europe and North America, but we are also in the fifth or sixth decade of a
worldwide Pentecostal revival. It’s really no joke. It is the story of the twentieth century.
Christianity’s center of gravity has shifted many times in this religion’s history, and it is
on the move once again.

Saying that, I am skeptical of those who say that so-called reverse missionaries from the
global South are going to sweep into the West and save us from ourselves and rejuvenate
the faith of this culture. But certainly Westerners have got to realize that they are not the
center of the universe. And it is not at all clear that all we have to do is kill some time and
wait for Western-style modernity to come to these other countries, and then they will just
get over religion. If you want to take China as an example, Christianity is making great
gains in that country that seem to be actually accelerating as that country modernizes.

In the past few minutes, I have tried to give you an overview of this thing that scholars
call secularization, what it is, signs that it is happening, reasons why this is so, and some
questions that this has made me ponder. I have tried to stress both continuity and
change. Yes, secularization is speeding up. Yes, our era is different from the past. But
none of these patterns or problems are brand-new.

Now I think I have talked long enough, and I am looking forward to our conversation.

E.J. DIONNE: That was remarkable, and it is really wise of a speaker to write the lines
of each of the respondents before they even respond. That was very well done.
Is your new baby, do you know, a boy or a girl?

MOLLY WORTHEN: A girl.

E.J. DIONNE: I was going to say, if it had been a boy, if the respondents are really nice,
the boy would be named Ross Harvey or Harvey Ross. But the next one.

What a joy it is to introduce Harvey Cox. Harvey Cox was by far one of my very favorite
teachers in college. Indeed, I teach now, and I borrowed a whole bunch of your
techniques from all those years ago. A lot of students ask me — students are very
practical; they want jobs in a difficult economy — “What was the most professionally
useful course you took in college?” I always say, “The most professionally useful course in
college I took was called Eschatology and Politics.”
I am telling the absolute truth here. Roughly fifteen years after I took Eschatology and Politics, I found myself covering the Vatican for *The New York Times* at a moment when then-Cardinal Ratzinger was condemning a whole series of liberation theologians, whom Harvey had us read, in mimeograph, in Eschatology and Politics. So I knew all these things.

Harvey is also the perfect person for tonight. Many of you know his book *The Secular City*, which is an extraordinary book. I was telling Harvey — and I hope we talk about this tonight — I think it has gone through a kind of U-curve. I guess this suggests that I agree with a lot of what Molly said. I think there was a period in which people had grave doubts — what is this argument about the rise of secularity, let alone a celebration of secularity and the liberating energies it was bringing — that this was all wrong. Andrew Greeley wrote a book that was kind of a riposte, called *Unsecular Man*. Yet I think we are now back in a period where your book is all the more relevant to this discussion.

I recently reread it on the beach, and I guess that means I’m the only person who regards *The Secular City* as great beach reading.

Two other points about Harvey before I go on to Ross.

Harvey is not confined to looking at the parts of the religious world he is part of or agrees with. More than twenty years ago, he wrote one of the first books on the Pentecostal revival called *Fire from Heaven*, subtitled, appropriately to this talk, *The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the 21st Century*.

One of my favorite books — you might say it’s a book about Washington-based newspaper columnists — is called *The Feast of Fools*. Actually the subtitle is *A Theological Essay on Festivity and Fantasy*, and also a book called *On Not Leaving It to the Snake*.

I love Harvey Cox.

On Ross Douthat — I always tell people, in my Media and Politics class, I had two young bloggers. I decided we have to teach them. They were 23 years old, both of them. One blogged for *The Atlantic*. His name was Ross Douthat. The other blogged for *The American Prospect*, and his name was Ezra Klein. So I always tell my students that my class was way ahead of the mainstream media.

I have been a fan of Ross for a very long time, even though we don’t always agree. I particularly disagree with his critique of Harvey Cox in his book *Bad Religion*, which I hope we talk about tonight. But he is brilliant and understands that, just as he thought I needed to come around to Benedict, he needs to come around to Pope Francis.

He is a film critic for the *National Review*. He is the author of *Privilege*, a critical study of his alma mater, Harvard. With Reihan Salam, he coauthored *Grand New Party*, a 2008 book that seeks to convince Republicans that their future rests with the concerns of a battered working class, whose votes they keep getting and for whom they do very little.

I don’t think that is unfair to what you said in the book. Correct me if I’m wrong.

His most recent book is called *Bad Religion: How We Have Become a Nation of Heretics*. It is a really, in a funny way, fair and balanced critique of almost everybody except those whom Ross thinks are properly orthodox. But almost everyone will take joy
from different parts of his critique.

Without further ado, one of my favorite teachers in the world, Harvey Cox, and one of my favorite conservatives in the world, Ross Douthat.

**HARVEY COX:** What a treat it is to be here tonight on this occasion and see Peggy and Peter once again.

While we are introducing daughters, may I introduce my daughter? Would you stand up, Rachel? There she is, my firstborn. I won’t tell you how old she is now. She’s here. She came down from Hastings for this event.

That was a brilliant and comprehensive coverage, I think, of the topic. I want to congratulate Molly for starting us off on exactly the right foot.

I want to respond in the following way. Her mentioning the word “global” — we get sick and tired, don’t we, of hearing about global this and global that? However, notice that this panel is not about the future of religion in America. The future of religion. America has to be understood in a global setting, and what is happening on the globe is anything but the decline and disappearance of religion. Just look around you and see the South American continent, with the booming of Pentecostalism there, China, which — who would have predicted this many years ago? — now is on a curve to perhaps having the largest Christian population of any country in the world within a couple of decades.

It may look bad locally, maybe in New York City, I don’t know. But if you take into consideration the entire world, we are on the upswing. Christianity is growing faster now than it has ever grown in its history, by the hundreds of thousands a day. It is not the kind of Christianity that I particularly would design, and maybe not what some of you would design. But there it is. The Pentecostal movement, charismatic movements around the world, the spirit-empowered movements, are changing. They are multiplying. They are beginning to develop a real kind of political-social theology in various places, which they didn’t used to have.

So I see the glass as half-full. I will wait to see how Ross feels about this.

I should point out, by the way, that I did have these two gentlemen in class. I wore my crimson tie tonight in honor of that event. Lest you think there is some kind of a Cox school of politics, this should dissuade you from that notion. [Laughter]

Not stamped from the same mold, right?

Yes, we are undergoing some very important changes. I want to mention two very big ones.

The first I call the transmutation of religiousness, not secularization. I have come to believe, Molly, over the last years that “secularization” is a rather misleading term. I know I wrote a book about this some years ago. However, it is not very descriptive. It is a bit fuzzy. You tried very valiantly to describe what you mean by secularization. I don't think it quite does it. It is a far more subtle set of changes that are going on. I want to mention what I think some of them are:

Change in the nature of what it means to be a religious person. Take these people who say, “Look, I'm not religious, but I'm spiritual,” that Molly mentioned. What in the world do they mean? I had a seminar a couple of years ago where I sent the students out to
interview people who described themselves that way. And you are right, they don't want to say, “I'm an atheist,” which they might in some other cultures. They might say, “Look, I don't have a religion. I’m an atheist. I’m a spiritual person.”

You are absolutely right that this baffles sociologists of religion. I’m glad it baffles them. It’s about time they got baffled. This clear dichotomy between what is religious and what is secular I think has served its purpose, and we now have to realize that all of us are kind of an admixture of secular elements, religious elements, spiritual elements. They are all there. Just look at how you are thinking and your activities in a given day and a given week.

These are people who have taken a step away from the institutional expression of religion, as they understand it, away from the creedal expression of religion, but they still consider themselves to be spiritual. They have made a choice.

One of the things we have to remember about the coming of Christianity into the world in the first century is that people had to make a choice. Most of them were not born Christian. They had to choose this weird new movement. They had to choose the possibility of facing the lions.

After Constantine, of course, it became the thing to do. It became the thing to do. Constantine, for his own imperial purposes, engaged in what might be called a hostile takeover of the church in the fourth century, funded very generously the church, built cathedrals, fired and hired bishops, and, in one sense, imperialized the church. We are still living with the wounds of that imperialization. I think we are slowly getting out of it, but we are still living with it and the damage that it caused.

We are watching now a change in what it means to be a religious person, a spiritual person, call it what you will. I don't think that is a big distinction. There are a lot of people who call themselves religious who are not affiliated with religious institutions either, by the way.

What has happened as we witness this going on around the world is that it has pushed us to think again about those early years of Christianity, the first three centuries, let's say, before the Constantinian takeover, in which, remember, there was not a single hierarchy, there was not a fixed liturgy. There were little congregations dotted all over the Mediterranean. They had their own liturgies. There were some things in common, but there were a lot of differences. There was no single universal creed. There was certainly not a universal hierarchy. There were local bishops, but the papacy was just evolving at the time.

I don't think it’s a stretch to say that what we see around us now bears a strange kind of similarity to those early years of Christianity, before the imperialization of the church and, you might say, the religionization of the empire.

So here we are. Now, it is not secularization. It is something far more subtle, far more nuanced, and something that I think Molly would agree we don't quite have the tools for. So many of the tools that are used — attendance figures and things like that — are quantitative. They don't have the kind of nuance and subtlety to look into this really quite tidal change that is going on. It is going on all around the world, and we are a part of it.

In the last fifteen years or so, I have become a fan of Bernard Lonergan. I consider him to be one of the greatest, if not the greatest, Catholic theologians of our century. I consider
him an ally, by the way, in his understanding of the secular and the religious. He is a subtle and careful writer about this. Here is what Bernard Lonergan — isn't this wonderful, to read a quote from Lonergan here at Fordham? I'm loving every minute of this.

He says there are secularizations — plural — to welcome. There are secularizations to oppose. There are sacralizations to welcome, and there are sacralizations to oppose.

That is a little more subtle than just some overall term of what is happening to us. I think I know what he means. I know what he means in part because I have read the rest of the book and some of the people that have commented on it.

He talks about the emigration of the sacred, the emigration of the sacred, into other cultural formations, like some of the ones you mentioned, Molly. The national state and the consumer culture, the market consumer culture, have now taken on a tone of sacrality — holy sites, holy holidays, holy figures. The sacred juice, as it were, has leaked out into these other cultures or into consumer culture. A student of Lonergan, a man named Randy Rosenberg from St. Louis, has a wonderful analysis he has just written about consumerist culture as the place now where most people experience the sacred, the parables that come across television in the ads: what's wrong with you, how you can fix it — here is the sacrament; buy it today and you will be better, just watch.

It fills our screens and the show windows with mannequins — not saint figures, but, still, figures held up to us as what the good life is all about.

There is a brilliant section in his paper about the mall as the new cathedral. You walk into the mall and there you have all these “saints” (models) standing here — they are headless, some of them, but they still show you want you ought to look like — the boutique side altars all the way down the mall.

The mall in Milano, if you have ever been there, is right across the square from the cathedral. It was one of the first malls ever built. It absolutely replicates the cathedral across the way from it. In fact, one of my friends says, “I don't know when I walk into that mall whether to get out my pocketbook or cross myself.” It has that kind of atmosphere.

So we are witnessing something, I think, Molly — and I rather think you would agree — far more complex, nuanced, and subtle than this whole thing of secularization or religion and secularization. This is going to take a lot of thinking and a lot of new kinds of ways of studying religion. According to your paper, you are already at work on them.

A couple points about what we might expect in the future. We are in the prophecy business here, I guess, so we risk that.

We are going to be seeing here in America, and I think other places, not rampant secularization, but a complex mixture of traditional, nontraditional religion, religious movements, political movements that are tainted or tinged with religion, something in between, quasi-religious, secular movements that have some religious elements in them. It is going to be a very complex picture, a very complex picture. And some of it is going to be, to coin a phrase, bad religion. There are going to be bad religious elements in all of these things, and they aren't always going to announce themselves as religion. Be careful of that. The most subtle kind of religion and sometimes the most influential kind doesn't announce itself to be religious.
This means — second point — the main adversary for Christianity in our time, I think, is not going to be atheism. There are some atheists around that get a little bit of attention now and then. But I don’t think that is it. And it is not the so-called modern man that we used to think about when I was in seminary — the scientifically oriented, rational person to whom we had to interpret the meaning of Christianity. Not that either. It is going to be this mixture. Therefore, to use a very old term, the problem is going to be idolatry — that is, the attachment of worth and significance to objects that are not worthy of our allegiance and our reverence. That is what we see.

Thank you, Molly, for starting us off. And I think I look forward to hearing from Ross, who will take it from there.

MR. DOUTHAT: Thank you. I actually think we are going to have perhaps almost a boring amount of agreement in this discussion.

First of all, thanks so much for having me. It is a privilege to be here. Thanks to all of you for coming. Thanks to the Steinfelses, obviously. I have never, unfortunately, had the privilege of convalescing in their home — maybe tonight, after a few drinks — but I have read them with great profit for many, many years, including on those occasions when they have explained to me why I am mistaken.

E.J., of course, it is a pleasure to be here with you. Someone mentioned they couldn’t imagine a world without E.J. Those of us who work in political journalism know you can’t even imagine a political panel without E.J. So it’s good to be here with you.

Professor Cox, I don’t want to create a false impression in the suggestion that both E.J. and I were your students. It sort of overlooks the fact that E.J. sounds like he was actually your student, whereas I was in the back of a large lecture hall trying to figure out if Natalie Portman was actually in the row behind me at Harvard. So every mistake and intellectual wrong turn I have taken in my career cannot be laid at Professor Cox’s door.

Finally, Molly, I thought it was a wonderful talk, and I basically find myself in agreement with most of it and also, then, in agreement with a lot of the qualifiers and complications that Professor Cox raised.

I think we can usefully think about the moment that we are living through, at least in the Western world — I think, obviously, the global context is very different — whether or not we want to call it secularization per se, we can call it a kind of deinstitutionalization and individualization of religious life, which is manifest, I think, fairly explicitly in the kind of spiritual but not religious mentality that we have talked about a fair amount, and then also in just the relationship that even people who formally belong to their churches, Protestant or Catholic, or non-Christian bodies for that matter, tend to have.

In that sense, I think — and I think Harvey would probably agree on this point — if you are looking forward to the future of religious experience and spiritual exploration in the United States, it is very useful to spend a lot of time, for instance, watching Oprah Winfrey or watching or reading Joel Osteen or reading a book like Elizabeth Gilbert’s Eat, Pray, Love, or basically looking, I think, for all of these different places where the spiritual, the pop cultural, and the commercial sort of intersect and where people, in a kind of hyper-individualized age, are finding spiritual encounter, finding religious experience, direct religious experience in many cases, that does not fit comfortably at all into the traditional categories of institutional faith.
If I were going to put on my predictive hat, I would say that both Professor Cox’s vision and Professor Worthen’s — I am sort of toggling back and forth between honorifics and first names here — both of their visions of the most likely future seem to be correct: that the trends we are talking about overall seem to be accelerating, that there are some deep structural forces behind them, ranging from the sexual revolution to the decline of institutional life writ large, to mass media and communications technology, and so on. If you are just looking at the moment where we are now, I think the trends that we have been talking about seem to have a bright future ahead of them, you might say.

But in the interest of being sort of useful here, I thought I would just quickly sketch out a few possible scenarios in which the future could be a little bit different and a few possible ways that you could imagine a more institutional form of religious faith making some kind of a comeback in America and in the Western and developed world overall, let’s say, in the next twenty-five to fifty years. I will just run through them very briefly so that then we can get on to a conversation.

The first reason is just the fact that trends do not necessarily continue and that it is important not to always project forward from a particular moment. I know that in the United States, in debates about American politics and culture, if you went back just ten or fifteen years, the defining thesis was that the secularization hypothesis was a mistake, that if you looked at the rise of the religious right in the United States, that dovetailed in some sense with these global trends around charismatic Christianity we are talking about, and that actually religion was sort of reascendant in the U.S., as well as in the world.

That story doesn’t seem to be correct ten or fifteen years later. We have a lot of evidence to the contrary. But things can just change very quickly.

One way to think about what we have been living through in the last ten or fifteen years is, to use a term that Robert Putnam actually uses in his book on religion in America, this idea that there was a kind of shock to religion in the U.S., driven by everything we associate with the 1960s, and that we have been living through a kind of aftershock, where some of those same trends have been working themselves out again.

But again, if you flash back in time to, say, 1974 and just project trends from 1964 to 1974 forward, you would have assumed that by the 2000, everyone will be a Unitarian.

These kinds of projections are just very vulnerable to the unexpected, to unexpected changes, and to reactions against them, to stabilizations, to the reassertion of the status quo, and so on.

So that is one just baseline reason for imagining that institutional religion, institutional Christianity might have a little more life in it than we think.

The second reason is just the fact that human nature sometimes changes, but sometimes doesn’t change all that much. While we have become a very individualistic culture, the communitarian impulse is still very much there. It is an impulse that may actually grow stronger and have a kind of renaissance, as some of these individualized trends in social life and family life gradually work themselves out. There may come a point at which the decline of the two-parent family, the aging of society, the fact that more people are spending more and more of their lives going solo, living alone, living by themselves, forming families that then break apart — all of that may reach a kind of critical point at which people will look anew at institutional forms of faith. They may be new forms of faith. They may be older forms of faith that have sort of reinvented themselves for a new era, found new leadership, new strategies, and so on. But either way, I think it might be a
mistake to assume that atomization can proceed more or less indefinitely at the same pace.

In fact, the things that people have traditionally looked for from religious communities, beyond doctrine and dogma, to include people of common views and common faith taking care of one another — that may have more appeal in a more atomized America than we expect right now.

Finally, there is the demographic factor, the reality that over the last twenty or thirty years — and this has been true before that, but it has accelerated to some extent — there has been a large divergence just in simple birth rates between people who are attached to religious traditions and people who are not. That divergence has something to do with ideology and theology, but it also just has something to do with selection effects, where people who are involved in religious communities are more likely to get married and stay married, or married people are more likely to join religious communities. The cycle works in both directions. But either way, there are some significant differences in family stability and basic fecundity between — the most extreme example would be the difference between the Mormons and everybody else. But that example exists on a smaller scale within Catholic and Protestant communities. It exists on a stark scale here in New York City between Orthodox Jews and every other Jewish community.

While it is completely possible that that will all come out in the wash — in the sense that religious families will have five kids and three of them will secularize, so things will more or less stay stable — you can’t just assume that, I think. There is always the possibility that, in a sense, those differential trends will radically change the basic religious composition of America of 2070.

In fact, this already happened, to a certain extent. One of the reasons for what seemed like the religious right’s remarkable revival/resilience in the 1970s and 1980s is that if you go back to the 1920s and 1930s, to the modernist-fundamentalist controversies in Protestantism, there is a big divergence in birth rates between modernist Protestants in the 1920s and 1930s and fundamentalist and evangelical Protestants in that same era. That had a big effect on American politics and culture thirty or forty years later.

Those would be just three of what would be, I think, many possible reasons to imagine that bodies in motion don’t always stay in motion; trends sometimes reverse.

Of course, the final one would be just the impact, totally unknowable, of this global picture that we have gestured at. While I agree that it is very unlikely to imagine Chinese missionaries radically reconverting Americans to some form of Chinese Protestantism in the year 2077, at the very least religion in the U.S. has always been deeply influenced by immigrant groups. Catholicism is the paradigmatic example, but Reinhold Niebuhr grew up speaking German at home. So you can’t necessarily imagine or foresee exactly what impact immigration will have in bringing that more vital and growing form of faith back to American shores in the future.

I’ll save my defense of the Emperor Constantine for another time. Thank you very much.

E.J. DIONNE: I would really like to hear it, but we won’t go there now.

ROSS DOUTHAT: There is a book I can recommend.

E.J. DIONNE: I want to let Molly respond, but if I could, I would like to shape that with
a couple of questions.

I must say, listening, I am so tempted — but will resist the temptation — to make a case that all those spiritual but [not] religious people are really operational Unitarians, so Jefferson might have been right after all.

Let me divide this into two baskets. I think in your talk and in the excellent responses, part of the problem here is who and where are we talking about. I think there is a case that is very strong in your paper that what we call secularization has really gone on in the United States to a surprising degree, where the U.S. is becoming more European. We may not be there yet, but we are becoming more European.

But then there are all these other developments out there. And what about Islam? Where does Islam fit into this story, as well as the rise of Christianity in Africa, in China, and elsewhere?

I would like you to deal with the global question. You dealt with it at the end. But it really has an enormous impact in the Catholic Church. The vast majority of the Catholic Church’s membership is outside the place of its birth and outside the United States.

The second thing I would like to ask — and this is for everybody, just to provoke a general conversation — I am quite persuaded that what you said in the paper is right and that something is going on. But I have been very suspicious of our sense of secularization, whether we are right or not, ever since the 1960s because of *Time* magazine. You may remember, the biblical account has Jesus resurrecting in three days; in *Time* magazine, it took three years. The “God Is Dead” cover — *Time* magazine, on April 8, 1966, put “God Is Dead” on the cover. Then, conveniently for the Christmas audience, on December 26, 1969, their cover was “Is God Coming Back to Life?”

That is a lot of action in three years. God moves in many ways.

It has always led me to wonder, what are we — we reach an awful lot of conclusions awfully quickly, and history is long. I would like to press us all, in a way, on the question: Are we looking at really short-term phenomena?

So I put those large issues on the table.

I want to say everybody has little cards to write questions or comments on. If you hold them up for students to collect and bring them up here, I will try to read as many of them as I can. So please write your comments, religious treatises, sociological observations on those little cards, and I will do the best I can with them up here.

Let’s go back to Molly.

MOLLY WORTHEN: I am obviously not going to attempt to respond to all the interesting ideas and critiques and questions that have been raised in the past few minutes. I will just grab the things that were most interesting immediately to me that I found myself responding to in my head.

One thing that strikes me is perhaps a difference in perspective between me, as essentially a secular historian who does not come out of any particular religious background — other than the vague Protestant penumbra that you do grow up in, whether you like it or not, if you are raised in this country, I think — and the perspective of those who do have a different kind of dog in the fight. I hear in both Harvey’s and Ross’s comments a declension narrative and a real desire to push back against that declension narrative and
say, “No, it’s not so bad as it seems.”

That, I think, shapes our perspectives a little bit, and it is important to note that.

I am really interested in Harvey’s comments and certainly take all the qualifications he raises about the problems with the terminology we use, and the methods, to heart. Certainly the global context requires a sort of different narrative. But I am particularly interested in this idea of some of the folks that today we might see as ringing the death knell of traditional institutionalized Christianity being actually people who return us to an earlier apostolic age.

This raises the question of what we mean when we say we believe something. What does the verb “to believe” mean?

A historian of religion named Wilfred Cantwell Smith really changed a lot of people’s minds in the 1960s when he wrote a kind of history of the etymology of “to believe” in Western civilization and argued that in the Middle Ages, up to the Enlightenment in the West, when you said, “I believe something,” you did not mean “I assert a set of truth claims, a set of propositions about reality,” but rather you were swearing your allegiance to an authority. You were saying, “I am loyal to this worldview,” in some sense.

His claim was that this changed in the course of the Enlightenment, and in fact religious people adopted this change and turned faith and reason into the fight that we know it today.

I take all of that as a really important qualification to the framework that we tend to impose on past centuries.

At the same time, I wonder if we go a little too far in drawing these vast distinctions between what we mean when we say we believe something and what Augustine or the Apostles meant. This matter of the fixity of creeds is perhaps a red herring.

So my question for Harvey is, would you say that Paul was spiritual but not religious? Would you say that Paul did not care about claims about truth and doctrine and the boundaries of community? It is an honest question. If he cared about them, but in a different way than those who claim to preach his message today, then what are those differences?

In thinking about the questions that Ross raised, I really appreciate just the general call to humility in this art of prediction and in reading data. I think actually a big explanation for why so many scholars got things so wrong in the last third of the twentieth century is that, in many ways, they simply misread the data, because they weren’t really looking in the right places. Evangelical Christianity sort of came out of nowhere to the mainstream media in a way that is very hard for us to understand today.

But on the other hand, I think to make up for that, the secular media exaggerated the evangelical juggernaut simply in comparison to the mainline, because the mainline was declining. The fecundity of these more traditional religious communities is not insulating them from stagnation and even decline. This is true of the Mormons. This is true of the Southern Baptists. This is true of the Assemblies of God, who are kind of the only ones hanging onto an even keel. Now these traditions — well, the Southern Baptists are their own story, but the Pentecostals and the Mormons do seem to be growing outside of the West. That is a separate question.
I was particularly intrigued, though, by what you raised in your comments about human nature and this impulse toward communitarianism. This is something that I struggle with teaching undergraduates. I primarily teach the more modern period, but occasionally have occasion to expose them to ancient thinkers. I always struggle with whether to emphasize to them how much we have in common with people who lived centuries prior to us or to emphasize how vastly, vastly different our worldview is to their own.

But it strikes me that every world religion and, in fact, every powerful secular ideology, whether you want to talk about Marxism or secular liberalism, is fundamentally concerned with the human problem of alienation. We all feel alienated. We all want, to use the words of E.M. Forster, to only connect. Each of these traditions solves this problem in a different way, but is fundamentally aimed at the same angst, the same ache.

What do we do with that as scholars? I am curious to hear your thoughts on how much continuity and how much change there is across these cultures, whether, as we try to turn to the global context to cast light on our predicaments in the West, we are talking about the same thing when we talk about religious faith. Certainly these new burgeoning African Pentecostal churches are very concerned with certain doctrinal issues, certain maintenance of boundaries, in a way that I think would deeply disturb some of the spiritual but not religious nones that Harvey casts as perhaps the vanguard here. Do we simply allow for different labels for each of these contexts or can we grasp at some common terms that do apply across cultures?

E.J. DIONNE: Harvey?

HARVEY COX: I'm grasping for common terms here. Give me a moment.

Let's go back to St. Paul and maybe, through St. Paul, back to Constantine.

E.J. DIONNE: We are going to have that argument yet.

HARVEY COX: Of course St. Paul was religious. He was Jewish, and he never stopped being Jewish. He will tell you that in all of his epistles. He had an experience on the road to Damascus in which he believed that he met the risen Christ, he says, and he was told that the moment had now come, long prayed for and expected by Jews, when the goyim, the nations, those on the outside, would be invited to be part of the commonwealth of Israel. That was his message. He went around the Mediterranean proclaiming that, both to Jews and to Gentiles: This is the moment. Now we can all share this promise of God.

As far as belief is concerned, I don't think that belief was all that central for Paul. As I just said, he never called himself a Christian. The word had hardly come into being at the time. He talked about those people we call early Christians, the people of the Way, the people of the Way — that is, walking in a certain fashion.

I'm glad you mentioned also my mentor, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and his epical book on belief, in which he concludes, as you may recall, by saying belief is not all that central to religion. Belief is really, at least in the modern Enlightenment sense of asserting or affirming certain propositions to be true, not central. What is central is praxis. If you have looked at religion and spent as much time as I have, the history of religion and comparative religion, this is certainly true.

He was a comparativist, by the way, as well as a Christian theologian.
I think what happened with Constantine — and here I will bait my colleague a bit — not only did Constantine fundamentally change the relationship between the church and the empire and the structure of the church; what changed was the definition of what it means to be a Christian. Now being a Christian meant affirming that creed, that universal creed, which had not existed before Nicaea, which existed after they invented it at Nicaea, where he presided over the meeting. It wasn’t the pope or the bishops. Then he told them, “This is what you have to believe in or else. This is going to be enforced by the empire.”

So within forty-two years after Nicaea, Bishop Priscillian of Avila, one of my favorite figures in church history, was beheaded, martyred, because he didn’t have the theologically correct beliefs. He was turned in by his fellow bishops and beheaded by imperial decree — the first Christian martyr through Christians killing each other.

I am nominating him for sainthood. I want to have a St. Priscillian, because many, many, many, many more came after that — many more, alas.

I think that the creedal move, which was really instituted by Constantine, with some of the bishops not liking it at all, was not a good move and created further divisions. It did not unify the church. It didn’t unify the empire. We are just now getting out of that. We are just now getting out of that, and I’m glad.

E.J. DIONNE: Mr. Douthat.

ROSS DOUTHAT: Oh, come, now. This is probably not the definitive argument that should be had about the future of institutional religion in the West, but I do think it has some connection. I think this is sort of the open question, in a way, facing people involved in institutional churches in the Western world. It is the question: To what extent do creeds actually matter? To what extent do they matter in practical organizational terms, in terms of defining boundaries and membership and everything else, and to what extent do they matter in theological terms, in terms of truth and things like that?

There I think Harvey and I have a slight disagreement. I think if you read the letters of St. Paul, you don’t have exactly the Christology that developed fully at later points in the Western church, but you have a very clear and, frankly, creedal Christology that is the reason that Paul thinks that this moment of missionary work and conversion has arrived. I don’t think it is possible to understand Paul himself or to understand the Christian movement that followed him without seeing it in terms of specific beliefs — again, beliefs that didn’t have the full substance of the Nicene creed or the Athanasian creed or any other creed that you want to cite, but beliefs that included basic elements of basic Christology that have been basic to Christianity ever since and that were not corrupted or brought in or imposed or ruined by Constantine, but were part of the church from the beginning and part of the arguments within the church from the beginning.

Yes, of course those arguments became more shot through with violence, and particularly state violence, as Christianity became — whether co-opted by or implicated by the state or implicated in governance or whatever else.

But if you go back to the earliest debates of the church, debates that people in the twentieth century were always very fond of rediscovering because they wanted to root for the people who lost those debates, those debates were theological debates. They were creedal debates, or they were debates about whether creeds mattered at all. Obviously,
big part of Christian gnosticism in the second century was about the idea that there was sort of a mistake being made by what we now call orthodox Christians and that Christianity was about something a little bit different. You can argue about whether that was still inherently creedal in its view of mysteries and so on.

But either way, I just think that these debates have been around Christianity from the beginning and that issues of belief, whether you define it as trust in or intellectual assent to — either way, you are trusting in or giving assent to something very specific. I think it is very difficult to imagine a meaningful future for religious life in the West that does away with the creedal move. Obviously we will find out.

But I would suggest that the lesson of the last thirty or forty or fifty years in American religious life has been ultimately that as people quest away from creedal forms of faith, you end up with a level of individualization and atomization that doesn’t really reflect some sort of spiritual ferment and spiritual experimentation. That exists, but a lot of it is people who are lonely and isolated and cut off from community.

Again, it’s hard for me to imagine reconstituting community in the way that I talked about before without some kind of creedal element. In fact, I think this is one of the big weaknesses of the evangelicalism that sort of surged in American life for a while — or seemed to surge, because people hadn’t realized how big it was to begin with — and then has gone into a partial ebb. Megachurch Christianity, in particular, has a difficult time transmitting itself intergenerationally because it isn’t clear on what it is actually organized around, beyond charismatic personalities and pastors.

This is why there is again wisdom in the older confessional forms of Protestantism. Of course, as a Catholic, I have bias towards confessional forms of Protestantism. But I think they provide something, independent of their truth claims, that is transmittable across generations, provides for continuity, and that that continuity is crucial to the communal experience of religion, and that the communal experience of religion is essential to religion itself.

Other than that, Harvey and I are in complete agreement.

**E.J. DIONNE:** That’s wonderful.

I want to throw out two observations to lead into these questions to put in the back of people’s heads. One is to go back to the difficulty of the term “secular” and “secularity.” Wilfred McClay had a very interesting essay some years back on two kinds of secularism, where he is talking about different forms of state secularism. Our regime in the United States is secular because it does not favor any religion. The French regime is secular because it does not favor any religion. But our form of secularism is a kind of welcoming secularism, whereas the French form, at least technically, is a rather harder secularism that sees religion itself as dangerous to the republic.

I think making that distinction complicates our view of this question, and I find it enlightening.

The other is just an observation that the Lord’s Prayer may be the most secular prayer anyone ever recited. When you think about the Lord’s Prayer, it’s not creedal. There is mention of God at the very beginning, the request, but the Lord’s Prayer is a very interesting moment in the history of religion. We could probably have a whole discussion of the Lord’s Prayer, but I just want to put that out there.
We have fascinating questions. I am going to try to group them to put a couple together so people can respond as they wish.

Here is one: Since no major U.S. politician, certainly none contending for the presidency, can hope to win office if they declare themselves atheist, or even agnostic perhaps — or I might add spiritual but not religious — how secular is our society, really?

That is an interesting question.

I will ask a second. There are some other good ones here. Why no focus of your attention on the role or place of feminisms worldwide in the context of religions and secularism? Why no focus on the role and place of feminisms — plural — worldwide in the context of religion and secularism?

So the American question in particular and the feminism question. We will start with Molly, on either of those, in the interest of feminism.

**MOLLY WORTHEN:** As a spokesman for all women everywhere, I am clearly the most qualified.

I was pondering, I guess, the point about women when I was thinking through some of the reasons for secularization and the drift in mainstream opinion in the West from some of the teachings in these traditional religious communities on gender roles.

It is very complicated, though. On the one hand, I suppose you could make an argument that the advance and the political liberation of this large group of more than half of humanity, who has historically been somewhat marginalized in almost every religious tradition, has in some way had the effect of undermining the authority of those traditions. However, we certainly know that in the West, with very few exceptions, women have made up the majority of people in the pews and the majority of the personnel in almost every religious community, with the exception of sort of a brief moment in the heyday of New England Puritanism. Some other exceptions would be Orthodox Judaism and the early founding years of the Nation of Islam.

Women far outnumber men in every single religious community. What do we do with that? I think scholars have understood this historically as women grasping religion as a kind of third space that allowed for certain opportunities that they did not always have in the public square or in their professional life. Particularly this is true for middle-class white women, who had more restrictions, in many ways, and more luxuries that enabled them to stay at home. Nonwhite women were working and doing things. They were not in a separate sphere in the way that the Victorians may have led us to believe.

But I don't know the answer to this as far as whether the rise of feminism is something that we need to give a great deal of credit to in the story of decline of institutionalized religion or whether it is more complicated than that.

What was the other question?

**E.J. DIONNE:** No one could run for president. The polling is, so far, quite clear on that, although I think fifty years from now it will be different, if this thesis is correct.

If secularism is so successful, why is it that no open atheist could be elected president?

**MOLLY WORTHEN:** Some commentators have made the point that as
institutionalized religion declines, it does seem as if politics are becoming more religious. I think this is perhaps the wrong way of putting it. It is true that we see more polarization. If you go back to Eisenhower, he won equal numbers of conservative religious voters and nonreligious voters, whereas the split is much more pronounced, red and blue, religious/nonreligious, in 2004, 2008, and 2012.

But religion was always there. This idea that only very recently we have seen the sacralization of the states and of politics, this just seems completely incorrect to me. Religion has always bled out of any kind of boundaries we attempt to confine it with. Certainly this is one blind spot that we have in the West when we talk about our neutral secular public square, because it has always been a public square very much defined by Protestant definitions of religion, relying on Protestant definitions of institutions like marriage.

So in this sense, there is more continuity than perhaps we want to readily admit with earlier eras of human history, as much as we want to bash on Constantine.

E.J. DIONNE: There is a defense of Constantine in these questions, by the way.

Does anybody want to take any of those? In Harvey’s class, a later class I took, all references to God as male were banned, all sexist language was banned. Students had kazooos, and they enforced this ban by blowing the kazoo.

HARVEY COX: They called them consciousness-raising devices.

I had a few years ago a student from Harvard College in one of my courses who told me the first day that he was the chairman of the Undergraduate Atheist Club. I said, “Welcome. Could you tell me why you’re taking this course?” He said, “I really want to see what the other side is thinking.” I said, “Okay, Howard. Look, I’m not going to try to convert you. I wouldn’t advise you to try to convert me. However, by the time this course is over, I want you to be the smartest atheist on the campus,” because, frankly, a lot of the atheists I meet really don’t know what they’re talking about when they talk about religion. They learned something in sixth grade. They had their Bar Mitzvah maybe or they had their catechism class, and that’s religion as far as they are concerned.

I am looking for a kind of atheism that really is sophisticated. I am looking for atheists who have read Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr and Bernard Lonergan, and they are still atheists. I haven’t found one yet. They don’t do that sort of thing.

Could there be an atheist president? Of course. I would vote for one. As long as he’s a Democrat, I would vote for an atheist for president.

E.J. DIONNE: We don’t know, by the way. We may well have had an atheist president.

HARVEY COX: Could I say one other thing about the Pentecostals? I am very interested in the Pentecostal movement around the world. It is worth pointing out that there are about 2 billion people in the world who call themselves Christians. About 1 billion, slightly more, are Roman Catholics. The other billion consist of about 500 million Protestants, orthodox and the rest, and 500 million Pentecostals and charismatics, and growing. This is the fastest-growing — already one-fourth of all the Christians in the world.

I have spent a lot of time with them. I wrote a book about them. I do want to differ a little bit with Ross here. They are not only not creedal, they tend to be very anti-creedal.
The early Pentecostals said, “We’re sick and tired of dead creeds.” They really mark the reemergence in our time, I think, of a kind of mysticism.

Someone wrote a book a few years ago called Main Street Mystics. These people depend on experience. They are distrusted by Protestant fundamentalists because they are not textually bound. They get the spirit directly. They are directly in touch with God and the spirit.

I think there is going to be a lot of overlap between some of the currents that we see in the worldwide charismatic Pentecostal movement and some of these spiritual but not religious people. I see that happening already.

By the way, I was told just a few weeks ago that about one-half now of the Roman Catholics in Latin America are charismatic Catholics. It is keeping the Catholic Church afloat in Latin America, where there used to be a hemorrhage going on.

So we have to keep our eyes on this. I don't think we should consign them to a kind of fundamentalist or creedal slot, because that is not the way they understand themselves.

E.J. DIONNE: Ross, can I ask you to hold off so I can read some more questions? I think that some of these would interest you. I will ask you to start.

First, just a comment. All creeds from the beginning — the Apostles’ Creed; there were creeds long before the creeds of Nicaea, etc. — they develop out of a Trinitarian baptismal formulation. This goes all the way back to Matthew’s gospel.

I believe this came from a Jesuit. I just want to pass that along.

We have at least a couple of questions about Islam that I want to put on the table for people to take up. One says, how will the growing challenge from the Islamic world impact on the trends cited in this evening’s comments — e.g., beheadings, planes shot down, potential new Dark Age. That is what that reads.

Another question akin to it: What can we learn about secularization in both the West and globally from the recent crises in the Middle East — ISIS recruiting, Israel-Palestine? Doesn’t the Internet propagate some of this religiosity?

There was one more that I wanted to throw in. There were several that were very interesting, but the last one: How does belief in an afterlife fit into this discussion? Are we assuming that members of institutional religions, as well as the nones and spiritual persons, believe in an afterlife? To what extent do secularization trends affect notions of an afterlife?

I toss those out there. Start with any of them, Ross — other than going back and praising the creedal question.

ROSS DOUGHTAT: Jesuits are wonderful.

I guess I will quickly say something about Islam, because I think it raises some interesting questions. There are some conservative writers particularly, I think, who look at trends in Europe over the last twenty or thirty years, demographic trends in particular, and make a more extreme version of the demographic scenario that I floated, where, because white Christian/Western birth rates in Europe are so low and birth rates in the Muslim world
are higher and birth rates among Muslims who are recent immigrants to Europe are higher, you are headed for a kind of “Eurabian” scenario on the European continent, which would obviously radically unsettle all of our categories and theories about secularization.

I tend to think that that scenario is somewhat unlikely — not somewhat; I think that scenario is quite unlikely. I think it is unlikely mostly because I don’t see as yet any deep intellectual appeal from Islam, in its current manifestations, to large numbers of Westerners.

I think what you see with ISIS and with people from the West going to fight for ISIS is an example of people in a kind of individualistic, quasi-secularized society grasping for some form of meaning or purpose or, obviously, just a chance to sort of act out in ways that Western civilization doesn’t allow them to do.

But that is so much concentrated among marginal elements in Western culture and society. You have nothing as yet at all like the kind of appeal that both fascism and Marxism held for Western elites and intellectuals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Nothing like that has surfaced with radical Islam across this multi-decade period. You have had some somewhat radical left-wing intellectuals who have had sort of post-colonial flirtations with the idea that radical Islam is a people’s liberation struggle and so on, but nothing that rises to the level that I think would get you real radical cultural and religious change in the West because of Islam’s advance.

To the extent that you could get change, I think it would be more likely to be manifested in a sort of Christian identity politics almost in Europe of the kind you get a little bit of with the Front National and UKIP and so on, where you have a kind of resurgence of Christian identity that isn’t necessarily religious, could become religious, but is mostly based on saying, “We’re not like these Muslim immigrants. St. George for England,” or something like that.

That is a real partial phenomenon, but again not a sweeping culture-wide phenomenon.

So I think, in a way, the future of Islam’s interaction with the West on the level of religious change is likely to be more of the same, what we are having right now — this kind of low-grade conflict between immigrant communities in Europe and the dominant culture, and a persistent appeal for radical ideologies that doesn’t get above where ISIS and Al Qaeda are right now in terms of having real appeal beyond the marginal fringe.

But then, obviously, the interaction between Islam and Christianity in Africa is a completely different story, which I am not really qualified to comment on. But it is very different and very important for both faiths’ development, I think.

E.J. DIONNE: Do you have any response?

HARVEY COX: I agree with that completely.

MOLLY WORTHEN: I have a couple thoughts. Briefly, on Islam, I think one of the most interesting things that may happen is that secular liberals — much more so in Europe, but to some extent in North America as well — are finally having to confront the fact that they are not mere multiculturalist pragmatists, that in fact they are ideologues, that they have a creed, and that there are boundaries to their liberal ideal of tolerance. If the confrontation with radical Islam forces liberal intellectuals to actually articulate that, I think that would be a positive intellectual development.
I have been pondering Harvey’s comments on the creedalism of Pentecostals. I think that he is very right to push us away from our Western fixation on creeds, but this idea that Pentecostals are not creedal just does not line up with my understanding of Pentecostal history or the current situation, either here or around the world. Almost as soon as the Pentecostals emerged as a movement after the 1906 Azusa Street Revival, they were fighting over the Trinity. We have now the divisions between Oneness Pentecostals and Trinitarian Pentecostals.

So this is present in the movement from the beginning. Certainly in Africa, you see among Pentecostals a real what I think is quite in many ways doctrinal fight between those African Pentecostals who want to embrace a great deal of pre-Christian African animist traditions and those who want to draw tighter boundaries between the Christianity that they inherited from missionaries and the more indigenous movements.

As far as Catholic charismatics go, the Catholic charismatics I speak to — I was recently on the phone with a Brazilian-American Catholic charismatic who is one of the lay leaders in the Boston Catholic charismatic community, and he emphasized to me — and this resonates with what I have heard other folks in his community say — that charismatic Catholics become more Catholic, which is to say they become more committed to many of the doctrinal sacramental aspects of Catholicism that are deeply embedded in creedal formations of what it is to be a Catholic.

So it’s very complicated. We cannot simply say there is creedal Christianity and it’s bad and it makes people murder each other, and there is non-creedal Christianity that is happy and pacifist and is a recipe for us all getting along.

E.J. DIONNE: Do you have a comment on that?

HARVEY COX: Well, it’s a very big movement. There are 500 million people. It is pretty hard to generalize about it. However, I do think that one could honestly say that the element of creed is not as important, not nearly as important, as central an element in the Pentecostal movement worldwide, as the direct experience of the Holy Spirit. It is basically a mystical movement. When it first started, Azusa Street and beyond that, it was regarded by conservative Protestants as a kind of poisonous substance that they were afraid was going to — it was toxic, because these people were not paying enough attention to the literal meaning of the scriptural text.

Sometimes it is influenced a lot by indigenous religions. Sometimes it is influenced by standing Protestant religions and Catholic religiosity and all the rest. But I don’t think we should lose sight of the fact that the central element in the Pentecostal movement is the direct experience of God which is not mediated through doctrinal or scriptural — maybe checked by them, maybe strengthened by them, but that’s about it.

E.J. DIONNE: I want to close with two questions. One is on a card and the other is my question that relates to the one on the card. I will ask mine first, then go to the card.

I would like you to reflect. Fifty years from now, and assuming a lecture in honor of people as wonderful as the Steinfeltes, will people care enough about religion even to fill a room like this? Under what circumstances would that be true? Under what circumstances might that not be true?

The second is related to that. I am reading here: Is Pope Francis leading the Catholic
Church in a direction that could encompass the nones or is he on a path which will undermine the Catholic Church, as Ross has suggested in a recent column?

I think my question closely relates to that question.

Maybe we could start with Ross and let Molly close. She can open and close. Go ahead, Ross.

ROSS DOUTHAT: I was promised there would be no Pope Francis questions on this panel.

E.J. DIONNE: I’m a small “d” democrat, the voice of the people.

ROSS DOUTHAT: A conduit for the Holy Spirit.

To the general question, I think absolutely you will be able to fill a room for a conversation about religion in fifty years’ time, and probably in 500 years’ time, unless we have all been uploaded to the clouds, in which case we won’t need to be in a room at that point.

I think the issues may be wildly different than they are right now. It could be that what we consider institutional manifestations of Christianity and faith in general could be much more marginal than they are. That could make it a very different debate. But I am confident that the fifty-first Steinfels Lecture will be just as well attended as this one.

On the question of Pope Francis, briefly, I think there is a clear attempt in this pontificate and by this pope to, in effect, move — one way I framed it a while ago was that it is an attempt to sort of reclaim a kind of religious center, basically, and to prove that institutional religion, particularly Catholicism, obviously, can be relevant beyond a kind of 10 to 15 to 20 percent of the population of self-identified Catholics — whatever core exists — and to effectively do outreach, both to lapsed or disillusioned Catholics and to people who would fall into the spiritual but not religious nones kind of category.

I think that in the response to the Pope and to his gestures and to the imagery surrounding the pontificate, you can see a partial vindication of this idea that we have circled around again and again tonight, that secularization, whatever it means, does not mean the disappearance of the religious impulse, in any way, shape, or form. It doesn’t really mean necessarily that we have entered a truly post-Christian age even, in any real sense. The most secular institutions, in certain ways, of our society are media institutions, and yet those institutions, when you have this kind of deeply Christian gesture, this iconic gesture, of the Pope kissing a deeply disfigured man, that becomes the viral image to end all viral images. That would not happen in a truly post-Christian society. In a truly post-Christian society, people would look at that and say, “Gross. Why is he kissing that deformed subhuman person,” or something.

In that sense, there is in this pontificate both an attempt at a sort of transformation of how institutional religion relates to people who have fallen away from it and a partial vindication of the basic idea that institutional religion, Christianity and so on, is still relevant.

With all that said, there is also a push that I have argued, I think on reasonable grounds, emanates from the pontiff himself to make what I and some others within the church consider fairly substantial shifts — not explicit, but at least implicit — on some significant doctrinal questions related to the tangle of issues around sex and marriage that we are
always debating in our culture, and particularly within Catholicism.

Because, as you can tell from my exchange with Harvey, I tend to put a fair amount of stock in the importance of creedal and doctrinal ideas within religion — Christianity, Catholicism, and so on — I think that some of the moves that the Pope has made and some of the moves that have maybe been made on his behalf are fraught with a significant amount of risk for the internal coherence and unity of the church. That is a risk that, I think certainly it could be argued, is worth undertaking for the purpose of this broader strategy of outreach. But there are also steps that I think we have a lot of case studies in and examples of from the experience of Protestant denominations over the last forty or fifty years that they tend to lead to internal conflicts that become almost impossible to resolve.

Again, if you believe that these steps are absolutely the right thing and that this is the way the Holy Spirit is moving and that the logical arguments for, say, allowing remarried people whose marriages have not been annulled to receive communion — if you think those theological arguments are airtight, then that is obviously a reason to support Pope Francis or support the ideas that he has allowed to be floated and so on.

I don’t think those arguments are airtight. I think those arguments are actually pretty weak in the context of the history of Catholic theology and argument. I am obviously just a newspaper columnist, so take that with a grain of salt. But I think, to the extent they are weak, it is going to be very hard for moves like this to carry church unity with them and that, instead, they are going to lead to significant debates, Anglican-style debates, with probably Anglican-style results. Therefore, I would prefer that the pontiff pursue a slightly different version of an overall strategy that I still think might lead to a very successful pontiff.

I’ll leave it there.

E.J. DIONNE: Harvey?

HARVEY COX: I can hardly wait to say something about Pope Francis.

Let me say, first of all, I have absolutely no doubt that fifty years from now, a hundred years from now, people will still be interested in the basic questions of human life, death, suffering, Peggy Lee’s Song “Is That All There Is,” which I think is, in some ways, an Augustinian question — it’s really the basic question of human life — and the way religions have tried to answer those over the years and still try to do it. I have no doubt about that.

As I just bragged to my two Catholic friends here, I did meet Pope Francis about a year ago in Rome, had a personal conversation with him. I have not been the same since. I think he is an extraordinary person. We had a very brief conversation, but I can be very candid and say I think Francis is a gift of God, and not just to the Catholic Church, to Christianity worldwide and to any people who are people of faith.

As we parted, he took my hand in his and looked me right in the eye and said, “Would you pray for me?” The Pope asked me to pray for him. I told him I would, and believe me, I do. In fact, I came back to our little local Baptist congregation in Cambridge and I said, “I want to put on our prayer list Pope Francis.” It’s in the church bulletin every week, sick people and refugees and Pope Francis. Someone came in a few weeks ago and said, “You know, this is probably the only Baptist church in the world where you pray for the Pope.” I said, “I don’t think so, but I think there ought to be a lot more.”
I am quite serious about that. I think he represents something far, far larger than the Roman Catholic Church. It's a breath of fresh air, and I think it's a gift.

**E.J. DIONNE:** Molly?

**MOLLY WORTHEN:** I'll let the Pope stand. I have sympathy with both Ross's perspective and Harvey's, just as an outside observer.

**E.J. DIONNE:** That is very Clintonian of you.

**MOLLY WORTHEN:** Certainly, of course, people who spend their careers pontificating about religion are going to tell you that in fifty years we will still be in business. I don't know that we are reliable on this point. But my honest answer is, yes, I think so. The reason why I got into this business is because I sincerely believe that ideas and pondering things beyond the material — this is what makes humans different from other animals. It's that simple.

**E.J. DIONNE:** We have had a wonderful evening. The great liberal Baptist quotes the great Jesuit for his purposes. Ross and Harvey have had many areas of agreement. Harvey — I think we saw signs that he soon will convert to Roman Catholicism. All of this set off by an extraordinary and enlightening talk by Molly Worthen.

I just want to end with a Harvey Cox quote. Harvey Cox once said, “What we are seeking so frantically elsewhere may turn out to be the horse we have been riding all along.”

So we will all be back here in fifty years.
Thank you all so much.

[Applause]

**JAMES MCCARTIN:** Before you get up and leave, the quickest of things I want to say. On the back of your program is your invitation to our next event in January. Take it and come back.
Thanks very much to our panel. Thanks to all of you.

[Adjourn: 8:07 p.m.]