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The topic of our panel today is extremely important. It gets to the heart of the matter of what has gone deeply, deeply wrong with our public discourse around religion and religious freedom.

Just a few weeks ago, Gallup released a poll showing that religion is on the decline in the U.S. – and expert commentators have said the reason why is because religion has become too closely aligned with political identity.

What does this mean exactly - and how do we fix the problem?

I tackle precisely these issues in my recent book *The Politics of Vulnerability: Today's Threat to Religion and Religious Freedom*. In the book, I use the fraught relationship between Muslims and Evangelicals as a case study in religious and political polarization.

I explore:

- The role of group identity
- The dynamics of intergroup bias
- The layering of political and religious identities
- The role of *vulnerability*, particularly as it's tied up with fast-changing demographics in the U.S. and fast-changing cultural norms, too.
- How all of this impacts our ability – or inability – to stand up for each other's rights.
- And, finally, what we can do to change these harmful trends.

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**So, let's start with group identity.** Our group is the in-group and those outside our group are the out-group. Our attachment to our group is so significant that loyalty boosts self-esteem. On the flip side, studies have shown that if we're isolated from our group for whatever reason, the stigma acts on us psychologically and also triggers a physical assault on our body.<sup>i</sup> What this means in practice is that, even evolutionarily, humans are programmed to signal their allegiance to their tribe as a way of avoiding this loneliness and stress that comes with being cast out.

**Then, there are the mechanisms of intergroup bias.** While it's natural, and not harmful, for groups to favor their own, things get much more complicated when the in-group experiences strong emotions. Stronger emotions include things like feeling the out-group is moving against you: "an out-group seen as threatening may elicit fear and hostile actions." Whereas "high status" groups (groups that are a numerical majority and have power) don't feel threatened by minorities when the status gap is very wide, they are more likely to feel threatened when the status gap is closing.

And in fact, that gap is closing. If we are going to think of white conservative Christians as the in-group that feels threatened, there are many reasons why they feel this way:

1. First, and for the first time in US history, white racial dominance is on the decline. In 1965, white Americans constituted 84 percent of the US population. Since then there has been an influx of immigrants, with nearly 59 million arriving in the last fifty years alone. Between 1965 and 2015, the American Asian population went from 1.3 million to 18 million, and the Hispanic

population went from 8 million to almost 57 million. Pew says whites generally will be a minority by 2055;<sup>ii</sup> the US Census says it'll happen even sooner, in 2044.<sup>iii</sup>

2. Second, and also for the first time in US history, white Protestant Christians are a minority in America. A 2017 study found that white Protestant Christians constitute only 43% of the US population. To understand the gravity of the shift, consider that in 1976, 8 in 10 Americans were white Christians, and 55% of Americans were white Protestants. In 1996, white Christians still made up two-thirds of the population. Today, they don't even constitute a majority. Among these white Protestants, white evangelicals have also seen a precipitous drop. In the 1990s, white evangelicals constituted 27% of the US population; today it's somewhere between 17% and 13%.<sup>iv</sup>
3. Third, the demise of white Protestant America has brought with it an end to "the cultural and institutional world built primarily by white Protestants that dominated American culture until the last decade." Not only is Christianity declining, but so is religion overall. More and more Americans are religiously unaffiliated (the so-called "nones"), and in 2019 the percentage of nones became roughly the same as the percentage of evangelicals or Catholics.<sup>v</sup> (By 2016, the nones already constituted the nation's largest religious voting bloc.)<sup>vi</sup>

Altogether, this has precipitated an "internal identity crisis" that has generated tremendous anger, insecurity, and anxiety. Unfortunately, that anger has been directed outwards toward a number of minority groups—Muslims included.

What's more – we're also living at a time of incredibly high polarization. *Politico* calls it the "ferocious politicization of everything."

**What does this mean? Well, take everything I just told you about group identity, and layer onto it our political group identity.**

**Indeed, our allegiance to our political tribes is no different than the usual intergroup competition.**

Elections are pure team rivalry. In the election context, what matters more than anything is that our group wins. This means Americans are driven more by making sure the other team loses – that is, by what they oppose -- rather than what they support. For example, a 2016 Pew study found that a “deeper affection” for the Republican Party increased voting much less than “very unfavorable views” of the Democratic Party. Among Americans who are highly engaged in politics, this disparity became even starker—the more they hated the other side, the more likely they were to donate money to their own party. This is why politicians focus so much of their messaging on generating fear and hatred of the other party.

**This tribalism also affects how we interpret and respond to information.**

Our desire for our group to win makes us less interested in finding the right answer to a particular question or debate and more interested in locating and shaping the information that will help us win the argument.

We have a certain idea about our opponents and our brain prefers not to revise that idea.<sup>vii</sup>

With people sorted into their tribes, many feel the need to weigh in on an issue even if they don't have all the facts. As the writer Brene Brown notes, “We don't even bother being curious anymore because ‘our side’ has a position and in a fitting-in culture, curiosity is seen as weakness and asking questions equates to antagonism rather than being valued as learning.”<sup>viii</sup>

**So, here's how it plays out when it comes to American Muslims** – and, again, my book examines the Evangelical-Muslim divide as a microcosm of this much broader phenomenon.

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In our present political climate, our group rivalries pose ever more serious implications because of what political scientist Lilliana Mason calls “mega-identities.” She writes: “A single vote can now indicate a person’s partisan preference *as well as* his or her religion, race, ethnicity, gender, neighborhood, and favorite grocery store.”

So, “if you told someone on the phone whom you had never met before that you are white, that single fact would not tell them much more about you. But if you told them that you are a Republican, they could reasonably assume that you are not black, lesbian, gay, transgender or bisexual, nonreligious or Jewish.”

We can think of it as the difference between sorting and polarizing. The first is issue-based polarization—we cluster together based on our policy opinions. The second is identity-based polarization—we cluster together based on political identities. “[O]ur political identities are polarizing our other identities, too,” and issue conflicts are just one of many expressions of that hostility.

In this ever-widening circle—again, the “ferocious politicization of everything”—almost nothing is apolitical anymore. Consider a 2004 ad by the Club for Growth, a conservative group that advocates for lower taxes and deregulation, against then-presidential candidate Howard Dean. The ad features someone asking an older white couple what they think of Dean’s plan, and the man responds: “I think Howard Dean should take his tax-hiking, government-expanding, latte-drinking, sushi-eating, Volvo-driving, *New York Times*-reading—.’ His wife cuts in, ‘Body-piercing, Hollywood-loving, left-wing freak show back to Vermont, where it belongs.’” Each of these traits reinforces a particular mega-identity, and when you activate one, you activate them all.

I think something like this is at work when it comes to Muslims and liberals. Specifically, Muslims—and especially liberal advocacy on behalf of Muslims—are traits of the liberal mega-identity, and opposition to Muslims is a trait of the

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conservative mega-identity. Nothing captures this political football better than variations of Obama’s “Hope” poster with a woman in a hijab. The poster is used to protest Trump and was, for example, ubiquitous in the January 2017 Women’s March on Washington.<sup>ix</sup> More generally, liberals have championed the hijab for years and featured women who wear headscarves in numerous prominent outlets. The phenomenon might seem peculiar since the hijab as a facet of a modest (or restrictive) dress code for women is not ordinarily something that liberals would champion. But Muslims and hijab are part of the Left’s mega-identity, and the Right—which isn’t normally associated with feminism—makes feminist arguments against the hijab.

At the core of my new book is this idea of Muslims serving as a proxy for the political Left, and when the conservative tribe opposes everything in the liberal tribe, it opposes liberals’ advocacy for Muslims and positions itself against Muslims’ rights.

**That’s the most startling – and tragic – piece of all of this. The way these political dynamics impact constitutional rights.**

The Left wants to protect the religious rights it prioritizes without also supporting conservative Christian claims. Many conservatives take a similarly selective approach to religious liberty. Indeed, the flipside of liberals protecting Muslims is Christian reluctance to protect Muslims, and it’s all tied up with the politics of vulnerability. The Left thinks Christians are favored over vulnerable minorities, and the Right thinks its own vulnerability is overlooked in favor of minorities.

As one conservative explained it to me, “The Left hates Christianity and opposes our religious claims because they want to rub our faces in the dirt. Meanwhile, for the Left, Islam is the better—perhaps even the *best*—religion.” Given these tribal dynamics, the Right responds with even fiercer hatred of Muslims. Think of it in terms of the ancient proverb “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” In the Right’s view of Muslims, it’s “the friend of my enemy is also my enemy.” There isn’t even

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room to acknowledge that Muslims are actually facing religious discrimination in the US. Indeed, many of the same commentators who claim Christians are “persecuted” in America decry a “false” Muslim “victimhood.”

In both of my books, I explain in detail what this looks like in practice. Everything from cynicism and emotional hostility to physically violent crimes and to the very concerted effort to challenge Muslims’ access to religious freedom. In a 2010 court case, local opponents in Murfreesboro, TN – all of them Christian and fully supportive of legal protections for Christian churches – argued in court that Muslims cannot build a mosque because Islam is not a religion. Unfortunately, these sorts of controversies are extremely widespread and, in 2017, even led to a series of mosques being burned down. We also see legal challenges to Muslims’ use of religious arbitration, accommodations for Muslim students in public schools, and so on.

## **SOLUTIONS**

So, what is the way out? What can we do about our rather sad state of affairs? Well, first, we have to figure out the category of people who are even amenable to solutions.

For example, violent actors are, in my view, outside the pale.

I also spend some time in my book, *The Politics of Vulnerability*, parsing the differences between Christian nationalists and conservative Christians generally, especially conservative white evangelicals. Christian Nationalists have a vision of America that explicitly excludes Muslims and other religious minorities; it’s a political vision in which religion plays a secondary role if any role at all.

But for Christians for whom religion is what’s central, I think a few strategies might work. In particular, there is the strategy of superordinate goals. In a nutshell, the idea is that people sorted into their different groups are programmed to compete with

each other—except when they’re faced with a problem they can solve only by working together.

In our hyper-partisan context today, political scientists have said that superordinate goals are really hard to identify. Shared goals require some level of trust in authorities; people want to know that the people in charge are working in their interest. It’s harder and harder to find a cross-cutting issue that unifies Democrats and Republicans over and above the partisan rancor.

I argue, however, that religious freedom might be the cross-cutting issue we need. Christians have a legal stake in protecting the religious freedom of Muslims.<sup>x</sup> Our rights are bound up together. If we start to carve out exceptions for groups we don’t like, then we’re effectively ceding power to the government, which it can – *and will* – later apply against us, too.

And at a time like this, when many Christians understand religious freedom as a vital tool to protect their place in this country, they have the incentive to protect it robustly for everyone.

Religious freedom is also really effective because it doesn’t require anyone to give up any of their beliefs. People are not made to feel like their identity is being threatened or minimized. They have to be able to hold onto their distinctiveness even as they let go of their prejudices.<sup>1</sup> The point isn’t to erase differences but to live among and with diversity.

Another strategy is Empathy

In our increasingly tribal society, each side has its own stories of oppression and victimhood, but “[t]ribalism makes conversations about these issues harder, because it robs individuals of their humanity and reduces them to members of in-groups and



out-groups.” To build connection across difference, we have to be willing to “intentionally be with people who are different from us” and “learn how to listen, have hard conversations ... and be more curious than defensive.”

An openness to seeing other people *as people* is what makes real change possible.

Thank you.

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- <sup>i</sup> Mason, Lilliana. 2018. *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- <sup>ii</sup> Pew Research Center. 2015. “Modern Immigration Wave Brings 59 Million to U.S., Driving Population Growth and Change Through 2065.” Last modified September 28, 2015. <https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/2015/09/28/modern-immigration-wave-brings-59-million-to-u-s-driving-population-growth-and-change-through-2065/#post-1965-immigration-drives-u-s-population-growth-through-2065>
- <sup>iii</sup> US Census. 2014. “Projecting Majority-Minority.” [https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/newsroom/releases/2015/cb15-tps16\\_graphic.pdf](https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/newsroom/releases/2015/cb15-tps16_graphic.pdf)
- <sup>iv</sup> Sherwood, Harriet. 2018. “‘Toxic Christianity’: the evangelicals creating champions for Trump.” *Guardian*, October 21, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/oct/21/evangelical-christians-trump-liberty-university-jerry-falwell>
- <sup>v</sup> Smith, Samuel. 2019. “Religious ‘nones’ now as big as evangelicals in the US, new data shows.” *Christian Post*, March 20, 2019. <https://www.christianpost.com/news/religious-nones-now-as-big-as-evangelicals-in-the-us-new-data-shows.html>
- <sup>vi</sup> Ingraham, Christopher. 2016. “The non-religious are now the country’s largest religious voting bloc.” *Washington Post*, July 14, 2016. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/07/14/the-non-religious-are-now-the-countrys-largest-religious-voting-bloc/>
- <sup>vii</sup> Mason, Lilliana. 2018. *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- <sup>viii</sup> Brown, Brené. 2019. *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone*. New York: Random House.
- <sup>ix</sup> Garay, Jesus. 2016. “These Posters Protesting Trump Were Created by The Man Responsible for Obama’s ‘Hope’ Artwork.” 2016. Guff, <https://guff.com/these-posters-protesting-trump-were-created-by-the-man-responsible-for-obamas-hope-artwork>
- <sup>x</sup> Goodrich, Luke. *Free to Believe: The Battle Over Religious Liberty in America*. (New York: Penguin Random House, 2019).