

## Engage360 Episode 150 | Connection and Humility in a Polarized World

### Dr. Ryan Burge

[00:00:00] **Tim Koller:** Hi friends. Welcome to Engage360, Denver Seminary's podcast. I'm your host, Timothy Koller. Thank you for joining for today's conversation. Dr. Mark Young and I are delighted to have Dr. Ryan Burge here on the podcast with us. Dr. Burge is a professor. He has been a pastor and he is a trained political scientist. And as we get into our conversation with Ryan today, we are looking at a very interesting landscape around the U. S. And as Denver Seminary, we fly under the banner of what we call charitable orthodoxy. It means that we've got people within the Orthodox Christian faith holding a number of different views. And so it's delightful to have Ryan come and help us understand some of the things that we've seen in the history of the U. S. politically and even up to the modern day. So Ryan, thank you for joining us.

[00:01:02] **Ryan Burge:** Thanks so much for having me guys. Appreciate it.

[00:01:04] **Tim Koller:** And Dr. Young, thank you for being here as part of the hosting of this podcast.

[00:01:08] **Mark Young:** My pleasure,

[00:01:10] **Tim Koller:** To get started, Ryan, I would love to hear a bit about what you are seeing as you are interacting with the data around religion and politics. What are some of the trends, generically, that we have seen over the last few years?

[00:01:23] **Ryan Burge:** Yeah. So I, I think there's two major trends that, that really jumped to the top, politics aside, by the way, we'll probably, I'm sure we'll talk about that down the road, but let's just talk about pure religious demography. One is the rise of the nones which I mean, I think we all know about this point. I mean, I have to say that I've probably contributed to that conversation a little bit. I wrote a book called the nones in 21 and then a follow up in 2023. And I'm pretty sure I'll probably update it for the next three or four years. It's just, the nones were 5 percent of America in 1972. And today they're probably 30 ish percent of America. Amongst Generation Z, they're north of 40%, somewhere between 40 and 45%. The numbers are bouncing there quite a bit, but I mean, they're coming from everywhere too, you know, you don't get to be 30 percent of the population by just being white people or just being men or just being older people or younger people or educated people or Republicans or Democrats, you know, it's, really drawing now, it draws more heavily from some of those groups, but it's really affected every swath of American society. I mean, there's no, no groups become unscathed by the rise of the non religious Americans. what's interesting about that though is while they rose very quickly from 1991 to 2021, the last couple years have shown the data has slowed down the rise of the nones. They've kind of plateaued right around 30 percent of the population, which is actually really interesting, because it means that what we saw was like a 30 year era. of American religion. And then what is going to come after that is something that's not going to look like those prior 30 years. And obviously I can't see the future, but what I know is the next 30 years are not going to look like the last 30 years. The other thing is the rise of the nones and that are non denominational Protestant Christians. You know, in America, they were 3% ish of the country in 1972. Today, they're closer to 15 percent of Americans. there are more non denominational than there are Southern Baptists. There are more non denominational, and actually, Southern Baptists and United Methodists combined, probably on the order of 25 to 30 million non denominational, although it's impossible to count such an amorphous group that has no central reporting agency. And by all estimates, these non denominational will continue to rise in really every part of America as well. I mean, they're concentrated in the South a lot, but you're also seeing a rise of them in

places like New England, which is not typically a very religious place. And even the Pacific Northwest, places like Oregon and Washington State, you know, places that we typically see as more secular, more liberal, are also seeing a huge rise in these nones, so I think it's the nones and the nones to me are the two biggest stories in American religion right now.

[00:04:01] **Mark Young:** You know, I think we would say as an institution Non denominational or non affiliated denominationally would be the largest category that our students self identify as they come to Denver Seminary. And that fits our profile as an institution, right? We're not attached to any particular denomination, historical denomination. You know, we're coming, obviously, we've all just suffered through another campaign season. and we hear a lot about polling. And what I think is really important is for us to understand, and perhaps for you to help us understand better, the difference between polling, which seems to be consistently inaccurate, and the kind of work you do, and the kinds of data sets you use, to come, with much more supported, observations about where we are religiously, and particularly religiously and politically.

[00:04:58] **Ryan Burge:** That's a great in the weeds question. I'll try to make not in the weeds as possible. So we're right now. I say we're in the fog of war a little bit from the 2024 election happened less than a week ago And the data you're seeing kind of Come out is what we call exit poll Data now exit poll data is kind of exactly what you would think. They used to do it when people exited the polls like walk to their car They would scoop you up and ask you some questions basic demographics and who you voted for And then we would sort of construct an understanding of how the vote went based on those exit polls. The problem now Is that more and more people are not voting in the traditional way on election day by going to the polls. So now people are voting early. They're voting absentee. They're voting by mail in you know less than half all the votes in America happened on November 5th for the election. So It what we're seeing with these exit poll numbers are actually not that good and they're not that accurate But the media has this, you know they're they had this insatiable appetite for content And therefore they're looking for anything to fill that void and these exit polls become like the thing they can latch on To tell these stories about what happened in the 2024 election. The reality is we won't have good academically rigorous data on these questions Transcript until probably March or April of next year. That's when these really scientific polls, they're actually in the field right now, by the way, but they're going to be tested and cleaned and weighted and judged and, all these experts are going to weigh in on them. And then when the data comes out in March or April, we're going to get the right, the objectively correct picture of what happened last week. I'll just give you one example of how far these exit polls are off. So, Muslims. Yeah. In the 2020 exit polls, it said about 30 percent of Muslims voted for Donald Trump in the exit polls in the 2020 cooperative election study, which is an academically rigorous study done through Harvard, the share of Muslims who voted for Trump was 6%. That's a huge difference. That's not two or three points. That's a factor of five different between what the exit polls told us and what the actual data says. So right now it's hard for me to do my job. Cause everyone wants me to comment on what I saw in the religion and politics trends. And it's I know less than you do, I feel like in this situation, or at least with less certainty and surety of what we're seeing. So when we publish stuff, I don't think I've ever seen an exit poll published in an academically peer reviewed journal, it's just they're not that good. you know, sometimes it might be a question How far are the exit polls off from the real data? That's how they're being cited but just to hang your entire argument on an exit poll is a tremendous methodological mistake

[00:07:43] **Mark Young:** And in terms of the data you work with around religion and society, what are those really important data sets that you use and why do you trust them?

[00:07:53] **Ryan Burge:** Yeah, so the big one is the general social survey, which has been in the fields in 1972, I love it. It's, done by the National Opinion Research Council, which is based out of University of Chicago. And they are incredibly rigorous. I mean, they spend so much time and so much money. It's, funded through the NSF, by the way, National Science Foundation. And they've been doing the same poll in the same way for 50 years. I mean, it's been, it's, people publish with GSS data 500 times a year. I mean, it is that, that vetted and that reviewed. And now, you know, I've been telling people that we have entered into a golden age of religion data because the GSS is great, don't get me wrong. But the average sample of the GSS is about 2, 500, which means if you get into these smaller groups, like for instance, Latter day Saints or Muslims, they're 1 percent of America. You don't get enough people in a 2, 500 person poll to do much with that. Well, the study I was just telling you about, the cooperative election study, began at Harvard in 2006, It's got this really interesting funding model. It's funded primarily by the government, but also other research teams join in. And it started in 2006, the 2024 data they collected was 74, 000 people. And so what that means is I can write stories about the LDS vote or the Hindu vote or the I can even look at state level results because there's that many people in the top level survey. None of that used to be available. So those are the two I use primarily the general social survey and the cooperative election study. But more and more I've been working with different granting agencies to fund surveys. They really focus on subsets of Americans. For instance, I surveyed in the field of 12 000 non religious. And that just focused on questions about non religion. So it's really, those are my centerpieces, those nationally funded studies, and then I kind of augment them and supplement them with these other work I'm doing, through granting organizations.

[00:09:41] **Mark Young:** And so, for those of us who aren't professionals in a country of more than 350 million people, why do you have confidence in a survey that at max is 75, 000 people?

[00:09:54] **Ryan Burge:** Well, what I, the way I always describe it is when you go get your blood tested, how much do they take? they don't take it all. they don't even take half of it. They take a fraction of 1 percent of your blood, right? and the theory there is your blood is mixed well in your body, right? Your heart pumps it around, it's really kind of sloshed around. And so if we draw just a little vial of that blood, that little vial should represent the entirety of your blood supply. So if we do, now this is a big If we manage to get a random sample of the American population as best as we can, do a survey of a thousand people that will accurately represent the views of 300 million people as long as it's randomly collected.

[00:10:36] **Mark Young:** Wow. I think that, frankly, for lay, for those of us who are lay people in this field, that kind of boggles our mind. It makes sense that as you talk about the, is it truly random? Is it broad enough? But still, I think there's some skepticism out there that any kind of sample would be, you know, Accurate related to the complexity of our nation, the population that makes up our nation.

[00:11:00] **Ryan Burge:** Oh, and let me be clear on this point. We missed in 2024. the polls had a definite democratic bias by two or three points overall. listen, pollsters spend their entire lives trying to get it right. And every four years in America, we have a reckoning, right? Did we get it right or not? And how did we miss and why did we miss? And there's an entire organization called AAPR, American Academy of Public Opinion Researchers. And their entire job is to try to get it right. There is no, I get really, the thing that really gets me going is people like, Oh, you're biased on purpose. you're politically biased. no. One thing we're biased in is getting the right answer. that's how you get famous. That's how you get rich. That's how you get more funding, is by getting it right over and over again. And look at Nate Silver for instance. He's been doing it now for four or five election cycles and he rose to prominence, because he got it right more than he got it wrong. And I think

there's, and the same thing like climate change. oh, you're just being paid off by these people to say climate change is real. Man, if you could publish a study that showed that climate change was not real and was academically rigorous, you would be the most famous scientist in America right now. it's not a political thing. We, meaning the academic community and the polling community, want to get it right. My job is to describe the way the world works, how it actually is not the way I want it to be or hope it to be or wish it to be the way it actually appears on the ground. And the closer I can get to that, the more I'm doing my mission and the better I feel about my work. So, you know, I just want to, anyone who's listening to this, we're not missing this on purpose. We're really trying our best. It's just, we're in a really chaotic polling environment right now. . I have full faith and credit in, in my colleagues who work more in this field than I do, it's going to get better, but it, part of it's going to be we get better technology.

[00:12:43] **Mark Young:** Let me put out three groups of people. Those who are doing ministry among students, and by that I would mean primarily high school, college, even down into junior high. Those who are pastoring existing churches. And those of us who are theological educators. Group by group, what do you think are the most significant trends related to faith, belief, belonging, that those, each of those groups should be paying attention to?

[00:13:14] **Ryan Burge:** Yeah. So let's talk about college ministry a little bit here. so college ministry is incredibly important, like high school, youth group, college ministry, like in the great de churching one common, like one upshot of what caused people to be less likely to be de churching. And the answer was they were part of a campus ministry in college and they were also part, regular attender of a church in college. that is when we know the boat is the leakiest, alright, and you're the most likely to slip away. And so if you can find ways to sort of patch up that boat and reinforce that hull as much as you can, I think that's incredibly important. What we are seeing though with Generation Z, When you compare them to Millennials, let's say, , there's always been a huge drop between, generations when it comes to religion. So Boomers to Gen X and then Gen X to Millennials, huge drops, like 8 to 10 point drops in percentage who are non religious. Amongst the, between Millennials and Gen Z, the difference is about 3 percentage points. So Gen Z is almost exactly like Millennials when it comes to their religious orientation. So, you know, whatever we saw with millennials is also probably going to work with Gen Z in a very similar way There's not there's not just oh the next generation of youth ministry handbooks need to look totally different, I don't think that's true I think it actually needs to look a lot more similar to what millennials are up to So a 40 year old and a 20 year old politically or religiously and spiritually are very similar I think that's a really important point to make. okay second group people who are currently pastoring churches. Oh, man, okay. So Here's what I'll say. One thing I learned is that not everything is your fault. American religion has a lot of headwinds right now. You know, there's politics, there's culture, there's society, there's just the general move towards secularization in America. And is it impossible to grow a church in, you know, X community? No, it's not. Is it really hard in a lot of places? Absolutely it is. And so what the data says is if you are in a community that is, not growing population wise, you're gonna have a harder time growing a church. If you're in a, community that has a low level of education, you're gonna have a harder time growing a church. If you are in a more liberal place, more left leaning place, you're gonna have a harder time growing a church. And so I think the reality is you know, you have agency, right? Like you have ability to do and be and preach and teach and serve however you want. But you also work inside a larger cultural milieu. And right now, it's not in your favor. I always say, and this gets me in trouble sometimes, but I'll say it, if Billy Graham was born 30 years later, he would not have been Billy Graham. Because, you know, you know, like he was in his late 30s when the baby boom started. People were hungry for religion. He had gotten, he's, you know, built up his chops, his preaching chops. By that point, he had built a platform, really, William Randolph Hearst really gave him a really nice platform, a nationwide platform in his newspapers. everything lined up for Billy Graham to be Billy Graham, and it was because of culture

stuff. It was because of history stuff. And so, it's just harder to do what Billy Graham did today, especially because of how fractured American Christianity is today compared to where it was 50 years ago. So, don't blame everything on you. What I've always been telling pastors is, God called you to be faithful, not successful. You know, and it's your job to just be faithful, to preach your best, to serve your best, to love your best, to visit your best, to be your best pastor. And if your church grows, doubles in size in a year, God bless you. If it's half the size in five years and God bless you, you know, like you're just doing your job. And so, That, that's a reality we only need to come to terms with. The third, okay, so theologians and theological educators. Oh man, there's fewer and fewer young people who are religious, which means by default, there's going to be fewer and fewer young people who want to go into the world of ministry. I think the way the current workforce works is it used to be, you know, you went to college, you got a job at 22, you worked for that job 65, you got your pension, you got your gold watch, and you retired off into the sunset. I don't think people are having careers for life anymore. You know, you might start and do this for 10 or 15 years and then do this for something for 10 or 15 years and that for 10 or 15 years. And I think a lot of pastors are pastors for a season and to, you know, be theologians and training, right. Is, I'm going to prepare you for this part of your life, but I don't, expect you to be a pastor when you're 65, you know, you probably won't be a pastor when you're 65. So how can I give you tools beyond the theology stuff, which is important, but also things like organizational development, budgeting, HR, you know, planning, all those kinds of things. Not just work in the ministry context. But also work in the business context as well. So equipping them particularly to be ministers, but also generally to be, you know, leaders and organizers and developers of business and society and community, I think that's really doing them a service because they're not pigeonholed, they're not going to get to 40 years old and go, man, I have to be a minister because I have no other options. They can say either I want to be a minister because that's what I want to do, or I could go do something else and use the tools I was taught in seminary to go, you know, serve the community in a different way.

[00:18:01] **Mark Young:** Yeah. Wow. Thanks for pointing out the challenges of being a pastor or being a theological educator in a rapidly secularizing culture. And we probably need to step back and say, what do we mean by secular, right? And what is secularization? I'll make this observation. We lived in Europe for a number of years. And, the case can certainly be made that the secularization of certainly Western Europe was far in advance of the United States. And in that setting, if you're a pastor, the simple fact that you have a church the next year and the next year, and you create this lingering presence of the gospel, year over year, and even by God's grace, generation by generation, what is success, I think educationally, we have this. Illusion that we know how to fix stuff, and we know how to change things, right? So we are a very problem solving culture when it comes to our educational processes. And a lot of times folks go into ministry and they think, well, my church is not growing, I gotta fix it. Rather than saying, my church isn't growing, but I still have a church. still have a faithful presence of the gospel here in this community. And for a lot of us, that's going to be enough. That's got to be enough. That's got to be a thank you, Lord, kind of experience. So thanks for, bringing that out as well.

[00:19:26] **Tim Koller:** In The nones one of the things that was really helpful was giving us some history. And so Dr Young has already made comment of secularism, and that was part of what you were identifying as trends and patterns. But then you also look at how racial tension in the 19 sixties and seventies also led to modern day impacts. Dr Young wrote a bit about that in his book, The Hope of the Gospel as well. And we see these different Patterns and trends. Economics was another factor that you cited in the nones as how we came to be the way that we are. And for me, one of the most fascinating components of the nones was looking at how black Protestants and white Protestants, though they hold very, similar values, voted very differently and how those things emerged. Part of that was looking What the black Americans had access to versus what white Americans did, the areas where they were no longer, they weren't permitted to be part of the conversation and

therefore they socialized differently than their white counterparts, which led to differences in how they viewed government. And how they viewed the role of government in their lives. So they voted differently as a result of that. And I'm curious, it has been now three years since the nones published. Does that still hold true based on the senses that you've gotten over the last few years, or are we starting to see fragmentation of that?

[00:20:42] **Ryan Burge:** I think we're seeing a little bit of weakening between the black Protestant church and the democratic party a little bit. I mean, it's not like we're not, I think that the Hispanic conversations are much more like dynamic conversation than the black church at this point, but the black church is, I think the democratic party is in a very difficult spot because their coalition is like this potpourri of a lot of disparate groups that don't really connect on a lot of things. The Republican Party's whole platform is Christianity is good, white Christianity is really good. And 75 percent of their voters are white Christians. So it's pretty easy to hit that drum over and over again. The Democratic Party's got this weird like coalition of like atheists and black Protestants and Muslims and like all these different groups, right? They don't really fit together that well. And I think the problem is the Democratic Party is in a transitional period where almost half of Democratic voters are non religious. 45% in 2020, we're gonna see what it is in 2024, probably higher. but you also got your black Protestants, right? And you got your Muslims and you got Hispanic Catholics. And it's like, how do you keep this group happy without, you know, I don't think many politicians are good at talking about religion in a way that, that seems sincere, but also is like, sort of nuanced and thoughtful and, tries to cast a big net and a, wide net. I think the problem is the Democratic Party, how do you keep atheists happy, but also Protestants into the fold at the same time? I think by them not talking about religion, they're actually sort of nudging a lot of things. really engaged Hispanic Catholics Hispanic evangelicals and black protestants away from the democratic party and toward the republican party but what we know in politics is for every action there's an equal and opposite reaction we're still by the way we're still a 51 49 country like let's be clear about that so for everyone that you draw in who are you pushing out And I think they're you know, so like I think both parties have to think about be thoughtful about okay So maybe republicans are doing a good job bringing in Hispanic conservative social conservatives, but who are they losing at the same time? You know, we're not seeing that part of the equation emerge just yet, but it's going to be there so I think we I get really nervous when people say you can't be a good Christian and vote for blank, you know, because white protestants vote for republicans for a very specific reason and black protestants vote for democrats for a very specific reason And it's not my role to say you're a good a real Christian . So I think that's the problem is, we have a completely different understanding of the gospel and politics based on our, not just our economic background, our racial background, our educational background, our gender, all those things impact who we vote for. It's not just how we read the Bible.

[00:23:19] **Tim Koller:** And one of the interesting things you did in the nones that I found really helpful was to be able to look at both social desire, social desirability bias as well as ask the question of are we going into church because it is already confirming the political views that I hold or am I in a space where I can actually be in congregation with people who hold different views than I do. And as a seminary under charitable orthodoxy with a number of different views, that is one of the challenges in teaching theological education the way that we do. So I appreciated you helping us understand how social desirability bias shape some of the polling, but also than asking the question about how politics leads us into the kind of congregation we choose to be a part of. So I'm curious, as you reflect on that, how can we help make sense of that in our own self reflection? How can I think better about how I am being shaped by the environments I'm in?

[00:24:17] **Ryan Burge:** Yeah, so I'm actually, The presentation I gave at Denver Seminary a couple weeks ago was on the book that I'm I just finished the draft of it's called The title I gave it was called

the death of polite religion in the future of America It's going to be probably called the big church sort though, which is basically this idea like churches have sorted out Politically, you know used to be like the southern Baptists by the way Even the late 1980s were 40 percent democrats and 40 percent republicans people forget that and even as late as 15 years ago They're actually fairly politically heterogeneous and the main line by the way, the Episcopalians the methodists are not overwhelmingly liberal. A majority of United Methodists voted for Trump in 2020, ELCA. Presbyterian Church USA were all Trump. Majority Trump voted 52 48, something like that. But here's the thing about those denominations, they're declining very rapidly. And they're going to be gone in the next 20 or 30 years. I think for us, and this is a really important, you have to, there's this concept in psychology called metacognition. Which is thinking about thinking. Right? you've got to think about what you're thinking about and how your brain works. And you have, you can, I really do think you can change the way you think about things by thinking about them a lot. And by training your brain to be all, I'm like, guys, I'm a social scientist. So when I walk into any room, I'm thinking like a social scientist. And where did I learn that? In graduate school. You know, that, that indoctrinated me, to use a loaded term, in how to think about the world. And so I always am thinking about who am I with and why am I with them? And do I agree with them? And do they agree with me? Are we talking about things that matter? am I exposing myself to viewpoints that I disagree with? You know, articulated well, by the way. And I think that's the thing, don't, hear the worst version of the other argument. Hear the best version of the other argument, and see if you would agree with it or not. We have, the easier thing to do, Disclose to ourselves and bubble ourselves and only surround ourselves with people who agree with us on everything. And the problem is every institution in America has made that easier and easier on us. We're not going to mixed organizations anymore. Our workplaces are more politically homogenous than they've ever been. Our churches are more politically homogenous. Our social groups are more politically homogenous. And so we don't know anyone who has a different viewpoint than us. And what that does, unfortunately, is it makes it easier for us to demonize people who are different. And, listen, anything that dehumanizes another person I think is antithetical to the gospel of Jesus Christ. I just think that's a universal principle, left, right, or center, no matter who you voted for last week. If you, if your politics dehumanizes a person because of their gender identity, because of their racial background, because of their country of origin, then, you have sinned against the kingdom of heaven. And I think whatever we do, we cannot dehumanize. And even, what I also mean by that is dehumanize people who vote for someone different. I Than me, right? They're still people and they just believe something different about the world So we have to constantly be mindful of are I'm only surrounding myself with yes people You know who would just reaffirm what I believe and pat me on the head and say how smart and good and virtuous I am And if I am then why maybe I should extend myself out go to a group that makes me uncomfortable start a conversation with someone I know I disagree with and see where it goes Because that helps us become more fully human and actually becomes we become more functional as members of a democracy Which, you know, is something we should really care about because we live in the greatest country on earth and it hinges upon us to, to maintain that democracy.

[00:27:38] **Mark Young:** Yeah, the fundamental premise of a democracy is nobody gets everything they want and you're never just going to be hanging out with or you shouldn't just hang out with people who are just like you, right? The whole concept is to bring together a difference one way or another. In your presentation last month, you, what I took away is the disappearance of the middle as a trend that you see moving forward. Could you expand on that for quite a bit? That was quite jarring to me to hear you talk about that.

[00:28:07] **Ryan Burge:** Yeah, so let's just speak in what's happened with my evangelical brethren over the last five years or so. You know, it used to be the case that SBC was a fairly big ish tent, right? You had people who were moderates, people who weren't literalists. Part of the SBC. and now

what you've seen is it's the purification that's gone on in the evangelical subculture where it's Russell Moore is a liberal now. David French is a liberal now. Beth Moore is a liberal now and has to leave. They're not part of our flock. And there was even a book that came out a couple months ago that the entire premise was the idea the problem with the evangelicals is becoming too liberal. Which is like on its face you go, who are you? What are you talking about? Like you've lost the plot. Even 80 percent of evangelicals voted for Donald Trump. every data point I can show you shows you the fact that white evangelicals have been, they're more conservative today than they've been in the last 50 years. And yet there are people in that tribe that say we are not conservative enough. Now, that's the right. The left has done even more so, you know, atheists, for instance, are some of the most strident people in America when it comes to what they believe and Richard Dawkins, right, who was one of the four horsemen of modern atheism, the New Atheist Movement is what he was called, you know. Dawkins and Hitchens and Harris and all those guys were, like, kind of key figures 20 years ago in, leading modern atheism. Well, Dawkins is a biologist, and on his podcast a couple years ago, he won, Humanist of the Year, about seven years ago, right? Big award, everyone clapped. And then he went on his podcast two years ago and said, I think there's only two genders, male and female, and they revoked his Humanist of the Year award. You know, it's oh, we're tolerant, you know, we believe in all kinds of worldviews, except if you say something that violates our liberal orthodoxy, then we're gonna kick you out. So it's this purification on both sides that, that's killing America. And it used to be the mainline, which is like Episcopalians, United Church of Christ, United Methodist Disciples of Christ, American Baptist. They used to be half of America, okay, in the 1950s. They were the dominant cultural understanding of religion. I would say if you go back to the Simpsons, They attend, United Methodist Church, which is like mainline Christianity in 1991, was like the thing, right? It was like the default type of religion in America. Now it's that seems so weird. But, they went from being 50 percent of America, now they're under 10 percent of America. And the share of Americans who are between the ages of 18 and 40 in our mainline is 2 percent of America. So, the mainline is going to be gone. Functionally in 20 or 30 years and they were the moderate middle of American religion. They saw both sides They had liberals and conservatives and I think that's the problem is now we don't work in these Spaces that have people who are different that we don't live in these spaces We don't worship in these spaces and it's going to tear us apart. And I think for whatever we saw for instance with Kevin McCarthy being removed as speaker. We didn't have a speaker for three weeks. Why because there was a group on one side that said we are not going to compromise. We want the speaker that we want or we're going to vote No. We are only going to see that accelerate on the right and the left In years to come, because we don't have any reason to compromise anymore, we're actually incentivized to dig our heels in, take the most extreme position, and try to convince other people that we're right and we're normal, which they are not, most definitely not normal.

[00:31:17] **Mark Young:** Wow. Sounds like the politics of nihilism, right? I don't really care. I don't have a policy or a solution. I just know I want to beat you.

[00:31:25] **Ryan Burge:** there's a theory in political science right now called agents of chaos, which is the idea there's a growing number of people who just want to burn it all down. You know, and you can even ask them, what do you think would come after, and they say, we don't care. We just think the current system is so corrupt and so broken and so disadvantageous to me that I would I will throw it in the fire and draw from the deck again Because possibly that new card will be better than the cards I was dealt initially which I can tell you as a guy who studied comparative politics and democratization It doesn't get much better than what we have in American democracy. , and not knowing how bad it can be in a country that doesn't have a functioning democracy.



[00:32:02] **Mark Young:** So what is your sense? Right? you talk about moving toward the, out, outer fringes, right? To the more extreme positions, both non religious and religious. are we fundamentally then looking at the inability to retain some type of social cohesion or that those two groups are just gonna continue to war with each other in ways that are non-productive for, because we're not really addressing the dilemmas we face, we're not addressed. Who's going to address the fact that people go to bed hungry in the United States of America, the wealthiest nation in the world? going to do that?

[00:32:40] **Ryan Burge:** I mean, the fact that we can't agree on free school lunch for every public school kid in America is like the height of insanity, right? can we, I mean, pay maternity leave. I consider name pro 80 percent plus approval ratings. Mandatory background checks on gun purchases, paid maternity leave, the end of daylight savings time. And, free, lunch. You know, free breakfast and lunch for kids in the public school system. these are basic things that we can all agree on, but we can't get there. And I think the problem is, and this is the, bigger problem in American society right now, that social media has given platforms to people who would not be platformed 20 years ago. You know, Monica Lewinsky once said, God bless Monica Lewinsky, she's actually had a really nice career post all that nonsense. She said, I think everyone in America deserves a voice, but not everyone in America deserves a megaphone. And I think that is the key distinction. I think everyone should be able to say what they want to say, but what social media does is amplify the very far left and the very far right. When most of us are in the moderate, pragmatic, compromising middle, Actually, I spent a whole chapter in the book making this point that most Americans are actually a lot more Pragmatic in middle of the road than you think they are on all kinds of issues It's just you only hear the nutty people on both sides Decrying this and saying you're racist for saying that or sexist or xenophobic or whatever it is That's the problem is a lot of people of people of faith by the way They have to stand up and say I don't want, I don't want this. I don't, you know, none of us want this. Like one of my prescriptions that, you know, I don't like to be prescriptive in my books is, one of it is identify fringe beliefs and tell them they're fringe. Like we need to be clear about that. Like part of what I do now is like I see a belief on Twitter, whatever I go, you do realize like 8% of Americans believe what you believe. let's be real about this, so that way when people are watching the conversation happen, they don't go, wow, is that a mainstream view? Why don't I believe a mainstream view? Like, why am I so far out of step with the mainstream? We sort of lost sense of what normal is. It's like a funhouse mirror, is what social media has become. And it amplifies these views that honestly should be fringe because they honestly are fringe. And guess what, in America, here's what I love about our country, we have free speech. You can say whatever crazy thing you want. For instance, in America, In the south in 1820 if you said black people are people not cattle You would have been called crazy. And if you said and women should have the right to vote in 1860 They go what are you talking about? But guess what free speech and the marketplace of ideas got us to where we are now. So if you believe that women should be jailed for seeking an abortion fine Six percent of America agrees with you right now convince 45 of America that you're right go I mean you can say whatever you want America Here's your chance, but I'm just telling you're working with a very stacked deck against you and let's just Let's be clear about that from the outset.

[00:35:19] **Mark Young:** let's think a bit about this, the polarization and the movement to religious and non religious as kind of the defining, defining characteristic moving forward. what are those, points of contact with the gospel of Jesus Christ that we can emphasize that address some of the objections that folks have to you? Even the presence of religion, but certainly to the kinds of religion they experience and the way they, view it after this, the last, let's say, ten years.

[00:35:54] **Ryan Burge:** Yeah, I'm always drawn to that verse from Micah 6, 8. What does the Lord require of you to act justly? You know, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. I like how

those things, cause they're all in tension with each other a little bit. You know what I mean? to act justly, but to love mercy is There's an inherent tension in those two ideas because sometimes the merciful thing is not the just thing and sometimes the just thing is not the merciful thing. But then the third thing kind of trumps all of that and is that be humble, you know, you know, to, you know, to use a Brian McLaren term, which is close to what you guys are generous orthodoxy. Right? To realize that historic Christianity has always had a very wide stream of what's considered to be acceptable. And we can't narrow that down and say, if you don't believe these two things, then you're not a Christian. And they almost are always like super evangelical. you don't, unless you believe the Bible is literally true, then you're not a real Christian. Okay, well, that means most people who ever lived were not real Christians. You know, I hear that a lot with the Catholic Church. if you are pro choice, you can't be Catholic. Well, you just eliminated about two thirds of Catholics in America. So, let's be real about what you're talking about here. You know, even if you look at evangelicals, a majority of evangelicals do not believe that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, according to polling data from Ligonier. there's all this data that points to the fact that we're not nearly as pure as we think we are. So let's deal with the reality on the ground. And so what I've been telling people is I've got a couple of principles. I believe in I'm a Baptist by the way, that's my polity. I believe in local church autonomy. I believe in priesthood of the believer. I believe in soul competency and I affirm the apostle's creed. That's it. that's my entire theology in, in, in 10 seconds. If you disagree with me on things like women pastors, cool. That's not my dogma. That's your doctrine. We can disagree on that. Transubstantiation. We can disagree on that. One saved, always saved. We can disagree on that. I don't care, but are you trying to act justly, love, mercy, and walk humbly with your God? That's it. and the key, by the way, epistemic humility, you know what I mean? I'm not, I might be right. I hope I'm right. I want to be right, but could I be wrong? Yeah. And I probably am.

[00:37:57] **Tim Koller:** I just want to invite our listeners as we're listening to this. It's an opportunity for us to do some reflection. Dr Burge mentioned the idea of metacognition and learning to think about our thinking. And I would venture to guess if we've done our job well today, every single listener has felt a bit of strong emotion come up at some point in this conversation. And I would like for that to be an invitation for us to get more curious. God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. It's a scripture passage that we see show up throughout the scriptures. And I would invite us to consider how might this conversation allow us to get more curious about being those who are in the middle of this polarization, not those who are exacerbating the conversation. Some weeks ago, I was finishing up a round of foot golf with my youth soccer team, and we were sitting down after we had concluded and we're having a conversation and by nature of who's gathered around, assistant coaches, parents. We have a conversation of politics emerge, and it was fascinating how difficult it could be to have a conversation with people who hold very different political ideas. And yet we did. And at the conclusion of our time, everyone walking away said, I wish more people could have honest conversations without demonizing one another. And so my hope would be that in light of what we're seeing, In light of this conversation, perhaps that we might be able to be those who have enough self differentiation, enough ability to be present in the midst of tension, but remain true to who we are, that we can walk away from this more aware of the polarization and resist that polarization. I believe that we're being invited into that, and I would encourage you to read the nones by Dr Burge. I would encourage you to read The Hope of the Gospel by Mark Young. These are really great resources and things that have been very edifying for me personally. So Dr. Burge, thank you for joining us. It has been such a delight. Of

[00:39:47] **Ryan Burge:** Thanks guys. It's been a real pleasure. I had a great time at Denver Seminary. make sure you pre order the book when it comes out. It'll be in 2026. It's probably the most personal thing I've ever written and it, blends the academic work I've been doing for a long time. Like I, this is my big swing book. if I'm going to really, you know, make a difference in America, I think this is, the

book and I'm really, proud of it. And I just want to change the conversation about religion and politics in the United States and help us understand it from both the academic perspective, but also the personal religious perspective as well. Cause I think it matters. It matters. Even if you're not religious, it matters to you. That's, the point I want to make in the book. It affects all, this is not just a, Oh, the church is declining. That's bad for religious people. It's a church is declining. It's bad for all of us. It's going to impact all of us. And we need to have a real conversation about that and really change the way that we think about religion, the role of religion in a functioning democracy.

[00:40:34] **Mark Young:** Super. Thanks for your work, Ryan, and thanks for joining us

[00:40:37] **Ryan Burge:** Thank you.

[00:40:38] **Mark Young:** Thank you, Tim, for hosting us.

[00:40:40] **Tim Koller:** course. Friends, we're grateful that you've chosen to spend some time with us. If you get the chance, please leave us a rating or review wherever you listen to podcasts, and please send any questions or comments to us at [podcast@denverseminary.edu](mailto:podcast@denverseminary.edu). In addition, visit [denverseminary.edu](http://denverseminary.edu) for more information and resources about Denver Seminary, such as events, degree programs, and other episodes of Engage 360, including full transcripts. We're grateful for your interest, support, and prayers. And until next time, may the Lord bless you.