

Masthead transcript of January 8, 2018 conference call with Emma Green

Caroline: Hi everybody, this is Caroline Kitchener. I am an associate editor at The Atlantic and one of the editors on the Masthead. Today, we have our first international Masthead conference call, Emma Green, who covers religion, politics, and policy for The Atlantic. She's calling us all the way from Jerusalem where she is reporting for the year. This year, Emma won the Religion News Association's first place award for news analysis, second place award for feature writing, and second place award for magazine writing. She is truly one of the top religion reporters in media today. Welcome, Emma. How's it going in Jerusalem?

Emma: Thank you so much for having me. This is so much fun. Jerusalem is a little cold and dreary, but from what I have seen on the internet, it is not nearly as cold and dreary as parts of the US right now.

Caroline: Yes.

Emma: For which I am very grateful.

Caroline: We're really excited to have you on. It seems like the connection is good, so this international thing is going to work. Before we get to questions, everybody, I'm just going to remind you of how these calls work. First, as you know, this call is really about your questions. I've collected a few in advance that people sent in and emailed, but we'd love to also answer questions that are submitted in real time.

For everybody listening, you can log in to social.maestroconference.com and give us your questions. There's a little chat window down in the lower left-hand corner of the screen. Go ahead and click on that. Then click on the everyone tab. If you type your questions in there, our new Masthead fellow, Karen Yuan, welcome Karen, she will go ahead and pass those over to us so we can read them. You can also email them to her at themasthead@theatlantic.com at any moment.

Okay, let's get to our questions. The questions that everybody sent in ahead of time were really fascinating. We're going to cover a lot of ground, lots of different types of questions related to faith and religion. We are going to start with everybody's either most or least favorite topic, and that is President Trump. We're going to talk about the impact that he has had on communities of faith.

First, Emma, you have written so much about the tensions within the Evangelical community in the United States over President Trump. Obviously, he has a ton of Evangelical support, but there have been a few breaking points when many

Evangelicals have distanced themselves. I'm thinking of the Access Hollywood tape, the Charlottesville protest. Is President Trump doing more to divide Evangelicals than past Republican presidents?

Emma: That's a great question. Definitely division and fracture are two of my big theme words for thinking about Evangelicals across America and how this political environment has impacted both their own individual political base and identification, but also how their communities are thinking about themselves in relation to politics.

I don't know that I can definitively state from a comparative perspective that Trump is dividing Evangelicals more than any other president before, just because first of all, Evangelicals are extraordinarily diverse. It's a catch-all topic that we like to assign, mostly referring to white Christians who have certain types of beliefs, often identifying on polls as having had a born-again experience, believing in the literality of the Bible, a few other sort of check marks that sociologists like to use when trying to identify this block.

We talk about them as a big lump, because it's somewhat politically useful, in the sense that white Evangelical-identifying people tend to vote in similar ways. They tend to have roughly similar demographic patterns. They tend to have beliefs about a number of issues that have over and over again been really important in American politics.

I'm giving all of that background to say even though this is a category that we use and we talk about in these broad strokes and sort of use as a shorthand, in reality, underneath that term is an extraordinary range of beliefs, of practices, of expressions of worship, certainly racially the picture is very, very different, even for people of similar creed or beliefs or practices. Their political orientation might be very different. Geographically, there's a wide range. It's hard to sort of measure in that linear way whether Trump compared to Jimmy Carter, Trump compared to Ronald Reagan, or Trump compared to Obama, has been more divisive because, in fact, there's a lot that's happening in any given political cycle with the Evangelical world and its relationship to politics.

Caroline: That was really interesting. We do group them always. After Charlottesville, you wrote this very interesting piece about the divisions within Trump's Evangelical advisory board. At least one member had stepped down at the time. What is at stake for Evangelical leaders if they continue to support Trump after he behaves or speaks in a way that doesn't align with their beliefs? What's at stake if they don't continue to support him?

Emma: There's a really wide range of these on this question. A short list, the kinds of Christian leaders who have been very supportive of President Trump are people

like Robert Jeffress, who is a pastor of a huge church in Dallas, Texas, who I recently interviewed maybe within the last month or two. He would say that, in fact, there's nothing to lose, because President Trump is defending the priorities of Evangelicals. He stands for the pro-life movement. He has been great on religious freedom. He stands with Israel. Go down the list of different kinds of political issues, he would say the President Trump has been an Evangelical champion.

There are a few figures who have really emerged as those kinds of very vocal pro-Trump champions. They would say that the Evangelical community will be much better off after four years, eight years of Trump.

Caroline: Why is that?

Emma: There are some who are ... They would offer a number of explanations. One is the narrative that President Obama was openly hostile to religious freedom. There are a number of different cases made on that front, one being, for example, the contraception requirement in the Affordable Care Act, which led to years and years of litigation. There have been a number of other issues surrounding LGBT rights and federal hiring and employment that some religious leaders felt were an assault on their beliefs. It's some sort of compare and contrast with Obama.

Some of it is just that President Trump, for better or for worse, has very much given a lot of time and energy and political capital to investing in Evangelical causes. Some issues that really didn't get that much traction in the base, as you might call it, among the peers and the people. For example, repealing the Johnson amendment, which is that a fair portion of the tax code which governs how non-profits, including churches, can and cannot be taxed and what kind of political activity they can and can't do; this has been sort of a bugaboo for a very small portion of a mostly Evangelical conservative community, not very popular as an issue more broadly. Trump put a lot of capital into it and mentioned it in a bunch of speeches, tried to get it through in the last tax bill. All of this is just saying that they feel hurt, and they feel like their interests are being protected and are helped by the Trump administration.

Now obviously that's just one camp, and I can talk about the whole range of viewpoints of how different Evangelical leaders are processing this, because there are some who are on the opposite side. That's one case, and I'm happy to keep going there. You can break in with a question, whichever works better for you.

Caroline: No, I'd love to hear about the other camp too and where they're coming from.

Emma: Yeah. I would say there are some leaders who are in the middle who think that either overt politicization of their churches or of their ministries does damage, and they're trying to stay as far away from Trump and politics as possible. Then there are some who really are feeling a friction with this time. Leaders who come to mind are, for example, [inaudible] a Presbyterian pastor in New York City, a Southern Baptist leader named Russell Moore, who heads the political arm of the Southern Baptist Convention who was a very outspoken never-Trumper when we got to the election and faced backlash within the Southern Baptist world that he inhabits.

People who have a very solid conviction around what it means to be publicly Christian and what the moral code for Christian leaders should be have often found themselves feeling disoriented and dizzied by seeing their peers in Christianity rally behind Trump. The result has been, for some of them, backlash from their own Evangelical world. It's been a feeling of political homelessness and not knowing how to use their resources and their influence. Ultimately, there's been a rallying cry among those who feel alienated to stick it out, stick to their principles, keep going for a Christian witness, and ultimately potentially to pull a little bit away from this tight twine between the Republican Party and Evangelicals, which has always been sort of an assumption, at least since roughly the Reagan years.

Caroline: We had a member write in and ask about Roy Moore and Evangelicals. You wrote a little bit about this. Despite the allegations of child sexual harassment that formed around him in the weeks leading up to the Senate race in Alabama, many Evangelicals did continue to support him. Could you talk us through what made the Roy Moore moment so difficult for Evangelicals?

Emma: Well, a few things on that. The first is that this comes back to the original point that I was making about diversity among who is falling under that Evangelical label, because especially in places like Alabama where there is strong Christian identification across the board, there are often people who identify with that label but who don't necessarily follow the credo beliefs or practices that we would typically associate with Evangelicals. People who maybe don't go to church that often but see Evangelical as a code for certain types of beliefs or cultural orientation, people who don't necessarily follow sort of the ticking box of, again, having had an experience with being saved, believing in the literality of the Bible, people who don't necessarily check those boxes but still claim the Evangelical term because of what it carries culturally.

All of that is to say that I think part of the Roy Moore phenomenon is that he speaks very directly into a lot of the Christian nationalist fervor that was very much behind President Trump as well. He came to fame many, many years ago, actually, for his defense of a kind of ugly statue in the Alabama State Supreme

Court building of the 10 Commandments. This was very much in keeping with Roy Moore's shtick, if you can even call it a shtick. It was Roy Moore's sort of oeuvre, I guess. Then he spoke very directly into this kind of vaguely Christian-identifying, American-associating, deeply nationalist belief in defense of religious freedom, defense of the unborn, sort of issues that tend to be rallying cries on the Evangelical right.

I will say that in the Roy Moore versus Doug Jones knock-down drag-out, there were a lot of Evangelicals from around the country who don't live in Alabama who were absolutely condemning Roy Moore, saying that the way he was conducting himself, the way that he had behaved with those women was not keeping with Christian values or Christian beliefs, were disowning any kind of association with him.

I think on the flip side, there were a lot of Christians who were pulling for Doug Jones. Even though the narrative around Roy Moore very much associated him with solid Evangelical politics and labeled him as this champion of Evangelicalism or as this representative, he's really representing and speaking into one very, very specific swath of what it's come to mean or come to be associated with to be Evangelical in America. That's a very nationalist point-of-view.

Caroline: Okay. I want to pivot a little bit away from Evangelicals and talk about Trump's religion and Trump's foreign policy. In a recent piece, you wrote, "One of the great paradoxes of Donald Trump is that for a president who's among the least overtly pious in recent memory, he often presents the world through a religious lens." I thought that was really interesting. You explain that he does use a lot of religious language to justify foreign policy. Could you say a little bit more about how he does that?

Emma: This is a trend that we've started picking up on fairly early into President Trump's term, which is that a lot of his speeches and a lot of his overt sort of foreign policy addresses or approaches have framed the world in this sort of Samuel Huntington, clash of civilizations-type of way. One of the big pieces of evidence for this was his first ever international trip as president, which was sort of a religion world tour. He went to all of the spots and homelands of the three Abrahamic states, going to Saudi Arabia, which is home to Mecca and Medina, going to Israel, which is home to Jerusalem, which the Jews consider to be a historic homeland, and also visiting the Vatican and Rome and seeing that as the heart of Catholicism or Christianity. He met with the pope there.

This framing I don't think was accidental. In fact, when the White House officials were briefing reporters on why they had chosen these spots, they pointed out that this was a novel way to approach constructing an international trip, to visit homes of the major world religions. As Trump has gone on through his term, this

has come up again and again, paying attention not only to the causes that are near and dear to a sort of conservative religious community in the US, but also framing the way he's thinking about terrorism, the way he thinks about Muslims and Muslim assimilation in the US, the way that he thinks about aids to Christians overseas, all of this is framed in the language of religion and civilization.

The reason this is remarkable, and I've written about this a number of times, is that from all my reporting and all that I understand, in the foreign policy establishment in the state department in traditional policy-making circles in Washington, religion isn't typically viewed as the primary driving force for many cultural phenomena outside of potentially terrorism and radicalization. This is something that the Obama administration moved to counter a little bit with the creation of a new office in the state department that is dedicated to building ties between US diplomats and religious institutions around the world.

What was attractive to me was finding out that, in fact, we had never done that before. When there is a conflict in Chad, for example, we didn't have the infrastructure to reach out to influential religious leaders in Chad to try to get a sense of what was happening on the ground. We maybe had formal diplomatic correspondence with the Holy See, but we didn't necessarily have a tap into all of the diocese of the Catholic church around the world that could potentially be helpful to us in diplomatic situations.

That was something the Obama administration tried to do. It certainly flew against the grain of the foreign policy establishment. I would say that Trump's rhetoric has even more so defied the norm of the foreign policy elites who tend to run things in Washington.

Caroline: He's using that language. Is he actually implementing those kinds of changes?

Emma: Here's where a number of the scholars I've talked to saw a bit of a gulf, which is that much of Trump's rhetoric has focused on religion in the context of foreign policy, but there hasn't been a lot of that institution-building that they see as influential and crucial for making sure that these kinds of policies and orientations are played out on the ground.

For example, the office and the state department that I was just speaking about that was created under Secretary of State John Kerry has essentially been dismantled and rolled into another already existing office at the state department. That functionality at state is going to go away. Like a lot of the diplomacy in the US, really how much we're able to do, how much we're able to build connections with religious organizations, have an impact in different cultures, have sort of an American mission and connection to religious

institutions around the world, has to do with those bodies who are there in Washington, in Foggy Bottom, at the state department, that are being deployed from there to make segues around the world or make connections around the world.

This is something that policy experts who I've spoken with, scholars who I spoke with were pretty unsure about in terms of what kind of money, bodies in offices, HR, and orientation, the Trump administration is actually going to have to [inaudible] to try to match the rhetoric that they've put forth about religion.

Caroline: This segues nicely into Jerusalem, where you are now. You've been reporting there since the summer, right? Is that when you arrived?

Emma: Yeah. Off and on. I'm back and forth a lot, but yeah.

Caroline: Okay. You had a front row seat in December when Trump recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and relocated the American Embassy there. I'd just love to get a little background on that. Why did Trump make that call? Was that a long time coming?

Emma: Yeah. Trump has made this one of his campaign promises. He always said if ... Excuse me. He always said when, not if. He, in that way, followed in the footsteps of his predecessors. Bill Clinton and George W. Bush had both said that they were going to move the American Embassy. In fact, Congress passed a law in the '90s that mandated that ...

Caroline: Emma, are you still there? Let's give it a minute. Emma, are you still there?

Emma: I'm here. I'm back.

Caroline: Okay. Good, good, good.

Emma: There was no failure of technology due to the international connection. It was my face pressing the mute button. That's what I get for gesturing wildly while I'm talking. I don't know where you lost me. I was talking about the mandate that Congress passed in the '90s that requires US presidents every six months to sign a waiver delaying the movement of the Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, which Trump, President Trump had signed this waiver back in the spring. There was a lot of uproar from his Evangelical constituents, from conservatives, from Orthodox Jews, people who thought that this was a right move and had trusted him in his campaign to make this happen.

There was a lot of attention on him coming up to December. Would he sign it again? Would he sign it again? Would he kick the can down the road? Eventually

what ended up happening was something of a meet in the middle. He did sign the waiver, and there was sort of a pushing back of the effects on the ground or when it would happen. He essentially made a promise that it was going to be put into action. There were plans being rolled out to take a number of years, but most importantly there was a change in language. That was this: that Trump recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, that it was the capital for the Jewish people, and that there was a holy connection for the Jewish people to Israel, or excuse me, to Jerusalem.

This is really important, because there's always been debate in discussions between the Israelis and the Palestinians in movement towards the peace process over what the final status of Jerusalem would be. Palestinians claim Jerusalem as their capital, and specifically east Jerusalem is overwhelmingly populated by Palestinians. It's almost like a divided city in that you can cross one street and you'll be reading signs in Arabic, and then cross over and you'll be reading signs in Hebrew in sort of a total cultural difference.

There was a lot of uproar over this, because the move was seen as the US coming out and taking a firm and outward position on the side of the Israelis, who had always maintained that Jerusalem is their capital, and essentially sabotaged any prospects for the US to play a role as a mutual negotiator in negotiations over a two-state solution moving forward into the future.

Caroline: How was that news received on the ground there? What did you notice?

Emma: There was a lot of talk in the lead up to Trump's decision about the potential for a massive uprising in both Palestine, but also around the Arab world. There was a term tossed around called "the days of rage", which is something that Hamas said, a major political force here, called for, which is basically destruction through protests and violence and pushing back in the days and year following the announcement. Honestly, what I found is that Jerusalem was quiet. There has been some scattered protests, particularly in the West Bank and on the border with Gaza. Gaza's about three and a half hours from Jerusalem. There are less bank towns. Literally a five minute drive or a 10 minute drive from the old city in Jerusalem. Not too far away.

In Jerusalem itself, especially in the old city and in east Jerusalem where protests often take place, in the days right after President Trump's announcement, there were some protests. There were some clashes with police, but they were generally pretty quiet. What I noticed most was a lot of media attention looking for the conflict [inaudible]. I reported from Damascus gate right outside the old city in Jerusalem after Trump's announcement, and there were probably three reporters for every protester.

Caroline: Wow. Wow.

Emma: That just goes to show that the predictions that we make, or especially the predictions of people sitting thousands away in Washington, don't always come to pass. It's really important to always reserve judgment until we actually know the facts before we're predicting what the cataclysmic effect of any given decision is going to be.

Caroline: Yeah, absolutely. We have a question from Bill related to this. Bill asked, and I'm quoting here, "Some Christians think these second coming can't happen until Jews have full control of the Temple Mount. What role, if any, does this thinking have on efforts to find a peaceful solution in the Israeli-Arab conflict, and on the role Jerusalem will play in any future peace settlement? Or do Israel's leaders either ignore this thinking or not understand its anti-Jewish implications?"

Emma: That's a really important question, and one theme I've been following here in Jerusalem is the outside influence that Christians, and particularly American Christians play in Israeli politics. I do think you're right that those Messianic believing Christians, you might call their beliefs millennial or any version of sort of millennialist belief, do think that there's a sort of story of history, a set narrative. One of the prerequisites in this set narrative of history is that Jews will have to all be back in Israel and that they'll have to control the Temple Mount, which is also a sacred space for Muslims. That has driven certainly a portion of Christian Zionist support for Israel in the US and around the world.

But I will say this: a lot of the Christian Zionists who I have met have been uncomfortable with that narrative. They say that, first of all, this supercessionist rhetoric among Christian Zionist, which supercessionism is this belief that Christianity essentially took the place of or made unnecessary Judaism. They're uncomfortable with that kind of rhetoric. Many of them are also uncomfortable with this notion that they support Israel for any other reason than that they believe that Israel is the historic homeland of the Jews, that it's where the events of the bible took place, and it's sacred to them as Christians. They believe in the importance of having a Jewish state in the Middle East. I do think that's part of what's happening here, and it does play into some of the mindset and the politics around Israel, especially among American Christians, but it's only a partial picture of what's happening.

Caroline: That's fascinating. How much longer are you there, Emma?

Emma: I will be here for the next few months, but I'll be back and forth quite a bit. I'm sort of bopping around, but probably through the summer.

Caroline: Got it. We'll look forward to your future Jerusalem reporting. Now we're going to shift over and talk about ... I got quite a few questions about searching, the personal search for a different kind of faith, or the process of losing your faith, going through some kind of transition in the way that you think about faith and religion.

Joy asks, "Today, we are seeing more and more people who say that they are spiritual but not religious. They're moving away from churches." Joy calls them SBNRs. Why are they resistant to finding a church? What are these people looking for? Is this group that identifies in this way growing?

Emma: That's a great question. This is definitely one of the most important long-brewing stories in American religion, which is the move away from American religious institutions. The growth is definitely there. We've seen in the Pew Religious Landscape Survey, which is kind of the gold star for sampling the American religious population, even over the last seven years between 2007 and 2014 when the last polling dates were, huge growth in the population of Americans who did identify this way, as either spiritual but not religious, or more popularly this term used on polls is sort of the nones, nothing in particular. They don't really identify with any kind of religion in particular.

This is especially being driven by young people. Millennials, and particularly the younger cohort of millennials, those people who now may be 26 and under, have very widespread disaffiliation from religious institutions. I think there are a lot of reasons for this. The first is that you can't talk about disaffiliation from religious institutions decoupled from a broader phenomenon in American life, which is that these traditional institutions where people used to meet up and build community and have small groups where they would get together have somewhat crumbled.

There was a famous book on this actually a while ago by a sociologist named Robert Putnam called "Bowling Alone", which was about the decline of bowling clubs and other types of civic and voluntary institutions, not just churches, all of these other kind of secular intuitions as well. That's one part of the story is-

Caroline: That's fascinating.

Emma: ... the decline of American institutional life. Yeah, and the other part of this is I think a lot of the sort of generational impulse behind this disaffiliation from churches, from synagogues, from other religious institutions among those young people, those millennials is this idea that religion or spirituality isn't going to follow a specific set of rules. There shouldn't necessarily conform to preexisting [inaudible]. That choice and self-identification.

We ran a series a couple of springs ago, which I would definitely recommend to all of you, that was called "Choosing My Religion". It was all about this question of young people and how they were going to navigate religion and how they were going to sort of self-identify their way through this complicated religious landscape. What we found is, first of all, diversity, absolutely. There are a lot of young people who are still very traditionally religious and do find a lot of growth in that and a lot of resonance in that. There are people who fit that SBNR category who are finding spirituality outside of traditional institutions.

Most of all, all young people are facing a choice. They are opting into spaces. They are selecting the kinds of communities that fit their values. They're defining their own sense of identity. It's a really, really interesting terrain. I think there's going to be a ton to report on for many, many years in the future.

Caroline: Along these same lines, Rin wants to know is atheism also growing in the US?

Emma: That's a great question. This is actually one of my favorite fun facts about this particular area of religious life. I'm not going to quote you numbers, because I don't have them right in front of me, and I'm afraid of getting them wrong. Atheist, in that sort of on a poll somebody who would say either, "I am an atheist," or, "I definitively do not believe that God exists," are a really, really small segment of the American population. They are some percentage of that SBNR sort of religious nones, nothing in particular group, but many, many of those people who are disaffiliated from religious institutions actually do believe in God and maybe just haven't found an institutional home for it, or aren't that interested in it.

Atheism is growing is the answer to your question, but it is not growing at the kind of rate that religious disaffiliation at large is, and it certainly doesn't represent as wide of a population as those people who are just kind of nothing in particular.

Caroline: That's so interesting. Do you know, is atheism also growing among young people in the same way that nothing in particulars or spiritual but not religious is? Is that more kind of cross-generational?

Emma: Yeah. Again, I want to make sure I'm careful about quoting percentages and numbers, because I don't have them right in front of me, but I do think it's right that among young people, again, who are much more widely disaffiliated from religious institutions than their parents or grandparents, there is a larger proportion of atheists, so the percentage would be bigger.

Still, even among millennials, even among whatever the name is that I don't even know for the next generation that's coming up under millennials, there are a lot

of people who still believe in God or maybe identify as agnostic. Wouldn't necessarily fit that atheist category definitively. There's a lot of diversity there.

Caroline: Yeah. That sounds like a big story. We have had in our Masthead edit meetings with Matt Peterson and Matt Thompson, we spoke last week about a book called "Why Buddhism is True" by Robert Wright. He's talking about really making the case for why Buddhism can ... He's arguing that natural selection creates a biological pull towards dissatisfaction in humans. Human beings are always looking for more, perpetually dissatisfied. He makes the case that Buddhism and meditation can be the antidote.

We've been having these conversations about faith as a lifestyle choice rather than coming into faith for purely religious reasons, coming into it because you want to make a change in your lifestyle. I'm wondering is that a trend right now? Is that something that people are doing, and particularly adopting, I know as a western person, adopting a non-western faith? Is that trending right now?

Emma: Mm-hmm (affirmative). That's an interesting question. I will say up front I have not read that book, although I've read a couple of reviews of it. I'm not going to speak to that directly, because I want to make sure I'm not misquoting or misattributing. There are echoes of this all over the American religious landscape. It sits really well into the conversation we were having about SBNRs, that none crowd. In the absence of these traditional religious institutions, a lot of people gravitate towards [inaudible] and sort of mix and match, make your own form of spirituality. We see this expressed in a lot of different ways.

I'll give you a few examples. One of my favorite things to talk about is the connection between SoulCycle and the decline of religious institutions in the US.

Caroline: Awesome.

Emma: I wrote an essay about this a couple of years ago. People are always talking about SoulCycle. It's the new religion. It's their religious replacement. Of course, there are a lot of flaws to be found in arguments about that, I'll say, but one thing that I find really interesting about SoulCycle is the way that it's not just an exercise class, it's a lifestyle, and it's a form of spirituality. The language that's used around working hard on the bike and being a champion and finding your inner peace, channeling your week, finding a connection to something, all of that has these same kinds of resonances of sort of channeling an Eastern-ish packaging around something that is highly commodified and very much sitting within an American elite capitalist society.

I would say another iteration of this, radically different on the spectrum, but much more resonant with what you were saying about finding religion in order

to find peace or in order to find lifestyle satisfaction is a campaign that I saw in London in October, which is about Shabbat. Shabbat is the Jewish adherence of the Sabbath, which goes from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday. Traditionally, Jews will not use electronics, including their telephones on Shabbat. There's a campaign by the Jewish community and the chief rabbi in England in London to get everybody to take a cell phone holiday on Shabbat. They push this about once a year.

It's very interesting, because they're doing outreach not just to Jews, but to the broader community. I think that really speaks to this idea that finding resonance in a religious tradition, even one that's not your own, sort of find an answer to a problem you have or a lifestyle pressure that you have with being on your phone all the time, really, really common in this day and age to sort of mix and match religions.

Caroline: Yeah. Wow. Wow. That campaign, that's so interesting. I've never heard of that.

Emma: Yeah, I was really surprised too.

Caroline: Okay, so here we go. We've got one last question on this broad theme. Charles wrote to us with a little bit of a personal reflection. He says, "I'm no longer able to profess any faith, despite the very large comfort and joy it has brought me through a large portion of my life. I can no longer reconcile it, the logic and science of my experience, and not to mention the continued litany of horrible things in the world done in the name of religion. More than anything, this makes me sad, but I've not yet been able to find any resources or writing on the topic of losing your faith and dealing with that loss. What have you learned or read about this topic?"

Emma: That's a great question. I love the way the question is framed, because it's a call to action for people like me who report about different religious communities to find ways to tell those stories, because I don't think that experience is uncommon. I think people lose their faith for a lot of different reasons. Sometimes it's evidence in the world. Like you were saying in that example, sometimes it's a personal event. Sometimes it's just drifting away from a community.

I will say this. In my sort of travels as a reporter talking to a lot of different kinds of people, I found most of all a diversity in how people deal with this kind of question. Everything from a sort of new atheist style rejection of religion, hostility towards religion, a belief that religion actively damages the world, that's one expression of it.

Then, for example, I've met people who, from the outside, look like highly religious Jews who follow orthodox customs around prayer, around keeping the Sabbath, but who themselves don't necessarily believe in God. When I meet people like that, I'm always curious to ask, "Why do you stay in this community? Why do you keep behaving in these same ways?" Some of them say, "It's my community. It's my obligation." Some of them say, "I just like the form. I get a lot of comfort out of keeping Shabbat or going to those prayer services or showing up for the luncheon on Saturday afternoons."

I think there are a lot of different ways to deal with it, and I do think there's writing out there on losing my religion. There's some really good writing about people who are sort of the nothing in particulars these days. I think in that category, there are probably a number of people who have either had a bad experience with religion or have lost their faith in one way or another. If I can, I'll try to maybe tweet out some of that as I see it, but I definitely affirm you in trying to look for things to read. Hopefully there will be stories from the Atlantic that will satisfy that itch in the future.

Caroline: That's great. All right, we're going to end here on a question that ... I'm going to shorten it when I read it, but it was a long, very well thought out, beautifully written email about feminism and Christianity. Masthead member William, he writes, "Do we now have a unique opportunity to reinterpret scripture from a feminist point-of-view, which would revitalize religion and make it more meaningful and relevant?" William asks.

He then goes on to outline the powerful roles women like Sarah, Leah, and Rachel play in the bible and the ways in which the bible could be reinterpreted from a feminist perspective today. He says, "These women had agency. It seems to me that a feminist interpretation of the bible has the potential to completely remake religion and reform our society." Emma, are we seeing anything like that now? Is there any kind of movement to, with everything that has been going on over the last couple of months, to do a more feminist reading of the bible and go into those perspectives more than we have in the past?

Emma: Yeah. I would say that this question would be met with tears by many, many academic theologians and people who work in sort of religious writing from a theological or biblical interpretation perspective, because there's a lot of energy and interest in ways to tell the stories of the bible highlighting the voices of women and the roles that they played in defining our theological religious history from a sort of Christian and Jewish perspective, and also from a Muslim perspective.

I think there's a lot packed into that question, because the way that different religious communities relate to this word feminism can really, really range. I had

a great and interesting interview with a woman who is sort of in that Evangelical reform spectrum who was talking to me about a story on women's leadership roles in churches that don't allow women to be pastors, and talking about how she really argued against pushing women to the side and marginalizing them, even though her church and her belief hold that women couldn't be in this top position of leadership.

She really felt conflicted about this word "feminism", even though that was typically what she had written about, or she wrote from a perspective of women's empowerment. I think there's a lot of baggage there in a lot of communities thinking about women's roles and women's narratives in traditional religious interpretations. Yet we're seeing creatively all over the place different rewritings and retellings of these old stories in ways that help us to understand the pivotal role that women have always played and the role that women can play now today in defining American religion.

Yes, definitely. There's a lot out there, and I think it's a great topic to look at and explore, because there's a lot happening there.

Caroline: All right. Emma, I think that's all of our time, but this has been really wonderful. We covered a lot of ground.

Emma: Yeah, we did.

Caroline: Whenever I see a long piece from Emma Green, I always get very excited, because I love your work. We're so lucky to have you on this call today.

Emma: Aw, thanks so much. It was really, really fun. I'm so glad to get to connect a little bit with the people who make the Atlantic tick. Thank you all for coming and hanging out and listening to me yap on about religion.

Caroline: Thanks everybody for listening. Next week, because of the holiday, we won't have a call, but the following week, we have Ta-Nehisi Coates will be on our conference call. It will be that Tuesday rather than the normal Monday slot, but we will write to you about all of that and give you lots of reminders. All that said, everybody have a wonderful Monday, and we will talk to you soon.