

[Transcript] The Realignment / 403 | Kevin Vallier: Integralism & the Radical Religious Alternatives to Liberalism

Marshall here. Welcome back to The Re-alignment.

I've got a great bonus episode for you all today. My guest is Kevin Valier, author of the recent released *All the Kingdoms of the World* on radical religious alternatives to liberalism. A really interesting theme of the intellectual movements that have defined the post 2016 Re-alignment era has been the desire to abend, replace, or even overthrow the status quo of our

liberal society. By liberal, of course, I'm not referring to the liberalism of the Democratic Party of the Left, but rather liberalism with a lower case L, the political philosophy that developed after the Enlightenment. Kevin's work and the new book is focused on those seeking to replace liberalism with a religiously based alternative. He does a particularly great job of articulating in good faith, a view, and understanding of the world that a huge portion of the audience will likely be highly skeptical of. That said, I think it's really important to dive into these themes because whether you agree or disagree, they get at underlying debates about how our society continues to and struggles to function. Huge thank you to the Foundation for American Innovation who is part of the work of this podcast. Hope you all enjoy this conversation.

Kevin Valier, welcome to The Re-alignment.

Thanks so much for having me on.

Yeah, it's really great to chat with you. I have an unhelpful habit as a podcaster slash thinker of not really diving into topics that appear to not, let me just say, be quite as relevant. But I think the conversational liberalism and religious alternatives to it is one that it's just going to keep coming up and coming up and coming up. And I think that's the definition of a great book on that topic. So treat me like I am not particularly schooled on these topics. I'll ask you the basic question. So number one, let's get this out of the way. You're writing about radical religious alternatives to liberalism. Let's just define liberalism. You're obviously not talking about the left side of the Democratic Party here. So let's just get that set.

Right, right. So I think of liberalism as a political tradition that emphasizes kind of at least four different principles, maybe a few subsidiary others. The first one, these are values about how to structure government in particular. So liberalism isn't essentially a theory about the good life, about how to live your life every day in detail.

It's really a theory about how and for what reasons the government should act.

The most important reason in the liberal tradition is freedom. And freedom are understood in different ways and applied to different groups, to individuals, families, small associations. Sometimes it's freedom for interference. Sometimes it's freedom to be able to have control of your own life. So there are different notions of freedom, different strands of liberalism. But liberalism is centrally about government protecting freedom. The other theme, I think, which is in principle is that of equality. So the idea is that whatever freedoms people have, they're all entitled to the same amount of them. And as we have equal rights and the government should treat us equally by treating us equally in accord with those rights and equally before the law. The third principle is a kind of broad principle of toleration. And is liberalism tries to be patient with diverse points of view, starting early on with different points of view within Christianity, but then extending to religious toleration broadly and ultimately to a range of secular doctrines as well. So the state should not be involved in sort of taking sides in the

promotion of any particular religious view, or increasingly particular moral doctrines as well. And the final principle, as I see it, is that there's a kind of principle of harmony of interests or maybe mutual advantage. Liberalism is kind of the win-win political tradition. So it tries to emphasize that society isn't inherently at war with itself. And it's very much a distinction to say socialist traditions that emphasize class conflict as being sort of endemic to any society. So liberalism says that we can sort of set up social order so that people can interact in a mutually beneficial way. So that's how I see it. Liberalism is a political address that addresses freedom, equality, toleration, and mutual advantage. And the key thing is that most listeners, especially those in Western societies, live in liberal societies that are based upon liberal principles, obviously, then, right? Yeah, that's right. And those principles give rise to certain institutions, the institutions of say constitutional rights, and the rule of law, democracy, markets in the welfare state. That's tended to be institutions that liberalism has packaged as a whole. I mean, plenty of people have advocated for them. But so the principles tend to lead to certain kind of institutions. And I am realizing as you're giving these very eloquent and fair answers that I started off the podcast in a slightly rude way if you don't get the context of what I was trying to say. So when I was saying, I've avoided topics of religious alternatives to liberalism, I was not besmirching your academic specialty. What I was basically trying to get out and just ask this frankly, is this is a weird space, just like the idea that we'd look at our society today and say, hey, what if we installed more religion? What if we kind of tore up some of those principles and did something different? It's just so weird on the face of it. And to me, a lot of the people, especially in academic contexts, who tend to, you know, talk about these ideas tend to be crank adjacent. It's not that they're not well credentialed. It just seems kind of weird. So that's what I was really trying to say there. So why is this a topic not just for weirdos stuck in the 19th or early 20th century back? Why is this something relevant today for having this conversation? Sure. In the book, I'm talking about a class of these views that I call religious anti liberalisms. And I see these doctrines as having kind of two key elements. One, they reject the liberal principle of broad religious toleration. They want a particular religion recognized as true by the state and that they use coercion in many cases to promote those religious ends. So we're not talking about like the Church of England right now, coercive establishment of religion, and also a belief that the authority of government ultimately comes from the divine in some way, not ultimately from the people. It may pass through the people, but it ultimately originates in the divine. So you see I'm dealing with a class of you. And the reason I was interested in them for two reasons. One, I'm interested in them as a group because I think they're reviving around the world. And then I'm interested in the particular version, Catholic integralism, because it's on the rise in intellectual circles on the right. So I'll tell you two stories, hopefully brief ones about the global story and then the American story. So the global story goes a little bit like this. For thousands and thousands of years, the great religions arose, replaced sort of previous pagan religions and created great civilizations. There were no secular civilizations. The religions varied in all kinds of different ways, but their power were limited generally by one another. So including say you go back foreigners or Austrianism, but you also have with respect to Hinduism, Islam, Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Christianity, and on and on. And of course, people raised in these great civilizations are of course going to think that politics and religion have some relationship to each other.

They think that religion is true. They think it's the path, say, to eternal life. What else should political order do but help people pursue the good life to promote the good? And that includes

the religious good. And so, you know, most human beings have political impulses. People have these religious impulses, their civilization facilitates that religious impulse is very, very ancient.

You know, recent ethnographic work has found that there's no society we know of in archaeology or ethnography that does not have religious people in it. So not all people are religious, but religion is a kind of human trait, same way that say brown hairs, a human trait.

So we've got a human race, a human species that's political and that's very often religious.

And the main thing that happens to these great civilizations that mixes them is first liberalism and then socialism begin to take hold among elites and then they start to push for certain kinds of desecularizations. So at the very least to disestablish the great religions in Western Europe to make sure that those regimes were secular or at least that there wasn't coercive establishment of religion. But socialism went further than liberalism. Liberalism was interested in religious toleration and the removal, of course, of establishment. On Europe, it was more aggressive than, say, in the Anglesphere. But socialism was very much more kind of free thought and ultimately of atheistic movement in most of its manifestations, not all. Marxist socialism would just suppress religion entirely or just kick it to the outskirts of society. And in more moderate socialist regimes like the ones we saw in India and Turkey would be pretty strongly secularist, but would completely remove the political power of the great religions in their societies. So I think in the 20th century, it was socialism that was leading us to think that we could separate religion and politics in a big way, but that that was an illusion. That as soon as socialism collapsed worldwide, these religiously infused political movements and ideological systems began to revive and basically all the great religions. I mean, Protestantism to some extent, but Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Sunni, and Shia Islam was already going on before socialism collapsed. The Hindu nationalism had been building

steam for a century, but it really came to the fore. The Confucian revival in China following Mao trying to just totally wipe out Confucius's influence. So all over the place, you start to see this, you see it in Turkey with Erdogan instead of totally rejecting the secular Turkish regime of Adatürk. So I see there's this global movement of religious anti-liberalisms,

and then there's this interesting question, where do they come from? One, it's just humanity returning to its spiritual and political norm. So that's what I think is going on globally, that we have to sort of take on and address these ideas because liberalism is the sort of lone survivor here, and there's a question about whether stability could be maintained in these different liberal regimes, given these impulses or inclinations. So that's the global story. The American story is much weirder and more idiosyncratic, because this is still a largely Protestant country, but the view I wrote the book most about was about Roman Catholic anti-liberalism,

also called integralism, which we'll explore in a bit. The very strange thing about this is that Catholic intellectual institutions in the United States tended to be on the outskirts, the Catholics were discriminated against for decades and centuries, and there was a process internal to American Catholicism about how much Catholicism should conform itself to American political culture in order to assimilate. And the people that proposed more assimilation

were able to eventually reduce Catholic prejudice, reduce bias in the law, and attain positions of power. So for instance, if you told someone 100 years ago that the majority of the Supreme Court would be Roman Catholic, at the same time there was a Catholic president, and until last year, a Catholic speaker of the House, they would not have believed you. But that was only after decades and decades of work. This is especially true on the right. Going all the way back to national review days, you had Catholic intellectuals leading a largely Protestant conservative movement. So Catholic intellectuals have been enormously influential in the American right, pound for pound. That is, individuals having a spectacular amount of influence in terms of their ideas. Luckily it was a Catholic, but also Kirk was a Catholic. And so movements within American Catholic intellectual circles had this extraordinary power instilled today, very much today, in how particularly the American right is thinking about its relationship to traditional American institutions. And what's going on with Catholic intellectual elites is that for a while they're saying, okay, you know, look, we built ourselves into the Reagan coalition, we're on board, we have some differences, we're being accepted, we're being integrated. And then we reached the late 2000s and early 2010s and the push for same-sex marriage. And around that time, you started to see increasingly on university campuses, but also in the law the sense that actually Catholics hadn't been integrated at all, that they were about to go back on the sidelines, but now because of their views on abortion and on LGBT issues and so on. So a lot of the elite Catholics at top institutions feel like this is like 70 years ago. I mean, we're on the outskirts again, but just for a totally different reason, not because we're not Protestant, because we're not egalitarian enough. And so many younger Catholics are growing up in a more polarized, less trusting environment in general in the United States. And also their experience and their education is one where they feel at least to some extent excluded. And so they've started asking themselves the question that Catholics asked decades ago, which is that, is the American project, is the American experiment compatible with true and pious Roman Catholic belief? And increasingly, a number of young people are saying, no, they weren't compatible. The compatibility was just a brief illusion. It lasted for about 30 years, and then it started to crack. And so there was some kind of deep incompatibility between sort of broadly American liberalism on the one hand and again, pious traditional Roman Catholicism on the other. And so the reason I think a lot of young people want to think about these radical alternatives, even if they're not feasible, is because they're wanting to know, well, what should I be for politically as a Catholic? If I'm not for just say, whatever the conservative movement is for, if I'm not just say whatever the Republican Party or the Democratic Party is for, what am I for? What am I excited about? What do I think society should ultimately do? And the answer is a very simple one. The simple answer that civilizations gave for thousands of years, the state should promote the good. And that includes in the next life, right? That's the ultimate good. I mean, again, what else should the state do? Why would we think the liberal thing where it just protects rights and lets people make their own choices? Like, there's an objective good. It has infinite weight because it lasts forever. Why wouldn't the state be promoting the good? What was wrong with us? Why did we ever think it should do anything else? So that's the American story. There's more to it. But that's what I think is going on here. Yeah, so a million follow up questions will go one at a time. Number one, can you explain the feeling of outsider status that these young Catholics feel because in your articulation,

Supreme Court justices, the presidency, the Speaker of the House, JFK was elected president between like early Russell Kirk and William F. Buckley. Obviously Catholics are probably the most representative they have ever been in American society and disproportionately so. Therefore, explain that personal level of feeling how that works there.

Yeah, I mean, it's really interesting. But a lot of it has to do with the fact that many of the Catholics that are in power have basically had to sort of, in their terms, sort of pay obeisance to progressive elites. So if you like look at JFK's speech about, oh, look, I'm not going to listen to the Pope. Many Catholics look back at that with disgust and say that JFK was just like acting totally incompatibly with his faith.

Pelosi and Biden have been questioned many times about how their faith influences their politics. And they say, look, maybe I believe abortion is wrong or the church has different positions on this, but my job as an elected official is to sort of govern in accord with the Constitution. And many conservative Catholics have said, look, yeah, you're being conformed to this world because

you're being conformed to elite progressive attitudes. And so the argument isn't so much that Catholics are excluded. They're excluded if they're faithful.

And that's the key differentiator yet. You could take any, you could take any integralist and save it. JFK is not the proper example that actually proves the point.

Yeah, that would save us a terrible example. Yeah.

I guess the other question then is, and this is where this gets awkward from a historical perspective, and you're not Catholic, correct? Just to...

No, I'm Eastern Orthodox, actually, but I got into these questions 20 years ago when I was, I just converted to Christianity. So I spent a lot of time with the different denominations and their thought. For sure. Yeah, I just want to make sure that we're pricing ourselves within the conversation. So then the question I have then is, how do you just reflect on how awkward everything you're saying it within the broad narrative we tell of American history? So for example, think of the AP US history version of the Know Nothing Party in the 1850s. Oh, there are these crazy anti-immigrants, anti-black, anti-Jewish group of people who claim that in the Catholic case, these Catholics are worshipers of the Pope, the whore of Babylon, all the cliches, things. You have the people who are saying we won't vote for JFK because I got a core level, like the Catholic Church is incompatible with American life. We tell American history as a triumph over those groups of people who are saying those arguments. Yeah, at the same time, you're very much swimming in the waters of intellectuals who make arguments that by their very nature are actually validating of the critiques that others were uttering. Maybe their error then was in misapplying who held those views. But how does it make you just reflect on the way

we think of American history in this context? It's funny you asked this. I was at a conference last weekend talking to a very prominent Baptist pastor and intellectual, and he'd studied this sort of Catholic anti-liberal movement too. And he says, it's as if Catholicism were what all of these Baptist preachers said it was in 1920. It's like all the things that it said about being anti-democratic, about it being for restricted liberty, for it not believing equal rights. This was like an insult to Catholics, whereas many of these younger Catholics are taking that on. So just to accent what you're saying, it is a little strange because it looks like, yeah,

there's this movement that's now kind of saying, well, in a certain sense, they were correct.

I mean, part of the integralist ideal is that the Pope and his bishops would have a kind of indirect sovereignty over the state in matters of religion.

And so this is exactly what people have been saying about Catholicism for centuries in Protestant countries. And then you've got this group of people saying, well, you know, maybe.

And quick question, why did you cite 1920? That's like the second coming of the Pope's campaign was then, so he would, the Al Smith campaign was, I believe, 1920. He was Roman Catholic.

I think he was the first Roman Catholic candidate for president in a major party.

So that's why that would have been top of mind there, specifically. I guess my other question that I would have here is what is the means by which one achieves this form of Catholic

integralism? Because I know that that may feel like a cheap shot, but I'm thinking back to, if you're talking about 20 years ago, think back to your most like George W. Bush era Jesus camp, like you have all these evangelicals and like the American government and they're going to sort of pass like evangelical laws, appoint Supreme Court justices, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

There's at least kind of a theory of the case or how that kind of gets there. But I don't understand how that theory of the case works in the case of Catholic integralists. And the also key thing too is that no matter how evangelical the George W. Bush administration was, it's still operated within the bounds of liberalism. You can appoint justices who will overturn Roe v. Wade and you're still operating from the liberal system. So you have a minority of a minority, obviously, the Catholic integralists. Do they spend time thinking about the how do you get their part?

Oh, yes. Yeah. So a couple of things first. I should define integralism,

name some integralists, distinguish between them, and then tell you about the transitional stuff.

So I think of Catholic integralism is in the following way. So first, it proposes two things that most Christians have accepted historically. The first is that God ordains a secular power, the non ecclesiastical power, say a monarch or even even a democratic leader to promote the temporal or earthly common good of the human community. The second is that God engages in another act in the creation of the church and sets the church in order to both preach the gospel to bring people in the church, but also to provide salvation and the sort of spiritual goods of this life to its members, just baptized members. So those are just two not so controversial claims. What makes the Catholic integralists Catholic is that they think that the church is the Catholic church in this case. What makes them an integralist is the third condition, which was something that was developed over the course medieval Europe that came to be called the indirect power of the Pope. So the thought here is you have these two powers and what happens when they conflict? Well, the integralist says, well, in certain cases, because the end of the church, the goal of the church is no blood, salvation, it has to be sovereign in a certain realm of cases, particularly when it comes to spiritual affairs. So a huge part of the development of integralist regimes was the rejection of royal authority over any dogmatic or ecclesiastical matters. So for instance, the appointment of bishops, the prosecution of clerics in canonical courts versus civil courts. Over and over the idea was the liberty of the church and also the liberty of the church to direct in some ways the actions of political leaders, at least with respect to say like the dissemination of heretical materials, the punishment of apostasy, heresy, and so on. So there's an integration of church and state where the church and state relationship

is a little about the relationship between soul and body. So the church sort of animates the state, gives it its ultimate purpose and gives it direction when it needs to and things that really matter. But agricultural policy, all this kind of other stuff would be left directly to the state and are under God's sort of direction. So you've got these two divine authorization moments, right, the state and the church, and then their integration in order to produce the whole common good of the community, both earthly and eternal. This was actually something like the political ideal for many, many popes and particularly in Italy for many centuries. There have been a lot of people who have advocated a doctrine like this in the history of the Catholic Church. So it's not unfamiliar or even obscure if you've studied modern, early modern or medieval Catholicism.

Okay, so that's actually going to make this view even weirder to your audience because it's like, okay, maybe this worked in 13th century France. Why are we even talking about this?

Okay, so we talked about that a little bit, but now let's distinguish between the two types.

Quick pause. I just want to say this to bookmark. We could even debate whether or not it worked in 13th century France, right? We'll get to there later, but I just want to bookmark that because I think that gets some of the structural problems here. Go on.

Yes. No, I mean, I argue in the book actually the closest thing we had to an integralist regime lasted about 35 years in France in the 13th century before the Pope and the French crown basically went to war and the crown tried to kill the Pope. At 35 years after St. Louis, the sort of the Louis and I, the king of France, got along really, really well with this former advisor, Clement IV, who was Pope. So yeah, we'll talk about that. Now today, there are two groups of integralists as I see it in the book. I call them theorists and strategists. And the theorists mostly live in Europe. A lot of them are British. And what they're trying to do is kind of revive integralism for religious purposes. So they're trying to sort of get the church to revive by reconciling itself with its past. Their goal is to get the church to conceive of itself once again as a kind of political order, in part because they think Catholicism has collapsed in Western Europe because the church refuses to hold people responsible for sin. And so for the British integralists like Thomas Pink, integralism is a spiritual reform movement within the Catholic Church. They have no political ambitions whatsoever in the United States. They're not even American in most cases. So this got started around 15 years ago as a kind of renewal movement between say French and British Catholic intellectuals, theologians and so on. So what ended up happening is they influenced Americans and the story I explain in the book. And quick pause to understand the European context. Obviously in the United States, there are structural realities that limit the integration of church and state. In Europe, obviously there's a church of England, so that makes the British case complicated. Are there structural impediments to integralism in the way you're describing it? Oh, yeah. I mean, particularly with it being an issue in France, I mean, they've been fighting about integralism in France since there was integralism. So I mean, there's always been these different factions in French political life, some of which would give the Pope more authority than others. And of course, in France today, it's totally off the table. But there is still a sizable Catholic minority that harbors a great deal of many traditionalists. It's just a much smaller group in French politics than in American politics. But there is still a sense in which because it was part of French history, it's more imaginable. It's less alien than in that sense. Yeah, it's less alien than it is in the United States,

which has never had a Catholic, it never had an established church, but definitely not a Catholic one. So yeah, you were talking about the influence of the... Yeah, the theorists and but what happens within about five to 10 years, the ideas have moved into the United States and start to win converts online. And a couple of prominent people convert, most importantly, among them is the Harvard Law Professor, Cass Sunstein protege, Adrian Vermeule. And so through a variety of sort of odd events that I again, that I describe in the book, there develops this American integralist movement and their goal is to kind of transform the right fundamentally to reject everything that's liberal about it, and to ultimately transform the government into something that would promote both the sort of temporal and spiritual common good. Now, what is the plan here? Well, and quick pause there too. Could you make the transform everything about the right that's liberal thing a little more tangible? So what are they doing? What are the ideas that are being jettisoned? Yeah, so first and foremost is anything remotely free market. So like, you know, you had Sir Abumari on, he's one of them to, you know, sort of reject the way the right thinks about markets and market freedom, right? So that's one thing. They've been really playing up that element over the last year or two. Before then, a great deal of it was trying to sort of jettison originalism, textualism as interpretive strategy on the right. So with Vermeule's common good constitutionalism book, that was another assault on the traditional right, also in the way that the right has handled certain kinds of policies like wanting to return abortion to the states, whereas the integralist have wanted abortion policy pro life enforced at the federal level. You also have attempts to attack like liberalism is an ideology and to kind of lump in all the different kinds of liberalism and to sort of attack it just in terms of in ideological terms. They haven't done a lot with foreign policy, though they have tended to be kind of anti anti Putin, you know, sort of critical of Ukraine. You know, Danina Maury and I think Papin describe China as a civilizational equal in New York Times from a few years ago, which is a little odd. So foreign policy wise, they want a multipolar world. And they want many of those powers to be non liberal. So but they haven't done a lot in foreign policy. But in that way, it's an attack on every part of the right, right? I mean, every it's yeah. And I guess the real question, this is where this gets super. I mean, I think this is all interesting, but this is where it gets interesting for me because my day job is in the foreign policy category. Obviously, in American history, there's been this long standing conflict over. Well, Sonianism, like, do we go abroad in search of monsters to destroy? Do we evangelize in favor of democracy? I think the version of this that would come to mind in the integralist sense is to what degree is the integralist project limited to America or even hemispheric board hemispheric borders? Or is this a situation where, well, if this is about promoting God's vision, the common good, etc, etc, etc. How can you just accept the existence of multipolarism? If anything, that sounds like what's the word? More relativism? Oh, but Chinese have their civilization and we have our civilization. And the French, they're kind of like us, but they're different. Like, I don't see how that works out in the first place. So how should we understand this? I guess what I'm asking is, would you start with the Catholic, you start with you start with the Protestant and Catholic countries, and then maybe in centuries to come, you go further. But the idea is to establish at least several integralist nations and perhaps a union of those nations. But you have to start where the sort of getting is good best, right? You have to start where you have the most rudiments. And so I think that's what they're thinking,

that they want to destroy the liberal global elite. So that's one reason they want to resist anything. Well, Sonia, as they see it, it's just more revolutionary liberalism. And their critics of the Iraq war, which I mean, that's not unreasonable in itself. But the thought is that they think liberalism is intrinsically revolutionary, is intrinsically imperialistic, and that until it stopped. But if it's stopping means, let's say that EU collapses, NATO collapses, China grows stronger, India grows stronger independently of Russia's serious, say, Orthodox nation. To them, this is progress because the sort of acidic liberal elite, global elite has been dissolved and chastened. And that would actually allow them to build integralist regimes in some at least Western nations. I guess another question before we get back to the time. But again, I should say, I should just say, foreign policy, they haven't they've done the least with foreign policy. And I guess the question just comes to mind here is, you said earlier, essentially, that we've, if we're going to talk about the word radical, from the broad scope of human history's perspective, our status quo is actually what's radical in the sense that what's different. Therefore, it's not merely that they're asking us to do this whole crazy new thing that they've never been done before, they're actually asking us to return to something. So it's not that they're asking us to do something that's never been attempted before, it doesn't exist in some forms across the world, it's actually returning to something. But that integralist status quo fell apart for a reason. And it's not as if people sort of woke up one day and said, Hey, let's just become decadent liberals. It's because you had things like the 30 years war, you had inventions such as nationalism, that's part of 30 years war, you had the printing press or it became harder to impose a viewpoint from top down, etc, etc, how do they understand the nature of how we got there in that sense, in the sense that liberalism, if anything, is actually a response to the failures of their system that they're trying to bring back. Yeah, I mean, so it's common within conservative Catholic circles to accept a kind of idea heavy, Declanist narrative, where Catholicism kind of creates this extraordinary Western Christendom in the medieval period, a truly pious and Christian social order, and then come along a variety of people that have bad ideas, following Aquinas in 13th century, who's the hero, he's the apex intellectual apex of this movement, it's also 13th century France, by the way. And you get, you know, Dante in the 14th century. And, but you also start to get people like William Abakum, who are defending colonialism and philosophy, the doctrine, there are no objective natures or universals, it could be articulated in many ways, but that I'll set aside and getting in much detail. The denial that they were ultimate natures and natural law, they see as leading inexorably to rebellion against the Catholic Church in its moral order, which comes in the form of the Protestant Reformation, which the law often called the Protestant Revolt. And then Protestantism lays the ground for liberalism. So Protestantism says you can interpret the Bible for yourself, liberalism so you can interpret life for yourself. So Protestantism is this kind of like revolt and attack on Christendom. And then once it wins out, or at least fights Catholicism to a sin still, it births liberalism, and then socialism, and then the secular ideologies just end up taking over. So ultimately, they see liberalism as kind of secularized Protestant movement, and the ultimate apotheosis of the attempt to abandon the idea that there's a greater, broader moral order than whatever the human being subjectively wants. The story they tell, again, is extremely, aggressively idea-centric. And I talk a number about a number of different reasons to think, you know, like economics matters and stuff like that,

too, so technology matters a lot. They wouldn't deny that in principle, but the story that they will tell, William Mockham, 14th century Franciscan friar, will be part of that story, which is weird. But that's been around since Richard Weaver's ideas have consequences in the American conservative

movement to blame everything bad in Western civilization on non-minimalism.

You talk about the Pope, obviously, what's interesting about the Catholic integralists is that they don't fit into traditional conceptions of like quote unquote conservatism. So there's plenty of things that Pope Francis would say, fit on paper, your average national review, or daily wire reading conservative would say, oh, that's bad, like this, this or that.

But I think Catholic integralists could find plenty of ideas that you would call more liberal in the like left sense that Pope Francis has as not being inherently bad or oppositional.

So how should we understand their relationship to Pope Francis and just the implications of Pope Francis thought? So this is this is actually quite complicated, but also great interest.

There's a theme here. Integralism got going because they were a kind of splinter group among traditional Catholics who traditionally in the United States have taken an extremely oppositional approach to the recent decisions of the Catholic hierarchy, many of whom don't even think they think Francis is the worst Pope ever. They think that he's a tyrant and a small group of them think he's not even really Pope. So you have all these Catholic traditionalists that at least since the Second Vatican Council just really, really are opposed to the hierarchy.

And some of the early integralists around 10 years ago to 15 years ago started to say, you know, this is not really pious, like we really should be sort of supporters of the church hierarchy through thick and thin. And so the early integralists end up developing a attitude of complete subordination to the hierarchy and a refusal to criticize them or embarrass them in really almost any way. And so you'll never see the sort of big integralists Twitter accounts, for instance, Saurav Ramari or Adrian Vermeel, which had Pecnold, Glide and Papad say anything critical about Francis, as opposed to those who share all of their theological inclinations, but will go after him often. And indeed, actually, the sort of intellectual father of the movement, Thomas Pink, the British philosopher, has actually been quite critical of Francis. And then the American integralists don't talk about his work anymore at all, because they're trying to take a totally, what they regard as pious submission to the hierarchy. Now, that's number one. Number two, they're doing this partly for instrumentalist reasons. Because 100 years ago, the French integralist movement was crushed by Pope Pius XI. Axel and François, because he condemned the movement. And I think they don't want to get condemned. And so if they're totally obedient, including to the American hierarchy, they think they're most likely to avoid condemnation. So that's the second thing.

Third thing is that they can buy into a lot of Francis' econ, like his economic views, because they're not wedded to markets at all. And in fact, they're turning against markets, although I think this is partly strategic in order to appeal more to people on the left, particularly with Amari working with people on the left at Compact. They're trying to sort of stitch themselves and to make allies wherever they can. I think they're sincere, but it just turns it out that all the things they're sincere about, a lot of them also line up with what sort of is strategically effective in terms of building alliances and winning, converting hearts and minds and so on. So yeah, my broad view is that, yeah,

they could like Francis' economics, but they're not going to criticize and they're going to be totally submissive. And they have both, I think, religious reasons and strategic reasons for that posture. So let's get back then to the strategy question, because on a couple of different levels, I feel as if you're in a difficult position if you're an integralist in the sense that, A, let's say you could even win the argument about liberalism and its flaws. Well, my math would suggest to me that the average person to be open to the argument is probably a Protestant in the United States, not a Catholic. And obviously, most Catholics wouldn't even agree with that either way, too. So like, let's talk through, where do the strategists come down to thinking through this? Yeah. Yeah. So the beginning of being able to see this is that the vernal converts to Catholicism in 2016. And a lot of the integralists start doing a lot more on Twitter in 2016 and writing a lot for blogs and online publications. And I wanted to write a great deal about integralism as an ideal, but one of the things I wanted to look at was one of the things that's good about a political ideal is that it's supposed to help you figure out how to get to it. It's supposed to have prescriptions for transition. But I couldn't really find anything that integralists had to say about transition, except for Vermeul. Vermeul had written all of these strategy pieces that were not sort of by him connected together. But that if you read those 12 or 13 of them, it's just pretty clear what he has in mind. So there's two pieces in particular, his Review of Deneen's book, *Why Liberalism Failed in American Affairs*, called *Integration from Within*. And then a piece he has in first thing is called *On Christian Strategy*. I document all of this in the book. So roughly, integration from within is kind of the name of the strategy. And the idea here is, first, you sort of try to create a community of people that understand two things, one that sort of liberalism is bad, Catholicism is good, but also that liberalism is going to decline or collapse. So it's very important for Vermeul and also for Deneen that they feel very sure that liberalism will collapse under its own internal contradictions at some point. They both said as much, it's quite clear in their writing. In the process of liberalism's demise or decay, you train up a new elite. So this is what a lot of regime changes about for Deneen, but he has an older piece in first things called *Replace the Elite*. So if you look at what Vermeul's been doing, he's a scholar of the administrative state, he's encouraged young conservatives instead of trying to destroy the administrative state to staff it, to rule, to as he sometimes puts it, dare to command. And also he has an entire judicial philosophy that just so happens to involve promoting the common good. So if you're a member of the federal judiciary, you're reasoning in terms of interpreting the Constitution and lie to the common good. Well, what is the common good when people disagree about its content? Well, it's the true view, right? So the idea is to gradually staff the administrative state and the judiciary with people from that group, wait for liberalism to fall or help move it along, and then take over the main positions of power. So again, there's a certain way in which it's what any fringe group would have to do in order to take power, right? They would have to create a self-conscious community, they would have to train elite, they'd have to put the elite in positions of power, and then wait for the majority group to collapse, right? There's nothing like particularly wacky about the plan except the view itself, right? I mean, any sect is going to have this kind of structure in a democratic society where there's lots of groups, competitive elections, and so on. But I think it's quite clear from his writing he thinks of these things. There should be a sub-community that they should take positions of power, that

liberalism will fall, and that ultimately they should rule. What does it mean for liberalism to collapse under the contradictions there within? Because in the case of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, or even pre-New Deal American capitalism, it wasn't that a memo came out saying this intellectual product doesn't work anymore. It's actually that, A, the Soviet Union literally couldn't hold together, so the constituent republic broke up. In the case of laissez-faire capitalism, you had the Great Depression, and you had to actually install new programs and policies that had post-Laissez-faire capitalism principles within it. I struggle to conceive of what the liberalism equivalent of that would be beyond maybe we just collectively just say, hey, we're not going to take the Constitution seriously anymore, and we're just going to ignore it. Or maybe you have a constitutional convention where everything's thrown out, and there's an opportunity to do that. But I just struggle to see what the transition moment is if we're talking about something as big as liberalism.

Yeah, so I mean, the way that Mule thinks of liberals as a kind of like aesthetic elite that will eventually is so obsessed with liberation, that they're going to push liberation all the way from when it was fair, like with slavery, all the way to the trans issues, and he thinks that there's just an obsession with liberation, that they're going to harass the population so much, and so often with so much bizarre stuff, that eventually they're going to look ridiculous, and people are going to get tired of just being constantly told that they're backwards and bigoted and so on. So the idea is liberal elites eventually just discredit themselves, just like Soviet elites discredited themselves, or any elite in the civilization discredits itself, and then there's not a state collapse so much as a sort of clearing out of the main bureaucracies, so that they can be colonized or taken over by people with new ideas.

And this happens many, many times. I mean, it happens in many countries.

Yeah, right. So they're thinking that, you know, if they have enough people in the elites, they have enough people in the administrative state, enough people in the judiciary, then when liberals exhaust themselves and delegitimize themselves in the eyes of the public, and they have to start vacating positions of power, and other people can move in.

So I think if you look at a lot of their behavior in the UES in terms of like their conferences, new publications, new blogs, the way they conduct themselves on social media, in terms of like cultivating a small group of supporters and sort of blocking challengers, publishing books that, you know, are not an argumentative standard that would appeal to almost anyone but young 20-year-olds that agree with them, I mean, I've read them, and, you know, they're usually very poorly received among even Catholic intellectuals. So you know, they're building a movement of young people, essentially. It's not a cult or anything like that. It's just a political sect. It's what any political sect does that's sort of on the outskirts. You know, there's nothing, again, especially innovative. It's just they're trying to get a view to take root in the U.S. that's like really, really hard for it to take root in the U.S. I mean, the socialists did stuff that was far more extensive in terms of laying the groundwork, building parties, academic warfare, and everything, and you know, American socialism just pretty much failed. I mean, really, it was the Roosevelt's who were able to sort of build socialist sentiment into the New Deal coalition and neutralize it as an independent movement and by giving them a few of the policies that they wanted but not very much.

So I want to pick up on that. I want to pick up on that quick because that's interesting because and I guess this is hard because whether it's William Jennings Bryan and, you know, the progressive, the rise of the progressive movement on the Democratic and Republican side, they take aspects of that platform. Same thing goes for like Ross Perot in the 1990s. What happens in our governmental system is you either the outsider challengers, they are kind of like wackadoodle in different ways, but what successful center parties can do is take the parts that really work here. But if the actual outsider thing is not premised on the broad shared liberal universe, it's hard to see how accommodation works in that sense. So I guess my question is, are there any asks quote unquote, or aspects of the post liberal or anti liberal program that let's say a conservative, okay, for example, the common good conservatism, like is there something that Ron DeSantis or Marco Rubio, Marco Rubio having more than flirted with, you know, previous podcasts clip, but Marco Rubio has written books like books mentioning common good conservatism, speeches, etc. Is there a part of the program they could adopt that would bring this into the system? Yes, on the organism. So I mean, the integrals are big supporters of Victor Orban, they know him, he has them out to conferences, and he's just hired one of them as the president of the Hungarian Institute of Foreign Affairs. And so they're building deep connections with the Hungarian government in order to normalize the kind of tactics that DeSantis has given us a foretaste of, but that are very much shaped in Orban's vein. So you can expect, for instance, under their influence for senators like who senators, good friends with them, JD Vance, for instance, to push these kinds of anti-proceduralists, like kind of anti-ruled-up law, like let's just get the right result, let's just win kind of policies. The culture war, right, we use the state to win the culture war. Instead of just fighting the culture war, we have to actually use the law and policy to win. So that's the main way in which I think they've been influential, they've been banging that drum for a lot longer than anyone in the GOP has, which is look, the liberals, we need to fight fire with fire. We fought with one hand tied behind our backs. This is kind of unleashed with Trump's sentiment, but these are the folks that I think are the most intellectually sophisticated who are making these arguments. So I think you can see in DeSantis touches of the post-liberal influence because of the willingness to use the state to try and win the culture war. So I think that the main result of American integralism will be sort of some erosion of democratic and constitutional norms. I guess what I'm curious about then is, as a liberal and as someone who is in the book taking their argument seriously, why doesn't this strategy theory actually end up working out like a key part of the book? Like why, given everything we said, does this not produce a coherent whole? You mean as a system of ideas or as a strategy? As like an actual program that has a possibility of addressing the issues that they're raising in the first place. So for example, in any common good conservatism essay, and this is part of your point about Sorab and Co building allies, especially on the left, spiritual loneliness, vacancy, you'll see a lot of talk about deaths of despair, the like crisis of meaning. Why does this project, and maybe this isn't how you characterize it, but it doesn't seem that it succeeds on its own merits? No, I mean the problem is, at least I think, I don't think of them as conservatism or as what I would call counterrevolutionaries. And the counterrevolutionaries are trying to completely reverse the effects of the revolution, which for them includes not just liberalism or Protestantism. And so what you, I think what you

see is an ideal that's so far removed from where we are that it's hard to draw any coherent recommendations from it at all. So I mean, there's nothing other integralist ideal or their ultimate hopes that would dictate any particular policy proposals. I think they think that it does. And I think a weakness of any ideal theory in politics, be it libertarianism or Marxism or what have you, they all suffer from this. What they postulate is an ideal regime that's so far removed from current circumstances that it can't even perform a diagnostic function. So in chapter four on where I talk about transition issues, I say, look, this ideal is so far from where any modern liberal democracy is that we have no idea how to get there. And so the ideal itself does not really provide any unique prescriptions at all. In fact, what you're seeing from the integralists are things that all kinds of different people could advocate for and that aren't entailed by the integralist ideal at all. And so in fact, I think they think they're operating with the ideal when in fact they're making really complex political judgments. And the ideal wasn't really helping them at all. I don't think they think of it that way. But I don't think that any reason to think that the reforms they're proposing would get us any nearer the ideal because you have to kind of hypothesize the social dynamics, right? You're going to win and sometimes you're going to lose and you have to think about the multiple ideologies that are in contest with each other. And so yeah, I think their transition theory, their sort of non-ideal theory is very, very weak. And so my sort of broader view is that there is dangerous as any other radical group because they're going to try to remake society in certain ways and it's bound to fail because they think they know more than they do about what's good for people and about how to change things. I guess the big last question I have, and this is also just something I've literally never understood at an implementation level. So let's just say for a second, what's positive? You can have an integralist regime. Like the number one story, especially in Western societies is the decline of trust in institutions, just the existence of technology, part of it broke apart. The Catholic Church in the 16th century was the printing press, well, like the cell phone and the computer and just the instant transmission of information are that on steroids. How would you at all be able to maintain this regime if not at the point of a gun at a level that seems just completely unscalable?

This is why they like China. There we go. Because the Chinese state is the one trying to address the limitation of complexity and diversity through increasingly aggressive means. And I think that Vermeer has actually been an admirer of the Chinese state for a long time. But to retweet Chinese state officials here and there or Amore will do like a pro-China tweet or something or some of them calling China civilizational equal. And it's not because they agree with the regime's ideology, but that they agree with the idea that the government would be sort of very active in trying to control the flow of information and of ideas. But this is where they start to get into territory where I think they are going to contradict their own doctrine because the means that the Chinese state uses are incompatible with Catholic moral dogma and more teaching, because it violates the dignity of the person and human rights too much. So they're going to have to have a massive surveillance state. They're going to have to have an American-grade firewall. They're going to have to have a Catholic social credit system. I think there's no other way to do it because for precisely the reasons that you say. My dissertation advisor's last book, *The Open Society and Its Complexities*, he developed this concept that he called auto-catalytic diversity. And auto-catalytic diversity is self-amplifying diversity. So we not only have

disagreement, but what new technologies have done is they've made diversity self-amplifying and increased its speed. In fact, integrals wouldn't exist if it weren't for Twitter.

They're part of auto-catalytic diversity. They exist because social media created auto-catalytic diversity. And we have no idea. Think about the debate between trans-inclusionary feminists and gender-critical feminists. That's a mostly online thing. The viciousness of it is really the product of Twitter in particular. And so you've got basically these social media, these factories for diversity and disagreement that that integralism has profited from and yet would have to destroy. But I think to do it, you just have to start cracking eggs. And if they want to remain faithful Catholics, they can't do that. So that's one of my arguments against them, is that the view is morally infeasible. Like you could get to it, it would be feasible, but you have to do terrible things. If you don't do terrible things, you can't get to it.

And the thing that's interesting from a Chinese history perspective that kind of goes to your point about how the problem the integralist has is that their desired end state is so different from the status quo. The Chinese had the advantage of being able for a variety of quirky reasons to just build up their system along with these developments. So for example, there already was a Chinese Communist Party, and then the internet came along. So then as the internet developed in China, especially because they skipped desktop and went to mobile, they were just able to implement things onto it and just kind of like move that way. I think it'd be much harder for, let's just imagine like an alternate universe where the nationalist won the Chinese Civil War and then in 2007, let's say the dawn of the mobile internet, the CCP takes over after the fact, it'd be much harder to install a great firewall after you already had 15 years of the internet in the first place. So it just seems like you actually, it's not only that you don't have some of like the implements of China, you actually don't have the very specific history instead of circumstances that were necessary for all these pieces to fit together into a coherent role.

Yeah, that's absolutely true. I talk about this some in the book as well, when you look at how like fiercely ideological regimes operate, there's an old model of these regimes that I look at. And one of the things that you need to have this kind of control isn't just sort of already being there, but you could take over the state and impose it. But what you need is, you need special military forces that are pretty ideological, like the SS or Brown's Church or the Mujahideen, where you have to first, you have to scare all the other state centers of power into submission, right?

You have to get the military on your side. I mean, to do any of this, they need extraordinary power. They have to control the vast majority of the American government. They have to have the military behind them as well. So when you start to reason through this, it's insane what would be required. And I mean, the idea that these things can happen in the United States are so vanishingly improbable, that it's remarkable that we're even talking about it, except that I think thousands of young Catholic intellectuals kind of wonder whether it's true because of how they see American society developing. So yeah, I mean, you also have in the Catholic case, which is very different, say, than the Chinese case, is you have an independent ecclesiastical authority that's its own country. And so you have to balance between like the interests of the politics of like the papacy, and then the interest in politics of whatever nation state there is. So not only do you have to take over the state, you have to get the church on board, and then you have to bring the two sides together. And now once you think of that, it starts to sound really vanishingly and probably low as an outcome. So I just think it's

hopeless. And I think it's good that it's hopeless. But I think they're true believers. Well, if you are a young Catholic intellectual listening to this podcast, I think we've given you a lot of theoretical and practical homework to work through if you're trying to solve some of these questions that were raised. Kevin, this has been really great. Can you just shout this is coming out the podcast with book release. So could you just shout the book out for folks who watch it? Sure, sure, sure. The book is *All the Kingdoms of the World on Radical Religious Alternatives to Liberalism*. It's coming out with Oxford. And you can go to my website, kevinvalier.com to find a variety of booksellers, in particular discount codes are built into the links. So, you know, it's \$21 through Oxford University Press 15 on Kindle. I'd love for you to follow me on Twitter at [kvalier](https://twitter.com/kvalier) or check out my substack, *The Liberal Tortoise*, or just shoot me an email at kevinvalier.com. I'd love to hear from young people interested in these ideas. I'd love to talk further. I read the book for you. So I'm eager to talk with young people interested in the kind of liberalism, anti liberalism debates. Awesome. Thank you for joining me on the realignment. Thanks for having me. Hope you enjoyed this episode. If you learned something like the sort of mission or want to access our subscriber exclusive Q&A, bonus episodes and more, go to realignment.supercast.com and subscribe to our \$5 a month, \$50 a year, or \$500 for a lifetime membership. Greats. See you all next time.