



Falwell's Fall

Dr. Bradley Onishi: [00:00:00] Welcome to straight white American Jesus. My name is Brad associate professor of religious studies at Skidmore college. It is the second week of August and despite the disaster timeline that we are living through there is one story that we just have to talk about. Last week Jerry Falwell Jr. was put on indefinite, leave from Liberty University, following the posting on Instagram of pictures and video of a party that took place on a yacht.

In one of the pictures, Jerry Falwell jr. is posing with a young woman. She, we now know is the assistant to his wife, Becky, and he has his arm around her waist. He's holding what by all accounts seems to be a glass of alcohol. And, they both have their pants unzipped showing their underwear. It seems as if there was a context or a theme to the party that explains why they would have posed this way.

But the larger sort of issue here is that this picture. And this the, the video associated with it led to Jerry Falwell being asked, or [00:01:00] maybe not even asked, but put on indefinite, leave from Liberty. Just to give you some context Liberty University is the largest university Christian university in the country.

It enrolls about 15,000 students on campus and has about a hundred thousand people enrolled in online programs. It has incredible influence in the evangelical world. And, it was of course started by Jerry Falwell, senior. Many of you will know that Jerry Falwell Sr is a seminal figure in the rise of the religious right.

He was a big part of the push for Evangelicals to vote for Reagan over Carter in 76. He started the moral majority in 1979. And up until his death, in, the mid aughts, he was a kind of figurehead for the religious right. And its rise to prominence in American politics.

Jerry Falwell Jr took over the Liberty university when his father passed. And since then there have been numerous scandals surrounding him. Most recently there's been a scandal involving the, [00:02:00] loaning or giving of, over a million dollars to a pool boy that he and his wife had met on a trip or on a vacation. This raised some eyebrows, cause it seemed very suspicious that they would give this much money to someone that they had just met someone who was very young college aged and who they set up the money to be used as part of a business scheme.

And that scheme was a hostel. A hostel that was essentially. a gay friendly, hostile, and at one that, was known for kind of ruckus or parties, something that you would just not think

that the president of the largest evangelical university in the country, would be involved with. There's also the reports that there are racy sexual pictures of both Jerry Falwell and Becky Falwell that Michael Cohen.

Donald Trump's former lawyer and fixer who, we all know is a serving time for his [00:03:00] crimes, helped to, essentially make, go away. So scandal has followed Jerry Falwell Jr. as of late. And, these pictures and the video were essentially the straw that broke the camel's back. I had the opportunity to talk about all this with Dr. Diana Butler Bass. Many of you will know her as a prominent writer theologian. Speaker and scholar, somebody who's written 10 books and, is a prominent, kind of a face in American Christianity. Well, she had great insight on this, and so, I'm really happy to share our conversation with you now.

And I am absolutely thrilled to be joined today by Dr. Diana Butler Bass. Who's an author, speaker, scholar, and what I consider just a distinguished scholar of American Christianity. Over Dr. [00:04:00] Butler Bass' career, she has about everything from spiritual trends and sort of spirituality in the world. And in this country, she's written the kinds of genres I'll be honest I'm very jealous of. Which is a kind of memoir theology that includes personal experiences of hers and a sort of theological development and also history. And so, she's the author of 10 books included, grounded finding God in the world and Christianity after religion, the end of the church and the birth of a new spiritual awakening, both of those from Harper one and also has a new newsletter called the cottage.

And you can find that on sub stack. And we're going to talk hopefully today about, one of her recent posts there. So Diana, thank you so much for taking the time to join me. I'm I'm very, very grateful.

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: No, it's, it's wonderful to be with someone else who has degrees in American religious history. This is topic I don't get to talk about quite as much people asked me to. You know talk [00:05:00] about spiritual trends and it's like, oh, I like I do that. I like doing that. But talking about history really gets me going.

Dr. Bradley Onishi: Well. I'm, I'm glad. And, I had to stop my, you know, before we start recording, I had to stop myself. Cause I just wanted to talk to you about everything and I know you got things to do today. So let me jump in here today. We're talking about a kind of us suspicious topic, which is the kind of downfall of. Jerry Falwell Jr. recently he was put on indefinite leave from Liberty. Jerry Falwell started, Thomas Church in 1956. He was 22 years old, it went on to become a mega church.

He had two sons and a daughter. One son, Jonathan, became a minister like his father and took over at the church. The other son is Jerry Falwell Jr. And Jerry Falwell Jr. became basically the leader of Liberty university. Now Liberty university was started in the seventies. It was, at the time, many would stipulate kind of a response to certain things happening in regard to civil rights and segregation academies [00:06:00] and things like that.

It quickly grew and just like Thomas road, church, it became a mega sort of piece of the evangelical landscape. It's the largest, or at least the second largest, depending on who you

ask a Christian university in the country, the online programs enroll, something like 90 to a hundred thousand people every year.

I guess what I'm saying here, Diana is it's really hard to overstate the Falwell's legacy in the religious, right and in a modern American evangelicalism. And yet here we stand today with Jerry Falwell being asked to take an indefinite leave from Liberty university. There's never not been a Falwell in charge of Liberty.

And so I guess one of the things I'd like to start with is, you know, he took over, over a decade ago. And what are some of the things we've learned about his leadership style and, just his sort of personal personality or personal life, since he's become the figurehead of the, of the university.

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: Well, I think that's one of the best reporting done [00:07:00] on this question in particular is by Brandon Ambrosino. I think it's a pronounced Ambrosino and, he wrote a, an incredible article, last year, 2019 for Politico in which he talked to present and former, Liberty university city employees.

And, they revealed a style that was incredibly authoritarian and, very narcissistic. And, this was attributed in the article, not only to, Jerry Falwell Jr, but also to his wife, Becky, which I think is kind of an interesting aspect of this whole story is that evidently she is, incredibly strong-willed leader, but like most Christian leaders in this particular world, who are, who are women, they have to do it behind the guise of their husbands. And so, so this couple, at least Ambrosino [00:08:00] depicted them as a little, like, the Macbeths.

Really that's how I can think of as a literary comparison.

Dr. Bradley Onishi: Well, and what I, what I gleaned from that, from that article, as you were saying, is that it's really the two of them. Who who are, the helm and maybe, okay. We'll get the full story of how Becky is actually maybe the one calling the shots, but as you're sort of hinting at here in the evangelical world often, it's just not possible, in the minds of, of evangelical subculture for a woman to be kind of the figurehead of a place like Liberty university, It's also become clear over the last five, 10 years here that Becky and Jerry Falwell Jr. have sort of been, I don't know if implicated is the right word, but I'm sort of repeating to have been part of a good number of scandals. And some of those popped up in the last two years. Can you sort of just tell us a little bit about those? I mean, you know, things revolving around real [00:09:00] estate deals and youth hostels and other things that have popped up here.

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: Well, I think what's fascinating about evangelicalism in so many ways. The things that come forward are often the sex Scandore scandals. And, you know, there's so much in this story that reminds me of Jim and Tammy Faye Baker, and that whole scandal in the late. Eighties in the early 1990s. And, you know, that was also a scandal about largely real estate and fraud in real estate, but it came out because of, I mean, I almost hate to call it a sex scandal because, but what happened in the Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker story was that, Jim Baker was accused of rape by a church secretary and not just rape, but actually gang rape. And, it was, it was an ugly, horrible story. And that part of it, you could [00:10:00]

tell at the time, and I was, I was alive at the time, and watching, watching it on the news like everybody else. But you could tell at the time that Tammy Faye was upset, you know, is that she, in some way, shape or form, although she was with Jim in the television empire and the real estate empire, and she was loving it and they were getting rich, you know?

And so they were really a team and building this sort of corrupt and fraudulent organization that was taking money from their followers. But when it came to the sex scandal, boy, Tammy phase phase was, you know, she was shocked and, and it was the sex scandal that opened the door for all these other things to come out.

And, and that's a little bit, I think what's happening here. Although the Ambrosino article came out last year and it's that article is mostly about real estate fraud. And also, you know, sort of heavy handed authoritarian [00:11:00] practices at Liberty university. And then there's this sub thread in the article, which was the thing that got her base attention.

It was the pool boy story, where. Yes. You know, somehow we've never really gotten clarity on it, but pool boy that worked for the Falwells. Okay. I believe that he's wound up, wound up suing them. And I think that the case is still in process, because something happened with the PO or the followers and the pool boy, and, he would like to talk about it. And they would like him not to talk about it. So there's the pool boy thing has been going on for awhile and accompanying that. Apparently there are photographs of at least Falwell and Becky, in compromising sexual situations, none of which we have seen again, but there [00:12:00] are pretty widespread reports of these photographs existing and that if there somehow implicated in this pool boy case.

So, so, that, that sex scandal came out a while ago. And I think that what happened this year, when the picture of Falwell with his arms around his wife's. Assistant with their pants on zipped, which is a photograph that I will never be able to see. It's just like, I did not have Jerry fall was underwear on my 20, 20 bingo card, you know?

And so, but when that came out, I think that, that there were people associated with the university who just said, this is just way too much. Yeah. And, Yeah. That's when they backed, backed off of some of their support of him. And so, so it's going to be interesting because I think what this will be as a crack in the door to go back.

And, look at those other things. I think the most [00:13:00] interesting possibility, and I haven't seen this, I live in Virginia and I haven't seen this yet. So this is just my suggestion to the attorney general state of Virginia.

But I think that the state of Virginia needs to investigate these real estate deals.

And, you know, maybe the sex scandal will, you know, sort of, cause Mark Herring is the attorney general, Virginia Mark Herring's attention. They're sort of turned down there towards Lynchburg and try to figure out what's what's really going on. And there does seem to be as one faculty member at Lynch at Liberty said, we're not a university, we're a real estate hedge fund.

And, if they're a real estate hedge fund, the state of Virginia has a vested interest in, in looking at its practices.

Dr. Bradley Onishi: I, you know, as a historian, as a theologian, I'm wondering if you can help us understand, both. People listening who are insiders and have been insiders in evangelical culture and, or maybe now [00:14:00] consider themselves ex evangelicals.

And for those who are not part of the subculture and are just truly perplexed by these things, why do shady, you know, in the evangelical world, why do shady financial dealings clearly backwards sort of, business practices, greed, narcissism, None of these things trigger the ejection of someone like Falwell from leadership and yet a picture and don't get me wrong.

I cannot un-see the image either. This 2020 bingo card, it's just, it's, it's off the rails and we all, we all know that by now, but you know, don't get me wrong. I didn't like the picture. I didn't want to see the picture. But as pictures go, it's not the worst thing you might see on any given day on the internet.

So why is it that, that picture with Falwell and this, young person who works for his, his wife, why would that trigger this strong reaction on the part of Liberty's, board of trustees and not the other things, the greed, the narcissism, [00:15:00] the shady dealings, so on and so forth.

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: Well, I have a funny answer and then I have a more serious answer.

And the, the funny answer. Takes me back to a class that I had in graduate school with a grant Wacker and a grant was, and he's still alive. And he, but he's retired now the great historian of American Pentecostalism. And I remember so clearly one day sitting in class and we were talking about these kinds of skills candles, cause we had Baker and swagger or just a whole string of them.

By the time I was in graduate school, he said, you know, the funniest thing. About these, these scandals, especially in Pentecostal circles. Now Falwell crosses some lines here between sort of traditional fundamentalist, Southern Baptist and, and Pentecostalism. And so anyway, grant said, there's a story about an evangelist who was followed.

And his wife [00:16:00] discovered that he was in a motel with a, with a young woman and the detective took all these pictures, presented them to the wife and the wife turned around and presented them to the church. And the church said, Oh, that's terrible. We're going to fire him. And, what the, what happened was they weren't upset about the fact that he was having an affair with a young woman in a hotel room, but that as he had exited the hotel room, I was walking towards his car. A picture was snapped of him smoking a cigarette

And then Grant said, and that's Pentecostalism for you.

And so what I saw. Jerry Falwell Jr. holding the glass of Brown liquid.

Dr. Bradley Onishi: Yep.

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: I went, Oh my gosh. That's the cigarette.

Dr. Bradley Onishi: Yup.

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: And, and honestly, I think that that's how they responded. It was like this [00:17:00] certain amount of stuff. Oh, sex boys will be poised. So, you know, she's kinda cute. I wouldn't mind having my arm around her too. You know, this is an all male board of trustees that we're dealing with here, or, you know, if there's a woman there, she's the only one. And so, but, but beer.

Dr. Bradley Onishi: Yep.

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: I mean, that was like the straw that broke the camel's back, you know? because I mean that. That right there. That's the clear violation of liberties, you know, sort of last line you don't do it.

Yeah. Well,

Dr. Bradley Onishi: and

That's, it's

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: just bad. He broke the rules and you can't have that because then the students might start breaking the rules.

Dr. Bradley Onishi: It's amazing to think about how that works, you know, and evangelical culture where a kind of greedy malicious business

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: practice is not a problem.

Dr. Bradley Onishi: And yet, you know, and

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: Sex, even sex, isn't really a problem.

Dr. Bradley Onishi: And I want to get there. I mean, I was going to save this [00:18:00] for later, but this plays right into the gender norms of evangelicalism and it plays right into the idea. As you just mentioned that in evangelical culture, men are viewed as sort of this, having an uncontrollable sexuality that is a kind of a double edged sword in many ways.

It's just, boys will be boys, as you said. Nothing we can do about it. And yet it makes them sort of susceptible to these kinds of scandals and mishaps. So I guess here's the question. If we played a game a little, a little, hypothetical, what would have happened if, if this were a woman, if Jerry Falwell Jr.

Were instead of being him, he was a prominent female pastor or prominent female sort of leader. Do you think this would have, would, would go differently? Would this be a different story? Would it be a different kind of a narrative surrounding what's going on here?

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: Well, I, I think we have a cultural equivalent and a slightly different place right now.

And that is with a representative from California, [00:19:00] Katie Hill. No pretty young woman, first elected to Congress. No revenge porn is put out on the internet by her husband and she crawls away and, you know, disgrace. And so that's not about evangelical, but nevertheless it shows our, our culture is pretty harsh when it comes to women and sexual missteps that become publicly visible. Celebrities are different, you know, so like actresses and, and, you know, the Kardashians and some other people like that can get away with things like this. And some women even become famous for it for it. but they're not generally women who have positions of respectful authority like Congresswoman or university presidents or ministers. And so, so, so that's the, the current example, but the, the other example, the one that I find really interesting, and I know that, [00:20:00] you know, this is that there has been one woman in American history who survived a scandal that was even worse than this. And that was Aimee Semple McPherson the great Pentecostal evangelists in the 1920s.

And, you know, she, she was famous. She was on radio. She had great, huge crusade. She built the largest, religious building in Los Angeles in the 1920s. I think it is still one of the largest religious buildings, the Angeles temple, in Los Angeles, it stands today. Very expensive, huge, amazing piece of property.

And I'm she the crowds of thousands and thousands and thousands of people that followed her. Wrote books and everything, the whole, the whole thing and empire run by a woman. And in 1926, she was walking along reported who have been walking along the beach in ocean park, California and [00:21:00] disappeared. And she was gone for, I believe it was 34 days.

And when she came stumbling back across the border from Mexico into Arizona, and claimed to have been kidnapped by Mexican band that's who snatched her off of the beach and, and drove her down and held her hostage in, in Mexico in some place where she was tied up and who knows what she, she made terrible stories up, I guess, about what had happened to her in Mexico.

And she had broken free and she, she had made her way back to the United States. And so, you know, her followers believed her. And a lot of people in America didn't believe her and the, the story. Has I think more or less been put out. And I think, I don't know how much evidence there is. I'd have to go back and check the, his, where historian stand with this right now.

But the main story is probably that she was [00:22:00] pregnant out of wedlock and went to Mexico, had the baby, gave the baby up for adoption in Mexico and then, you know, beat feedback and cooked up this big story about the Mexican kidnapping and when she was rescued in the desert in Arizona. And so, Yeah, but there were plenty of rumors about that even at the time, that she had a lover in Mexico that she, you know, had sort of given up the faith and that she was running away.

And I mean, it was, it was an amazing scandal and it was as big or bigger than some of these things that we've lived through. Certainly I think it was bigger than what Falwell's have going

on, but follow right now. But the strangest thing about it is she made it through. And, you know, I always wondered about that.

Her ministry wasn't quite the same as it was before the scandal. And she, but she did survive and she still had tons of followers and she still did [00:23:00] her crusades and she still did a radio. And, people loved her. And people really stood up for her. And what happened after that I think is telling for these kinds of, of things, is that it almost became a kind of permission slip for her.

And so like in ninth is she had it, she went on, she had a nervous breakdown. And so then she was away for a little bit. And that's a pretty bad thing when you're known as a healing evangelist. And so apparently her healing didn't help, you know, for her own mental illness, but so, so she left for a little while with the, with that.

And then, when that was part I think was ended. I think this was the order it went in. She went on a, running off eloping. I'm with a guy who was in her choir who had actually been engaged to another woman. And, the woman brought a breach of promise suit. I'm in Los Angeles [00:24:00] courts. And that exploded into another scandal for Amy because of home with Pearson that she stole the love of this poor woman.

And, then, that marriage ended in divorce, not very long after. And so there were disagreements with, people who worked for her. She was known as being very authoritarian. There was some. The questions about mismanagement of money. she and several of her family members had big public falling outs.

And, then she wound up, dying of a drug overdose in a hotel in Oakland, California in 1944. And so, you know, she was a really interesting character and clearly very troubled, but she kept and that she was a woman and she kept managing for so long. really almost 30 years of riding these waves of scandal, and still being, being a respected and [00:25:00] trusted, preacher in American culture is, is really rather interesting.

He's the only one I can think of. I mean, I have racked my brains to try to find anybody even close to Aimee Semple McPherson and every other woman who gets anywhere near, near any scandal like this winds up crashing.

Dr. Bradley Onishi: And I think what you outlined there is something else that I think is really important to this.

You know, I think the time mine right now is so saturated with crisis that it's hard to focus. And I think we all know that, right? That every day we wake up to something new. So a new tweet from the president or a new, failing on the part of our government, and so on and so forth. But I think when many of us saw the Falwell picture and then the news of his indefinite leave, the thought was, oh, well, he's done. It's over.

And I think, you know, it only took me about five minutes to think, no, these are evangelicals. This is not over. And so would you, would you be willing to just share with us what's the path for Falwell going forward? Because basically the redemption starts now [00:26:00] and we all know what's coming, it's we're probably a 12 months out. Maybe,

maybe, maybe a little longer. I don't know. We'll see what happens, but yeah. If I'm Jerry Falwell Jr. what's the path forward for my redemption. Cause we all know that that's gonna, that's gonna take place. We're going to witness it. It's just a matter of when.

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: Well it's, it's pretty simple.

The path forward is some sort of withdrawal. You know, he'll, he'll go off. And, eventually we'll hear some claim that he was in counseling or therapy or spiritual direction, or however they talk about it. And, that it, it made him realize the error of his ways and, he will hire them a ghost writer who will put out a memoir, and his name and what that will be.

It will be a tell all kind of book about Jerry junior and what it was like to grow up with his dad. And he will slightly throw his dad under the bus I suspect. [00:27:00] I'm saying, you know how hard it was being the eldest son and bearing the name of this, this really famous guy. And that was really what contributed to all these troubles.

And I think somewhere along the line, he'll have a reconversion experience where he'll say that he had, yes, he gave his life to Jesus when he was 12 and he was baptized in the Baptist Church Thomas Road. But so it didn't really stick. And, through all of this, he's come back to Jesus and for the first time, he's really committed his life to Jesus.

He's been forgiven and he is going to move on as a true servant of the Lord. And I know that sounds cynical, but it's really not cynical because as a historian, I have an entire shelf load of books up there that tell exactly this story. And, you know, it's actually a rare male Christian [00:28:00] leader in America that doesn't have a combo.

Dr. Bradley Onishi: Yeah.

Yeah. It's it is amazing how. The path is just well, tread it, you know, there's no, there's no need to clear anything here. He, as you said, there's a nice historical precedent as to how you do this. And, we can see that coming. I mean, you mentioned Jim Baker he's back. I mean, Jim Baker's back Jim Baker's on television or he was a couple of months ago trying to sell folks that he was saying was a liquid, a remedy to the coronavirus. Right. I mean, you know, we're going on 30 years later as well, over 30 years later after his scandal and he's still around and he's people are still giving him lots of money. So this is, this happens.

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: Yeah. I think one of the, that the bakers again, are kind of instructive about this because Tammy Faye, she actually had a career after all of this. You know, the American public let her off the hook. And I don't know that there were ever any financial charges that were brought against her [00:29:00] that really was directed towards his husband or her husband and his associates. and what was fascinating about her?

Her kind of comeback is it didn't happen with Christians. She was rehabilitated largely by gay men and she became kind of a you know, Christian comedic almost, you know, kind of wiser Minnelli figure in the early nineties and gay men invited her to their conferences and she, she, I mean, the, the Christian part of it for her, the preaching part of it was, she was actually one of the first evangelical leaders to really embrace gay men. And she walked into the AIDS crisis and, and literally it was like she had been cast out of the central part of evangelicalism.

And so where did she go? She went into a community that was in the early nineties being [00:30:00] essentially treated as lepers.

Dr. Bradley Onishi: Yep.

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: And she became kind of, like I said, a cross Eliza Minnelli finger, but it was kind of as a cross with mother Teresa for gay men.

Yeah. And they loved her and they, and she loved them back. And boy together, they built really the last act of Tammy Faye Baker's life before she passed away. And she is in some circle absolutely beloved. Yeah. But I think what was interesting about that is she to go, she had to leave Evangelicalism and she really had to go someplace where her whole past did it matter.

And, and so that's what happened to her, but then her husband, yeah. He served his time. Got out of jail, rode his books and had his new TV show. And it's never been the same. There's no theme park. There's no real estate fraud, as far as I know, right now. And, You know, he got [00:31:00] remarried. So he has a new, you know, sort of sidekick wife and, it's a kind of a shadow knockoff of what he had before.

But as you say, he's still makes money and he still makes headlines. And so, so I think that that's kind of intriguing model to show what the gender piece of it. You know what happens to the man and what happens to the woman. And now, so, so that gives of course a pathway to see, you know, what might happen with Jerry Falwell Jr.

Dr. Bradley Onishi: It's just occurring to me as we're talking that, I wonder if there's a slight deviation from this comeback path, just because, you know, Jerry Falwell Jr. and, and Becky Falwell are not ministers in the strict sense. I mean, I know we often sort of lump them in there because. Jerry Falwell, jr. So often on TV, talking about Trump and evangelicals and, and faith, but even as opposed to someone like Franklin Graham, another famous son of a, of a luminary and in 20th century evangelicalism, [00:32:00] it's really Jonathan Falwell who's the minister of the family. I mean, he is really the one who's who's at Thomas road, church Baptist church. He is the one who's engaged, in the sort of family ministry. Jerry, by all accounts seems, you know, he has a law degree. He seems more interested in business than anything else. So I just wonder if his path might be a little different.

I mean, I wonder if he'll he'll end up back in the public eye, will he end up back at the helm of Liberty? Do you think? Or maybe his afterlife will be somewhere else, you know, I guess that's remained that remains to be seen, but it, it does occur to me that there's a slight, I guess, a deviation here from, from the path of others who've had to come back from scandal.

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: I was thinking of that too. Even when I was making the comparison with Jim Baker, the thing with the bakers, is that they were always really pretty charismatic. Yeah. I mean, you could go, you could look, have, and go, ewh, which a lot of you people did. But even if you had that [00:33:00] response, you were having a kind of an interesting visceral response to their emotional appeal.

And, yeah, I, I mean, I, I didn't like their show, but sure. I sure sometimes watched it.

Dr. Bradley Onishi: Yeah.

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: And they were charismatic, you know, they, you felt when you were watching that show when it was on originally in the eighties, You kind of felt like they liked you, you know, you felt like they were your family, you wanted, you know, there was something about, there was a connection there that happened over the television.

And I think that that's true about Aimee Semple MacPherson too. All you have to do is listen to recordings of some of her sermons and Oh my gosh. I want to go join her church.

Dr. Bradley Onishi: Yeah. Yep.

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: And, and so the, the charismatic element in terms of personality, not theology. It's really important here. And one of the things that I think is true about Jerry Falwell Jr. is nobody really likes him. I mean, [00:34:00] maybe the pool boy, you know, maybe his wife, but you know, you don't get a 12 page article in political, where all of your work makes are hacking on you saying how completely unlikable you are unless you're pretty darn obnoxious.

Dr. Bradley Onishi: Yeah.

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: And so I think that, you know, there's, there has been some talk through different analyses of what's going on, how very different the Falwell sons are.

And that Jerry kind of got his father's sort of tough political edge. And Jonathan got the winsome Southern Baptist preacher edge. And a lot of people talk to Jonathan would be, have become president of Liberty.

Dr. Bradley Onishi: Yeah.

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: Just because the faculty liked him better. And just because he could preach in chapel and students seemed to warm to [00:35:00] him.

But that's not what happened. and that's, that's the piece that piece that Ambrosino points to that Becky Falwell got involved and perhaps helped to engineer. her husband, becoming the president of Liberty in 2007. So, so he's just not likable. TrumpMight like him, but nobody else

Dr. Bradley Onishi: Really well. And it's absolutely true.

What your, when you were talking about the bakers, I was thinking there was a little bit of like a Sonny and Cher thing there where, where you would watch them and just sort of feel like they were. Yeah, they, they liked you. You're connecting with them somehow. And Jerry Falwell senior was had this. He had that, you know, my, my grandmother's from Missouri, Tennessee, and I've met figures like Falwell where you don't you walk into the room thinking I don't like this guy. I don't like his politics. I don't like him. He's mean. And then he's

somehow wins you over through an affable smile and a warm personality. [00:36:00] There's pictures of Jerry Falwell, senior going down water slides in a suit and tie just to be, you know, he's being fun. When Jerry Falwell Jr. is on the television. I have the exact same reaction. You just, I just, he, he seems like a guy who should be behind the scenes. Doing the business, not the one in front of the camera. This does not have that natural kind of warmth that one needs in order to, be a kind of, you know, loved and beloved figure in this subculture or any subculture, really.

So I, I think that's a really important point and we'll see what that means.

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: And the other thing that's really kind of interesting with Jerry Falwell jr. Is that not only does he not have the personality that kind of winsome all shucks? I'm your buddy sort of thing that is so successful in evangelical leadership?

He, he doesn't know theology. I mean, I literally have heard him or seen things that he's written and I think to myself, [00:37:00] okay, that's not, that's not right.

Dr. Bradley Onishi: Right.

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: I mean, he literally misquoted scripture. he doesn't even present interpretations. That matched the way conservative evangelicals interprets pretty standard passages.

And so it's, it's really weird. I mean, he, he it's like, he doesn't know the Bible and, and I think that you really kind of need that. In this world.

Dr. Bradley Onishi: Yeah.

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: So yeah, I do. I actually have a funny, Jerry Falwell story.

Dr. Bradley Onishi: Oh my goodness. Okay. We have an exclusive there's. Oh man, this is the main, okay. Sorry, I'm trying to contain myself, please. Please go.

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: Okay. So back in the nineties, the unification church, the church, headed by Reverend Sun Myung Moon.. Good.

Yup.

Did junkets for religious leaders and journalists and academics [00:38:00] across the world.

And it was really kind of a, at a tent, I think on the part of the unification church to buy the Goodwill of people in elite culture. And so, everybody, I know so many people who went on these junkets and. In a, I think it was 1994. I'd have to look up the date, my journal, but it was someplace right in there in 93 or 94, I got the phone call and it was an invitation to go with the unit at the behest and the, and the full treatment, by the unification church to go to their conference.

They're going to hold in why and the topic was. achumanism . And so I fly down there. We are all put up at this five star hotel, which of course was owned by Reverend moon. And, I

get the list of participants and lo and behold. [00:39:00] Jerry Falwell is on this list. And not only is Jerry Falwell on list, he's in the room right down the hall from me at the hotel.

So I'm met Jerry Falwell on an elevator, you know, hotel in Uruguay and, as it happened I think I was probably on this whole junket. I was probably working for the New York times a wire service at the time. And I'm in a, the paneling in, I think I was the only person on this junket who actually represented, a liberal mainline denomination.

Almost everybody else without exception was from some evangelical place. And a lot of them were pretty famous. What I would call this sort of second tier people, people who run think tanks and magazines and all this kind of stuff. And so there I was having just recently myself and kicked out of evangelicalism as an Episcopalian, working for the New York times on a junket with Jerry Falwell and all these evangelicals in [00:40:00] Uruguay, with the Mooney's.

Dr. Bradley Onishi: Oh, wow.

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: And I mean, there are so many stories. But, the story that came to mind this week. Was I, I was, was talking to a woman whose name, I, if I remember correctly, it was named Anne and I liked her. She was really nice. She was Chuck Colson's ghost writer. So she was on this trip and, she worked with prison fellowship, which is, she was a really smart woman.

And so she and I were walking down the street in Uruguay during one of the extended breaks and then that's it. Most of the day, it was a very pretty city it's it was, it was a lovely day. And, we see Jerry Falwell. I am, he's sitting on a chair all by himself, outside of an ice cream shop and he's eating an ice cream cone.

And so we walk up and we start talking to him and he was glad to see us. And he was very warm [00:41:00] and engaging. Yeah. And he particularly liked talking about Chuck Colson. Of course. And I was sort of taking all these mental notes. And finally, Anne said this whole, whole time, there were these guys who were sort of hovering around in the background and, Anne said, can we take a picture together?

And Jerry said, fine. And so she gave her camera to some other tourists, one person who spoke English, she was walking by and she says, can you take a picture of the three of us? And so we get into the picture frame. And I'm standing right next to Jerry Falwell. Now catch this Jerry Falwell holding it ice cream cone, and I'm standing very close to him and I'm this nice warm evangelical girl from Southern California.

And so what do I do naturally is that as I just talk, put that's right. I just start to put my arms around both her and him, because that's what you do. You hug people. And before I know it, one of those guys in the suit [00:42:00] ran up and pushed me away from Jerry Falwell Jr. And the guy said, you can take a picture, but you have to stand three feet away.

Dr. Bradley Onishi: Wow.

Wow. So just

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: About seniors. And so, for years, and I don't have the picture anymore because I had it hanging up on my office door when I taught at Rhodes college and it was a hilarious picture and somebody stole it. Oh no, I know. And this is the day when you had to, you know, you had, you know, the, what you call it. Oh, I can't remember the name of it. I didn't have another copy of it.

Dr. Bradley Onishi: Yeah, no, no film, no, no negative, nothing

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: Negatives right. She had those and see, I can't even remember her name, so that's pretty bad. I couldn't even get the negative, but, she, so anyhow, there's this there was this picture that I had for years.

And my husband was swear on a stack of Bible. The Bible said it existed [00:43:00] of Jerry Falwell, standing with an ice cream cone, Brown liquid, me standing at an inappropriate social distance and then Anne and standing next to us. So I just thought to myself wow Jerry Falwell senior, he knew.

Dr. Bradley Onishi: That's what I was going to say. Yep.

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: He knew, and that Jerry Falwell Jr. Has so much hubris. And so such a lack of self awareness that his own father didn't that his own father possessed those things. His father was smart.

Dr. Bradley Onishi: Yeah. Yeah. Yep. Well, and it's interesting to think about, okay. So there's no doubt that Jerry Falwell Jr. has that kind of, access to those guys, those, whatever we want to call them, bodyguard slash advisor types, that the entourage that follows you around and make sure you don't get into trouble. And no one messes with [00:44:00] you when you're, when you're a Falwell. Clearly, those guys didn't make it on the yacht.

Clearly he told them not to come, clearly, because he wasn't, they weren't there. And he, as you said, he's arrogant enough. He put his arm right around the young woman's waist. No one was there to sort of break that up and it wasn't an ice cream cone. Was it? It was this mysterious black, liquid that, we, you know, we don't know about, but, everyone can guess it.

So, that is an amazing story. Wow. I mean, thank you for sharing that.

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: Also worst of it is, is that this week I thought I could have been that woman in the photograph, my whole life would have been different.

Dr. Bradley Onishi: There, there would have been a different memoir to write if that would have happened. Also, let's just point out friends that you might think theologians are just in a room reading, systematic theology, but no, you know, Diana Butler Bass is in Uruguay with the Moonies, you know, having these amazing experiences with the secret service following, you know, [00:45:00] Jerry Falwell. So that's just, you know, the life of the scholar is not just the dusty, archive, you know, we're, we're out there, being Indiana Jones. That's at least if you're dying a Butler Bass, you are so, With that I promised we would stop. I know that you have many things to do today. I'm so thankful for your time and just for your insight on, yeah

The picture that none of us needed to see, but we, we definitely needed to talk about. And so, anyway, folks, please, I know that many of you listening will already be familiar with Dr. Bass has books and work. But I do want to highlight her brand new, new newsletter, which is called the cottage it's on sub stack and you can find it there. We are kind of running out of time here, but you had a great post just from this week about power. And it was in response to the New York times article that talked about evangelicals will, or Christianity will have power.

And you talked about Christianity, always had power. It's just a matter of what kind, Christians have cultivated and sought. And, would you, I guess the last thing I'll just ask you is it seems as if Jerry Falwell Jr. maybe, wielded the power of, of Christianity. in, in ways, [00:46:00] that were, were, unflattering to say the least.

And, and in contradiction to some, some of the early Christians that you mentioned in your post. And so .

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: I actually loved writing that piece. you know, it's, it's shaped for a large audience and so, I didn't really get into kind of the theological influences on my thinking about power. When I was working on it, I had in mind, a body of work done by Walter Wink, who was the biblical scholar, mostly in the 1990s and the early odds before he passed away.

And he wrote on the theme of power in the New Testament. And I think that his enduring contribution, to biblical studies is to point out that it has power is a major theme in the new Testament. And that it isn't an issue that Christians and Christianity is powerless. You know, we don't give up. Power, but he talks about how there really are two kinds signs of power in the New Testament.

And that is the power of this world, the powers that [00:47:00] be the powers of what he calls the domination system, and that kind of power is always structured in ways that oppress that are hierarchical that choose one group over another. And that tend to be tend towards narcissism of people who are at the top of the social pyramids and that, that kind of power serves to enrich only a few.

And then he says that there's this alternate power. That's in the New Testament and that's the power that we see, Jesus, demonstrate in his life and also in his death. And so that power is for example, the power that sits down at the well and talks to the Samaritan woman. It's a power to break the boundaries that divide people, the power to set tables, where sinners and saints share meal together.

They, everyone is invited to the feast, that kind of power to realign our [00:48:00] expectations of what it means for people to be in community with one another. Of course the power of compassion, the power of love. And then, the, the, the power of the resurrection, the power that ultimately, says that even death.

That, that Roman imperialism. Rome's power has no power over God. And so, so it's really a difference that when he talks about, this dominion domination power, which is always the power over, versus a power that emerges from, relationships based in true, true capacity to

love the neighbor. And so that's what I, I wrote about that more generally, but I was very much have the, the, thoughts of Walter Wink in mind if people want to pursue that more when I'm reading it.

And his best book on that subject is a book that he wrote at the behest of Madeleine L'Engle. [00:49:00] Interesting.

Dr. Bradley Onishi: Wow.

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: Yeah, it's really a fascinating story in itself. The writing of that book, it's called the powers that be. And I don't know if it's still in print, but you know, these days you can find most anything, at the dark Lord's headquarters.

Dr. Bradley Onishi: Yeah, sure, sure.

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: I think that Jerry Falwell, I mean, I think this is a perfect example of Jerry Falwell, really embracing the power of the domination system. It's classic Walter Wink. And what I think is sort of more interesting about his father. It is that I think that his father was a little bit more torn.

Dr. Bradley Onishi: Yeah.

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: I actually think there were elements of Jerry Falwell senior's life that understood. And I've gotten this from other friends of mine, like, Mel White, who was, Falwell's ghostwriter sr. Oh, well, it's ghost writer for a while who is gay and, no white and Jerry Falwell, senior wound up having quite the [00:50:00] conversation, in their older years about, what it means to be a gay Christian.

And you know, that Jerry Falwell senior was willing to have that conversation and hold onto that relationship with a person who he came to disagree with so much. I have always thought to myself, you know, they're the echoes of that gospel story about that kind of power. I think it was always in Jerry Falwell seniors, heart and imagination.

I think it thoughts with this other kind of power. And I think the other kind of power really took it over.

Dr. Bradley Onishi: Yeah.

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: But you know, I, I. I mean, I'm only viewing this from a distance, but I can't say that I have seen an awareness of that alternative vision of power that Jesus presents in the sun.

Dr. Bradley Onishi: Yeah. And it's it's, it also just reminds me that [00:51:00] nothing is set in stone.

Nothing is, is destiny is not set. And so you can see a path where American evangelicalism in the 20th century would not have latched onto and become obsessed with the kinds of worldly power dominating power that you're discussing that there was a path for a different kind of approach. And, and sadly that has, over the last six decades or more has not taken

shape that we've seen the apatheosis a thirst for the power of domination in the Alliance with Trump and, and, other other, things that have happened over the last decade. So, I,

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: It's sad. It's really sad.

Dr. Bradley Onishi: It is.

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: For all I'm a critic of American evangelicalism, as you know, particularly in the white community. You know, I think that there were always other options for them.

And I think that some smaller churches and smaller communities sometimes have taken those options and they have found themselves on the outs. And I've certainly know a lot of evangelicals as [00:52:00] individuals who have taken the alternative option. And what is also very sad is that they often find themselves sort of lost, rejected by their own families.

With no place to go to worship. And so there's a kind of a homelessness, among evangelicals who have opted to follow more closely the path of biblical power that Jesus lays out.

Dr. Bradley Onishi: It's definitely not the way to, evangelical celebrity evangelical, you know, Riches that kind of, it's just not the path.

And so you're right. People feel like they're caught and they have their they're in no man's land, essentially.

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: So a good friend of mine who started out writing books for evangelicals and made huge, I mean, huge sales shifted.

Dr. Bradley Onishi: Yep. And then

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: He left and, I remember a few years ago asking him how a particular book of his did. And he said, he said, well, if I had stayed with the other guys, I'd would have sold a lot more books.

Dr. Bradley Onishi: That's how it works.

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: And he [00:53:00] just, he just kind of smiled and he said, yeah, this is the right path.

Dr. Bradley Onishi: And not everyone chooses that path though. And the path of money and power and famous is a lot more alluring. nyway, I have taken up too much of yourtime, so I'm just going to say I'm so thankful that you would, on short notice, you know, once we, once we all saw the picture, we can't unsee, that you were able to, jump on and talk with me here for an hour. So. Diana. Thank you so much, everybody. Please check out the cottage, the brand new newsletter and all the books and all the writing and all the work you've just done over the course of your career. It's great. So thanks for being here and I hope we can have you back soon.

Dr. Diana Butler Bass: Thank you for having me. .

