

“Evangelical History: The Crossroads of Culture and Religion”

By Adrienne Bradley, RPLP undergraduate student fellow

At a recent Religious and Civic Leaders Gathering, the Religion and Public Life Program (RPLP) hosted Kristin Kobes Du Mez, historian and professor at Calvin University specializing in the intersection of religion, gender, and politics. She discussed the impacts of her book, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (Liveright 2020), responding to both questions from RPLP director Rachel Schneider and the audience.

Du Mez first explained her research for the book, which centered on the history of white evangelicalism in the United States and the development of current beliefs. Her book’s central argument is that white evangelical beliefs emerged out of a combination of cultural, political, and social factors, with strong emphasis placed on a strong patriarchal social order and idolization of a masculine, militant figure. This led to greater evangelical support for aggressive foreign policy and unified conservative alignment, culminating in 81 percent of evangelicals supporting Donald Trump in recent elections. According to Du Mez, these voting patterns should not have been the shock that they were: “In regard to Trump’s election, asking ‘how could white evangelicals betray their values?’ is the wrong question.” Rather, Du Mez argues, evangelicals voted for Trump *because* of their values.

When asked about the controversial reception of *Jesus and John Wayne*, Du Mez said the intention of her work was not to “woo” evangelicals, but rather to “be accurate and tell the story as well as possible,” including the examples of male leaders within the movement who were accused of sexual abuse and/or other abuses of power. With the rise of Trump as a political figure, Du Mez came to a sense of urgency for needing to testify to the patterns she saw, regardless of her ability to change minds. After publishing, she was surprised by the number of evangelical readers, in particular women, who embraced the book and wrote her letters (which she continues to receive), thanking her for “putting their experiences into words.”

Du Mez also addressed the future implications of her work in evangelical spaces. When asked about her perspective on the possibility of healing in the nation, she said, “We might not be at the place to repair yet. There is more deconstructing necessary to do. We also need to reconsider if the current leaders are the ones who should be involved in the healing process.” In her view, before there is a possibility of reconciliation, there is a need for both individual and collective reflection within the evangelical community.

The audience was particularly interested in examining evangelical impacts on other groups, with Du Mez taking questions from the audience on how her work relates to women, Christian communities of color, and white progressive Christian spaces. For example, one audience member wanted to know how white evangelical positioning spilled over into white progressive Christian spaces. “Even with equality between men and women, many cultural dispositions still align,” Du Mez said. This leaves us needing to apply the same questions to progressive Christianity as we do to evangelical Christian faith, looking beyond the surface differences in beliefs to examine the underlying cultural expectations of each.