# ALYSSA MILANO: SORRY NOT SORRY
# EMPTYING THE PEWS WITH EX-EVANGELICAL CHRISSY STROOP
## Season 1, Episode 47
## Original Air Date: March 16, 2020

**Alyssa Milano** [00:00:08] Hi, I'm Alyssa Milano, and this is Sorry Not Sorry.

**Alyssa Milano** [00:00:34] I am so happy to be joined by my friend Chrissy Stroop Chrissy is a leader in the movement of those raised in evangelical traditions and are now leaving their churches. As the editor of the book *Empty the Pews: Stories of Leaving the Church*, she brought together the personal, powerful stories of 26 former evangelicals who left their religious upbringings and the challenges they faced.

**Various** [00:01:01] A Pew report out today says that in the past seven years, the number of Americans who don't belong to an organized religion has grown by nearly 20 million. Evangelicals remain an important demographic group for politicians. The percent of Americans who identify with any religion has been on the decline for decades who support Donald Trump. Their backing is without question. How does that Puritan stance sit alongside the...in 2016? About 80% percent of white evangelicals voted for Donald Trump, the twice divorced candidate accused of extramarital affairs with porn stars. These are some of the greatest faith leaders. They would love to pray. A Reverend Steve Youngblood basically wants to slap a way with him that Walker was immersed as almost sexual mentor later at by shared with some of my closest friends, hoping they'd give me some wisdom. Instead, they just went straight to the rules, they said. Being gay is a sin and you can't accept it. Not accept my daughter. What does that even mean? One day you will grow up and you will realize you can leave all of this.

**Chrissy Stroop** [00:02:18] Hi, I'm Chrissy Stroop. I'm a transgender exvangelical. Sorry, not sorry.

**Alyssa Milano** [00:02:24] So you and I first met on Twitter. I think around 2017, shortly after the election, your Twitter bio reads  ex-Evangelical Writer and Russian History PhD. Trans Girl and sometimes snarkyista. I'd like for you to briefly tell us a little bit about your childhood. Where did you grow up? What was your childhood like?

**Chrissy Stroop** [00:02:51] So I grew up mostly in a north suburb of Indianapolis called Fishers. I was born in a small town in northern Indiana, but my family moved down there when I was around 5 years old and after kindergarden, and with the exception of half of 6th grade, I was in Christian schools the entire time of my elementary and secondary education. And when I say Christian school, I don't mean a Jesuit academy or something like that. You know, the the schools that call themselves Christian schools or Christian Academies, they're usually more like the ones where second lady Karen Pence teaches art, where they're very anti LGBTQ or they mobilize the kids for right-wing culture wars, kind of advocacy and involvements, illiberal civics, if you will. So, you know, I had it drilled into my head in church, in Christian schools from a very early age that liberals are these horrible people who kill babies. And we have to stop them. And we also have to stop gay people from having rights.

**Alyssa Milano** [00:03:50] Talk a little bit about the history of evangelicalism.

**Chrissy Stroop** [00:03:56] Sure. The history of evangelicalism that have been written, a lot of them have been written by people who come out of the more like moderate liberal

purist tradition of evangelicalism. Right. Or somewhat sympathetic to it. And they want to locate the origins of evangelicalism in things like the second great awakening in the abolitionist movement. And it is true that a kind of evangelical Protestantism was a motivating factor for the abolition of slavery in Britain, in the United States. But that's not really the ancestor of the direct ancestor of what we call evangelical Protestantism or what it has mostly become in the United States today. If you want to look at what evangelicalism is in the United States today and here we're talking mostly about white evangelicals. There are some evangelicals of color that would also fall into this category. But there are also some Christians of color that some people would call evangelicals and some would not. Someone self-defined as evangelicals and some would not, who are very different and they vote very differently. But, you know, this right wing, mostly white evangelicalism. It's the descendant of slave holder christianity, it's, you know, the descendant of denominations. And while it is still all these denominations as well, like the Southern Baptist Convention, which split off of other Baptists over the issue of slavery, because, you know, these northern about just groups decided that they didn't want they didn't think slave owners should be missionaries. What became this Southern Baptist Convention thought that was very insulting. So they broke away so they could have missionaries who own slaves. And, you know, this is also seriously inflected through the Cold War and anti-communism. And in American history, that's really inseparable from the civil rights movement. Our far right wing anti-communists, they denounce Martin Luther King as a communist, that sort of thing. And, you know, initially people like Jerry Falwell, senior, who, of course, built the Moral Majority. You know, he he mobilized Christians around opposition to civil rights legislation and to integration. And today, evangelicals who are still very much in that tradition, they try to distance themselves from that history. But it is their history. And it's my history, too. I mean, I grew up that way, and they they still vote to uphold white supremacism, even if they won't admit it. And there's another key moment there, too, that I sort of forgot to go over earlier, which is there were these debates in theology in the early 20th century between the so-called modernists who were able to move away from biblical literalism and the fundamentalists. And this is actually where the term fundamentalists came from. There was a series of pamphlets published starting in 1915 called The Fundamentals. And today's evangelicals are also very much the descendants of the fundamentalist side of those early 20th century debates. So evangelicalism in the United States, it's best considered a type of fundamentalist Christianity, even if some evangelicals and fundamentalists would define themselves against each other. If we take a step back and look at it through kind of a scholarly framework, it's it's very much a variety of Christian fundamentalism.

**Alyssa Milano** [00:07:04] I want to get a better understanding of, really, what your life was like as an evangelical Christian. Can you describe that to me? I mean, were you happy?

**Chrissy Stroop** [00:07:18] Yeah. Yeah. That's a complicated question. And the kind of things that happen to you when you end up rejecting the ideology, when you change politically and religiously from your family in high demand religious group and authoritarian religious groups like this, you know, people will accuse you of quote unquote, attacking everything you stand for. That's a direct phrase I've heard from multiple relatives of mine. They will accuse you of hating your entire childhood. But I did not hate my entire childhood, and I don't hate my entire childhood now. I also definitely didn't get the worst of evangelicalism. So as we now know, I mean, there is a big expose, a I think over 700 cases, as far as I recall last year were exposed of child sexual abuse and cover ups in the Southern Baptist Convention. You know, that didn't happen to me. I didn't get the worst kind of corporal punishment. The worst I got was being spanked with a wooden spoon. But corporal punishment is highly emphasized in evangelical communities. Spare the rod and

spoil the child and all that. And like any fundamentalist group, they create these kind of parallel institutions and structures, this whole parallel society alongside mainstream American society. So they look at outsiders as, quote unquote, the world. That's the phrase that they use. The world is scary. You're supposed to kind of go into it sometimes and convert people. But most of our social life was people we knew through church and Christian school. And so I was isolated that way. And then they also built up kind of a whole system of, as I said, parallel institutions and even publishing houses, books. The whole Christian music industry, this sort of stuff to reinforce a set of alternative facts, if you will, and to kind of expose and highlight that a couple of years ago I coined the hashtag #ChristianAltFacts to look at the kinds of alternative facts that children raised in this environment are indoctrinated with. You know, things like the Loch Ness monster might be real, and that's more proof that humans and dinosaurs lived at the same time.

**Alyssa Milano** [00:09:24] Right. Right.

**Chrissy Stroop** [00:09:26] You know, there's there's a lot of really, really, really wild stuff. Some of it has much more well, maybe just differently problematic implications than that. I mean, once you start to get into things like purity culture and what I like to call fake sex ed, they tell you things like, you know, condoms can't stop the AIDS virus. Abortion causes breast cancer and lots of other stuff that's just completely made up.

**Billy Graham** [00:09:51] All across America and Canada and in Western Europe. There is sweeping a new craze among teenagers. It's called love-ins. And they've had one in Toronto recently. They had one in Montreal. Now, the one in Toronto was quite harmless. The one in Montreal got a little bit out of hand. The police had to come in. But in some parts of the Western world they've become sex orgies.

**Alyssa Milano** [00:10:18] So you almost grew up in a bubble, in a sense.

**Chrissy Stroop** [00:10:22] It was a bubble. It was a bubble. And I was able to get out of it a little bit because my parents weren't the strictest that you can have in this subculture, which has kind of a spectrum of very extremist to kind of extremist, if you will. So, you know, my sister and I got to do some community theater and things, and we interacted with outsiders that way. You know, I also got to play Winthrop in the music man.

**Alyssa Milano** [00:10:46] Wow.

**Chrissy Stroop** [00:10:47] [inaudible], Dinner Theater, which is an equity house in Indianapolis. So that was a really fun childhood experience. But apart from those sorts of things, yeah, mostly I was isolated in this Christian bubble. This particular very conservative Christian bubble. I had access to some reading material that was from outside that bubble and that created some cognitive dissonance from early on. My grandma, who is more moderate than, you know, the rest, that family on that side of the family. She subscribed me to Ranger Rick magazine for a number of years. And so I learned about evolution and environmentalism and I rejected the evolution teachings. You know, I was like, well, we don't believe that millions of years stuff. But, hey, I love reading this Nature magazine.

**Alyssa Milano** [00:11:27] Is there a spoken rule about just science being bullshit? I mean, do people talk, you know, from an outsider when you hear about the beliefs of evangelicals and science? I just can't believe that it is so denied. Is there a spoken rule about that?

**Chrissy Stroop** [00:11:47] Not exactly. But there certainly is a lot of rhetoric about, you know, secular scientists and particularly biologists. They refer to them as evolutionists. And that's a tell if you ever hear someone use the word evolutionist. That's a fundamentalist, because only that only they say it that way so that they can compare it to creationists and make it seem like they're, you know, equivalently scientific or maybe even creationists are more scientific. So there's there's a whole lot of conspiratorial thinking about how worldly scientists and atheists as well, they really just want to have as much sex as they want and do other sinful things. So some people are much stricter about theater, about non-Christian music, that sort of thing. Until I think the year before my graduating class, they actually had people in my high school watch a video called Hell's Bells about how rock and roll is the devil's music because it has drumbeats and that comes from Africa. So it's a super racist thing that links other religions to demonic activity and that sort of thing.

**Alyssa Milano** [00:12:49] I just think it's so interesting because so much of what we hear right now about evangelicals is really just their unwavering support for Trump. Right. That's what's in the daily zeitgeist of evangelicalism. And we don't hear a ton about those who left the movement. And what personally triggered their exodus. So was there a specific moment for you? Was there an event or a breaking point to which led you to leave or was it a gradual buildup?

**Chrissy Stroop** [00:13:23] It was a gradual build up and then a long, painful, protracted process for me.

**Alyssa Milano** [00:13:28] Yeah, I bet.

**Chrissy Stroop** [00:13:28] I didn't really want to rock the boat with my family or be a rebel. And I was afraid of the social consequences. But I began to experience a lot of psychological consequences from trying to stay in the fold and having a hard time doing that. And also, you know, being a smart, talented, high performing student. And then also just the whole issue of how inhumane the whole thing seemed. I mean, if we take the Bible literally, including, you know, the divinely ordained genocide parts and, you know, everybody goes to hell except for right wing Christians interpretation. It's just it's a really, really inhumane and cruel worldview. And I had difficulty adhering to that, particularly as I got to be a little bit older and thinking a little bit more for myself.

**Former Evangelical Woman** [00:14:17] So I felt like that with religion where it's like, well, I think the earth's older than 6000 years. But I have faith that God exists. So I'll just ignore that. And pretty soon it got to be so many things. They were against homosexuality. They were against, you know, getting divorced. You know, they're against really technically they're against wearing two different types of fabric together. You know, there were so many things where it was just like, I can't. My faith is not strong enough for this relationship to last. Like, I can't believing others, too many things. And so I decided to leave.

**Reporter** [00:14:48] According to an October report from the Pew Research Center, 76 percent of the baby boomer generation described themselves as Christians, a contrast only half of millennials identify as Christians. Four in 10 say they are religiously unaffiliated and one in 10 identify with non-Christian faiths.

**Chrissy Stroop** [00:15:07] I met more people outside the bubble through some summer honors programs. I was admitted to at Indiana State University while I was still in my Christian high school. After my sophomore and junior years, those summers, I took

classes in theater and English and we had like actual dances and things like, wow, you know, as part of those summer honors programs and all these kids were like cussing and smoking. And I was like...

**Alyssa Milano** [00:15:33] Wow, it's like Footloose.

**Chrissy Stroop** [00:15:35] Kind of. So, you know, I was still like very straight laced, dorky Christian kid that didn't quite know what to do with all of this. But I had a lot of interesting conversations and I did just try to sort of listen to people and learn what other people's experiences were like, as well as feeling some pressure to try to convert them. But I was just never very good at pushing that very far.

**Alyssa Milano** [00:15:58] Oh, Interesting.

**Chrissy Stroop** [00:15:58] And a couple of people from those summers are still my friends.

**Alyssa Milano** [00:16:01] Is that part of the evangelical community where you try to convert people?

**Chrissy Stroop** [00:16:06] Very much so. So one way to define evangelicalism is according to these principles that were identified by a scholar called Bebbington and one of them is conversion ism. So it's a it's a conversion focused religion. The emphasis is on the so-called great commission where Jesus says in the Gospels, you know, go out into the world and make disciples of all nations. So in high school, for example, in my senior year Bible class, we had to take Bible every year. We would go out sometimes in the evening to downtown Indianapolis and hand out tracts. A hated doing that.

**Reporter** [00:17:01] If you've never heard of Jack Chick or his publications, Jack Chick is a cartoonist and publisher of Christian Religious Tract Comic Books, which have been distributed globally in hundreds of languages and are possibly the most widely distributed published comics of all time. He uses these to try to convert the unsaved into to Christians so that when they die they don't have to go to the horrible hell which he repeatedly draws gleefully in his own books.

**Alyssa Milano** [00:17:26] What did you hate about it?

**Chrissy Stroop** [00:17:27] Well, for one thing, I'm an introvert, so there's a lot of stuff about evangelical subculture that just was not a good fit for me. I hated like when you had to pray out loud in a group with other people and you didn't know who was supposed to pray next. And I wanted that to be more private. I hated greeting time at church when you're supposed to, like, shake a bunch people's hands that you don't know. I mean, maybe you know them. It could be a small church, but if it's a big church, there's a chance you're sitting around people you don't know or you don't know very well. Why do I want to say hi to all these random people? I just want to sit here. So trying to, quote unquote, share the gospel is also uncomfortable in that way. But it's also uncomfortable because something about trying to convert people in certain concepts that we were taught, like friendship evangelism, you know, be careful, but make some friends with non-Christians so you can try to convert them, you know, or all this emphasis on invite your friends to church, invite them to these kind of bait and switch events like, oh, we're going to have a rock concert and then we'll just happen to have an altar call and give everyone a chance to get saved, you know, or invite the neighbor kids to vacation Bible school, try to get them

saved. I did as a as a little kid, sort of convert another neighbor kid who lived down the street. And I feel super awkward about that now. I got him to pray through the basic kind of evangelical prayer of salvation anyway. And I think it's horrible that they train kids to do this, you know, and that they tell you that you'll be tortured forever if you're not saved yourself. I mean, I had a lot of intense anxiety around that in early childhood. Some nights I would lie awake, praying the prayer over and over with high anxiety, sometimes crying because I wasn't sure I was really saved.

**Alyssa Milano** [00:19:02] I could understand that feeling of almost guilt for those that you did convert, especially where you are now. But I want to go back a little bit because I want to get a very vivid picture of you leaving the church and what that meant, because it's not only leaving a church, it's leaving your entire community. And I would think parts of your family. So walk me through that a little bit. You make the decision.

**Chrissy Stroop** [00:19:30] Mm hmm.

**Alyssa Milano** [00:19:31] Did you go through any therapy in as far as how to leave the church? Did you reach out to any support groups or did you just dive in and say, this is it, I'm done?

**Chrissy Stroop** [00:19:41] Well, I kind of quasi just simulated for a long time. And I really made, you know, more of a solid break kind of in the middle of grad school. I also managed to get both married and divorced in the middle of grad school. So I was trying to follow this career path that would be kind of safe, provide me with a middle class living, become a professor. That didn't work out. I knew that I could no longer consider myself an evangelical Christian after my junior year abroad, when I was studying at Ball State University, so I went to a secular state university. Like Christian school, tried to funnel people into Christian colleges. But, you know, they're expensive. And both my parents actually went to Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana. It's also Dave Letterman's alma mater. So, you know, they even had their kind of intense conversion experiences there, having had more moderate Christian childhoods. So they didn't really worry about me going to a state school. And I wasn't a real crisis of faith there. I had also, when I started college, just come off doing a short term youth mission trip in Russia, which kind of was what sparked my eventual scholarly interest in Russia. But it also created even sort of more aspects to my crisis of faith because, yeah, there was just a lot of awkward things that I learned about, you know, missionaries and what they do in terms of not seeming to understand foreign cultures very well. People saying really stupid things like, oh, I just love the Russian people because you can totally love a whole people. You know, actually, maybe it's easier to love a people because that's an abstraction than it is to actually love people. But, you know, they say things like that. And then on this mission trip, too, I thought that in post-Soviet Russia there would still be a lot of atheists, but there weren't because like pretty much everyone at least nominally converted to orthodox Christianity after the collapse of the Soviet Union. So it was like, OK, are we here to convert Christians to Christianity or what are we here for? We even had a an orthodox priest who would visit our summer camp where we were doing kind of one of those bait and switch things. It was an English camp. We were giving local students practice speaking English and tutoring in English, except we never gotten to training about how to be actual tutors. And our materials were just English translations of the Bible, which is really impractical in terms of vocabulary. So this is not good pedagogy. But it was like, all right. So they have an orthodox priest here. And I even overheard some of the adult missionaries arguing over, you know, whether that was OK or not. So it was all just kind of a clusterfuck. And I came back from that and started college, and I still went back for a second year of the mission

trip, which was dumb. I shouldn't have. Anyway, if people want that whole story, it's what I wrote my essay about in my new co-edited anthology*, Empty The Pews Stories of Leaving the Church*. And so that was definitely contributing to my intellectual deconstruction of the faith. And then after studying abroad in Germany, in England, I was really depressed. But I knew like, OK, I'm really not in the club anymore. I had voted for George W. Bush in 2000 over abortion and then I voted for John Kerry in 2004. Another big break. And then when I was in grad school and I haven't voted for a Republican since when I was in grad school in California at Stanford, one of my cousins who used to live in California for a while when her dad was a pastor there, came to visit. And I thought that she would be more moderate, too. And I actually admitted to her that I voted for John Kerry, and she was totally scandalized by that. So her whole kind of like hipster Christian thing turned out to be just completely phony. It didn't really mean anything in terms of breaking away from the rigid ideology of the biblical literalism, which was disappointing. And then occasionally I would I would be very vocal. I started publicly standing up for LGBTQ rights and that sort of thing, particularly with the Prop 8 fight in California.

**Alyssa Milano** [00:23:38] I remember that well.

**Chrissy Stroop** [00:23:39] So I didn't tell my parents or anybody like, oh, I'm not a Christian anymore. I didn't even tell myself. I mean, technically, I got confirmed in the Episcopal Church in 2012 because I was sort of trying to hold on to something that could maybe sort of smooth things over with my family.

**Former Evangelical Woman** [00:23:55] One of the hardest things about walking away from your faith, losing your faith, leaving your faith, however you want to word it. I think one of the hardest things is the position that it puts us in with our parents. Those of us that end up losing our faith have such a desire to be real and authentic, especially with our family. But we fear that telling our parents what's happened with our faith will ruin our relationship. And if you look at what actually happens when a an individual goes to their parents in the evangelical community and tells them that they've had a change of heart or a change of mind or they're not able or capable to believe anymore, it totally destroys their relationship with their parents.

**Chrissy Stroop** [00:24:43] I didn't go to church that often. And once I started teaching humanities and social sciences classes at a Russian university in Moscow, which is what I did for three years after graduating from Stanford with my PhD, I just stopped going to church.

**Alyssa Milano** [00:24:55] As one does,.

**Chrissy Stroop** [00:24:56] And when it came to making a big break, it was really over politics and it was I think 2014. And I started publicly just becoming very critical of evangelical subculture. And that was also the time that I had finally realized for myself that I'm queer and I didn't come out yet. But I also started writing a lot of things about evangelicals and their anti LGBTQ attitudes and violence and politics.

**Alyssa Milano** [00:25:20] Well, you've fairly recently come out as a trans woman. Did you know when you were in the church?

**Chrissy Stroop** [00:25:26] No. I knew that I felt difference. I knew that I felt weird and somehow uncomfortable in my own skin. And I think I did not, for a long time, really have the intellectual toolkit to articulate what it was that was different about me. I knew that I

often made friends with girls. I knew that I often identified with strong women. And yet I was also attracted to women. So, you know, when people would tease me in school, which they sometimes did about not really fitting with masculine stereotypes or masculine roles and that sort of thing, I would always just kind of quip, well, I'm comfortable in my masculinity, which always meant exactly one thing. I like girls and I certainly was a far cry at that time from knowing that gender and sexuality operate independently. And I also discovered later that I can be attracted to men as well. So that was interesting. But I think being so kind of hyper focused on the intellectual problem of, you know, deconstructing. Right wing fundamentalist Christianity and what that meant for me with my family. It really kind of kept me from recognizing a lot of other things. And becoming the kind of cerebral and intellectual kid and high academic performer that I was, I do believe that was also a coping mechanism to this sense of being off and different that I had from early childhood, but that I couldn't place.

**Alyssa Milano** [00:26:42] It's so interesting to me because I feel like living in that space, in that culture, in the church and seeing and witnessing how they view the LGBTQ community must have given you great heartache as you were trying to figure out your own identity.

**Chrissy Stroop** [00:27:04] Yeah, definitely. I mean, to say that they literally demonized the LGBTQ community is not an exaggeration.

**Reporter** [00:27:11] I mean, he said in church that he wants to put gay people behind electric fences and have them all die out. What do you think about that?

**Evangelical Woman** [00:27:18] Well, that's not really what he said. He said yes. He says some of that that he was going to feed him and everything else. And, you know, they always.

**Reporter** [00:27:27] You're saying that it's OK if you feed them? .

**Evangelical Woman** [00:27:29] Well, I'm not saying it's okay one way or the other. What I'm saying, that is his opinion.

**Reporter** [00:27:35] I do have some breaking news I want to get you up to date on. We're learning about an anti-gay sermon delivered by a now former Knox County sheriff's detective. He's also a pastor at a local church. Detective Grayson Fritts in the sermon that is posted online saying at one point, quote, God has instilled the power of civil government to send the police in 2019 out to these LGBT freaks and arrest them and have a trial for them. And if they are convicted, they are to be put to death.

**Alyssa Milano** [00:28:02] Did you try to just turn off that part of you? Your sexuality, your. Or were you able to just divert that into, you know, whatever experience was right in front of you in that moment that you felt was an experience that you needed to live?

**Chrissy Stroop** [00:28:21] Well, because of purity culture and, you know, all this fear mongering around sex and sexuality and and that sort of thing. I got kind of started late being sexually active, you know, and then I had what were on the surface heterosexual relationships. But I did tend to have some issues with my girlfriends and eventually now ex-wife, you know, trying to put me in the man box and me being like, no, I don't want to do that. You know, or they just have certain expectations of you because you're a man and you're like, that doesn't make sense. You know, I actually had arguments with one of my

ex girlfriends about whether we should be equal in our relationship. And I was the one who wanted it to be totally equal. And she was like, no, no, no, no, you're the man and you have to be the man. God. Yeah. She was arguing and anti-feminist line. A white woman, obviously. Hashtag not all... But, you know, and I was arguing the feminist line because I was like, this is bullshit,.

**Alyssa Milano** [00:29:22] Right? And well, and then they just turned around everything saying, you know, I am the complete feminist. You're not a feminist. You're you're you're hurting women by being pro-choice. Really, it's the strength of a woman, the way in which the evangelicals turn an argument around. It's just mind boggling. And to me, I think it's one of the most toxic things about that movement is that you can't have an honest debate with someone because of what you feel like, that they're imprinted or programed to only see things in their own way. I'm wondering, in your view, what do you think is the most toxic part of the movement?

**Chrissy Stroop** [00:30:07] Yeah. I mean, you know, I think it kind of all goes back to a basic authoritarian ethos. You know, they're masters of deflection and gaslighting like authoritarians are. They are sort of programmed for that. The way that I think about it. I mean, we've seen a lot of people talking about parallels between abusive relationships and authoritarian politics in recent years. And fundamentalist communities are authoritarian through and through. They're kind of the social embodiment of cycles of abuse. And so, again, while I did not get the worst physical abuse, I mean, some people are beaten much more on other parts of their body with things worse than a wooden spoon. And I didn't get the sexual abuse. The whole culture is pervaded with emotional abuse, manipulation and spiritual abuse, coercion. It's fundamentally a violent and coercive subculture. And so these kind of cycles just perpetuate. And one thing that goes along with that is, is strong in-group outgroup consciousness, which is also associated with this sense of superiority, which is really, I think, projected from a deeper sense of inferiority. As you know, we certainly also see with obvious authoritarian personalities like Donald Trump. He projects his own insecurities out into the world in his ridiculous tweets where he says things like we're gonna destroy the cultural sites in Iran. And then, you know, the secretary of defense says no we're not. Because that's really dumb. It's a similar kind of thing in these Christian communities, the authoritarian ones anyway, evangelicals and other kinds of fundamentalists. So, yeah, it isn't possible to have a good faith debate with them, just like it's impossible to have a good faith debate with, you know, an alt-right pro Trump type because they're going to be using alternative facts and will not look at your actually demonstrable facts. And they're simply not arguing in good faith. Though sometimes they might fool themselves and they might think that they are. And, you know, you talk about the abortion issue. It took me a long time to fully come around on that one. I think it was also probably around 2008 when, you know, I was involved in opposition to Prop 8 in California that I concluded to myself maybe a little before that. You know, I wasn't going to make abortion a single issue. Well, obviously, I didn't vote based on that before I started voting for Democrats in 2004. But, you know, I still had a really hard time shaking that programmed sense that it's murder. And I certainly you know, now I think that's just an awful, awful way to look at it. And it completely erases women's bodily autonomy. But, you know, it was emphasized so much from a very early age that for many people that becomes the hardest thing to shake. For many ex evangelicals or cis women too that I've talked to, you know, that is one of the hardest things or the hardest thing to shake from that kind of programing.

**Alyssa Milano** [00:33:18] What can you tell me about this combination of evangelicalism and conservative right wing politics? When did that happen?

**Chrissy Stroop** [00:33:29] So that certainly has been a process. And, you know, there are still some older. Well, not necessarily older in terms of age was sort of more old fashioned. They often are older. Jimmy Carter style Baptists, for example, who are very pro separation of church and state. And, you know, very kind and inclusive toward other people. But the whole thing with abortion, you know, it didn't even start immediately after Roe. But there were people, far right wing ideologues like Paul Weyrich, like Jerry Falwell, senior, who were looking for issues to mobilize Christians around for right wing politics that could replace civil rights. It's exactly the sort of thing that, you know, happened with the Southern Strategy. Well, you're not allowed to say the N-word anymore now. Right. So you have to come up with coded things. So the Christian right started focusing on abortion. You know, very late 70s, really not they didn't really make a political impact until 1980. And many Protestants, including evangelical Protestants who might be in other ways very conservative, thought of abortion as essentially a Catholic issue before that time. So a lot of us, I think, think that, well, Roe changed everything because it was such a big shift for the Supreme Court. Suddenly, conservative Christians all freaked out. That's not how it went down. The official Catholic position was always anti-abortion and Protestants were divided. But mostly, you know, really blasé about it didn't particularly care. Probably most of them, most leaders, anyway, didn't think abortion should be banned, or at least not in all cases. People who were just looking for a new issue to rally around really started to change that. And it is really mix up with all of this coded racial politics that we associate with Reagan and the Reagan era. Abortion becomes this kind of defensive fetish that can be used to cover over white supremacism, which is no longer respectable. And in conjunction with that, in the 1980s and early 1990s, conservative leaders in the Southern Baptist Convention essentially purged the whole convention, or at least its leadership and its institutions of Jimmy Carter type Baptists. You know, liberal Baptists were in a series of slick and, you know, really hardcore maneuvers basically ousted. People like Paul Pressler were leading the charge here. Paige Patterson, both of them have made scandalous headlines in recent years. Paige Patterson, because he was it was caught on tape that he told women stay with their abusive husbands and just be more submissive and pray and try to convert them. And Paul Pressler, because he's been credibly accused of molesting young boys, none of which surprises me at all.

**Alyssa Milano** [00:36:11] It's so frustrating to me.

**Reporter** [00:36:14] The leader of the Southwest Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth is out. That's according to the Baptist Standard. We first told you last night at 10:00, Paige Patterson is accused of ignoring a woman's rape complaint when he was president at a seminary in North Carolina. According to the Post, Patterson told the woman not to report the rape to police. And just forgive her attacker.

**Chrissy Stroop** [00:36:34] These guys took over. They took over the whole Southern Baptist Convention and they worked with the Heritage Foundation, the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition and all the later instantiations of those things. And focus on the family, the Family Research Council. They made common cause with Phyllis Schlafly and her Eagle Forum. So they built these things. These kinds of institutions that brought Catholics and Protestants and ultimately Mormons together around right wing politics.

**Alyssa Milano** [00:37:00] What do you think the lack of separation of church and state means for the future of politics?

**Paula White, Donald Trump's Spiritual Advisor** [00:37:07] I got a phone call. He was watching Christian television and he caught up, said, hey, you're fantastic. And repeated almost verbatim three of my sermons on value vision. A friendship formed relationship not just with Donald, but also with the staff, with his family, with his children, and with this friends.[SERMON BEGINS] We declare that any strange winds, any strange winds that have been sent to hurt the church, sent against this nation, sent against our president, sent against myself, sent against others. We break it by the superior blood of Jesus right now in the name of Jesus. We arrest every infirmity, affliction, fatigue, weariness, weakness, fear, sickness, any self-righteousness, any self serving action, God. Let pride fall. Let pride fall. Let pride fall.

**Alyssa Milano** [00:37:57] Do you think that we keep, you know, this divide of the Republican Party is that of evangelicals and right wing conservatives? Do you think that there's any way to now eliminate that aspect of the Republican Party, or do you think we're forever on this spiral of there not being a moderate candidate for the Republican Party? Do you think Republicans will only now nominate people for their their ticket...People that have this very calcified view of the issues?

**Chrissy Stroop** [00:38:31] This whole question, it goes, I think, back to the realignment that started happening with civil rights in the 1960s and all of that. And this is kind of the culmination of it. So we do this radicalized-I would call them fascists far right-Republican Party. And I think there's a real danger that we get stuck with that. And it makes it very difficult to get to anything like a sort of functional democratic process in the United States.

**Alyssa Milano** [00:38:58] Exactly.

**Chrissy Stroop** [00:38:58] Because I really don't see how....

**Alyssa Milano** [00:38:59] That's so scary to me.

**Chrissy Stroop** [00:39:01] Absolutely. And I don't see how the Republican Party is going to reform itself unless it is really deprived of political power at almost all levels for decades. They know the demographics are not in their favor. But we know they cheat. They practice voter suppression in many states. You know, obviously, Mitch McConnell in an unprecedented act, stole a Supreme Court seat. He blocked President Obama from telling us about the Russian influence campaign during the election. And had President Obama done so, then he would have been smeared as partisan. So, you know, they're they're just so radicalized now. And the Electoral College continues to favor them, at least for now. Right. But they are panicked about their demographic decline. And so they're trying to grab power even more like a wounded bear. You know, they're lashing out and they're stacking the federal courts and the Supreme Court. And so I think we have we face a serious danger of having, you know, minority authoritarian rule imposed on us for a very long time or a best case scenario, having extremely dysfunctional politics, because it's in this kind of Two Party system that we have with these factors that I've just, you know, gone over. It's very, very difficult to deprive the Republicans of enough power to really force them to reform or be replaced by a new moderate conservative party.

**Alyssa Milano** [00:40:23] So I was raised Catholic, you know, and I think it's it's an important part of my identity, especially as I got older and I realized the faults of Catholicism. You know, I have I have a lot of problems with many of the teachings of the church. And I think that those problems were made more palatable for me once this pope came into play, because there is something that is so almost liberal about him. He clearly

didn't do enough as far as penalizing the predator priests. But I do think that he was able to shift the tone of Catholicism during this time. And I think almost the only way to change a religion is from within. Otherwise, it just seems to be criticism. Right. So I'm I'm wondering if you think that there is room for people of faith, for people in the evangelical movement to work from within to change things?

**Chrissy Stroop** [00:41:31] You know, I think it's it's very difficult to change that kind of subculture or institution from within. In fact, my friend and colleague, Cindy Wang Brandt, she made this very interesting argument that evangelicals and doesn't really change from the inside. It slowly responds to outside pressure and then kind of rebrands and sells itself as having changed from the inside. Catholicism is kind of a different thing. And as much as it's always been this huge big tent church and most of the leity doesn't do a lot of the things that the Magisterium prescribes, and they just seem to feel okay with that. You know, when it comes to abortion, birth control and that sort of thing, most Catholics ignore the official church teaching and everyone just kind of goes on about their business unless, you know, you happen to be a politician and then a bishop gets involved and says, well, you can't take communion. And I think you're right that, you know, Pope Francis has changed the tone, whether he's changed the substance much, I don't think he has, but he also has a lot of institutional roadblocks if if he would even want to. He is a Jesuit and they tend to be more moderate Catholics than maybe some other kinds of priests and bishops. But evangelical subculture. I think it has a lot of factors mitigating against its change from the inside. Evangelical institutions, they have this pattern of purging and ousting people who rock the boat. We've seen this a lot with evangelical colleges and universities in recent years. That's something that I've published some investigative journalism on. So, you know, schools censoring student newspapers, ousting professors that are more open to becoming inclusive toward LGBTQ students, that sort of thing. And often silencing them through non-disclosure agreements that are tied to severance packages. And you might say, well, this is a really stupid move on their part. And maybe it is. Maybe it's short sighted. But in the short term, this works out better for them financially because there are a lot of sort of panicky white evangelical parents out there who want to send their kids to colleges, maybe won't provide any assistance to their kids if they want to go to any other kind of college so that they'll be taught things that don't challenge the quote unquote, Christian worldview that they grew up with. So they want this very strict orthodoxy on gender and sexuality, on abortion and on creationism and all the rest. And as it turns out, at these colleges, the administrations are often far more conservative and ready to enforce orthodoxy than the faculty and the students. There's a pretty solid contingent of students at a lot of these colleges and universities who would like to be more inclusive of different views of the LGBTQ community. And the professors are probably actually the most liberal group of all at Christian colleges and universities. But you have to be very, very quiet about it. [00:44:30]And so why do the administrations act the way they do? Because they depend on major right wing donors and organizations to fund them. And if they don't get that funding, nobody else is going to fund them. And, you know, people like the Kochs and the Acton Institute and National Christian Foundation, they expect that these schools will remain kind of incubators of the next generation of elite culture warriors. And so if these schools loosen up, they're going to lose their donor money and nobody is going to step up to replace it. So you can't really change evangelical institutions from the inside. [34.6s] Ultimately, that may not work out in their favor. But this is why, you know, I created the hashtag #emptythepews and call for people to leave evangelical churches in protest and or to simply tell their stories of why they did so, to put them on notice and put pressure on them. Yes. And for us to heal and reclaim our own stories collectively, because I didn't have anything like that, any kind of community when I was going through it, but also simply to alert the broader public to the serious threat to democracy and human rights that the

white evangelical subculture and community that that demographic. The single most right wing demographic in America represents. I don't think that enough people in our media take it seriously. And the work that I do, it's not for evangelicals because I don't expect them to change, because having grown up inside that, I lost all faith that people can change it from the inside. Individually, you might have a preexisting relationship with a conservative evangelical. I still have some that are friends and that I can have honest talks with one on one that's different. And there, you know, over time you might really have some progress in changing someone's mind on some issues, but it takes great patience. It's not super likely. I have seen some people in my life moderate and you know, and I'm and I'm grateful that I have is still a pretty good relationship with my parents. It's very complicated with a lot of people in my family and from my past. And I really don't talk to most of my childhood friends. But yeah, the work that he was not for evangelicals. It's great if they read it and they want to think about it and they want to actually be open to it, most of them aren't. But it's for the broader public and it's for ex-evangelicals.

**Dawn Smith - TEDx Natick** [00:46:44] Cults are all consuming. They don't allow their members to invest in a life outside of the group. But college became a refuge for me. It was the first time in my life I could spend hours of my day without seeing anybody from the assembly and at the same time I was getting an education. This world that I had been taught was dark was actually amazing. Get this. Women in the arts. Women in science. There was a place for me there. If I wanted it, I started to see how small my world view really was. I could have left the assembly by then. I was over 18, but in a cult. When you leave, you're shunned. And I wasn't ready to lose my family and my friends.

**Alyssa Milano** [00:47:50] I would imagine that you can't really come up or fight against people who truly believe what we think is toxic behavior to them. It's just an act of love and it's an act of love commanded by God. I don't know how you convert that. That is a big, lofty belief. And in your book, *Empty the Pews*. I think it's so interesting what you did because you compiled stories from people who left the church. Again, something that we don't hear about often in the news. In our zeitgeist is people who left the church. Are there are there common themes with these people? Is there anything that surprised you from their stories? Tell me a little bit about compiling the stories in your book.

**Chrissy Stroop** [00:48:41] Sure. So we got together-Lauren and I-a very diverse group of contributors. And that was deliberate. But we did find that there are a lot of common themes in the stories. So 16 of these 21 essays are by women. And that's not coincidental because evangelical subculture is extremely patriarchal sub.

**Pastor Stephen L. Anderson** [00:49:01] The preaching of God's word is taking place. It first of all, it's not for a woman to be doing the preaching. And second of all, it's not for women to be speaking. Even the Bible's really clear on this. Even if they were to have a question, they they're not to ask that question in the church. Number one. And number two, even if they want to ask that question to their husband, they should wait until they get home. You know, they should not in the service be done. And by the way, this is why I don't believe that women should say amen during the preaching either. Now, here's the thing. When the preaching is going on, women should not express their opinion about the sermon even if it's a positive opinion. And of course, the heart is in the right place. Now, I did one time, I was preaching one time and a woman actually disagreed with me in the middle of my preaching. You know, I said something and she said I was wrong, you know. And I kind of, you know, blew up a little bit.

**Former Evangelical Woman** [00:49:56] What I experienced was a subculture that was very interested in making sure that women understood their proper role and that they didn't stray from it. So that necessitated strict modesty codes. So you would hear a lot. You know, you're supposed to dress in a certain way. And if you don't dress in this way, then you're potentially a stumbling block to men. You know, you can lead them on. And if they stray, that's partially on you. And I think that really is a factor when you're thinking through stories like the Roy Moore saga, most of these people wouldn't come out and say, like, I think it's totally fine that he touched a 14 year old girl. But the subtext is there. And I think a lot of evangelicals really haven't thought through the implications of the doctrine that they hear in church every Sunday.

**Chrissy Stroop** [00:50:43] So, you know, it disproportionately harms women and the kind of fake sex ed that you get and the purity culture harms everybody. But it's it's disproportionately harmful to women. There's a lot of queer narratives in the book, which also did not surprise me. I think some of the most surprising and interesting things to me came in what we ultimately put into the section on a global kind of reach and impact of this kind of conservative evangelicalism. So, you know, there's a very interesting essay by young woman from Singapore who grew up in megachurches there that were very much directly inspired by American megachurches and that sold sermons and books by American evangelical prosperity gospel pastors. That was interesting to me. That was something new to learn. I also really like the couple of stories that we have of people who grew up in immigrant communities and learned some things about their experience. And of course, there are some specificities there. So, you know, one woman who ended up moving from Latin America to Florida and converting from Catholicism to evangelicalism, along with her family and another man who grew up in a kind of Chinese evangelical church in California. But yeah, a lot of those common themes are there. Gender and sexuality. The inhumanity of the whole thing. Abuse problems, issues with with hell and intellectual problems. That kind of sums it up.

**Alyssa Milano** [00:52:10] Do you have something that you would say right now to people who may find true real fulfillment in the evangelical faiths? I mean, what would you to say to someone if you were having that debate? Right, right this right this moment?

**Chrissy Stroop** [00:52:27] I mean, you know, you said that they they do what they do out of what they think of as love and as commanded by God. But I'd ask them to really search themselves and ask themselves whether it's truly loving to exclude entire groups of people and discriminate against them, to try to pass laws to to control them. To behave in these ways? And if not, you know, how is it possible that they have more of a moral compass than than God has? And, you know, a lot of them would reject that framing right out of hand. But I think that's that's how a lot of people begin to think themselves out of this. Is that well, this really seems not like Jesus or this really seems kind of harsh and cruel wjat we're doing.God says we have to do it, but I don't like it. If you're willing to really kind of take a hard look at those feelings, maybe you can come away with a different understanding of God without throwing away your faith. And you know, the slogan or the hashtag #emptythepews when when I kinda a framed it as leaving toxic Christianity for no religion or a better religion as your own conscience dictates. So it's not a message that I see anyway as anti-religious or anti-theist. Certainly some people use it that way. And also in the Empty the Pews anthology, Lauren and I really wanted to highlight people who left religion altogether because we don't think there's enough representation of that in the press. And we're hoping that the book will really kind of change the conversation around religion. But I think there's a conversation to be had between and among people who left and stayed in some kind of Christianity or they became Wiccans or something else. And

those of us who just left religion altogether and I think we also do need to be highlighting the fact that there are progressive and inclusive kinds of Christianity and building bridges, building political coalitions with nonbelievers and different kinds of believers from different faiths on the basis of shared values. To me, a shared values are far more important than shared beliefs.

**Alyssa Milano** [00:54:26] And I guess the other part of that question really is if you were face to face with someone who's in the church and who is potentially questioning what they have been told, what the belief system is, but very much values the community they have within the church. What would you say to that person?

**Chrissy Stroop** [00:54:48] I'd say that, you know, leaving is definitely not going to be easy. It comes with social and psychological costs. But if your sense of morality and ethics demands that you do so, then I hope you'll be willing to pay that cost. And it is not as hard as it used to be because we have built a lot more of a community. Definitely online there are a lot of resources available. I've got some resources listed on my website, cstroop.com. Alice Gretchen has this great Web site called Dare to Doubt. That points people to a lot of different resources. There are a lot of local groups that meet as well. It's not as uncommon a thing. It probably was never really an uncommon thing. But now people are talking about it. And my hope is that we'll also be able to talk about it, you know, in the elite public sphere more and more, because people who come from these hard line, you know, high demand religious backgrounds and have left them really deserve a voice. And we're seeing a lot of interesting advocacy emerging in these kinds of spaces as well. I want to mention Torah Bontrager, for example, who founded the Amish Heritage Foundation. She is ex Amish and she is, in my opinion, quite rightly upset that the Amish are legally allowed to stop educating their children after eighth grade. She ran away and lived with an ex-Amish uncle so that she could go to high school. Now she lives in New York and back in December. No, it was November. Back in November. I was in in New York for the Amish Heritage Foundation's second annual conference. And it brought together people from different kinds of backgrounds. Exvangelical Ex Amish or Non-compliant Amish, ex-Muslim, ex-Ultra Orthodox Jewish to talk about common issues that people who grew up in fundamentalism often have, particularly the issue of education and the fact that children in the United States do not have a right to a full education. Her very ambitious goals, Torah Bontrager's goal is to overturn the precedent Wisconsin v. Yoder, which established the Amish, don't have to educate their children after eighth grade. And I think her work deserves so much more attention than it gets.

**Alyssa Milano** [00:57:00] Well, yeah, I think that it points to faith, questioning faith. And what it means to believe in something and have that override truth, science, facts, humanity, really. What does healthy faith look like to you?

**Chrissy Stroop** [00:57:23] You know, to me it looks like a kind of faith that is epistemologically humble, I guess. That might look like someone suggesting that okay, I don't have all the answers. People in different faith traditions maybe can also find different aspects of God or truth, or we might all be able to come to the divine through different paths. I might choose Christianity as my path. I might find Jesus to be an admirable person and teacher, or even a divine figure that I look to as a model. Some people might not be willing to go that far. But I think at the very least, we need people to accept that they can't convert everybody. And conversion with coercion and manipulation is never legitimate. The United States is pluralist, and so we can't have democracy without pluralism. And we need to be willing to live together with people of other faiths and of no faith, but with everyone having equal rights and equal accommodation in the public square. So a healthy

Christianity at the very least has to embrace pluralism and give up Christian supremacism. Stop trying to legislate women's and LGBTQ people's rights away. Stop trying to legislate anything that is grounded only in a faith tradition and not in a kind of common consensus that we can come to around pursuing the common good.

**Megan Phelps-Roper** [00:58:42] I was a blue eyed, chubby cheeked 5 year old when I joined my family on the picket line for the first time. My mom made me leave my dolls in the minivan. It's down on a street corner in the heavy Kansas humidity, surrounded by a few dozen relatives with my tiny fists clutching a sign that I couldn't read yet. Gays are worthy of death. This was the beginning. Our protests soon became a daily occurrence and an international phenomenon. And as a member of Westboro Baptist Church, I became a fixture on picket lines across the country. The end of my anti-gay picketing career and life as I knew it came 20 years later, triggered in part by strangers on Twitter who showed me the power of engaging the other man named David. It was one such person. He ran a blog called Judicious, and after several months of heated but friendly arguments online, he came out to see me at a picket in New Orleans. He brought me a Middle Eastern desert from Jerusalem, where he lives. And I brought him kosher chocolate and held. God hates Jew sign. There was no confusion about our positions. But the line between friend and foe was becoming blurred. We'd started to see each other as human beings and it changed the way we spoke to one another. It took time, but eventually these conversations planted seeds of doubt in me. My friends on Twitter took the time to understand Westeros doctrines, and in doing so they were able to find inconsistencies I'd missed my entire life. Why did we advocate the death penalty for gays? When Jesus said let he, who is without sin, cast the first stone. How could we claim to love our neighbor while at the same time praying for God to destroy them? The truth is that the care shown to me by these strangers on the internet was itself a contradiction. It was growing evidence that people on the other side were not the demons I'd been led to believe. These realizations were life altering.

**Alyssa Milano** [01:00:47] Now, I'm going to tell you everything Jesus said about being trans, about being gay and about having an abortion. Are you ready? Here we go. [SILENCE] And that's it. That's all. Literally nothing. It's this perversion of faith, this cramming words into the mouths of religious figures to advance harmful, hateful, discriminatory agendas that has so many people losing their religion. People are made to feel shame for being who they are, to suffer the loss of their families and communities simply because they did not conform to a vision of Jesus or any religious figure which never existed. Now we've covered this. There are no words from Jesus in the Bible which condemn the communities many of the evangelical churches so hate. And I know that Jesus never preached hate. Here's what he did say. "A new commandment I give unto you that you love one another as I have loved you, that you also love one another." And this is across all religions from the Prophet Muhammad: "you will not enter paradise until you have faith, and you will not have faith until you love each other" From the Torah: "love thy neighbor as thyself." And even among atheists, this holds true. Former minister Teresa McBain tells us, "the meaning of life or the meaning in life is helping people and loving people." None of this love lives in the hellfire preachers of the evangelical Christian movement. There is a place for each of us as we were created in this world, and those using religion to spread hate and fear are doing the exact opposite of God's work.

**Alyssa Milano** [01:02:43] Sorry Not Sorry is executive produced by Alyssa Milano. That's me. Our associate producer is Ben Jackson, Editing and Engineering by Natasha Jacobs and music by Josh Cooke, Elicia Eagle and Milo Bugliari. That's my boy. Please subscribe

on Spotify, iTunes or wherever you get your podcasts and if you'll like the show, please rate review and spread the word. Sorry. Not sorry.