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Cancelled: Redeeming Public Virtue in a Cancel Culture Age

May 4, 2021



The Veritas Forum

A Conversation about Forgiveness and the Ethics of Cancel Culture hosted by the Veritas Forum at Harvard University. This Forum was generously funded by The Donahue Foundation. • Speakers: Christine Emba, Columnist at The Washington Post Willie Jennings, Associate Professor of Systematic Theology and Africana Studies at Yale University Suzanne Nossel, Chief Executive Officer at PEN America • Moderated by Sung Kwang Oh and Lizzie Bond • Made possible through sponsorship by The Donahue Foundation • Please like, share, subscribe to, and review this podcast.

Transcript

Welcome to the Veritas Forum. This is the Veritas Forum Podcast. A place where ideas and beliefs converge.

What I'm really going to be watching is which one has the resources in their worldview to be tolerant, respectful and humble toward the people they disagree with. How do we know whether the lives that we're living are meaningful? If energy, light, gravity and consciousness are in history, don't be surprised if you're going to get an element of this in God. Today we hear from Washington Post journalist Christine Emba, Columnist Editor and Author.

In Suzanne Nossel, a Human Rights Advocate, Former Government Official, Author and Chief Executive Officer of PEN America and Willie Jennings, a Theologian, Author and Associate Professor of Systematic Theology and Africana Studies at Yale University. Together they have a conversation about Forgiveness and the ethics of cancel culture. In a talk titled "Canceled" is public transgression redeemable presented by the Veritas Forum at Harvard University.

To start with, you know, I guess my perspective on cancel culture and how I even got into this discussion, as our moderators mentioned, I am a journalist. I'm an editor and an opinion columnist at The Washington Post and as such I have over the past five to six, seven years become surprisingly and sometimes dismayingly both an observer and

participant in the discourse. I've written about cancel culture and various speech conflicts more generally in articles and on the disaster website that we call Twitter.

But I'm interested in it mainly because I really care about ideas. I care about conversation that's been my work as a journalist. But I also think that it's very important to figure out what is valuable and what questions need to be asked and answered and how to do it well.

So I think I have perhaps three key things that I try and keep in mind and that I think influence the way that I consider the phenomenon that we call cancel culture which I'm not even sure is a great title for what we're discussing but I'm sure we'll get back to that later. So number one, the purpose of speech and I know Suzanne has a lot to say about this but we talk a lot in the United States about freedom and the idea of free speech is something that's held in obviously very high regard. But sometimes I think there's a little bit of confusion about what that actually means.

So free speech is supposed to be purposeful. Free speech, good speech is supposed to serve as a corrective to falsehood and to in fact lead to truth and valuable discussion. It's not meant to be a smokescreen for bigotry.

You're not supposed to shout fire in a crowded theater. There is supposed to be a reason for you to be speaking. The second thing that I also try and hold in my head is the idea that you know consequences are not cancel culture.

Sometimes people do things that are inappropriate or incorrect for the situation that they're in and then there are consequences for that speech or those actions or whatever they did. Sometimes people lose prominent roles and jobs because they performed poorly in those jobs so they acted inappropriately. And that is sad but that's not them being canceled.

And as I was saying before I think we really need to be specific and talk more about what we mean when we say that someone is canceled. Are they experiencing consequences for an action or are they being you know removed from discussion for no good reason? Sometimes I think that there's a conflation of a bunch of different phenomena and that doesn't help us create a clear idea or have clear speech. But then countering that I think we also have to remember that conflict is not the same as abuse.

And that means that you know disagreement and discomfort you know are not abusive usually on either side. Not every situation or person that disagrees with you or makes you uncomfortable deserves to be banished from the scene deserves to in fact face consequences for not agreeing with you. So I think that we have to keep in mind and keep in our hearts an attitude of intellectual hospitality while really defining the causes that we're arguing about, the questions that we're stating whether we're using them as wedge issues or addressing you know the real questions and the real individuals

underlying them.

I could go on but I'll pass it off here. Thanks maybe I can jump in next. Thank you so much for having them really already enjoying this conversation.

So I run Pen America which is a free expression organization. We have a mission to both celebrate, great and defend freedom of expression worldwide and we do a lot of work around the world on behalf particularly of imperiled writers. So people in places like Turkey, Iran, China, Russia who pay very high price for the crime of expressing themselves.

But we also take on free speech policy issues and in the last several years we've gotten more involved in free speech debates on college campuses and here in this country and it's become increasingly clear that some of the gravest threats to free speech emanate not from the government not in the form of violations of the First Amendment but rather outside of that context whether it's private universities or social media platforms or in some cases sort of speech versus speech. You know the traditional notion in Supreme Court jurisprudence is that the answer to noxious speech is more speech but the equation has been sort of turned on its head in the digital arena because as we all know sometimes that sort of more speech can be so thunderous and overwhelming that the original speaker may have maybe chased off Twitter or afraid to leave their house because of death threats that they've received and so you know while I think more speech remains the best solution in many cases we have to recognize it's not perfect and it can you know in itself sometimes chill and inhibit speech so these questions for us come up a lot we speak out on instances I agree entirely with Christine that the term cancel culture is a highly elastic one people use it to mean all sorts of things you know there are some cancellations in my book that are perfectly justified that I think we all pretty much could agree on you know the easiest case is probably a Bill Cosby or Harvey Weinstein people who have been criminally convicted for what they've done but the idea of cancel culture now then on a spectrum people like a Rosanne Barr who loses her television show or it's a Steve King the Iowa congressman these are people associated with prejudice over time and repeatedly and so I don't think we should feel or do see a lot of consternation when they lose their platforms but we talk about cancel culture I think one of the things we have to come to grips with this is the way in which this sort of continuum of conduct that leads to consequences you know has brought it and to encompass many situations that are much more ambiguous you know a statement that was not intentionally offensive a statement that may be offensive or objectionable but maybe not grounds for draconian consequences you know one of the things I agree with Christine that there are consequences for speech and should be I think we sometimes lose sense of proportionality and how those consequences are exacted in that cancel culture because it's driven by you know these discrete acts by many people who kind of come together in a chorus very often it can lead to precipitous results where the chance for due process and deliberation really goes out the window and I would say just to wrap

up that the cancellations that concern me the most I wouldn't say these are the only cancellations that worry me but the ones that concern me most have three characteristics the first is that they center on an active speech so rather than you know a sexual harasser or somebody who you know shows the colleague it's somebody who has said something made a comment posted a tweet and the reprisals come in response to that the second criteria is that it's an isolated incident I think we look differently and rightly so at pervasive patterns of conduct that events intent and attitudes but when it's an isolated incident that leads to severe consequences I think that is more concerning I'd say the third criteria is the demand for escalation so when the response to speech is not simply to stigmatize to call out to shame but rather to demand that there be official consequences to turn to an employer or an institution who is in a position of power to exact those reprisals and exist that they do so and we can get into I'm sure as we go through the conversation why it is that cancellations meaning those criteria concern me thank you so much thanks Suzanne and then um professor Jennings how do you comment this conversation as a New Testament theologian well thank you so much for inviting me and I'm so glad to be here with my new colleagues here with Suzanne and Christine and I appreciate what they they both said I agree with them both especially the wonderful insights they both share especially Christine's wonderful insights there let me just be clear I'm not a New Testament scholar I'm a theologian set of mine but but I am a scholar in a community school so how I come into this conversation is that I train students to care very much about speech anyone who seeks to speak not only for God but to speak about the weighty matters of life they have to care about conversation and there are two things that are crucial to to my work that brings me to this conversation the one is um it's a question how do we speak and how do we facilitate conversation that builds community that's that's crucial um uh the the deepest purpose of speech is to build life together and so I'm about the craft and the practice of speaking in a way and inviting speech that always aims toward the other and life together and it moves beyond to a deeper level beyond our litigious society beyond even language of justice to language of life together how do how do we how do we do that that being said I'm also interested in how we engage in speech inside a understanding of history inside understanding of story we stand inside a very complicated and fought history in the country and one of the dangers with the way so many people talk about speech and free speech and so forth is that they sometimes forget that history that we stand in and they imagine that um doing the work of thinking about speech and uh and the kind of speech that would be accepted can be done apart from that long history so I'm very concerned as I work with students that they engage in the craft of speech and a facilitating conversation in ways that build community recognize the history we stand in and understand that the work of justice requires cultivating trust without without trust then the work of justice always gets thwarted so I'm I'm I'm happy to be a part of this conversation I look forward to to engaging my colleagues more. Wow thank you so much everyone um I guess to respond to something that was brought up this idea of cancel culture not being the appropriate term or being too nebulous of a term how else might

we call this and if we can start this question with you Christine that's I mean that's actually a that could be a panel in and of itself um I think that one of the one of the issues we have with cancel culture as a phenomenon and also as we think about how to describe it is that it can be the result of several or in fact competing motivations so on the one hand people might want say a bigoted editor to not be an editor anymore because they want a sense of accountability for past bad behavior then again they could also be trying to enact you know a form of revenge for a fence that they feel has been committed against them in many discussions we're kind of seeing a transfer of power where in some cases younger more diverse employees or writers or thinkers are calling for in some ways displacement of an older and more calcified guard because they think that their ideas are bad harmful and wrong but also because someone has to be a leader and we have to decide who is going to be able to fill that role and then you know there are even more motivations for cancel culture there's the idea of safety people want to feel safe in expressing their opinions feel that they aren't being targeted by other people there's also that the idea of you know community in some cases ganging up on somebody canceling them or even not quite canceling them but you know pushing their speech to the edges can be a way of identifying with a thought group or an in-group or it's a distraction you know or it's a form of camaraderie so you know when we talk about cancel culture i think we first have to and want to identify you know where this urge is coming from but then there's you know just the word cancellation right and what does that even mean when we say that someone is being canceled are we in fact saying that somebody you know has lost their job and if so what does that mean rosanne bar you know did in fact lose billing on the rosanne show she is in fact still a multi multi multi-millionaire she's probably okay um are we talking about someone being canceled as in you know they feel uncomfortable and they have to leave twitter for a few days or even weeks sometimes i would honestly love to be forced off twitter just because it's so terrible but again you know that is that is different from being jailed for their speech um you know that is different from losing their job or losing the contract are we saying as unfortunately some politicians have you know that cancellation is them being censored when what that means is people loudly disagree with their speech in actions but they still go on to sell books have you know hits and spaces on cable news are still in the u.s congress or senate what does cancellation mean in that circumstance and then i think you have you know the sort of cancellation that actually does bring fear um to the hearts and minds of you know sort of normal everyday people um it's one thing for you know me as an opinion call list you know it's my job to have opinions sometimes they're bad and if they're bad people will tell me they're bad and then i feel bad that's my job um but say someone you know as an office worker or works in the store and they have an uncomfortable interaction with the customer this customer complains films them throws it up on social media and suddenly they're out of a job and they have no way to support their family um that is something entirely different in kind i think then you know Ted Cruz saying that he's insulted by someone when he flies to ken kun um so i think you know we have to keep perspective um and we have to actually you know be sure of what

we are talking about with each example and realize that all of these examples are different um and all of them deserve something that's different and considered responses we have a pretty solid lay of the land about what we're looking at as far as this phenomenon of cancel culture goes but what do you think the social need is or um desire for justice that cancel culture might be responding to um professor Jennings or she's and if you have um thoughts about that yeah i do uh and i appreciate once again what christina said it i think it shows us that the elasticity that we think can be had with this word cancel isn't there and so um it probably at the end of the day my hope by the end of our time together we'll realize we probably need a different set of of words and a different designation for what we're talking about you know the my immediate worry is that um the phrase cancel culture will start to function in our society like political correctness and it becomes a way to dismiss um very important levels of thinking and talking that's involved and i i think here again um it is a question of the history that we stand in so um you know we are inside of an ongoing struggle about the enacting of justice that only in the west but especially in this country and we we can't afford to lose sight of that there is a struggle a real struggle for justice and now the question of course is how how does one how do you function inside of struggle and and that's not easy right it's not easy to always know how to respond in the midst of struggle how to respond in the midst of seeing injustice how to respond to the various ways injustice comes at you and it takes skill and nobody does it perfectly which means that sometimes the response the response isn't quite measured in the way we would want and this does not excuse people who dismiss others but i think it helps us see once again that there there is a compass necessary for speech um that that directs where it needs to go and there's a reality of responding to um statements that are that are hurtful and harmful and stand inside a long history of injustice and here what's really crucial for us is to to have a clear sense and to be attuned to that use of speech this country has function with coded language from its very beginning and knowing how to respond to those codes one has to be taught you know you're not born knowing how to hear and respond to code and learning how to do so takes time it takes it takes mentors it takes conversation it takes communities communities to help one understand how to respond that being said um as uh Christine mentioned a moment ago that being said that there are real world consequences to um how we speak to one another and that i think the challenge is for people to recognize those real world consequences um regardless whether you are the recipient of something that's very hurtful or you are the one who's spoken it um those consequences have to be thought through but but the the question is how do we how do we in many ways educate instruct people on the importance the depth of speech you know one thing that is important to our definition of cancel culture and how we understand it um is this idea of silencing and performative indignation um Pastor Jennings kind of mentioned the idea that you know sometimes either cancel culture or a sort of anti-cancel culture performative indignation is used to silence other people's speech you know you disagreeing with me publicly you saying that i'm wrong in public and should stop tweeting for a few days is you canceling being cancel culture is

bad and i think we also need to be aware when cancel culture this elasticized kind of indefinable term becomes a wedge issue in and of itself i'm being canceled i'm not being canceled cancellation is bad cancellation this cancellation that because often that is actually used to distract um from the actual object that's under discussion you know if we have a debate about cancel culture where somebody used the n-word in an article and now they're canceled or not canceled if we continue talking about cancel culture without defining it we are avoiding and in fact refusing to talk about the real problem which is the n-word it's history in this culture how it affects readers how it affects users in the workplace whether we should be using it or not what does that mean for our society that's the real and important debate that we should be having and i think sometimes by using a sort of large and airy term um often as performance we distract from the real issue and that's one of the reasons why we need to nail the term down so we aren't dancing around the term but can in fact discuss the objects under the um over to you Suzanne I agree but i think a prime example is uh the attorneys who are defending president trump in the impeachment trial you know uh suggesting that uh the effort to hold him accountable for the capital insurrection uh you know was an example of cancel culture uh you know i think it's being the term is being manipulated uh i think it's being used to discredit and undercut you know what are in in many instances you know kind of legitimate and validly taken points and arguments on all sorts of issues so i i think we should be leery of this term and really try to move toward i don't have the answer for what the better sort of nubin clature is i think it's not a single term because as we've said we're really talking about a whole range of content uh conduct and you know i think there are examples of so-called cancelations by all three of us would agree or justify uh some that maybe all three of us would agree are not justified and some that we would probably debate about and and we probably need new terms for each yeah just in response to revend jennings your point about you know and and you said this as well Christina but as from how we use language and and the imperative to use language in constructive and positive with i really agree with that you know in my book dare to speak defending free speech for all my first chapter is about conscientiousness with language and i think particularly living in 20 2021 here in the united states in our increasingly diverse society that implies new responsibilities for us as speakers we have to be conscious of who's in our audience what their sensibilities are what the history is you know what metaphors uh you know how metaphors land with them you know what terms the disabled community wants to use uh to describe themselves you know why it is that people are adopting new pronouns so i think you know i completely agree with that responsibility i'll also have another chapter about how there's an additional duty of care for people who are in positions of responsibility whether that's a professor or a talk show host or a journalist uh you know that that their words carry extra weight and so their their duty is additional to use those words wisely but i think it when we talk about cancel culture we're often dealing you know i we're dealing with people who have in some way oftentimes sort of breach that duty and responsibility you know and it happens and sometimes it's an adverted breach sometimes it's an inadvertent breach

sometimes it's kind of negligent and clueless um you know sometimes it's malicious and you know i think that the obligation of conscientiousness doesn't really answer how we should handle those instances and so i i sort of separate you know in the book i talk about all of it and i you know my notion is really that their whole range their 20 principles of the book but that they they kind of have to fit together another one is you know recognizing the genuine harms of speech something that both of you touched on and i cite research that you know shows that particularly for people who are on the receiving end of slurs and stereotyping throughout life that there are grievous consequences psychologically academically even physiologically for people and i think you know there has been some tendency among defenders of free speech to want to downplay those consequences and harms for fear that acknowledging them yeah could open the door to censorship and i you know i think the more honest or tried approach for free speech defenders is to cop to the harms of speech and you know admit that uh particularly in certain circumstances and when the messaging is pervasive over time that there uh you know can be uh wounds that are inflicted that can be lasting and and life altering you know i it is my view that despite that the better approach is to try to sustain open discourse and have a give and take and find ways to move forward in conversation if you know certainly uh preferable in my view to expanding the discretion in the hands of government to ban and punish speech but you know i i it's my view that sort of all these principles need to somehow fit together in a version of free speech that fits this diverse digitized and divided world and you know i very much agree that this discussion no discussion of you know whatever it is whatever the term is that we're going to develop to replace cancel culture the set of terms that you can't talk about it divorced from the context of the the racial justice reckoning that is now underway because i think the demands for accountability that we see you know really are fueled by that sense that you know this is justice denied and that you know we've had years and decades of people uh you know using racist language or coded language you know slurs and common parlance no one's done anything people had to sort of fit through it and pretend uh it didn't bother them you know they didn't have the power to challenge it and you know now that things are changing and moving you know that dynamic is is being tested uh and and contested and you know i think understandably so but it's also my view that we should and i think Christine touched on this that like each case really does need to be looked at in its on its own merits and that we as as understandable as that drive is i don't believe it should override you know questions of individual intent and culpability and you know remorselessness and you know all the determinations that sort of go into a normal equation of whether someone is to be blamed and and and how severe the uh a set of consequences should attach to their conduct so you know this my view is i guess a nuanced one of a complex one i you know i think there's kind of you know there there are many truths that we need to sort of find a way to simultaneously hold you know i agree with what susan just said i think she's exactly right context is everything here but i also want us to be aware and susan is pointing to the kind of historical reality that we're now in that's a part of context you know it's it's different for

every nation isn't it the the realities of free speech and the configurations of struggle are different for every nation but we also have to remember there's a difference between American speech and when America speaks and when other countries speak we have been in a context in many ways where we have been able to speak to and about the world without any consequences for us and so many people have been shaped inside that kind of American linguistic exceptionalism that we can speak and everybody else has to listen and it's shaped our educational systems and i think part of what susan is pointing to is the reckoning of a educational process where for so many of us free speech has been translated into speech without consequences that is to say the the consequence of of of the rest of the world speaking back the consequences of a history of that has formed this country speaking back and now we're in a situation where that speaking back is happening but that speaking back is this not just a matter of okay we have to figure out how how to speak more carefully we have to reckon with the formation of the education that's brought us to the point where we have had the kind of sick luxury of speaking without consequences and even at this moment we know this and so context is everything right so the students listening who are going to wind up in corporate offices and other places where the the people who are in charge continue to speak without consequences right the folks who have incredible resources in this country speak without consequences right nobody is going to tell you know nobody's going to tell that those the CEOs of the top fortune 500 you know you can't say that in a close meeting they're going to still speak without consequences and so i think we have to understand that that we are we are yet in a very serious work of re-education that has to happen that moves us out of the linguistic exceptionalism that is america that starts to reshape this this work of learning how to speak how to recognize the context but now let me also say and of both christina and susan both pointed to this as well what do we do when someone has spoken in ways that have been harmful and they recognize it and now they're trying to figure out how to acknowledge in in more public speech that they recognize they messed up right now that is that is that is a problem because we live in a country that doesn't know how to enact redemption we we don't we don't have a practice of speech that you that knows what to do with the world words i forgive you we don't know it in a litigious society what do you do with the words i forgive you what do you say how does that work with a lawyer and a judge i forgive you and because that language is absent from really the kind of moral architecture that is on the table now we don't yet have a way for people to take back what they've said we don't have a way that others can say oh you know i i confess and i apologize for what i've said and for others whether it's on facebook or twitter or whatever to say we hear you and we forgive you and to be able to say that without without dismissing the history that they have stepped into right because to say i forgive you doesn't mean i forget the history it means that i want to enact a new reality of relationship all that moves us beyond what you did but you know in here as a Christian theologian i just have to say this is these are resources that are available to everyone that you don't have to be a Christian to know how to say i forgive you but of course for many people they don't see the value in such words i think

that point about linguistic exceptionalism i love that phrase i think it's really useful i think this also comes into how we define and think about cancel culture and how this question of forgiveness and reconciliation is really like the next level the next step that we haven't begun to approach because you know one thing about history and i think as you as you put it really well Reverend Jennings you know some cultures have some people some culture some groups in in world history in american history certainly have been canceled by default always many groups have been silenced for a long time and you know have complained about it but no one has really you know no one called it cancel culture when slaves weren't allowed to read that was just how it was and one of the interesting things about these claims of cancel culture today that in many cases seem to be actually coming from you know from very powerful people in powerful cultural not to mention material conditions is that you know there's this fear that you know our history is kind of being flipped on its head that those people who once were canceled and once were silenced and we don't have to worry about them now have the ability to silence us now they're going to speak up and perhaps put us in probably not the place that they were in but you know some place that we don't want to be we're not recipients of that linguistic exceptionalism anymore and i think that actually generates you know a huge amount of fear that makes it very hard to have this have any discussion about redemption about forgiveness i think that one thing that you know both the cancel and the cancel are both sides of this argument do really need to think about as a next step but also as i figure out how to proceed in these individual circumstances is do we really want to just reverse the system have one side be the powerful and the other side the disempowered have one side be silent and the other side have the power to speak if we reverse it we're still enacting injustice just in a different direction and so as reference Jennings was saying we really need to start thinking about you know this middle way not just you know tipping the hegemony from one side to another but taking the third path that does lead to reconciliation that does in fact lead to equality even though equality can feel like a loss for people who have been at the top that leads to real interaction and you know neither side being canceled both sides seeking to speak and to understand but what we'll call that culture i'm not sure yet because we aren't there yet it's it requires a certain kind of vulnerability doesn't it i mean you to be able to listen with with knowing that there might be an accusation that speaks a truth that you don't want to hear so as you were saying christine so so think about this we we are in a country where the the indigenous peoples of this country to this moment are yet silenced very often especially when they start to speak about the land that is theirs right increasingly across this country and in Canada what at many universities when at every event now before they start the event someone will say we are on the unceded land of dot dot dot and we recognize that these people's have shepherded this land for thousands of years now that's the beginning of something right it's the beginning of recognizing that i am in a place in which others have already spoken about it for it to it and speak to me now the difficulty is most universities have not figured out how to how to step into the full moral weight of that reality the full moral weight of if you go to if every if every event is going

to begin with you saying this is the land of these people then the next question is where are those people are you going to give it back and why aren't they why aren't they speaking first before because what you're saying is that what authorizes my speech in this place is them and there's vulnerability there isn't it and especially in this country there there is yet no place in the educational system of this country for the full voice of indigenous peoples all over the country to speak into the very shape of what we will be what the education will be and what what will it mean to have a moral formation as an American i just maybe there's two two quick things i wanted to respond to and what is you know this question of voice and you know in our work and on the free expression of pen America we believe and i also write about this and dare to speak that until the barriers to voice that exclude certain populations are dismantled we will not have a truly open discourse that you know if you believe in the marketplace of ideas if people are shut out of it for reasons of education or socioeconomics or racism or religious prejudice you know that marketplace is less robust and and unless free free form and there's less give and take and so we have programs you know for example that focus on incarcerated writers and helping them learn how to have a voice how to express themselves to be mentored to have the opportunity for publication you know we have similar programs for young undocumented immigrants for aspiring writers locked out of the literary community and so you know we see that as a very important part of you know ultimately how free expression is realized i also want to come back on the on the point of us or but i apologize in redemption because you know it does sometimes happen you know i think you know we don't exclude it entirely there are examples in public life and i talk about them in in the book you know whether it's a Ralph Northam you know the governor of Virginia or Justin Trudeau you know both of whom had pictures of themselves in blackface that came out in big political scandals and they both survived the scandals and i sort of analyzed in the book you know what it takes to render an apology that is going to be taken seriously and you know ultimately accepted and offer you know as you say you know not forgetting or even necessarily total forgiveness but an opportunity to move forward and you know there are a case i talk about you know comedian who made very offensive remarks about LGBT people and you know his demonstration of remorse and and sort of i go through a set of criteria for an apology that uh is is is sort of uh has has the potential to be accepted and sometimes it involves a kind of you know act of explanation actually working in that case with the LGBT community uh you know confronting the misstatements uh and the offenses uh you know in comedy uh and and using the proceeds to benefit uh those who had been affected from that community so you know i think there are other instances where there is sort of a more absolutist feeling that it doesn't matter you know what you say no apology or expression of remorse is going to make a difference because you know there's a principle at stake that uh you know is sort of divorced from the individuals and the controversy at hand and i i worry about that attitude and i think you know in mind you i think there's got to be sort of a place for apology and forgiveness i think uh you know just as human beings we need that potential to exist it's not just to say that it

should be granted automatically or even readily but i think we we need to hold open that space of those examples and talk about how how an effective apology can be rendered and and what are the circumstances in which forgiveness should be contemplated right because there's a difference between accountability um you know telling someone or expressing that you did something wrong you said something wrong and like you should be aware of this and then repair it i do think that you know real apology in fact requires as you were saying you know repair and a difference between accountability in that sense and you know revenge um which in many cases is you know sort of a group anger that is focused on one source or one person but almost as a representative of some larger problem um and even if you attack and totally take down that one person that doesn't get rid of a larger problem and there's nothing that you know they can do to help repair it at that point so that's just sort of a one a unidirectional anger that doesn't that doesn't repair or doesn't you know change things um it may help you feel a little bit less angry it may serve to you know incense a crowd behind you more or you know maybe provide a bonding opportunity for those who are shouting in anger but it doesn't move anyone forward um and i think that often we conflate those two things when we talk about again the broad term cancel culture um and i do think that you know we have to think about accountability and accompaniment when we think about consequences or asking people to change not just shouting you know you over there you did a bad thing get out of my sight but if you have to say you over there you did a bad thing then accompanying them to understand you know why what happened was wrong even if it was also understanding yourself why you are offended by it what the actual problem you think that you're addressing is and then how to move forward into repair um how to change the situation not just shout and end it and move on to something else yeah Christine you are pointing to eloquently two real works that are ahead for anyone caught in this situation there is the work of of educating oneself the the deep work of of coming to understand what i've said what i've stepped into and here it's often learning the history that you're inside of you know um you know the the the the history of blackface what what is that and the the danger is someone apologizes without the without the learning i did something wrong i know i did it why why do you know that oh they told me it was wrong they everybody told me that it was a bad thing and i'm really sorry and they also told me why it's a bad thing okay that's great but there's a deeper work of education i mean to use theological language it's um it's the work of contrition it's the work of penance it's the work of learning in a deep way what what have i what have i touched what what what ground what ground of pain have i wandered into by what i've said and have i learned to sense and know that that ground so that when i speak it's not simply i apologize it's i apologize because now i understand and when you can trust that i understand now what i've done because my apology isn't the end it's the beginning of a life of touching that terrain but then there's the other work that you that you point to so powerfully in which is it's it's easier to hold anger at someone who has spoken harmful words it's much more difficult it's much more difficult to do the accompanying it's much more difficult to place oneself you know not only just one person but as a group to place

oneself in that work of a company and here's where in here's the where we get we would get the pushback because for for so many people of color for so many people of african-american the minute people start talking this way what they will say is that okay you're asking us to do more service work for white people who should know better i'm tired of doing service work for them i'm tired of having a company to know when and they should have learned this in the fourth grade they should have learned this in the eighth grade that you know this person's you know got a college degree why do i have to explain to them the problem with the the end word i mean i i got my you know and so in that regard there's a there's a fatigue a rightful fatigue and a rightful impatience with the accompanying work and so the question we have to ask ourselves is how might we imagine that accompanying work that doesn't lead once again to people of color being the service providers the moral service providers for especially for white people who don't know better okay let's let's walk together again so so there's and i think the way forward is um a new slow creation of trust where um the accompanying is not me carrying a burden it's walking with you as you are learning so that i'm not in the position of being the teacher all the time i'm a conversation partner but i'm not i'm not having to say next week okay let me correct what you just said today you know oh okay here here we go again you just you said this oh do you mess up again yeah you must up again that's the challenge isn't it the challenge is figuring how to do this work um especially in this crucial moment in the country as i've been saying in which this beautiful linguistics exceptionalism has meant the way that we're had to do that work really then now that work has to be done in one one aspect of cancel culture that i think there's some cuts against the kind of deliberate measure approach you're talking about is is just the speed and the excision theory of it and the way that you know when the winds start to whip up online you know it becomes so ferocious that there's no oxygen for a sort of discussion that the apology often comes almost too quickly because it's an emergency and so you know the learning if ever you know would have to be later because you know if the person doesn't apologize you know within the first few hours you know the cancellation is going to be all the more uh you know draconian and irreversible and so i think that's that's one of the aspects of of this rhythm that's driven by you know as stupid to have twitter very often is just sort of the speed and the velocity of it at least so you know it also leads to precipitous decisions by those in positions of authority you know they're not in a position to really deliberately weigh up they often don't have time to investigate am i talking the book about you know the case of um Shirley Sherrod the department of agriculture employee uh you know who gave a there was a snippet of a video where she uh she's a black woman and she was being accused uh based on the snippet of video of anti white racism white racism against white farmers and you know on the basis that you know it was so incendiary and Breitbart distributed it and the department of agriculture fired her the NAACP uh you know denounced her and you know by the time the full video came out it was it was crystal clear she wasn't racist in the least you know what she she was actually you know had developed this deep relationship with this white farmer and she was sort of getting to that uh uh in her story you know but the damage had been

done and it was just you know a great i think example of how things unfortunately sort of accelerate and you know outside of anyone's control and how we sort of slow that process down and create some space and sort of um temper the vitriol you know at least temporarily sometimes the vitriol you know and the retributive impulse may be justified but at least you know create some uh uh space and time to get the facts first so you know i think that's one of the one of the things i think was over the opposite cancellation but sort of the culture the way in which this is exacted and it uh unfolds i think you know one thing i wanted to respond to your point about you know that i've heard a lot uh about sort of the exhaustion factor and just how kind of tiring and exasperating it is to have to you know sort of walk through people through things that should be obvious and should be taught and should be sort of second nature to all of us and i think one maybe hopeful development especially with the rising generation is that you do see allies who become very sensitized you know actually the Don McNeil example on the sort of the New York Times you know the further reporting that's been done over the last few weeks is actually sort of an illustration of that that you know you now have white kids who are kind of as sensitized to the impact uh of the N-word uh you know as as others are and are being vigilant about it and i think that you know that is uh a positive thing that hopefully ultimately will alleviate some of that burden well you know you know i agree with you i think that is a positive development my worry is that it's it's kind of analogous to the training of a former factory workers for the for the new the new information technology right so that uh while while you know the 20-something and college kids may be more attuned to this um older generations you know um they're not moving at that speed so i think what we need but but Suzanne i think you're exactly right given the speed of what uh social media um how fast social media moves what we probably need is something like um a public practice of penance to use that language you know it's a little theological language for you also don't get scared but what we probably need is some kind of uh public practice and within the Catholic tradition penance is a process that's stretched out over time that allows one to to work at it and be seen at working at uh living out one's confession of sin living out one's acknowledgement of wrongdoing and what what we need is maybe because of the way social media works maybe what we need is some somebody to come up with a whole lovely process of public penance this is what i'm doing over the next six months to show you that i'm working at this so you know i know you're going to go off on me but i'm entering this process and um yeah check with me check with me in six months i i would love to thread a discussion that you guys were going on right in this idea of forgiveness and reconciliation and how can we have this time of public penance together and we're to switch over to a bit of audience Q&A and going along this thread right of understanding the history that we that this current moment um in this phenomenon is vested in right how do we understand and reconcile with the past with the history it's particularly what do we do with historical figures right and the history that we learned and and faced with whether it be literally what statues or names in schools or names in military bases right how do we understand and reconcile and can we forget even

someone who has long passed and can we start with Christine? Sure um so this is actually one of i think my my perhaps first print column for the Washington Post was actually about um the renaming of the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University which i graduated from and i was i majored in international affairs in the Woodrow Wilson School um it's since been just renamed as the School of Public and International Affairs um and it's a really tough question i mean the other another relevant part of my background i guess is that i grew up in Richmond, Virginia um home of Monument Avenue um it's really one of the like largest displays of Confederate history in a public space um in the former capital of the Confederacy and the American South um and you know you do have to take many of these these historical figures these questions on you know one-to-one basis you know this is kind of what we've been saying about cancel culture overall it's really not that useful and is in fact often harmful to try and you know make a sweeping pronouncement about everything and everyone all historical figures who had slaves need to be erased from history and also when that is said that's usually an exaggeration and false and unhelpful in and of itself even if you removed all the Confederate generals from pedestals they don't disappear everybody hasn't forgotten them that's not an erasure of history um one one theory that i've been holding for this practice and you know it's very much still open to revision because again this is a hard question you know is trying to trying to consider each individual um or historical figure um in sort of the whole of their person and results um so and then also thinking about what they represent um to the country to the people surrounding them to those who are you know familiar with the names of these places um so you know you have figures like say Stonewall Jackson who i think to most Americans or maybe that is not as well known to figure outside of the South but you know when you think of this person what you think of is oh yes Confederate general fought for the preservation of slavery that's that's what he did that's that is what we associate with him that is why he is historically famous um and then you have to think is that what we want to celebrate um this is our main association this person this is what they're known for this is the vision that it sparks in the minds of most Americans and then we can kind of debate whether that is something that we want to celebrate i would you know in that case suggest not but then you have you know more complicated figures um you know Abraham Lincoln um emancipation proclamation shepherded the United States of the Civil War um also frankly was kind of a racist himself uh had a lot of problematic opinions actually but then again you you need to weigh you know what do we respect this historical figure for um what is the effect of our venerating this figure what um what principles are we upholding and supporting when we venerate this figure and in most cases the association with Abraham Lincoln is in fact the preservation of the union and idea of freedom um some of these larger positive contributions that human to society and in those cases then you might decide okay we can acknowledge the truth of history acknowledge the whole person and also recognize that there are big things that are still worth celebrating and that can be a way to sort of decide who we want to keep celebrating and who we don't and then you know of course we also just have to think about historical figures and what

even putting people on pedestals means you know who has to look up and see that statue every day as they walk to class or walk to their office what does that make individuals feel what does that call to mind um whose comfort are we prioritizing here what we say well we like we have to keep this statue because you know like my grandma will be sad that it's gone versus this entire community of people find this statue very painful every day um who do we prioritize and why but I think you just have to take each case by case um and also both try and remember the history and also the context in each case it's impossible to make sweeping arguments on these things and that's where I think both sides um sort of fall apart in this discussion so we have another um audience question um and I think uh let's see Christine you brought up this idea of um whereas intellectual hospitality but I think um yeah we would love to hear your thoughts and especially Suzanne since you're working in this free speech space um what does good intellectual hospitality look like and especially how coming practice it online if we do decide to continue on twitter what does it look like to have intellectual hospitality there if it's possible yeah I've not heard that term before uh and I I uh I want to turn back to Christine to hear more about how she defines it I sort of I like the idea of it um you know I think there's there's a fundamental challenge in our digital discourse which is you know I think that that idea you know to me at least as I hear it implies uh you know an openness a receptivity a willingness to let someone come in and have a give and take with them you know like you'd open the door of your house and invite someone for a cup of coffee and you know online that sort of exchange you know is really disfavored and it's algorithmically disfavored because it doesn't rile people up and the way that our social media platforms are structured is it is that which evokes the most impassioned response that is elevated to the foreground because you know people want to share it it's compelling they react they engage you know their responses and you know that fuels eyeballs and that feeds advertising and that drives revenue and so you know a kind of intellectually hospitable approach you know one that you know the goal of which is so that this course you know light rather than heat you know nuance a search for common ground you know unfortunately the forums that you know we are engaging in together are inhospitable to you know for the most part to that or at the very least you can you can engage that way but you won't get rewarded by the measures of social media likes and clicks and followers and so that becomes disfavored and I think you know a big question for us is you know how we counteract that you know do we are we able to you know crack open this code that governs our online arenas and demand changes to the way that content is prioritized can we create alternative settings where you know other kinds of engagement are possible and privileged yeah I think that makes total sense I think the social media landscape is in fact hostile to much intellectual hospitality and I think in some ways the news cycle which I am part of can be hostile to that too because you know the hottest takes you know the angry and shouts the meanest tweets often get the most attention and attention is monetizable so in some sense in this debate for a whole nother time maybe I'm also blaming them to someone on capitalism but to go back to the question of intellectual hospitality I actually have a quote on hand from this

great article in a comment magazine which I will find and share in the chat after this but the scholar Diana Glycer observes that the ancient tradition of hospitality specifically meant to take our eyes off ourselves and linger face to face with someone who is not like me intellectual hospitality encourages us to engage with new ideas not merely contradict, dismiss, dispute, reject or ridicule them so exactly as Suzanne was saying I think of intellectual hospitality as really engaging in a relational way with someone else and the way that they are thinking you know when someone says something has an idea says a word we dislike our first response should not be to jump on them you know to try and catch them out to immediately you know despairing them and you know drag them out and punish them or even just to you know say I don't like this I'm backing the way I'm out I'm gone but to actually relate to them to engage with them to try and figure out you know why they think this way why they've said this what does that mean for them what does that mean for me in many cases you know these statements that we might find offensive this is conflict this is you know two people who have different ideas but what is underneath those ideas where does it come from when we actually relate to the other person and try and figure out what they're where they're coming from what they mean if they are wrong how to correct that in a sort of milieu that they might understand and relate with we can do much more than just a one second dismissal but you know unfortunately that that does take work it often takes time it also often takes a suspension of our own comfort just like engaging in hospitality having someone over to my house doing this panel means that you know I can't sit on the sofa in my sweatpants and just like hang out you know that is in some ways a sacrifice but you choose to do something else because hospitality is also good valuable and important and goal in and of itself that is a choice that we can make and it's a choice that we should make if we want to make the intellectual world better and to improve ourselves and others and then again I will also say unfortunately that it's because it's a slower process because sometimes it is more private and interior process it's not as attractive on social media sometimes it's not necessarily you know a conflict or a fight or an argument that will draw eyeballs and we have to choose to do it anyway we wanted to ask one final audience Q&A and this one is directed to you professor Jennings I did one that also note many of our audience members find your grin to be quote infectious and appreciate so much but to direct it to you and please Suzanne and Christine feel free to hop in after can we and how do we forgive collectively regardless of the death of the crime or injustice in other words can even demuse egregious public transgression be redeemable this is a great question and and the question of forgiveness is always a challenging question because for so many people they too quickly equate forgiveness with forgetting they equate forgiveness with excusing they equate forgiveness with the nondyle of justice so we have to think of forgiveness not as the denial of justice not as excusing not as forgetting but a deepening of recognition of the wrong but also a commitment to the possibility of life after the wrong right so forgiveness is possible but it can only be offered when it's understood as an act of hope and faith that aims toward love that's that's what forgiveness is about now of course as as my my colleagues have said in this panel you

know we're in a litigious country in a litigious society which means that the idea that forgiveness can do deep social and political work there's not a lot of people who believe that they believe that a judge's decision can do that work but forgiving someone okay but here's the thing we have to recognize that unless we decide that people if they're irredeemable then the only thing left with a person who's irredeemable is death unless we believe that then then we're going to have to think in the direction toward forgiveness because the lack of redemption means the lack of life and someone who's not redeemable is someone who has to die because what we're saying is that there's no real future with that person and so if for anyone who imagines a future possibility of life life after whatever the after is then we're going to have to think through some possibility of forgiveness so my hope is that we can we can step into the right frame of forgiveness and those who are those people who are of not only Christian faith but of many faiths they understand that forgiveness is not simply a possibility forgiveness is in many ways a vocation a duty a calling to forgive not because we not because we take injustice lightly but because we because we take it very seriously we have to forgive if you like this and you want to hear more like share review and subscribe to this podcast and from all of us here at the Veritas Forum thank you

(gentle music)