

VT-865 Transcription

Discussion on religion and politics featuring Marc H. Tanenbaum,
Bryan Hehir, Greg Dixon, and John Buchanan. 23 October 1984.

F1: [00:10] But to shed further light on this subject we invited four men of religion to join us in a discussion. Father Bryan Hehir is with the U.S. Catholic Conference. He was recently honored with a MacArthur Fellowship and will use the money he received to support his work in international ethics. John Buchanan is a Southern Baptist Minister and is currently chairman of People for the American Way. Mr. Buchanan coined the phrase "moral McCarthyism." Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum is with the American Jewish Committee. He recently received the Earle B. Pleasant Award honoring him for thirty years of leadership in improving Christian-Jewish relations. Greg Dixon is a fundamentalist minister. He has been national secretary of the Moral Majority and president of the Moral Majority in Indiana.

GREG DIXON: In the sixties -- the fifties and sixties [01:00] -- if we did not espouse every item of the civil rights agenda we were immoral, we were irreligious. Now why is it that there's something wrong when we say it's immoral or

irreligious to have eighteen million babies slaughtered for the last, uh, over the last ten years?

JOHN BUCHANAN: Well, I guess on the abortion question it's much more difficult because this clearly is a moral question. But your agenda goes way beyond the abortion question. It is another thing to try to build a political coalition as is taking place in this country right now among the religious right in which people like Jerry Falwell both can determine what kind of government we have that is specifically aimed at controlling government--

DIXON: What's the difference, John, in a Dr. Falwell or a Martin Luther King?

F1: I'd like to interrupt at this point. Is the Christian right aiming to take the government?

DIXON: Alright, let me answer that.

BUCHANAN: They have said so.

DIXON: Now that's folly [02:00] and you know it's folly--

BUCHANAN: That's been happening.

DIXON: --and each of the four men that are sitting in this room today know that that is pure folly.

BUCHANAN: But I think it is also true -- as I went to the Republican Convention in Dallas just as you did -- and I was resisting some of the postures of the Republican platform, I don't think you could escape the fact that not

only were new right evangelists like yourself, like Jerry Falwell, like James Robison, prominent in the convention but also the platform reflected very perfectly your agenda. Jerry Falwell said he couldn't have done it any better if he had written it himself.

F1: I'd like to hear you comment on President Reagan's moral and spiritual agenda as you see it.

MARC TANENBAUM: Look, I don't want to get involved in partisan politics, but I tell you what troubles me. When I begin hearing the President speaking like a fundamentalist preacher [03:00] using their rhetoric, their imagery, and using their apocalyptic language--

F1: For example?

TANENBAUM: Well, I'm opposed to the Soviet Union. I have fought it -- communist totalitarianism -- all my life, wherever I have gone. But the notion of dealing with the East-West conflict in terms of they're an evil empire, the focus of evil in the world, satanic, and therefore children of Christ must therefore destroy the children of Satan, in a nuclear age where the President has the capacity to realize Armageddon and he's talked a lot about Armageddon, that scares the hell out of me.

DIXON: But you're not saying that communism is not evil, not Satanic?

TANENBAUM: I went at some length to tell you where I'm at. My problem has to do with the fact that what I see happening is that this version of religion and politics is looking upon America as if it were a vast camp revival meeting. And the method of the camp revival preacher was to precipitate such moral anguish you were such a sinner that by bringing on that kind of crisis [04:00] in conscience then you offer the sinner the moral choice simple good or evil you converted to my church and you were saved automatically, somehow magically saved. Now I think that's what's happening in this kind of political campaign. America is in a state of moral decline. We are falling apart morally. We're appealing to the worst in the American people and the American conscience in order to bring about a conversion to this kind of fundamentalist religion and fundamentalist politics. Now there's no place in there for me I think as a Jew and for a great number of Americans who don't share that notion of what constitutes religion and morality.

HEHIR: But it does seem to me that the moral agenda is mixed. Thirty-six percent of the Blacks are in worse shape in terms of the poverty line today than they were eight, ten years ago. That's nothing to be happy about. We've got a new affluence in the country and that's going to make it harder to look at the new poverty in the country. I think

the question of what the moral issues are [05:00] is the question we ought to keep debating. They are not confined to pornography and abortion and they're not confined to civil rights.

DIXON: I would say creating a welfare state is immoral. You take social security. You say it's not immoral, I think it's immoral. I think it's, number one, I think it's wrong to tell the American people that there are trust funds when there are no trust funds. I think it's wrong to tell them that it's an insurance program when it isn't an insurance program.

BUCAHANAN: --on something like social security.

DIXON: I believe that the free enterprise system is not perfect, but I believe it's the most moral system

HEHIR: Well, we can have a long argument on that but I don't want to take that one on. My point is that it seems to be that one of the things the religious vision says, is, you don't judge the justice and the quality of a society by how well the powerful are doing. You don't judge the justice and the quality of the society by the upper income bracket. You judge the quality of a society precisely by the way those at the bottom of the ladder are dealt with by the rest of the society.

DIXON: But you see there's the fundamental difference between my philosophy and your philosophy. [06:00] I believe that you judge a society on the basis of the righteousness of the society not on the basis of the economic status.

HEHIR: I say if you don't take care of those at the bottom, you're not righteous. That's the point. That is a fundamental problem with righteousness.

DIXON: But it's whose responsibility to take care of them?

HEHIR: It is--

DIXON: You say the government. I say it's--

HEHIR: No, I say multiple responsibilities but the government is not to be excluded from it.

TANENBAUM: When the government was not providing social security in the early 1800s, the middle 1800s, it was the churches that were providing social security; it was the churches providing welfare. But the churches are not doing that today and therefore somebody has got to provide for that.

DIXON: How can the church--

TANENBAUM: Are you prepared to let millions of people die on the vine? To pass away before your eyes? And still call yourself a religious person?

DIXON: Sir, if we do not begin to dismantle this beast of government, I will assure you that we either are gonna go back to the old paths or we're not gonna have a nation.

HEHIR: We are not going to dismantle the state. That's just not gonna happen. Now the question of where we're going to go--
[07:00]

DIXON: This state is not going to be dismantled it's going to unravel and society's already beginning to unravel.

HEHIR: Now that's getting a little apocalyptic.

DIXON: I'm telling you that that's exactly where we're coming in this country, to an insolvable place; that only God can solve the problems and that's why He is coming back to set His kingdom upon this earth.

M: I think this is an important revelation.

HEHIR: I wanna find out where we're going to go now. Are we going to organize this society along religious vision and the national debt gets to a point and gets unreligious and income tax gets to be unreligious. What else does? And where do you get this--

DIXON: Nowhere in that Bible did it tell those people to go out and borrow money on the backs of the third and fourth generation to come to do some kind of a social welfare program that hasn't even worked.

HEHIR: But you're not going to find that in the Bible. That's my point. And the idea that in the midst of a complex society like ours with enormously complicated problems we're going to find these one-line answers in the Bible that are going

to tell us what to do just has to be brought up to very severe intellectual critique. And these one-liners about--

DIXON: Well I can give you one word that would solve the problems.

HEHIR: No you can't. In all honesty, sir--

DIXON: One word.

HEHIR: You can't give me one word because I know enough about the nature of these problems to know you can't. [08:00]

DIXON: Try me.

HEHIR: I will.

DIXON: Repent.

HEHIR: No, that isn't enough. That isn't enough.

DIXON: It was enough for Nineveh.

HEHIR: No, wait a minute

DIXON: It was enough for ancient Israel.

HEHIR: In all honesty, this is a question of intellectual honesty. The fact of the matter is that you need repentance plus. It's gotta be repentance plus the fact that we live in a society where the four of us and the groups we represent do not represent the whole society. There are people who are going to be hungry who don't believe in the Bible and they have a right to be helped; and there are people who are gonna have the power to do things in the society who don't believe in the Bible and they've got to

be part of the discussion. And indeed some of the most important things we may need to learn -- about how you feed and clothe and educate in a society as large as ours -- may come from people who don't have any religious belief at all but may in fact have some insights, rational insights into how we organize our society.

DIXON: See our Founding Fathers were afraid of government.

F1: Gentlemen, I'm going to bring this discussion to an end.

Obviously we haven't had a meeting of the minds necessarily, but we've met. And I think there's something important therein. Thank you. [09:00]

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