

VT-869 Transcription

Real to Reel interview. 15 March 1987.

ROBERT HOEFFNER: One of the strengths of this country is that many different religious faiths exists side by side.

CAROL GRANSTROM: This is very evident on college and university campuses, where campus ministers of many faiths work together to provide a religious dimension for students. As ideal as that sounds, religion on campus, and in our country for that matter, is facing some real challenges, among them, a fundamental fanaticism. This is just one of the issues I discussed with Jewish leader Marc Tanenbaum, when he visited Rollins College to address campus ministers from all over the United States. (footage of Rabbi Tanenbaum's talk) Rabbi Tanenbaum, you talked about the danger of fundamentalism and the fanaticism of it on two arenas, really, both domestic and international. Let's talk about the domestic first. You're saying that [01:00] some people want to put this country in the hands of Evangelical Christians, that only born-again Christians can keep America America. What's the danger of that, as you see it?

MARC TANENBAUM: Well, first of all, I think Evangelical Christians have as much right to participate in the

political life in America as do Catholics, Protestants, mainline Protestants, or Jews. I think the issue is what kind of ideology people bring to the politics of America. There are small groups of ultra-conservative fundamentalist Christians who are rewriting American history, who are saying that America, at one time, was a great Evangelical Christian country and that we've fallen away from those heights. In point of fact, that simply is hysterically inaccurate. What is dangerous now is the equating of American patriotism with being a born-again Evangelical Christian. And people who are advocating that you vote for born-again Christians only are [02:00] literally violating the Constitution of the United States. Article six says there must be no religious test for public office. And people in their enthusiasm and zeal, who want to do good, in fact can erode America's constitutional democracy by that kind of religious zeal.

GRANSTROM:       Why do you think Evangelical Christians have lost sight of their history to such a degree?

TANENBAUM:       I don't know. It's an important question. Here, in Virginia, it was Evangelical Baptists, Methodists, [new-side?] Presbyterians who fought a life and death struggle to bring about the separation of church and state. We owe to Evangelical Baptists -- Evangelical Christians -- the

whole tradition of religious pluralism and freedom of conscience. They were killed for upholding that tradition. And we have, ironically, people in Virginia today who are talking about a tradition which absolutely contradicts the great legacy the Baptists, and Methodists, and others gave to this country [03:00]. Americans need to understand that. I'm afraid that our kids are simply not learning that history. They need to be taught the history of what America really was about, not this kind of revisionist notion of some kind of pie-in-the-sky religion and culture which simply had no basis in fact.

GRANSTROM: Let's move on to that broader scene, the international scene. What is the threat of that fanaticism on that level?

TANENBAUM: Well, I think next to the spread of Soviet totalitarianism, the spread of certain forms of Islamic fanaticism has become one of the great threats to international peace and order. Look, you can't open the newspaper, you cannot watch TV in the evening without seeing the day after day after day. Hundreds and hundreds of people are killed in Lebanon. The Iran-Iraq war has resulted in nearly 1,000,000 people being destroyed in six years, most of them -- many of them children. At the heart of that dynamic is the notion of Ayatollah Khomeini [04:00]

in Iran, that first of all, American is the great Satan, Israel is the great Satan, western democracy is the great Satan. And in that fanatic worldview, you not only are justified, you are obligated to destroy Satan. And so you have kids literally committing suicide, being taught that by martyring themselves they're assured a place in heaven. Now, what kind of religion is it that calls for the destruction of human life, that calls upon people to commit suicide, regularly, as a daily diet? So that's one of the great threats not only in the Middle East. It's one of the great obstacles to peace in the Middle East. It's not Israel, it's the failure of nation-states to allow other human beings of different religion and culture to have the right to live and be themselves. You have that in Africa today. You've got it in the Sudan, Uganda, Ethiopia, throughout the whole of Africa. There's 6,000,000 refugees in Africa; most of them come as a result from problems or religious, racial, [05:00] tribal conflict within which this is extraordinary not only religious fanaticism but secular political fanaticism. Communism is secular messianism and leads to the same kind of destruction. So it is a massive challenge to those of us who are committed to democratic ideals and values, at the heart of which is belief in the sanctity of every human life.

GRANSTROM:       What do you think the answer to all this is? What are you doing to counteract this fanaticism in the world?

TANENBAUM:       I'm the son of a mother and father who were refugees from tsarist Russia. They fled Russia because of terrible pogroms of hatred against the Jewish people there as well as terrible poverty. They came to America and America was a new lease on life for them. I have this love affair with America and American democracy and what it has meant to all immigrants. I go by [06:00] the Statue of Liberty, I practically cry every time I see that. I've been in refugee camps in Thailand where a little girl came to me and said, "Mister, take me to America with you. I love America. America is liberty." I mean, America represents liberty all over the world. So it's that American aspect of it, through preservation of America what America stands for, which is very important. It's also my Jewishness. I lived through the Nazi Holocaust. Good parts of my family were destroyed by the racial hatred, the barbarism of the Nazis in Auschwitz, and Ber-Belsen, and Dachau, and other concentration camps. I learned one lesson. I was a kid then, but I, as a sat and listened to survivors, I came away with one permanent conviction. It's really a rephrasing of the book of Leviticus: "You shall not stand idly by while the blood of your brothers and sisters cry

out to you from the earth." Therefore, I've simply devoted my life, that wherever I see not only Jews who are in [07:00] but any human being who his suffering, that I have an obligation, under God, and as an American committed to democratic values, to do everything I can to contain the hatred and the suffering, and to try to help save lives. And I think that's what we're put on the earth for. And I cannot think of anything more useful to do with one's life. When kids come to me and say, "What shall I do?" I mean, you know, people want to become involved in all kinds of self-indulgent things; it's crazy. I mean, the world is crying for help. It's crying for people to give themselves to save it. And there's nothing more gratifying than pulling a child out of the water of the South China Sea, or saving a child in Ethiopia. And I just hope that human beings recognize that that's our task in the world: healing a broken world, not getting fat and then worrying about how to lose weight.

GRANSTROM: We'll have the rest of that conversation [08:00] with Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum next week on *Real to Reel*.

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