

CD-1040 Transcription

Marc H. Tanenbaum and Jerry Falwell -

85th Rabbinical Assembly convention [2]. 1983.

FINSTER: (applause) Dear friends, as promised, we shall now proceed with a discussion. It's a little late and we want to get to questions, but we are going to have that opportunity. I just want to say to Reverend Falwell and to Rabbi Tanenbaum, that as the Chairman of the Social Action Committee of the Rabbinical Assembly -- and I think I speak on behalf of our president, Alex Shapiro, and our good friend Jim Michaels, our convention chairman -- that in planning this session we did take a little bit of a risk. And there wasn't [01:00] total, universal agreement --

M1: (inaudible)

FINSTER: (laughter) -- that this ought to be the session that concludes the Rabbinical Assembly convention. There were, probably still are, one or two dissenters to that. But I must say in all truth that the eloquence, the persuasiveness, the commitment that we heard here tonight, I believe on the part of both of these gentlemen, was a truly remarkable experience and I'd like to thank them both for it. (applause) Reverend Falwell.

FALWELL: I don't need five minutes, I can do it in two. We do have our "Christian republic" preachers, but you have your Jewish Defense League. And, well, once in a while we have those who stand up and [02:00] say things that don't represent us. We are, I repeat, not monolithic. But I want to tell you that while 25 years ago there were many of us, Marc, who were saying "Christian republic," "Christian nation," I think you'll find the rhetoric is now "Judeo-Christian." I think you will have found an osmosis in the movement of conservative Christians in this country that I think has developed a spirit of pluralism that did not exist back when you and I first began meeting years ago. All we can say is that wherein we have had our excesses -- and I suspect they've been on both sides, but I can only speak for our side of it -- and we can only say we're sorry, and we will try to do better, and we most certainly do feel with all of our hearts that this is a pluralistic nation and a nation under God. (applause) But it is not a Christian nation, nor has it been and nor do we [03:00] want it to be a Christian state with a state church. That is, matter of fact, the distinctiveness of Baptist has been, as you pointed out, from the very beginning. I left something out when I was talking about our trip to Israel. Perhaps it doesn't fit except to throw it in for those of

you I think have a particular interest. While there in Jerusalem we visited the Ethiopian Jews, and I don't know anything that has moved me more to sense the gentleness and the dignity of those people. There's no way to explain these people if you haven't met them except in the word miracle. They are a miracle. They are really a miracle. (applause) And we went on to Sudan and saw some of the background behind what was happening. Now, just one more statement I would -- I don't favor, and I don't think most of our people favor, the use of government funds [04:00] to put out speeches on either side, or to use the public schools for either the teaching of a religious dogma, or the teaching of an anti-religious dogma. We feel the public schools should be neutral (applause) and should take no position on the issues. And finally, many of the congressmen, with tongue in cheek, that I know who say they were beat over the head by the grace of God just got out-hustled. Go ahead Marc. OK, OK. (laughter) That's two minutes.

TANENBAUM: I think what Reverend Falwell has indicated is potentially important. [05:00] I think we have still some way to go before this understanding of what mainstream American history has been. What it means to live in a pluralist, democratic society. The reason I say I think we

have some way to go is that here's a publication that is not Jerry Falwell's or the Moral Majority's, it's called *The Presidential Biblical Score Board*. It was used very widely in the last election campaign. It in fact was used by a group of fundamentalist Christians -- I make a distinction between a certain ideological stance in contrast of broader and diverse Evangelical strands [06:00] in the Southern Baptist convention, Southern Presbyterians among others. And indeed I think as Reverend Falwell, as Jerry has said, that there is now increasing reference to Judeo-Christian heritage. But I must tell you at least my perception from my study of a great many materials -- and incidentally I study Jewish fundamentalist materials, and the JDL is not equivalent to the Christian Voice.

(applause) JDL is a very real problem for us, but I am talking about major, major mainstream movements, many of them now associated with the American Council for Traditional Values, Tim LaHaye's outfit, and others. Well, when you look at the document on the editorial in the *Presidential Biblical Scoreboard*, [07:00] the word Judeo-Christian is used, but it is used cosmetically not in any integral fashion, which indicates a fundamental re-conceptualization of the legitimacy of the Jews in the American pluralist society. It says here the following --

and it says several things, one has to do with language as well -- "It has been said politics is the business of deciding who gets what, when, and where. Christians dare not leave such vital business to unbelievers. In fact in these times it goes without saying that no one can be a good Christian unless he is also a good citizen," which I buy. "The Bible explicitly calls for Christian citizenship. Christians must regard the voting privilege seriously, realizing that it is a provision of God for the selection of public leaders. When God's people refuse to actively participate in government, that leaves the amoral in charge." It seems to me there must be another way in which to describe people who differ from you as being amoral. [08:00] And beyond that, in the reference to the Judeo-Christian heritage it simply says, "Although most political candidates claim a Judeo-Christian heritage, it's important to carefully examine their actual position on the biblical family moral issues. Personal conviction" -- my point is that I've been through this with the editors of a thing called the Yellow Pages some years ago, which was intended as an honest thing, namely to create yellow pages to help Christians and churches go to places where they can buy things, except that all of the people listed in the Christian Yellow Pages had to identify themselves as born-

again Christians. And then in the introduction the implication was that these are the only people in your business community whom you can really trust to buy. Well, imagine if the Jews published that kind of Jewish Yellow Pages, buy from Jews only, and the Catholics published buy from Catholics only. We will have the balkanization of America de facto. Now it's these [09:00] tendencies to see America in these kind of sectarian terms and to speak of those outside of your own sect as being amoral, untrustworthy, infidel.

Now Jerry Falwell has just come through the Sudan. I have been in the Sudan in a time when Arab Muslims in the north have massacred nearly a million Christians and animists, because they were infidels. I've been involved in Uganda, where a half million black Christians were massacred by Idi Amin without the world saying a thing, half of them Anglicans, half of them Roman Catholic. I've been through Southeast Asia, the Vietnamese boat people, where I've seen people destroy each other. Malaysians, fundamentalist Malaysians in the north in Terengganu Province who pushed boatloads of ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese in the water in front of them until they drowned, calling them heretics, infidels, pork eaters -- Muslims don't eat pork as we don't

eat pork -- they're infidels. Erich Fromm calls this [10:00] mentality in a clinical sense "group narcissism." And group narcissism does not allow for the possibility of attributing dignity and value to someone outside of yourself once you (inaudible) all values, all virtue with yourself and deny that to the other. And that's at what at stake in this language.

Verbal violence historically has preceded physical violence. Read Professor Gordon Alcott's classic study on the study of prejudice. All the lynchings in the south always were preceded by a week of verbal violence or more. What happened to the Jews in Nazi Germany always began with verbal violence and those kinds of caricatures, which dehumanize Jews. There's too much verbal violence in this kind of political rhetoric and it's got to stop. (applause)

FINSTER: [11:00] Now, friends, we're going to go to the questions. Before we do, I'd like to read to you the convention resolution that was adopted on church state yesterday. You know, at the Rabbinical Assembly convention we have that tradition where resolutions are written, adopted, sometimes they're very heated. And sometimes there aren't enough people present who really understand, and see, and hear what it is that we're adopting and doing, and

they should. They read it when it comes out some months later or years later, they refer back to it. I don't know, Reverend Falwell, whether you would have voted for this resolution when it came up, but it passed -- I was there -- overwhelmingly. I don't have the exact vote, though maybe we can get it. Whereas the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States establishes a separation between government and religion, whereas the involvement of government in establishing, funding, and/or [12:00] participating any or all religious rights of practice is a violation of that separation, whereas the participation of government and specific rights or practices disenfranchises large segments of the citizenry, which do not subscribe to these rights and practices, and whereas the function of religious institutions, people of faith, is to educate society not to legislate for society. Therefore be it resolved that the Rabbinical Assembly opposes any legislation which seeks to formalize religious practice in public institutions or governmental settings, including prayer in the public schools, religious holiday observances, funding of religious symbols, and designation of any particular religion's holy days as national or state observance. And that is now the official policy of the Rabbinical Assembly, (applause) which I hope you agree

with. I learned from my good friend Arky [13:00] Goodman the other night -- Archie, I should have said -- to take a number of questions and then to ask the respondents to put them together and try to respond to them. The gentleman that I refer to with regards to the resolution is sitting over here, Jack (inaudible).

JACK: First of all, Rabbi Finster, the last clause of that resolution on religious holy days was not adopted.

FINSTER: Was not adopted, OK. I remember there was a discussion on it, but I thought it was.

JACK: I'll speak for no longer than 75 seconds. Reverend Falwell, I thank you for the book that you sent to all of us, and I read it carefully and discovered that the basis of your argument is based on the power of definition. When you discuss anti-Semitism you say that no true Christian can be an anti-Semite, and therefore you absolve Christianity of anti-Semitism. When you speak of the Moral Majority, the name of which you lend to 50 independent organizations, [14:00] you say that the only requisite is that they adhere to the national policy of the Moral Majority, which you and your advisors set, and if they violate it, they are no longer part of the Moral Majority. We saw another example of that in your reference to the Jewish Defense League tonight. You also stated that your

understanding of scripture has evolved. In the 1960s, you were opposed to clergy involvement in politics, and you've done 180-degree turn. My understanding of the history of religious institutions, especially Christian institutions, is that as they gained political power and influence, they become more and more totalitarian, defining out dissenters with sometimes extreme sanctions. And therefore my question is, Reverend Falwell, given the actions of checks and balances, what insurance do we have in cooperating with you that you're evolving understanding of scripture will not produce that same kind of totalitarian structure?

FINSTER: OK, is it possible to turn that light out, because I can't see a whole segment of the [15:00] congregation.

M2: It's a closed-circuit TV.

FINSTER: Oh, it's a closed-circuit TV, I'm sorry. Yakov Rosenberg?

ROSENBERG: Reverend Falwell, I think we are all very grateful to have heard your very strong statement of support, whether we like it or not, and your determination to stick to it could on behalf of the state of Israel. It becomes very strange, however, for us to be able to account for the fact that despite such pronouncement on your part every single senator and congressman who had any kind of a pro-Israel stance was selected to be defeated. And every

single candidate that Moral Majority supported was clearly anti-Israel. That seems to be a contradiction of all that you said publicly tonight.

FINSTER: Lyle Fishman. You can't -- well --

FISHMAN: (inaudible) [16:00]

FINSTER: Yeah, yeah. I recognize Lyle Fishman.

FISHMAN: Reverend Falwell, we are interested in knowing what you and your group are doing on behalf of the plight of Soviet Jewry, to relieve their oppression, to enable them to study their heritage, and to emigrate from the Soviet Union. We'd also like to know if that support which we have heard about is going to continue from you and from your group.

FINSTER: OK, I think we're going to take one more. Judah?

JUDAH: Reverend Mr. Falwell, I was very much interested in your comments after Rabbi Tanenbaum had spoken. And I was interested in hearing you say that you are not one of those who call this a Christian country. I wonder how you explain the quotation from your speech or [17:00] writings, which reads, "The idea that religion and politics don't mix was invented by the devil to keep Christians from running their own country." And while you explain that, explain please, if you will, another statement ascribed to you that reads,

"If a person is not a Christian, he is inherently a failure."

FINSTER: All right can we take one more -- it's not fair that I'm choosing everyone here, but I see a hand up over there. Is that a Rabbinical Assembly member?

M3: Yes, I am.

FINSTER: Good.

M3: Reverend Falwell, I used to be a cantor, I hope you can hear me. (laughter) I'll try to be brief anyway.

TANENBAUM: Try singing. (laughter)

FINSTER: Could you identify yourself, former cantor?

M3: I'm Rabbi (inaudible). [18:00] I read your book very carefully also. And although I don't agree with many of the things, I think I respect you much more than I did a week ago today, because I read it and now I feel much more educated about Reverend Jerry Falwell. You mentioned, and I have respect, is that you must, as an Evangelical Christian, convert other people to your faith. And I respect that very much. However, there are Christian groups, they call themselves Jews for Jesus and Messianic Jews, who disguise themselves as Jews and (inaudible) I believe from Corinthian that said, "To the Jew, I will be a Jew and to the gentile, I will be a gentile." And you, as a Christian minister, a responsible Christian minister,

accept this type of deceptive (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) where Jews are lured to Christianity through the guise of what might appear to be Judaism?

FINSTER: All right, thank you very much. (applause) [19:00] I must say that the questions, I think, have been very cogent, and I'm sure the answers will be powerful. At least I'm hoping.

FALWELL: I'm trying to recall from the little jotted notes here what the questions were. One was from the first questioner regarding the evolving views as a Christian of my responsibility not only to render to God that which is God's, but to (inaudible), citizenship, that which is belonging to the country. And then the question is how do you expect us to cooperate with you when you may be moving towards totalitarianism? First of all, I haven't asked you to cooperate with me. I'm not going anywhere that I need you to go with me. I'm here to be your friend whether you want to go along or not, and I'm just here to tell you what I have told you tonight -- and I can't add anything to it. A man's words only can offer is that we are not -- I, [20:00] first of all, not only believe that a state church is wrong, I also believe that a theocracy, except when God almighty is on the throne, is wrong and therefore those are not our interest.

The next question was it had to do with all the congressmen and senators, etc., who were defeated 1980 were all pro-Israel and that we targeted them, and selected them for defeat, and so on. Again, that is a generalization that we got accused of a few moments ago, and to which you, I suppose, were talking about Christian Voice, I'm not sure, Rabbi Tanenbaum, I assume that you're talking about Christian Voice or (inaudible). We are not a political action committee, so we have not -- we have never targeted or supported a candidate for any purpose -- I'm speaking of Moral Majority -- and I had nothing to do with George McGovern, or Frank Church, or any of the 12 senators who were defeated. We got the credit or the blame, depending on where you sat. I didn't go through their states [21:00] during that time. And so we back off that. And then all the ones we elected, for example, allegedly are anti-Israel. I spoke to the Americans for a Safe Israel in New York last summer, at which time we brought a letter from a senator who has not been a committed friend to Israel, and I am glad -- and again, I'm not saying we did this, I'm saying that there has been a marked change in its philosophy -- we brought a letter from Jesse Helms, who came out in support of the Jerusalem bill and who has lately begun to support pro-Israel causes. And rather than hissing that, you ought

to thank God with me that he is coming our way rather than going the other way. (applause) You know, we are, none of us ought to be so arrogant that whoever happens to be our enemy, let's shoot him. We ought to be trying to make a friend out of him, as someone did when [David?] Smith made his statements, some of the rabbis maybe in this room went to him and rather than clobbering [22:00] him, took him to Israel. And he happens to be one of the number one spokespersons for Israel in the country today. I think that's a far greater thing than just the idea if you don't like me I'll finish you off kind of philosophy.

And then -- (applause) -- and then someone quoted a People for the American Way publication into which in 1959 I made the statement the idea that religion and politics don't mix is a philosophy created by the devil for keeping Christians from running their own country. I think I addressed it a little while ago, but I'll address it again. We were wrong, we are sorry, and that's all I know how to say that.

(applause) And we don't say that and haven't for 25 years. And in the book the gentleman said I respect your commitment to your faith and your commitment to preaching your gospel to everyone with the intent of [23:00] sharing your message of redemption, but then commented on Jews for

Jesus and -- I can't read what I wrote here, something else

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M4: Messianic.

FALWELL: Oh, right -- who zero in on Jews. As I read the New Testament, we are not commissioned to zero in on anybody. We have a universal message that I try to share as I did tonight in what I had to say, and I say it everywhere as you do yourself. I sat here and was greatly blessed and much enjoyed when I didn't understand a word of what you were saying. (laughter) You didn't offend me and I didn't feel that you were trying to do me in. I was enjoying whatever I was eating while you were doing it. (laughter) And I can't sing, as I noticed Brother Tanenbaum cannot, (laughter) but I do try to make a joyful noise under the Lord. And we don't zero in on anybody. Our message is not [24:00] for Greeks, and Jews, or Turks, or Asians, or Europeans. We feel it's for everyone and I do share it with everybody, but zero in on nobody. And my experience has been that a lot of us are awfully gun-shy unnecessarily about persons who will knock on our doors. I gave a story in the book there -- I live on the end of a street and summer day a couple years ago I was watching two of the Mormon young men on their bicycles, making door by door. And I was hoping nobody would tell them who lived at the

last house. (laughter) And I was sitting there reading the newspaper waiting, but somebody did tell them. They headed back up the other street. (laughter) I was in Salt Lake City some time ago and this -- over a year ago -- and I saw Ezra Taft Benson, who is the number two -- you're nobody in the Mormon church until your 85, and he had just gotten there, so he was number two and he had just broken his hip trying to break a wild horse. (laughter) [25:00] And I was in his office and I told him about those two boys. And I said, "(inaudible) Benson, I would die for the right of those young men to knock on every door on that street. And they're all members of the church that I pastor. They didn't win anybody, but I'd die for their right to try. But I'm sending a young man out here to Salt Lake City to start a Baptist church soon and I want the same respect from you towards my boy that I gave towards yours." And to me that's what pluralism is all about, and to me that's what free speech and that's what America is all about. And I am not gun-shy about others trying to win my people. If I can't teach them well enough to keep them safe, that's Jerry Falwell's problem. And I would say to the rabbis here, if you're doing a pretty good job of teaching you shouldn't be afraid of somebody taking them away from you. They can't do it, OK. (applause)

M5: (inaudible)

FALWELL: Soviet Jewry, I left that one out. I'm interested not only in Soviet Jewry, but the persecuted Christians in Israel as well -- [26:00] in Russia as well. And I am very concerned right now over -- you can if you wish -- but I'm very concerned. And what we are doing simply is through our senators and congressmen, but particularly through senators, we are in a constant letter writing campaign to the Soviet embassy by senators, by thousands of people. We actually in our newspaper magazine print incidents of persecution and harassment as they filter out of the Soviet Union against Jews and Christians. And we do believe they respond to public opinion. They certainly do in Romania, and many of the Eastern Bloc nations, and some of the countries that had most favored nations treatment. And we use all the lobbying efforts we can to get the attention of and make the Soviets aware that we know what they're doing. And I don't know what else we can do, but we do that and we're very concerned. And thank you for allowing me to be with you [27:00] tonight. (applause)

TANENBAUM: I'm concerned about totalitarian religion, whether it's political religion or religious politics. I think it is important to ask a question whether certain kinds of ideologies, religiously or politically, can lead

to a totalist society. I think historically that has been the case. But I think it is not [28:00] just to pose that question alone to Jerry Falwell. I was kept out of Malaysia in 1978 with a mission of 14 prominent Americans, among them James Michener, William Casey, and others, who went there for solely humanitarian purposes, to try to save lives of Vietnamese boat people. And the fanaticism which we confronted was staggering. It was my first experience with what was to become Ayatollah [Khomeinism?]. When I came back to the United States I met with an assistant secretary of state in charge of southeastern South Asian affairs and he said to me, "The two greatest problems that [29:00] the United States and western democracies will face in the 1980s and beyond are, first, the expansion of Soviet totalitarianism, wherever they can penetrate, and secondly, the rise and spread of Islamic fanaticism, which will know no boundaries. You got your first taste of that in Malaysia."

I think all of us have got to face the issue, including the Jewish community. I've just come back from a mission in Israel. We took 100 of our top leaders there. Now, Israel is not Malaysia, but I can tell you that some of the fanaticism that we experienced as we went to Judea and

Samaria on the West Bank, with Jews and Arabs, [30:00]
scared -- if you allow the expression -- scared the devil
out of me. It's an issue we have to deal with. Pluralism in
America, as John Courtney Murray said, may not be the will
of God, but it is here to stay and it has made this the
greatest democracy in the world.

RECORDING: This program is continued on the opposite side.
(break in audio)

TANENBAUM: We have got to find a way to help Jews in Israel
understand in their own terms the importance of religious,
racial, ethnic pluralism for them. Beyond that Christians
and Jews together have got to find a way to engage whatever
there is of moderate Muslim leaders to have them begin to
develop first a theology of pluralism, and then a politics
and ideology of pluralism, or I tell you we will not
survive into the twenty-first century. [31:00] What has
happened in Lebanon today, and yesterday, and the week
before, what has been going on between Iran and Iraq -- how
many millions of people must be killed before the world
says enough? So none of us have a monopoly on fanaticism,
on certain kinds of fundamentalism. It takes different
forms, but if we're really concerned about the values that

I believe we do share in common in terms of the dignity of life, of the sense of *kol Yisrael arevim zeh la-zeh*, we're responsible for one another, but also responsible for the welfare of the human family. This is the great task that face not only Evangelicals and Jews, but all Christians and Jews, and all members of God's human family. It's been wonderful sharing this evening with you tonight. (applause)

FINSTER: [32:00] Before I turn the program back to our chairman, I just want to thank Reverend Falwell and Rabbi Tanenbaum. We had programmed that we conclude this portion of the program at 10:30. According to my trusty chronometer, we're pretty close. And I think those of us who are here felt that we had a two-hour remarkable experience. Thank you very much, gentlemen.

END OF AUDIO FILE