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WINS News Conference Program. 12 September 1989.

STAN BROOKS: The state of American religion has been in the news a lot lately, from the controversy over birth control in the schools, to the sex and money scandals surrounding television evangelists. In addition, this week marks the beginning of major religious for both the Christian and Jewish faiths. With me tonight to talk about religion, and our ethics and morality, are two WINS religious commentators, the Reverend Roy Lloyd of the Council of Churches of the City of New York, and the Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum of the American Jewish Committee. Good evening gentlemen, and welcome to the program.

ROY LLOYD: Good evening (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

MARC TANENBAUM: Thank you; good to be here.

BROOKS: What about the furor over TV evangelists, the money they take in, their sexual conduct and so forth? What impact is that having on religion generally? The more you think about it?

TANENBAUM: Well, I'll wait to hear Roy, since this is in his church, not my pew, but I'm very much concerned about that as a religiously concerned person. I think many of us have been concerned about the nature of evangelical, or in this

case, really [01:00] fundamentalist preachers, who have been exploiting the media. They have as much right as anyone else, Catholics or mainline Protestants or Jews, to have access to the media. It is a question of their methods, as well as their code of ethics. And I think the exploitation of the media, first of all, for such high commercial purposes tends to render much of their broadcasting as a kind of massive hustle. Take the case of Oral Roberts, saying that unless he got \$8 million by a certain date, that God would call him away. Well he's now been sued by two fundamentalist aerospace scientists who want their money back, because they say that he has made God into an extortionist. And they think that that's deception. I think there has been a lowering of the standards of religious broadcasting. There are many other consequences; I'll be interested in hearing Roy's comments, but there's much more to say about this in terms of the image of religion in the public domain, which I think has been [02:00] horribly distorted by many of these evangelical preachers. Reverend Lloyd?

LLOYD: Yeah, I agree with you, greatly. I think that what has happened, to a tremendous amount, is that we've had religious entrepreneurs, commercial religionists, and unless WINS, which airs religion commentaries, which are,

in a sense -- hopefully -- a blessing to the community, these are people who are, in essence, having to promote themselves all the time in their own programming to get more money to do more programming; it's an endless cycle. And I know people who have, looking for a meaning in their lives, have latched on to one of these people, because all of them, as you are well aware, have "the" answer, and so, since they have "the" answer, then you have to send them your money, and nowhere else, really. And I think that really is, that's quite dangerous because, at an age where people are wanting to have it all, [03:00] certainly those people in this commercial religion field want to have it all, too. So I think that it's -- I think in one way, it's been very good, because I think people have gotten in the back of their minds, these folks are really not on the up and up. I had my own experience with Jim Baker, and I found to be, to be quite frank, rather, kind of like a Elmer Gantry kind of person. He seemed to think that because we were God's chosen people, as it were, I mean, whatever his group was, then you're entitled to have everything. And I found that pretty bad, but I think that maybe a negative side of this is that the Gallup folks did a survey, as they do every year, about confidence in religion, and last year, for the first time since they've been sampling this, there

was a 9% drop in confidence in religion. And I think a lot of that has to do with these commercial religions.

BROOKS: And that's one of the things I wanted to get to. When we've seen recently, when a politician gets tarred due to corruption, [04:00] all politicians seem to be tarred with that same brush. Well now that we have Jim Baker accused of sexual misconduct and perhaps extortion, or [paying?] extortion, whatever, is this going to apply to other religious leaders, and will the American public say, "Gee, they're all a bunch of crooks, and they're all involved in stuff like that"?

TANENBAUM: That might happen. I think it would be terribly unfortunate, Stan, if it were to happen. I think it's important not to engage in collective stereotypes. I think some of the major personalities really deserve the criticism they're getting. I mean, that hustling that's been going on for many years -- millions and millions of dollars have been raised. It's appealed to the worst instincts of fear and anxiety of people. I would make a difference between many of these people who are now in the public domain, and someone like Billy Graham for example --

LLOYD: I agree.

TANENBAUM: -- Billy Graham happens to be a close personal friend, and we've been friends since the 1960s. He has been

scrupulous in his accounting of the funds that are raised, and public accountability. Also, his message as an evangelical message [05:00] does not appeal to the deepest of fears. I heard one evangelical preacher, quite prominent one, say, "Well, you know that there's going to be Armageddon. Armageddon is on its way. The world is going to fall apart; therefore, you're not going to need your money. Send in your money now." And you have these little old ladies on their Social Security checks sending in money out of simple fear and panic, which is being exploited. Well, I think that's scandalous for the whole message of religion to society today.

LLOYD: You know, I'd certainly back that up. People like Billy Graham and others, they are more than willing to open their books to the (inaudible) process. But others like Baker and Falwell and Robertson --

BROOKS: Jimmy Swaggart the other night --

LLOYD: Swaggart?

BROOKS: -- really was outraged by what they did.

TANENBAUM: First of all, there was an anti-Jewish slur --

LLOYD: That's right.

TANENBAUM: -- in one of his broadcasts, and that constantly seeps into the thing. And then, secondly, he began behaving like a clown, dancing and jumping in a kind of hysterical

feat -- what kind of religion is that? [06:00] I mean, there is -- it's an appeal to the most primitive kind of instincts. There is -- but saying all of that, I don't think it's efficient, simply, to dump on all of these fundamentalist preachers; we've got to look at ourselves in terms of the mainstream religions, and our own failings. One of the reasons that these people have moved into the mainstream is because, I think, that mainline Catholics, certainly since the days of Archbishop Fulton Sheen, mainline Protestants, and mainline Jews have not really made their contribution in a sufficiently effective way. And that's dangerous for America. So there was a time not too long ago, Stan, if you recall, when -- especially television was carrying programs Sunday morning or Catholic bishops, Catholic church -- mainline Protestant denominations, the Jewish community -- that, one of the things that was being contributed, used to see Catholics, Protestants, and Jews -- our top leadership -- sitting together, talking together, and a spirit of mutual respect about religious pluralism in America. This was the ideal of [07:00] America, where each one of us are faithful to our own traditions, and yet relate to each other in a spirit of genuine reverence, caring for one another. Today, you have a series of these isolated, separate evangelical-

fundamentalist messages, who are dominating the airwaves with one message -- mainly, you know, send your money in and you will be saved by us, as if no other form of religion is valid in American life. That's undermining the religious pluralistic character of American society. [A downfall?], in part, because we really have not done enough of our own homework.

BROOKS: Do you think this scandal might restore things to the way they were, and push the evangelists out of the mainstream?

TANENBAUM: I don't think so. I think that what is pervasive in our society today is the thought that money is the way that you value something. It's worth is measured by money. So therefore, what's happened is that the religious programs that are on in these paid time things -- well, the ones that are on are the ones that are willing to pay the [08:00] most money. And what we've done is we've said that those things which have the most money are the most valuable. And I happen to think that just because something has a lot of money doesn't mean that it's necessarily OK, or that because a particular church or synagogue or organization, non-profit organization, doesn't have money, that they aren't worthwhile. But that's what we've done;

we've bartered off the time that used to be public service time, and I don't think that's going to change around.

BROOKS: What do you think's going to happen? Is this just going to blow over and be forgotten, or is it going to change some of the situation a little bit?

TANENBAUM: Well, I think that, first of all, the American people have to think very seriously; and I think many more people are going to reflect on what all of this means. I mean, there are all kinds of revelations coming out; it's not only what happened with Jim Baker and his own personal moral code, but now it's becoming clear that some of the major fundamentalists, who have been raising hundreds of millions of dollars for overseas relief aid, it now turns out, have not been sending millions of dollars to overseas relief. [09:00] And that may call for investigations on how that money is being used. Certainly, accountability's going to have to be restored. But I think the major obligation really rests on the major religious traditions: they better put up or shut up. We either have to be prepared to put up very large amounts of money to compete with fundamentalists with a religious message that is humane and civilized and respectful of each other's traditions, or we're just going to continue this basic pattern, where they dominate the

airwaves because they hustle these fortunes out of their own people.

BROOKS: And is your group ready to come up with some money to do that?

TANENBAUM: Well, I know that many of our people have been talking about it. There have been conversations between Catholics, Protestants, and Jews to find a more effective way to be responsive. I'm glad to say that the Southern Baptist Convention has set up a very effective program; they're using a lot of cable TV for those purposes. It's going to take a much greater response than we have right now. And I'm not sure that that money is going to be made available, which is why this cycle may continue. [10:00] But it's a bind; it is a real bind, and somewhere, someplace in American society, we've got to find a way to deal with this. These single messages, with quick and instant salvation, which are not concerned about social justice, not concerned about the poor, about homeless -- real human problems -- get to be a distortion of the role of religion in American society.

BROOKS: Reverend Lloyd?

LLOYD: Yes, I have an idea that, [while revealing?] what the day is, a sense of a consumer society, and so often, the people who sit in front of their TV sets, or even listening

to the radios, are consumers, and they'll turn it on and consume what they want -- I'm not sure that the money exists within the religious communities to be able to counter, as far as time is concerned. Because all those religious entrepreneurs do is promote themselves, whereas you have homes for the elderly, and taking care of children, and minority tasks forces on [11:00] AIDS, and all the crack programs -- which aren't, indeed, a part of the interest of those people. So I don't think that the money will be there. But what I think is uniquely possible for folks like, all of our folks, is that the human touch can be applied. And this is an age that desperately needs that, and I think that we've been so interested in doing things and programs that we've forgotten the human touch. And that, I think, is the answer, Marc.

TANENBAUM: Well, it's, I guess, another way of saying that is, human touch also has to do with moral and personal, spiritual, and family values.

LLOYD: That's right.

TANENBAUM: One of the problems that has emerged and made it possible for some of these evangelical preachers to have such currency is that liberal Catholics, Protestants, and Jews, who have been so much concerned with social justice issues -- not only in this country, but overseas -- I mean,

we've spent fortunes of time and energy and money dealing with problems of refugees around the world, all of the refugees in the world -- six million [12:00] in Africa, taking care of the hungry in that part of the world. Trying to save lives in Southeast Asia. Well, when you devote so much attention and energy to that, and don't pay a corollary attention to personal and family needs of your own followers, you leave a great void (inaudible) nurturing. And what happens is, evangelicals address themselves entirely to the question of one's own personal life, family life, without paying attention to these other objective human problems, and they tend to touch a great many feelings. I think we need to get a better mix, in which there is much concern about the personal agonies or the personal hopes of our own people, their family needs, as we pay to social justice issues, in order to be able to meet the needs which, normally, now allow many of them to be attracted to these extreme positions of the evangelical community.

BROOKS: Would you see a return to the pastoral basics, if that's what you call it?

TANENBAUM: Well, I think there -- there is, [13:00] I mean, much of that has begun to happen in our religious communities. In part it has to do with that challenge. It's

also a matter of coming to terms with the needs that our people are putting to us.

LLOYD: What I see in the Protestant community, especially in this town, is that there is a much greater emphasis on reaching out to people, on expressing what your faith is, and from a personal basis, rather than necessarily programs -- it's the motivational underpinning of what you're talking about, I think, Marc. And that perhaps has been what is missing, has been missing, that people are looking for someplace else. So I think that most churches, especially those now seeing a loss of members, or a slackening in worship attendance, they're saying, "Oh, am I going to stay?" We have to look a little differently at how we're doing things, and I think, perhaps, maybe marketplace forces, if you want to put it that way, are indeed moving these organizations, synagogues, and churches to have [14:00] a much more personal kind of approach.

BROOKS: You're listening to the WINS news conference. I'm Stan Brooks, and our guests tonight are the Reverend Roy Lloyd of the Council of Churches of the City of New York, and Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, of the American Jewish Committee. Gentlemen, another question: on top of our political corruption, you have this kind of corruption. What is this doing to the moral fiber of our young people out there who,

you know, are supposed to follow their leaders? Political leaders, personal figures, and religious leaders?

TANENBAUM: I think many of our young people are really going to be discerning in their judgments. I think it takes intelligent young people in our university campuses -- I think they see through this kind of exploitation, and are turned off by it. There are many young people -- and Roy would know more about that than I -- but young evangelical Christians, who will continue to be devoted to the evangelical churches -- may turn to other leaders. But I think for -- the important thing for us is not to allow cynicism to set in, where [15:00] they begin judging all kinds of religion by those kinds of excesses. That's a real danger. And, just as I think we ought not to be stereotyping all evangelical Christians by the misdeeds of these people who now become prominent, we ought to make sure that people understand that not all religion can be judged by that as well. There is a danger sometimes, in the media play of all of this, that a brush will sweep over everybody, and those differences have to be made. And people need to understand that religious forces today -- I mean, my own experience, the past 35 years in public life, and the relationship of religion to society -- I know of no force in American society and the international community

that has been as powerful healing forces, lifesaving forces, as how the mainstream religious communities. The number of people who are living today because Catholics, Protestants, evangelical Christians, and Jews [16:00] have cared about refugees. You know, the religious community brought into this country a half million refugees alone between 1978 and the 1980s from Southeast Asia; they literally saved hundreds of thousands of lives. Restored people to dignity. The religious community in this city began a campaign four or five years with Bishop Paul Moore and Bishop Joseph Sullivan of the Brooklyn diocese of the Catholic Church. Carl Flemister, a Baptist minister, I join in with them, deal with problems of the homeless -- we just began paying attention to the problems of the homeless. On the eve of Christmas and Hanukkah, we call a major press conference at the Cathedral St. John the Divine; we got front page coverage in the *New York Times* and elsewhere; drove home with meetings with real estate people. The need for dealing with the problem of some 35,000 homeless people in New York -- I think it made a fundamental difference in raising consciousness about the importance of dealing with these tragic people, so that our [17:00] religious leadership has been an engine in moving toward social justice and humanitarian concerns. They've sometimes not

been as dramatic in telling this story; they've been so busy doing what needs to be done, and dealing with refugees and with homeless and the poor, now the problems of AIDS and many other concerns -- they have not been as effective in telling that story. But that doesn't mean that they ought to shift their priorities; I think that that's the work we're in business to try to do -- to heal broken lives; to try to lift up the spirit of the society, to deal with problems of corruption in society. That's our major task.

LLOYD: And you ask a significant question. Because I think that we are in danger of people being cynical, although cynicism can be a copout, too. You know, we can say, "Well, [it's this way?], so I don't have to worry about it," or "it's all that way, so I'm not going to be involved." That can be a nice way just to say, "Well, I'm going to do whatever I want to do, and not be concerned to vote, or to do [18:00] whatever in public life." Although we do see, on college campuses, very interesting upsurge in interest in religion. Not necessarily religious, per se, as far as going to worship services, but interest in courses about religion and philosophy and meaning of life -- I mean, people are asking those kinds of questions, and so I think that the biggest danger at looking at these problems today

is that we've become very used to things happening in short little bites. Like on WINS, the news comes fast, and it's clean, and it's not complicated. You see it, and there it is. Well, the problem is that there are many facets, many sides of things, and how do you get the breadth and depth of things? That's the biggest problem I see.

BROOKS: The interest of college students in religion interests me because we have -- people talk about, now, the fact that our college students are materialistic, interesting in getting jobs [19:00], getting ahead, and making lots of money and acquiring things. Is there room, or do they seem to evidence some spiritualism along with the materialism?

LLOYD: Indeed. It's an interesting phenomenon, I think. Many of our young people are discovering that having enough of everything isn't enough, and that you can have your nice car or good job, but somehow or other, there's something lacking, spiritually, something inside you that you can necessarily put your finger on, but something isn't there. So the same group -- we call them the yuppies, I guess -- that we castigate them and give them a hard time -- this is the same group, however, that is the most willing to give of its time, to volunteer, to be involved with different kinds of projects and programs, so it's a mixed picture, I think, as maybe life always has been a mixed picture.

TANENBAUM: Yeah, that's the word that came to my mind, Roy, the -- I think there is a mixed bag. On the one hand, we [20:00] have an experience, for example, that some 235 secular universities, major universities throughout the country -- Columbia, Chicago, Stanford -- offer courses in Jewish studies, chairs of Jewish studies. That's phenomenal! It's never happened before in Jewish history, that there's been so much academic attention paid to religion. There is a search, there is a genuine religious hunger among a great many young people. At the same time, there is the reality of the yuppies, of a yuppie culture, of a culture which is hedonistic, whose greatest preoccupation is pleasure, self-indulgence, making a fast buck, and making a big buck fast, bending the rules at whatever -- that the ends justifies any means. I think religion has a role to play in raising ethical questions. Is this really the purpose of your life? This is really the end of your existence -- you know, after you've had two cars, and a couple [21:00] summer homes, and three vacations a year -- is that what life is all about? How can you go on living in an island of such incredible self-indulgence and pleasure when you know there is a world in which there are millions of people starving to death, where every day UNICEF tells us 25, 35,000 children die from

hunger in the world -- can one live in that kind of world with that kind of moral contradiction and not be concerned about that? I mean, that's the dialogue which religious leadership increasingly must engage in, with those people who set those values for the general business world and, I think, leads ultimately to the kind of cynicism and then political corruption we've seen in so many parts of this city.

LLOYD: Let me play off of that, because we can think of people being hungry elsewhere -- but right in this town, among the black and Latino populations, infant mortality is as bad as it is in any of the places in the third world where we point a [22:00] finger and say, "These conditions are immoral." So it's happening here. Certainly that quest for something beyond yourself leaves many young people open to these sort of cult possibilities, or to those pseudo-religiously oriented things that say, "You are God," or "You can become God." And also, I think, allows people to get sucked into an attitude that, I think, is pervasive in our society. My concern is that the underlying problem in our society today is that there's a premise that you should maximize the profits no matter what the cost. And we see that played out in dumping dangerous materials out in New Jersey, or putting all of our -- 53 cents out of the dollar

into the military budget, while we cut back on programs to take care of people. We're more interested in things than people, and that's my biggest concern.

BROOKS: Is the religious community partly [23:00] to blame for this? Back in the '60s, we had active religious leaders on the Civil Rights lines, fighting against Vietnam, and we had students following them -- or perhaps leading, I don't know which is which -- but today, we don't seem to have the same activism we had then. Are the religious leaders not doing as much or not getting as much publicity, or are they failing to do as much?

LLOYD: I think there are a lot of religious leaders doing many things. It's an increasingly hard sell to get coverage of what you're doing in this town; there are so many things that are going on; it's not just here, either. But also, I think that what happened in -- this is my own little theory here -- I think what happened in many mainline religious organizations, is that about 15 years ago, they got into the function and structure mode of things. Everything had to be sort of put into a --

BROOKS: Bureaucracy.

LLOYD: -- bureaucracy, that's right, and what happens is, that you tend then not to get that prophetic kind of leadership, because that doesn't fit into the mold. People

say, "Oh, where are the good old leaders of the good old days?" [24:00] Well, they forget how frustrated they were with those same people that got up in front, and spoke and led, and everyone else had to catch up with them. Well, what happened was, the bureaucratization of institutions, I think, tended to homogenize the leadership in some ways.

TANENBAUM: That's, I think that's a very telling point. If you look at the '60s, and you just refer to -- the '60s centers around the life and work of the Reverend Martin Luther King. I shared a platform the other night with Jesse Jackson at Queens College, and it led me back when we were talking about black-Jewish relations. What a different world that was in the '60s, in terms of solidarity between the black and the Jewish community. And the point I made was that Martin Luther King, by his person, by what he stood for, by his openness to the Jewish community, led to a condition of such trust in him, that Jews and Rabbinic leaders were prepared to go anywhere, go to prison, go through cattle-prods, be prepared even to die [25:00] in order to uphold the cause of Civil Rights and human rights. Personalities do make a difference. First of all, this is a media culture, and media creates our national heroes, frequently. That's not the whole answer, but it is a factor. If you look at the role of religious communities,

it is when there were towering religious leaders, who made a very great impact, and as one British [Divine?] once said, "Religion is as much caught as it is taught." That is, people identify themselves with religious heroes, and Martin Luther King, in a (inaudible) in the Protestant community, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel in the Jewish community, Lionel [Vibor?] in the Protestant community, Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen. They became the symbols of what religion, in its reality, was. It may have to do with bureaucratization, it may have to do very much with the team approaches, and things being done by committee. Somehow, religious communities are not able to sustain major religious personalities. One of the reasons [26:00] evangelicals have become so prominent in the media is because that's exactly what they're concentrating on. So the one last religious leader of that era, who still commands that kind of respect, is Dr. Billy Graham. He turns up on every poll as being the most second or third popular leader in America, after the president of the United States.

BROOKS: The word is charisma, and they call themselves charismatics, and (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) capture the public's attention.

TANENBAUM: That's right.

BROOKS: So, are the religious leaders getting together, do you see new religious leaders coming into the fold who will work together in civil rights or whatever the cause, or do you have fights with Jesse Jackson because of his remarks that some would consider anti-Semitic, his support of Louis Farrakhan, and you know, those divisions -- lasting, or are they going to be (inaudible)?

TANENBAUM: No, I think that's an issue in itself, and I took that up publicly with Jesse Jackson. I think that whatever moral contribution he has to make -- and I think he has an important contribution to make, certainly on certain kinds of political, economic issues -- I think he compromises that by tolerating Farrakhan's [27:00] anti-Nazi, I mean Nazi-like anti-Jewish rhetoric. And we spoke about that quite publicly. Jesse Jackson is a sign of a black leader today who has that kind of prominence. It may be that one has to go the political route to get that kind of attention, I don't know. But if that is the case, then that means some deficiency exists in the religious community. But there isn't -- there is, you asked the question about cooperation. There is an extraordinary amount of cooperation going on between Catholics, Protestants, and Jews, but it also is very bureaucratic. It's between the bureaucracies of the Catholic Church, the bureaucracies of

the Protestant church, bureaucracies of the Jewish community, working on these kinds of systemic problems, which require that kind of system to deal with them. And doesn't [cough?] up, as it were, those kind of individual leaders in the same way.

BROOKS: What do you see as the pluses and minuses of a Pat Robertson, a religious leader, and a Reverend Jesse Jackson, running for president this year -- next year?

LLOYD: I [28:00] think it stirs the pot very nicely, because at least, among other things, you have to start to talk about, what are the roles that religion can play in public life. I don't necessarily agree with a lot of (inaudible) what I hear, but I don't have to agree. What I can do is find those kind of concerns are important -- it's just like what Governor Cuomo brought into the whole question of -- when he was running governor -- the question was really: is he running for president? And in the kind of ethical issues that he raises, I think that's helpful, even though there may be some bumps in the road.

BROOKS: Do you see these campaigns stimulating any racism or religious discriminations?

TANENBAUM: Well, I think there are different kinds of issues that are being raised. First of all, both the Reverend Pat Robertson and Jesse Jackson, Reverend Jesse Jackson, as

citizens of the United States, both have as much right as any other citizen to run for the [29:00] highest office of the land. I think they will raise different kinds of issues; Reverend Pat Robertson will raise for many of us in the Jewish community, I think for many other Americans, the whole question of his vision of America. He has talked about restoring America as a Christian, evangelical society. That kind of society will undermine our understanding of American democratic pluralism. He's also talked about how only evangelical, born-again Christians can be entrusted with the defending of the Constitution of the United States. He calls all non-born-again Christians termites who have eaten away at the foundation of the Constitution. Anyone who has that attitude about other American citizens must be subjected to the most severe criticism of what is, essentially, anti-democratic attitudes. Jesse Jackson will raise other questions, and some of them will have to do with black-Jewish relationships. But I think we're going to have, if Pat Robertson does run, for the ADA campaign, it will be an opportunity to deal with fundamental questions [30:00] of the First Amendment and church-state separation -- and the vision of what kind of America we really want to see.

BROOKS: Gentlemen, I'm afraid that's all the time we have tonight on the WINS news conference. Our guests have been Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum of the American Jewish Committee, and the Reverend Roy Lloyd of the Council of Churches of the City of New York. Thank you for joining us; I'm Stan Brooks, 1010 WINS news, good night.

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