

CD-1117 Transcription

WINS news conference, Easter and Passover. 14 April 1990.

STOCKTON: Good evening and welcome to the WINS news conference.

I'm Alice Stockton. For Christians, Jews, and Muslims around the world, this has been one of the holiest seasons of the year. Passover. Easter. Ramadan. Our guests tonight, our local religious leaders: Sister Camille D'Arienzo of the Catholic archdiocese of Brooklyn; Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum of the American Jewish Committee; the Reverend Calvin Butts of the Abyssinian Baptist Church; and the Reverend Roy Lloyd of the Council of Churches, New York City. We're discussing the issues facing today's religious leaders, and in doing that I would like to throw this out to you. Rabbi Tanenbaum, would you like to start with some of the issues that you feel are facing us today.

TANENBAUM: Well it's, I think what brings us together is the fact that we share such deep traditions during this Passover Easter period. For both of us in differing ways, Passover and Easter are the seasons of liberation. They remind us of the [01:00] slavery that our ancestors went through, a struggle for freedom and human dignity. And ultimate liberation, looking forward to what we call in our tradition, Passover of the future in which all mankind will be relieved of poverty, injustice, hatred, bigotry, and we'll be joined together by love and compassion. I think those themes, both for Jews, Christians, as well as Muslims,

are very powerful binding forces today which we need to renew.

STOCKTON: Are we renewing them?

TANENBAUM: Well...

STOCKTON: Do you see evidence?

TANENBAUM: I think in many ways we're recognizing that the struggles are still massive, the challenges are still enormous, the injustices are very great, but I think what sustains religious people, perhaps more than others who don't have a religious tradition, Passover and Easter and Ramadan, is that there's always a sign of hope. Springtime, renewal. No matter how great the evil and the suffering. There's always the [02:00] opportunity to renew the world.

BUTTS: One of the major concerns of Easter is the victory over death. Passover also. The fact that those forces that have traditionally oppressed people have somehow been escaped. You see that in Eastern Europe and, a recent trip that I had to South Africa, you see it beginning to happen there. One thing that the Easter season, the Passover season, reminds me of is that there is in fact though no salvation without the shedding of blood. So many people have given their lives across the years, centuries, to make sure the human justice, that human freedom are things that we cling to and things that will become a reality as each generation comes and goes. So in this season as we [03:00] remember those who suffered in bondage whether in Egypt, or those who suffered during the Holocaust or the Second World War, those who

suffer anywhere in the world, we must remember that there were many who are not enjoying the freedoms that we enjoy today but who did give their lives so that we could. And I think that that's very important.

STOCKTON: Sister?

D'ARIENZO: And Revered Butts, I would add to that that, not only are there people who gave their lives in the pursuit of justice and to the cause of justice, but there are, there have always been, and there continue to be people whose lives are taken from them because of injustice. And so when I look at the holy days that are upon us now and I reflect the wonderful things already expressed here, I want to say, in the tradition we go back to the beginning to Genesis. And then we go back to the Creation, to the beginning with the Word, and I think the Word is so important. To bond us, to bind us. [04:00] To heal us. The Word that exposes the injustice. The Word that gives hope and comfort. The Word that calls us to conscious. The Word that heals us and gives us promises that we can rely on. So I see the power of the Word not only in our faith tradition but in the way we relate and don't relate to one another. That dialogue should continue among the different religions and with people who have none at all. That dialogue, the Word which is blessed and which is creation, life-giving, that that never be aborted in any of the churches. That no one ever say we can't talk about this. We must talk about it because in the beginning was the Word.

LLOYD: You know I have to say that I come to this season this year a lot more hopeful and optimistic than in some previous years. I don't know about you but I do. Perhaps it's because we've [05:00] seen some fulfillment of the things in which we put trust and hope. It's all well and good to plant the seeds or to see the seeds planted, but to see some of the results really, really helps. To see some changes happening in South Africa, to see that changes are occurring in Eastern Europe. Especially where some folks might have to said there wasn't much going on or might have been willing to vilify what was happening. So I find myself much more hopeful. It doesn't mean that I'm happy with everything that I see, but in ways great, as I just described, or small, like I mentioned in the commentary, we could go about a synagogue and a church getting together, the young people. A predominately black congregation with a synagogue in the Forest Hills section, getting together to share a mock Seder to think about what it means to be liberated and what it means to value each other. I mean, on those small ways, [06:00] well those are big ways too. I'm optimistic.

STOCKTON: Revered Butts?

BUTTS: I just want to say though, as we look at our city, especially New York, we see thousands, hundreds of thousands, of young men and women who are not equipped to deal with the coming world. Not equipped in terms of an education, not equipped in terms of having a healthy respect for authority, not even a healthy regard for tradition. And

many of us, because of the overwhelming problem of drugs, the lack of discipline that we find among many of our young people, are willing to throw up our hands and say that there's nothing that we can do. And people have to continually be reminded that any [07:00] process that seeks to help serve and save humanity is one that requires great sacrifice. On behalf especially of those of us who put out faith in God. God's reconciling process, liberating process, whether it's in the tradition of Passover or Easter, requires great sacrifice on the parts of those who are willing to heed God's call. Whether it was Moses and the Hebrew children, whether it was the disciples and especially the Christ. And for those who are Jewish and Christian and yes Muslim, we must be prepared to present ourselves to sacrifices for the benefit of all humanity. That theme echoes more and more for me particularly as a Christian, as I see the Christ hanging on the cross. Because [08:00] it was a self-giving love that helped to save humanity. Or as I see a Moses, looking in to the promise land but not being able to go. Giving of himself completely with a group of people often whimsical and capricious, fickle if you will, but yet sticking with it even if it meant the sacrifice of his own life. That's what Easter is saying to me. Those of us who have must sacrifice in order to ensure the liberation, freedom, and health and justice for others.

STOCKTON: Rabbi Tanenbaum.

TANENBAUM: That's a marvelous statement and a very moving statement. You know some indication of the power -- we're not talking about pieties when we talk about Passover and Easter. We're talking about powerful transforming conceptions, images, which literally have changed the course of history and remain to change the course of history again. [09:00] Just a minor example of the redemptive power for me of a Passover. Some years ago I attended a Seder conducted by a black Baptist church in Roxbury, Massachusetts. At the center of the Passover Seder there's a plate that is held up and in it are traditional Jewish Passover foods recalling the oppression in Egypt and the hopeful redemption. And those foods consist of an arm, of a lamb or a chicken in this case, to recall the sacrifice in the temple; of an egg, universal return; and parsley, symbols of spring. Well in this church service, the black pastor replaced the Jewish Passover foods with the food of oppression of black people in slavery. Collard greens, ham hocks, those things which were so personal in expressing their slavery. And then the plate is held up and it's a marvelous [10:00] high point of the Seder service. We say in Aramaic, [*Kol dichfin yasei?*], that all who are hungry, come and eat with us. That all who are poor come and share with us. This year we are slaves, next year may we be free people. It's that ambiguity of human existence that really is a universal condition. And in many ways I think we're all talking about our common humanity in that way, as well as our common spirituality.

STOCKTON: Sister?

D'ARIENZO: I'd like to respond to the theme of sharing which is a form of sacrifice which the two previous speakers mentioned. I think about self-sacrifice not just in the great sense of being a martyr to a cause, but the sacrifice that costs on a regular basis. And I think especially when we are concerned with the children of our societies how many people will condemn them but how few will give of themselves in time. I think of the wonderful [11:00] procession that Pax Christi sponsors every year along 42nd street from [Hammarskjold Plaza?] up to around 10th Avenue where about two thousand people reenact the traditional stations of the cross as we have in our tradition of Jesus on the way to Calvary. A few years ago one of the stops was at Bryant Park behind the public library and the traditional station that was recalled was Jesus comforts the women of Jerusalem who cried when they saw his bent and bloody person under the cross. The contemporary prayer was for children who don't have parks to play in because they're taken over by drug addicts and for people to give their time to recreational activities so that children will have a place. Well that sounds so pragmatic, how could it be religious? Well religion is most pragmatic. It's the relationship with God that brings us to [12:00] love our neighbor in a practical way. And so I see that the Passion as we celebrate it in the Christian tradition continues in the Lenten season which just ended and Easter Sunday is a call to relieve the suffering of those who

continue to bear crosses and often not of their making. So it's renewal and it has the theme of sacrifice and redemption. We must do the redeeming. It's not over yet, it's not done once.

STOCKTON: It'll never be over.

TANENBAUM: You know, in our, if I may --

STOCKTON: Rabbi Tanenbaum.

TANENBAUM:-- make the comment that a central theme in Jewish tradition, both biblical and rabbinic, is that every human being is a co-creator. Every human being is a partner with God in the work of creation. And the work of creation is not completed. And our task of partnership with God is to help complete the work of creation. If I can just say one word -- Roy I know you were going to make a comment briefly -- you know, sometimes people think of [13:00] Easter and Passover, and I can speak most credibly about Passover, as a kind of family celebration. It's wonderful, you know the family gets together, lots of celebration, tremendous togetherness. And it almost becomes a kind of piety, it's almost a quality of enjoyment excluding all else. But in point of fact Passover in our tradition are commanding orders. I mean, they're the commands of the prophets. And it's, the exodus is to tell us how great the suffering was and yet how great was the hope and how Moses sees that hope to bring the people out. If you look around the world today, indeed our inner-cities, it is a scandal that in a city as wealthy as this what goes on in the ghettos, the indifference and the casualness, the

trifling of that, what is happening with [14:00] the drug culture and the crime, it rises again. But [it's not merely?] there. On the international scene I've been dealing with problems of world refugees, world hunger, now since the mid-60s, to go in refugee camps in southeast Asia, Africa, Latin America. It is mindboggling that the world can go on celebrating without being aware of the magnitude of human suffering that goes on today. Today, today alone 40 thousand children are dying of hunger every day in the year. Fourteen million refugees in the world. In South Africa there are two million children starving every day. So while there is celebration, it is a celebration in effect to renew our energies, to deal with the real world.

STOCKTON: It's 10:15 and you're listening to the WINS conference. I'm Alice Stockton. Our guests are Sister Camille D'Arienzo of the Catholic archdiocese of Brooklyn, Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum of the American Jewish Committee, the Reverend Calvin Butts of the [15:00] Abyssinian Baptist Church and the Reverend Roy Lloyd of the Council of Churches of New York City. We're discussing the issues facing today's religious leaders and facing all of us today. And I just wanted to make a comment, Rabbi Tanenbaum, I feel that there is just, people are overwhelmed. They don't know what to do. I believe that there are people out there who want to help, they want to help others, they want to help the homeless. They want to help the poor. But they don't know how, and they are so overwhelmed. In New York City alone, just

walking through the Port Authority is overwhelming. How do I help? What can I do? I'm just one person. What can I do? And I mean just starting with yourself and your own city and your own environment, let alone what is going on in South Africa, what is going on in Latin America, even Eastern Europe you have people saying, yeah that's a wonderful thing that's happening but I tell you people are waiting for the other shoe to drop. And rather than do anything, rather than do anything, they do nothing.

BUTTS: There are too many examples [16:00] however of people who do something. One person in our city who stands tall above so many of us is Mother Hale who continues to respond to the horrors of inner-city life and the horrors of drug addiction and alcohol addiction in our society. So she lights candles instead of cursing the darkness. And one other thing about Easter, I contend, our churches are filled on Easter. Filled to overflowing. We're filled every Sunday, but on Easter it's unbelievable. And people ask me, why do people come to church? And I say, well they come to show off their clothing, I say no. They come because it's Easter and they're not going to come any other time, I said no. The main reason people come to church on Easter is to make sure we're telling the same story. And here's Sister Camille's emphasis on the Word: to make sure someone is saying that he did [17:00] get up from the grave. Because what that means is, as long as that story is still being told, there's hope. And furthermore, it will not always be like this. That's the

end of the story, see we have the wonderful advantage of knowing what the end of the story is. That it will not always be hunger, that the land will one day flow with milk and honey. That the lion and the lamb will lie down together. That men will beat their swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks and study war no more. That the leaves on the trees will be good for the healing of the nation. And when people hear that over and over again, even if it's only on Easter, then they can go away and say, well God has still got a plan for us. And they may never come back to church until next Easter but they do that because that helps, first of all, to get them in the [18:00] spirit of saying, there's something that still can be done. And along the way, there are hundreds and thousands of stories in this city of people, little feeding programs, of collecting clothes for those who are naked, people fighting to save a closing hospital, you know, or people doing something in their own way. We've got this campaign where we're painting over billboards. You would not believe, people get a little roller and a stick with the roller at the end and dip it in some paint and paint over a cigarette sign, they're involved for the first time. And they're happy and they think they are doing something, and they are. And all of that counts, because if it was not for this, if you boarded up the synagogues, closed the churches and pulled down the mosques, what would we have left? This is the essence of what keeps us going.

LLOYD: Let me just pick up on that...

STOCKTON: Reverend Lloyd.

LLOYD: Yeah, because, it seems to me that what the essence, what we're [19:00] talking about, it certainly goes beyond just the cognitive. You're talking about something that's made real as you live. And we're talking about, how do you do something, you're overwhelmed of course you are. But the only way you can deal with something is on your own level, your own one-to-one basis. Your church, Calvin, I mean, feeding people, one of the most important things that happens there is when elderly people come in there, I mean there's some food, but they share companionship. They share each other's space and a touch that may not happen at any other time. That's real, you see. That's why, despite all the things that are going on that we certainly say are terrible, there are all those, really millions of small stories. Now of course what we hear on the news are these terrible tragedies and some of the awful things that -- I'm not, I guess I never understood why [20:00] that's always the most important thing that needs to capture the news. But we know, each of us, the stories that are going on. And I can tell you, one, the idea of Passover became real for me about sixteen, seventeen years ago when a good friend of mine, [Shelley Horowitz?], invited me to his home for the Passover Seder, and I was part of that family. I was accepted for who I was and within that family and gathered in, and that for me should be a symbol of what we should all

be -- you're talking, Calvin, about telling the same story -
- that's a story. That we are a family. That we are a
people. That we do share a gift and a promise. And that we
have to make good on the hope.

STOCKTON: Sister Camille.

D'ARIENZO: Yeah, I'd like to pick up on a couple of themes. One is
the sense of the co-creationism that [21:00] Rabbi Tanenbaum
introduced and the sense of, we ought to continue being
life-givers. In the words of Jesus, "I've come that you may
have life and have it more abundantly." This against the
background of criticism and condemnation which think has too
often occupied the best minds of religious leaders and
religious people. I like to think about the church as the
light in the darkness. The church, the synagogue, the place
where people can go to be family, to be community, to be
encouraged that they can be their very best selves in
confronting the very real problems of their lives. And
speaking of the distant ones, when this may be the case. And
I think about a very important moment in my life when this
notion took root in my own heart in a way that it can never
leave. It was back in 1970 and I was at the University of
Michigan and it was in Detroit when a priest [22:00] who was
a marvelous preacher and a great community person died
suddenly of a heart attack at the age of 47. It was the lead
story on the news out of Detroit because he was so well
respected. And just responding to the terrible news I got in
my car and drove the distance into Detroit and went to the

church of Saint Cecilia which he had pastored. And it was an interracial congregation and people were giving testimony to all the ways that he had known them and helped them and breathed life and hope into them. And as I was leaving the church that very hot June evening, a woman was running up the stairs and into the vestibule and then she stopped short. There was no question about her occupation: she had on a red strapless mini-dress and she was heavily made up, although her face was terribly smeared from the crying, and I looked at her and she looked at me, and I said to [23:00] her, "Is there anything I can do?" And she said, pointing to the casket in which the priest was laid out in the center aisle of the church, "I want to go up there but I can't like this". So I gave her my jacket and she went down the aisle and stood there for a few moments and then came back, tears still streaming down her face. And she handed me the jacket and said, "He was the only man who ever though I could be more than what I am". And I thought so many times that that is the work of religion, organized or disorganized. That we are the people who should say to our brothers and sisters who like us are incomplete and needing of redemption and needing of family and needing of healing, listen to God's love, listen to God's word. We can all be more than what we are. And then the whole city, the whole world might be a little better.

TANENBAUM:That's exquisite. Could I just make a quick point if we have a moment...

STOCKTON: Yeah. Rabbi Tanenbaum.

TANENBAUM: [24:00] You raise the question of people being overwhelmed and not knowing what to do, and you ask about going through Grand Central etc. And one of the remarkable things that I think Reverend Butts referred to it before, is that there's more going on that people are aware of. If one wants to do something about the homeless, caring about the elderly, youth programs, go to any church or synagogue in this city and ask about what they're doing. I'm amazed and I've lived here a long time, I've gone around -- I was involved in a program, an interreligious program, for the homeless. Actually it was the first national interreligious program that was started by Episcopal bishop Paul Moore and Reverend Carl Flemister and others, and we began touring churches and synagogues in the area. It was a magnificent experience -- and nobody knew about it. Day after day, people were feeding, you had Wall Street executives feeding homeless people. I mean deprived, demoralized people, [25:00] feeding them breakfast with such love and care. It did more for the Wall Street executive than it did for the homeless person. But it's there. Just to say this briefly, I'm amazed to find, [Catholic Relief Service?] does an absolutely exquisite program and almost all over the world. Most of the Catholics I talk to don't know about [his?] work all over the country. Jewish communities organize a program called American Jewish World Service which is working in 27 countries, in Asia, Africa, Latin America, in development

programs, technical assistance programs. Protestants have [Church World Service?], Lutheran Relief Service. I mean there are enormous programs just sitting there just waiting for you to make action with them. And they could always use the helping hands and the helping hearts that people bring to that. It's there. And all somebody has to do is pick up the telephone and call the church or synagogue that you belong to and ask about that. You will find a way to do something useful. You won't change the world and the best can be the enemy of the good, [26:00] but you can do an awful lot of good.

BUTTS: There's a...

STOCKTON: Reverend Butts.

BUTTS: I don't want us to ever forget though the power of evil in the world. And I think that's what Passover and Easter helps us with. Evil always thinks -- especially evil that has been endowed with tremendous worldly power, arms, guns, chariots, horses, money -- that it can win. And you know, when you take a look at South Africa, who would ever believe that Mandela and his forces would be able to come as far as they've come against de Klerk or Botha prior to de Klerk with their tremendous military arsenal. You would look out at the drug problem and say we'll never be able to overcome it. You look at the destruction of young children in our streets and say how can we ever solve these problems.

[27:00] Passover says (laughs) to Pharaoh, who thought that he had all power in his hands: God is mightier. Easter says

to the world of evil that crucified Christ and sealed him in a tomb: God is all powerful. And so that's what we say to people. You may think that you have nothing. You may think that you are powerless. But you have more than you realize and if you believe in yourself and if you believe in the power of God throughout the ages you can do anything, absolutely anything. Even defeat evil itself. And I think that's the tremendous message. I mean you see Christ hanging on the cross, they had him. They sealed in him a tomb, they had him. Then early Sunday morning, he was no longer there. And as long as people say "He wasn't there! How did he get away?" You know? "What happened? I mean how come just the firstborn of Egypt died? I mean, what happened?" And nobody [28:00] can explain it, you know, not chariots, not horses, but by my pow--

LLOYD: My spirit.

BUTTS: My spirit. Sayeth the lord. And so, that's the story of Passover, that's the story of Easter, and that's the story that continues to give hope. And without that hope, without that hope, the world would just fall apart.

LLOYD: That can be the story of this city too --

BUTTS: Oh yeah.

LLOYD: -- you see. And part of it is us sitting here, enjoying each other's company and telling this story, but it's all of those people maybe who faithfully come every Saturday or Sunday or Friday evening as well as those who maybe just show up on Christmas and Easter.

BUTTS: Oh but would to God that the leadership of this city is attentive.

TANENBAUM: See but I think that is really the challenge, Reverend Butts. There are many people of [29:00] good will in Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, Jewish communities, Greek Orthodox communities. The need is really to bring them together around common issues. So much of our work is fragmented, isolated. There's some places we come together. But I think one brings together the resources, the intellectual resources, the moral recourses, the finan-- the practical know-how of how to reorganize neighborhoods, community organization, economic development of the ghettos and elsewhere. There are tremendous resources here. It's a matter of someone undertaking to catalyze that. And we're talking to people in the city government now about doing exactly that. It's got to be done.

STOCKTON: And that's another news conference. (laughs) That's all the time we have for tonight. You've been listing to a WINS news conference discussion on the issues facing today's religious leaders. Our guests have been Sister Camille D'Arienzo of the Catholic archdiocese of Brooklyn, Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum of the American Jewish Committee, The Reverend Calvin Butts of the Abyssinian Baptist Church and the Reverend Roy Lloyd of the Council of Churches of New York City. [30:00] Thank you all for joining me tonight. This is Alice Stockton, 10:10 WINS news.

END OF AUDIO FILE