

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

FAITH & FASCISM: ROB REINER & DAN PARTLAND TACKLE CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM WITH “GOD & COUNTRY”

LAURA FLANDERS: What's so funny about peace, love, and understanding? To answer rocker Elvis Costello's well-known question, there is nothing funny about those basic tenets of Christian belief. But mix religion up with a macho messianic form of White nationalism and you get a very toxic brew. One that's dangerous not only to the very idea of secular democracy, but also to Christianity itself. History has seen crusades before. But today's Christian nationalism is posing a real and immediate threat. In "God & Country," their new documentary based on the book "The Power Worshipers" by Katherine Stewart, director Dan Partland and producer Rob Reiner look at the phenomenon of Christian nationalism, with insights from scholars and activists as well as Christian leaders like Reverend William Barber of the Poor People's Campaign. Rob Reiner first came to fame as an Emmy award-winning actor in the landmark TV series "All in the Family." He went on to become an acclaimed director of some of the most popular motion pictures in American history, including "When Harry Met Sally" and "The Princess Bride." He's also a dedicated political activist, as you'll hear. Dan Partland is a longtime documentary producer and director for film and television. Also, a five-time Emmy nominee with two Emmys for best nonfiction series, including one for "American High" on Fox. Together, they are sounding a very urgent alarm, which makes me particularly glad, and honored to have them with me on this program. Welcome both, I am so glad to have you with us, and I learned a lot from this film of yours, "God & Country." For one thing, the huge role that Christian nationalists played in the January 6th insurrection. Dan, you wanna start? What do we need to know about what happened the night before, January 5th?

DAN PARTLAND: Well, the uprising, the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6th was basically a Christian nationalist uprising. Which is not to say that everybody there was a Christian nationalist, but it was a unifying theme. And I think what people should know is that it wasn't a coincidence that all of those people were at the capitol that day. There were churches and a lot of Christian groups, conservative Christian groups organizing concerted protests, to bring people to the United States Capitol on January 5th, for a thing they had done a bunch of times prior, called The Jericho Marches. The idea of the Jericho Marches was to symbolize, in Christian terms, the taking down of the government. The story of Jericho is that the walls come crumbling down. So they had brought everybody to the Capitol. And it was well-known, highly publicized within certain Christian circles that the event on the 6th was going to be an effort to undermine, to block the election, the certification of the election.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well it all drove home to me just how much more seriously we need to take this phenomenon, and how much more closely we in the media need to look. Your film

"God & Country" directs our attention to this question of Christian nationalism. And to kick things off, let's give our viewers and listeners a chance to check out the trailer. America and Christianity are like baseball and apple pie, and we celebrate them together.

Coming to you, Rob Reiner and one of the producers on "God & Country," American as baseball and apple pie, is it? Christian nationalism?

ROB REINER: Christianity is certainly a part of the fabric of America. There's no getting around that. The problem with Christian nationalism is they claim that America should be a Christian nation. That it was founded by the founding fathers to be a white Christian nation. And we know, based on our constitution and how it was written, very clearly there is a separation of church and state. The problem is to say that Christian nationalism, this, which is a political movement, it's not a religious movement, it's a political movement, that that should be tied into what is American, is a little misleading.

LAURA FLANDERS: If you were to summarize what makes Christian nationalism of today different from perhaps the conservative religious movements we've known in the past?

DAN PARTLAND: The current Christian nationalist movement, which as Rob said is a political movement, it is not a faith, has become the dominant form, the dominant expression of Christianity in America. That's what's really scary. And you pointed it out in your intro, that it represents a danger not just to American democracy because of the ways in which they can use both democratic and anti-democratic means to try to implement this Christian agenda into law, but also the danger that it represents to the church itself, because of the ways that it's co-opting the idea of what Christianity is about and undermining the central tenets of the faith.

ROB REINER: We have experts in the the film, very conservative, devout Christians, leaders, thinkers, pastors, who talk specifically about how this movement is completely antithetical to the teachings of Jesus. And that's really is what you have to focus in on, because the idea that you could promote a political agenda in the name of God and that would give you permission to resort to any means, to get what you want up to and including violence, which we saw on January 6th, is completely antithetical to the teachings of Jesus, which is love thy neighbor, do unto others, and so on.

LAURA FLANDERS: One of those theologians you talk about who appears in the films is Russell Moore. He's the editor in chief of Christianity Today, and he makes exactly that point.

RUSSELL MOORE: The Bible does depict a warrior Jesus, just with a very different kind of warfare. The warfare takes place spiritually, through the means of the gospel, not through physical violence. In the New Testament, Jesus repudiated that when his own

disciple, Peter, pulled out a sword to defend him from being arrested. And Jesus said, put away your sword. Those who live by the sword will perish by the sword.

LAURA FLANDERS: How big is this movement?

ROB REINER: Christian nationalism, the way we talk about it in the film as this political movement, it is not the majority, it is far from the majority. And what is scary is that, because of the way our system works, a very virulent minority can control our politics. And that's what they've done. They've figured out a way to take this movement, which is very well funded, very well organized, and much more so than it was historically, which started back in the fifties. And they've funneled this organization into Donald Trump and he is their spokesperson for this. And so, you can gain a tremendous amount of power with maybe 20, 25, 30% of the populace.

LAURA FLANDERS: Donald Trump seems like a pretty unlikely Christian leader of any stripe, Rob?

ROB REINER: Yes. I mean, when you think about what he's done, I mean, the man was found guilty of rape, essentially, you know and sexual assault. And you know, he's cheated into his businesses. He's stiffed people. I mean, the list goes on and on.

LAURA FLANDERS: How do they seek to wield power, in what is supposedly a democracy, which is ruled by the majority? They're a minority, Dan, so how do they imagine they'll do it, or how are they doing it?

DAN PARTLAND: I think they are using both democratic and anti-democratic means. And the problem with some of the things on the democratic end of the spectrum is in general, we in America, we embrace that. Make your case by persuasion, move the public point of view, in order to get laws enacted. But there are a couple of exceptions to that, and those are contained in the Bill of Rights. The Bill of Rights is inherently an anti-democratic check on majorities, so that even if you get the votes to insert elements of any particular faith into American law, that is not allowed. That is not allowed. It doesn't mean it doesn't happen, it still happens. But it's not, it's unconstitutional. The more concerning thing is the ways in which this movement has, as it's felt its power diminishing in the electorate, it's become increasingly anti-democratic. So that's everything from gerrymandering districts, both sides obviously do that, but gerrymandering districts inherently anti-democratic. Voter suppression has become a main goal of this movement, and intimidation. And then obviously, violence itself both on January 6th and at other times, and I think we should expect to see more political violence in this coming 2024 cycle.

LAURA FLANDERS: There's violence and intimidation and then there's fear and anger. And you have another very powerful participant in your documentary, "God & Country," and that's

Rob Schenck. People may remember that name, evangelical pastor, used to be a leader in the right to life movement. I remember him from the days of Operation Rescue. He is singing a slightly different song, but he tells the story of how the tactics worked.

ROB SCHENCK: Evangelical enterprises raise billions of dollars. We're not talking about millions or even hundreds of millions anymore, but billions of dollars in mostly 10 to \$25 contributions. Well the way you get those contributions is by ginning up fear and anger. When I was an activist on the religious right, I would meet with fundraisers. I would hear from them 'you've gotta give me plenty of fear and anger', I need to make your people as mad as hell and frightened to go to sleep at night. Because when they're that afraid, they're gonna send you a lot of money.

LAURA FLANDERS: So ginning up fear and anger to make money. It all sounds incredibly hypocritical and cynical. Is it, Rob?

ROB REINER: Well, yeah, obviously it is. But they know it works.

LAURA FLANDERS: Yeah.

ROB REINER: And that's the problem. I mean, you can gin up fear and anger and it can be directed in any particular direction. And if you are feeling disenfranchised, you're feeling like you've been left behind, if you're feeling fear that the 'other' are starting to take over the country, and that you might at some point become a minority yourself. And that you believe that this should be a white Christian nation, that could engender a lot of fear and anger. And so they can then use that fear and anger not only to raise money, but to move this political movement along.

LAURA FLANDERS: What you've just described is mirrored in a sense by maybe some of the rest of us not finding a way to explain to people why they feel things have been taken from them or are being taken from them, that isn't about the 'other'. That instead perhaps tells the story of corporate extraction, government capture, you know taking from the poor to the rich. And solidifying that power of money in this country, that leaves a lot of people feeling shut out. Dan, as you think about the work you hope this film will do, who is your target audience and who are you trying to reach?

DAN PARTLAND: There's a lot of people, American Christians, who are starting to really be ill at ease with the overall direction of their political leanings, of their church, of this movement in general. And they've been swept up in it. So we're definitely interested in reaching those people because I think those people are reachable.

ROB REINER: We want religious group, church groups to take a look at it and share it with their flock, and say, you know, talk to each other. What do you think about Christianity? How do you feel about it? How do you feel this movement? Is it representing true Christianity? We want that discussion to hopefully proliferate. I think also we're seeing around the world the rise of autocracy and theocracy, and it's a clarion call to say this can happen here. So we want people, beyond the people who are questioning what direction their faith is being taken, but just generally the idea that America is the beacon of democracy for the rest of the world. And if that democracy crumbles, then it portends a danger throughout the world. So we want everybody to understand that a small group of people can turn a democracy inside out and destroy it.

DAN PARTLAND: The best comment that I've gotten so far, I did a podcast, a faith-based podcast a week or two ago, led by a pastor, who was shocked by a lot that he had seen. He certainly knew it because he was experiencing it in his own life. But his thought was that it showed up so much more clearly in the film, than the way he experienced in his own life. And he said sometimes maybe it takes an outsider's perspective to show us who we really are. And I thought that was chilling. It was something that I'm very worried about because you never wanna be an outsider. You wanna get deep into a subject, so that you're telling it in a way that makes sense to the people who it is most central to.

LAURA FLANDERS: So you're hoping people will watch the film and not be distracted by the fact that you have a lefty activist Jewish filmmaker Rob Reiner as producer?

DAN PARTLAND: Don't look behind-

LAURA FLANDERS: Is that basically- the curtain!

LAURA FLANDERS: what I'm hearing Dan?

DAN PARTLAND: Yeah. Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain. No, you know I think. Look, we come together in this country as Americans, and so to some extent, I think the idea that there's any less credibility or any importance that we're gonna look at what the faith profile is of the filmmakers, to decide if we wanna see it or decide if it's important or it's somehow tainted. The film is the film.

LAURA FLANDERS: Yeah.

DAN PARTLAND: People should see it. And look at the group of people, of dedicated, good citizens who came together in good faith to talk about this urgent problem. And that's what the film is about.

LAURA FLANDERS: There is something about evangelicalism that I respect, which is that within certain boundaries they do believe that people can be changed, saved, rescued, converted. That we are mutable in our beliefs, as our democracy system is also mutable, for good and for less good. Rob, you've gone on a journey yourself, you've talked about in the context of this film.

ROB REINER: Even though I am Jewish, I was not raised that way. But in a time in my life when I was going through the worst period of soul searching, I read everything. I read Buddhism and books about Christianity and Hinduism, I read everything. And what I came around thinking is the, if you look at the core teachings of Jesus that makes the most sense and made the most sense to me, the idea of do unto others. And there's a reason why it's called the golden rule. Because if you can live by that, everything else, it falls into place. You don't need the 10 Commandments, you don't need a lot, if you just live by that rule. And then I look at this film and I look at what's happened in this country, and it seems like we've come so far from those teachings, which Reverend Barber, who you mentioned at the beginning, brings us all back to at the end of the film.

REVEREND BARBER: Christianity at its best is committed to love and truth and justice. If we do this right, what a country we will be.

DAN PARTLAND: It's wrong to think of it as a light switch, that's either on or off. You're a Christian nationalist, you're not. The way that most of the scholarship views this is really is a spectrum, it's a continuum. And some of the best research on this classifies some different groups ranging from what they call Ambassadors of Christian nationalism, who firmly believe that this is a Christian nation and should be reflected that way in law. And the next tier is Accommodators, Resisters, and then full on Rejectors. Well in this top class of Ambassadors, those are probably most of the people we're talking about when we say Christian nationalists. This may be as much as 20% of the population. Okay, that's a huge, huge number, 20% who have deeply held beliefs that the United States is and should be officially a Christian nation, and are looking to write that into law. That's the population that we have to be worried about. But, what makes it so difficult to address is that when you consider the next tier, people who you'd call Accommodators of Christian nationalism or even Resisters, now you're talking about really almost two thirds to three quarters of the country have at least some bit of Christian nationalist belief. And some of it is fine, of course, this is basically a Christian nation. There's a background of Christianity throughout the history of this republic. The sort of benign ways that it starts, which is just recognizing that there's a lot of Christian people here, quickly becomes a slippery slope with this casual language of well, but the United States is basically a Christian nation. Well what does that mean? What does that mean? And I think what we have to do is we have to draw that bright line again between the separation of church and state, which is a foundational American principle, which I cannot believe in the year 2024 is becoming fuzzy to people.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, one of the things I learned that I didn't know before, Robert from the film, was just how recent it is that the word God appears on our coins and the pledge of allegiance.

ROB REINER: Well, I was in school actually in 1954 when they added "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance. It used to be "one nation indivisible", then it became "one nation under God, indivisible". And I remember when that happened, 'cause we gave that pledge every morning in school. So it really started happening around then. And we've seen it grow over time. But the question you asked, which is how do you undo it? And the way in which you undo it is not, you know you're never gonna get that hardcore group of people that just believe it and you can't convince them. It's those others, those other layers that Dan talked about. If you can get to those people, to make them understand that this is destroying their faith in a way, it's undermining their faith, that's the way in which I think you can undo it. And then, there's all kinds of pie in the sky kind of things like getting rid of the Electoral College and things like that, which would actually make it more democratic and majority rule, because we are not really majority rule in the country. There are a lot of safeguards for the minority, to make sure that they're not run roughshod, by the majority. But, when that minority gets too much power, then they're running roughshod over the vast majority. And so that's what you have to wrestle with and that's in our civics classes, so people have to understand how it works. You hear this every four years, that this is the greatest and most important election in our lifetime. This one actually is, I mean democracy is on the ballot. And Joe Biden has made that case. And we have a choice here, and it's a very stark choice. We can either choose to continue this wonderful experiment or take a big step towards destroying it. And so, to me, 2024 is the key. And I believe that Americans, at the end of the day, are gonna choose democracy over autocracy. I have to believe that.

LAURA FLANDERS: Thank you so much. I appreciate you both, Rob Reiner, Dan Partland, the film "God & Country." Thanks for joining me.

ROB REINER: Thanks for having us.

DAN PARTLAND: Thank you.

LAURA FLANDERS: There's a story that Rob Reiner likes to tell about Ben Franklin, who was asked after the writing of the Constitution whether the country had emerged with a monarchy or a republic. A republic, he responded, if we can keep it. As Reiner and Dan Partland's film reveals keeping it is gonna take some work. And while I'm no evangelical, there is something to be learned from the actions of the Christian right. Democracy as they understand it, is no static thing. It can be changed or captured, and some at least are out to do just that. It all makes me think about the democracy that was written about by French philosopher, Alexis de Tocqueville,

who toured around the United States in the mid 1800's, and found it to be a very democratically participatory place, with meetings happening all over and people actively engaged in the process. Fast forward a hundred years, and by the end of the 1900's, it seems to me we kind of privatized the process, like so much else. Outsourced it to professional politicians, pundits, funders seeking to wield power and influence. Can we grab it back? Make it active again? Play our part? Well, if ever there was a time to answer that question, this year would be that time, say our guests. You can find my full uncut conversation with Rob Reiner and Dan Partland about their film "God & Country" through a subscription to our podcast. It's free and all the information's at our website. 'Till the next time, stay kind, stay curious. For the Laura Flanders show, I'm Laura, thanks for joining us.

For more on this episode and other forward-thinking content, subscribe to our free newsletter for updates, my commentaries, and our full uncut conversations. We also have a podcast, it's all at lauraflanders.org.