

Ep 40: Rachel Laser- the Americanisation of the religious right

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[Emma Park] You're listening to Episode 40 of the National Secular Society podcast, hosted by Emma Park.

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Two episodes ago, the NSS's Alastair Lichten spoke to Andrew Seidel, an attorney at the Freedom

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From Religion Foundation, on how issues of religious nationalism were likely to

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influence the American presidential elections. Now that the elections have happened, I'm here

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with a follow-up episode to examine the outcome of the elections, Trump's legacy, Biden's positions

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on religious freedom, and the influence of the American religious right, not just within the US,

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but around the world. Under President Trump Christian right organizations in the US saw

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an increasing influence over politics in areas from women's reproductive rights and LGBT rights

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to appointments to the judiciary. However the influence of these organizations has in recent

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years started to extend outside America's borders. According to a report by the global

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media organisation Open Democracy, secretive evangelical organizations in the US have been

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pouring millions of dollars into other similarly regressive organizations all around the world.

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But what exactly do people mean when they talk about the religious or the Christian right?

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How far do politics and religion overlap in America? And looking further afield, how far are

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US evangelical organizations responsible for burgeoning nationalist and Christian

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conservative movements across the globe? To discuss these questions I'm joined now by

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Rachel Laser, President and CEO of Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

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Americans United is a non-profit organization that campaigns to ensure that religion does not

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dictate public policy, and is not used to justify

discrimination. Rachel is a lawyer and strategist

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whose previous roles include Deputy Director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism,

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and Director of the Culture Program at Third Way, a progressive think tank in Washington DC.

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At the NSS's 2019 conference she gave the keynote speech on Religious Freedom under Trump.

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She was also the first external guest to appear on this podcast in its second episode back in January 2019.

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Rachel Laser, welcome
[Rachel Laser] Nice to be here with you again, Emma.

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[EP] So let's make a start with the questions then.
On the podcast last month, the National Secular Society's Alistair

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Lichten spoke to Andrew Seidel about the role that secularism would play in the US election.

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Looking back on it now, with hindsight, in your view how important were issues about the

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separation of Church and state in Americans' voting behavior?
[RL] I think that it was part of

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the zeitgeist of what influenced the vote. I'm not sure that it was as specific as a vote for

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church state separation on a conscious level. But I think that, whereas this is something in America

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that was set up in the late 1700s, and that often many people have taken for granted. Now with what

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happened in Charlottesville, for example, with the protests and the Christian nationalists

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chanting "Jews will not replace us", and the hate that we saw, and then the President saying

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that there were good people on both sides, with the tear gassing of peaceful protesters in front

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of the White House, who were anguished over the murder of George Floyd, and part of

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the Black Lives Matter movement, white Americans, black and brown Americans, all coming together,

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the administration tear gas them so that the President could go hold up a bible (upside down by

0:03:39.600,0:03:45.840
the way) in front of St John's Church and declare 'Let's keep America safe and nice'.

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Right. So with a not-so-hidden dog
whistle that, I think,
was not missed by many. That what

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makes America safe and nice are white
Christians
basically, and not these protesters out there.

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So in that regard, the separation of
religion and government
really was playing a role in this election.

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[EP] Well of course the Black Lives Matter
movement has been of key importance this
year.

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To what extent do religious and ethnic or
racial issues
intersect in the US in politics?

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[RL] Very, very much. And in hidden ways.
And it's intentionally hidden. Certainly

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all around the world, but throughout
American
history, from the very beginning,
government

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officials were citing the bible and
entangling themselves
in religion as a way to advance racist policies.

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There's a very long history that really goes
through to today.
When you look at vouchers in America,

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which are really government funding for
private schools.

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But it's over 70%, in some places over 90%,
for
private religious schools. And if you look at
the

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history of vouchers, they are rooted in trying
to evade desegregation orders in this
country.

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And they are rooted in trying to fund
Christian
academies. It's documented everywhere.

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But that strategy of funding vouchers as
a way to avoid desegregation was
intentionally hidden,

0:05:21.423,0:05:30.521
a strategy where these commissions declared
that they were going to sound race neutral,

0:05:30.521,0:05:33.920
in the way that they were pitching vouchers.
And that's

0:05:33.920,0:05:39.600
stuck through today, to the extent that
there's a campaign that President Trump

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and the Christian nationalists have used to
to pitch vouchers as being FOR civil rights.

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Instead they're really used to take away
money
from public schools, where the vast majority
of

0:05:53.440,0:05:58.640
all Americans go, and an even greater
proportionate majority of black and brown

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American children go.
[EP] Well let's look specifically at the religious
right,

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the Christian right, of course. There are many different religions represented in the US, but

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the religious right as a phrase is widely used to describe Christian nationalism, and it's applied to

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other similar authoritarian religious movements around the world. In your view, how useful is

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this phrase 'religious right', and how would you understand it?
[RL] You know, it just might not be

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the winning phrase for the future. I think it's a very effective phrase when we're describing

0:06:33.440,0:06:37.920
a Christian nationalist movement ,
a movement that is

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sometimes disguised, I suppose, sometimes with true believers, who are advancing what is really a

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politically conservative agenda in the name of religion. And, I think, when we're talking to

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what we would call our 'base' of supporters, probably all around the world, but certainly in

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America, it's an easy shortcut for describing what we're talking about.

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It really grew out of the 'moral majority' in the 1970s. But if you think about the

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terminology, it's confusing, right? Firstly, at least in America, 'religious' is a term that's

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very positive term for a lot of people. A lot of people have very positive associations with it.

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[EP] Yeah, that's quite different from the UK, I would say.
[RL] Yes, okay. So there's a

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distinction right there. The right, also 'rights', is a positive term for people.

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Now what's clever about the phrase 'the religious right' is that it conveys this idea that it's the marrying of religious with political.

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It's not just religious. 'Right' is one way to reference a political group. But the problem is 'right' can also mean 'a right', which is very

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esteemed in America, and so you combine religious with right, and it's not surprising that last year,

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when Americans United did a 2000 person poll through a very well respected polling outfit, what

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we found is that the total favorability associated with religious right was 40%,

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and the total unfavorability was 33%. So more

favorable than unfavorable.

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[EP] It sounds nice and seductive, a nice little alliterative jingle: 'religious right'. it sounds like

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It encompasses so many positive moral qualities, you might say.

[RL] Yes, it does, and yes

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the alliterative part is attractive. But what we found in our polling is, when you talk about

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religious extremists, people are pretty united in opposition. Now, the danger there is you want

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to be really careful. Because of anti-muslim bigotry and bias, there's often a quick association

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of religious extremists, at least in America, with muslims, which is unfair.

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So you want to be careful when you use the phrase, that you're not conveying that.

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Another phrase that was more effective than not is 'Christian nationalism'.

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The total favorability was lower than the total unfavorability. Now the problem with 'Christian

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nationalism' in our poll is that 44% of Americans said they couldn't rate it, in other words they

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weren't sure what it was. So yeah we have a lot of education to do. But I think that term also

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nicely sums up who we're talking about. Of course, I'm Jewish. I'm actually the first

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Jewish leader of Americans United in our almost

75-year history. And as a Jew, I feel sometimes

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awkward about not making clear that the religious

extremist movement that we're fighting often does

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include, not always but often, does include orthodox

Jews in this country. Orthodox Jews are 10%

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of American Jews, so they're a very slim minority, but nonetheless, they do join, I think,

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which can be very short-sighted, because they're not gonna win by empowering a religious government

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in the end. I wish that there was more of a long-term vision, but that is a problem

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with Christian nationalism. Often what we are talking about is those who

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hold the power reigns, perpetuating their own

power. That does tend to be Christians in America.

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[EP] Now Biden is a Roman Catholic, and Trump was previously Presbyterian, but

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seemed to decide he was non-denominational for the purposes of the most recent election.

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To what extent is the Christian right a more Christian nationalist side of American politics?

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Is it non-denominational? Is it a particular type of Christian?
[RL] It certainly, in the

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concentric circle sort of way, lines up tightly with a lot of the white evangelical community.

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There certainly is white Catholic leadership. Not everyone is white in that movement, but it's

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certainly majority white, and tends to advance a white Christian privileged agenda.

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That's what we saw, even in this election, where, I think, President Trump

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really advanced a white nationalist agenda. And Catholics really divided on him, and

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went the right way ultimately. But white evangelicals still really stuck by him and his Christian nationalist agenda.

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So there certainly is a lot of overlap.
[EP] Finally, on domestic politics,

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what legacy do you think the Trump administration will leave, given that it did embrace

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the Christian right, especially the evangelical right?
[RL] I think a negative one

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and a positive one. So I'll start with the negative so I can end with the positive!

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In the very negative sense the fact that one-third of the Supreme Court

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were appointed now by Trump, and they really do hold true to, largely so far, not entirely,

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in certain ways, but certainly on the true religious freedom question, are certainly so far

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turning out to be right in line with a Christian nationalist agenda. That's very damaging for some years.

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There's also a large number of rules and regulations, executive orders, that President

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Trump and his administration have issued, that allow religious exemptions that are harmful,

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often targeted at the LGBTQ community, often targeted at women, religious minorities, non-theists.

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Here, in the realm of everything, from health care access and birth control access, to access to

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social services, the ability to foster children, employment. In this country, about anywhere

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between a fifth and a fourth, I've seen numbers for both, are employed by Federal contractors.

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They're in the process, now, before he leaves, of finalizing a rollout of the Department

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of Labor that would really broaden the ability of Federal contractors to discriminate in hiring

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and firing, based on their religious beliefs and views. Anyone who doesn't meet their religious

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litmus tests can be fired, including now for-profit government contractors, and not just

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non-profit ones. So, in so many walks of life, there's tons to undo. There's tons to

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undo, and it takes time. We haven't always seen, even Democratic administrations, sort of line up.

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I actually just wrote a column this month for our magazine. It's just out and it's online,

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about, even though we're really celebrating

a lot of what Biden's record promises on

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religious freedom, that if you listen to his victory speech that he gave, it was pretty

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loaded with religiosity. And that's fine, and there are certain parts of it that are sincere.

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He's Catholic. He was citing a hymn that's really important to him and his deceased son.

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He shared it, that's a big moment for him, he's sharing who he is, and a lot of it he universalized,

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so that's great. But there were elements of it which sort of made clear,

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in particular, I think, to non-believers, that he wasn't talking to non-believers. On the

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positive side, I think what the damaging, brutal Trump administration did on this issue

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woke a lot of Americans up to the threats to religious freedom and to church state separation.

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It made clear how connected and fundamental the separation of religion and government is to

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everything from science, like the vaccines and the treatment of coronavirus, to LGBTQ equality,

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to reproductive freedom, and connecting
those dots
is really important to galvanizing a movement
who

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doesn't take church state separation for
granted. Because what we saw in our poll

0:14:59.600,0:15:05.360
is that 60% of Americans said that the
separation
of religion and government is either one of
the

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most important things to them personally, or
very important. That was great. But only a
fifth

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thought that it was urgent in some real way.
[EP] So Trump made the urgency of
the situation more apparent.

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[RL] It really did.
[EP] Now, moving to the American influence
of

0:15:27.040,0:15:34.080
the Christian right and the nationalist
Christian
evangelical right around the world, outside
the US,

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a post on the Open Democracy website on
27th October
this year [2020], reported that the Christian
or

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religious right had, in recent years, spent at
least
\$280 million of dark money in countries

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around the world, from Africa to Europe, to
Asia,

to South America. And of that, almost \$90
million was

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spent in Europe. And this money has been
used, among
other things, to fuel campaigns against
women's

0:15:58.080,0:16:04.160
reproductive rights and LGBT+ movements.
Rachel, from your perspective, to what
extent

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is the American religious right interfering
in other countries affairs?
[RL] Oh very much. There's a

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great Netflix documentary series called The
Family.
It's based on a book that Jeff Sharlet wrote.

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Jeff Sharlet, by the way, just joined the board
of Americans United for Separation of Church
and

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State, which is wonderful. One of the five
dedicated episodes of the the Netflix series

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shows that there was tremendous intentional
influence by The Family, which is really

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a Christian nationalist group that is out to
assert white Christian power in a global sense.

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There were certainly ties that have been
demonstrated,
between The Family, here in America,

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and the Ugandan law that would have
put LGBTQ people to death, for example.

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These ties are being quite intentionally sought after and nurtured. And it's pretty scary

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and overwhelming. When I watched that Netflix series, it made me

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even realize that some of those ties could have even fortified what became

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some of the Russian interference on behalf of Trump in the in the 2016 election, here in America.

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[EP] To take one specific example of the influence of the American religious right around the world,

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according to the investigation by Open Democracy, the evangelical Billy Graham

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Evangelistic Association has been funding lawsuits even in Britain and elsewhere in Europe. Over here

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claimants, backed by the BGEA, have been suing local authorities who closed religious venues during the

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pandemic. The BGEA's president, Franklin Graham, has previously described Islam as evil, and same-sex

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marriage as "orchestrated by satan". The issues raised by his organization in these lawsuits,

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they use other tactics, but fundamentally the issue is whether the right to religious freedom

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trumps the local authority's power to close venues as a precaution against Covid. So, in other words,

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it's religious freedom versus public health concerns. This is a tactic which the religious

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right have already been using in the US. In your view, Rachel, how effective is this tactic likely to

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be, of exploiting human rights law in the interests of religious exceptionalism?

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[RL] I think that if the religious extremists and Christian nationalists are going to land on this

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as a key part of their strategy, that's favorable as compared to some other things that they could

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be pushing. From this perspective, that if, in order to win on this argument, that religious

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freedom doesn't mean that you have a license to cause harm to others, religious freedom

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is the right to believe as you wish, change your belief system across the course of your lifetime,

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as long as you don't harm others. Because as,
now very sadly deceased, Justice Ruth

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Bader Ginsburg over here used to say, 'your
right to swing your fist ends at the tip

0:19:04.720,0:19:10.720
of the other person's nose',
said in a more legalistic way.

0:19:10.720,0:19:16.960
When the government is asking for you to
bear the
cost of someone else's religious beliefs,
they're

0:19:16.960,0:19:21.600
giving privilege to that other person's
religious
beliefs, and in America the right to religious

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freedom, that's codified in the first
amendment of
our constitution, prohibits that. At the

0:19:27.520,0:19:34.240
same time, Americans United has filed over
40 Friend-of-the-court briefs, over 40 Amicus
briefs.

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In these cases here and we've done incredibly
well.
Up until this past Wednesday night,

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in only three of the cases where we had filed
briefs, had cases ruled in support of these
seekers

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of religious exemptions over public safety
orders. The Supreme Court had ruled twice

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on our side, that religious freedom is not a
right to risk lives, and that these services

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have been documented to be super
spreaders. Period.
The end. But unfortunately, on Wednesday
night, with

0:20:06.160,0:20:12.880
the newly composed court, even with
the Chief Justice Roberts, also a
conservative,

0:20:12.880,0:20:18.480
ruling on the side of the the progressives
on the Court, we lost for the first time. The

0:20:18.480,0:20:24.720
Court reversed itself and the Court found that
in New York, that

0:20:25.280,0:20:31.440
the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Brooklyn
and a
bunch of orthodox Jewish groups were
entitled to

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a preliminary injunction. It was just a
preliminary ruling, but nonetheless that was

0:20:36.640,0:20:40.480
very gratuitous.
[EP] Just to explain to the listeners who may
not know,

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this was in relation to their their right to
religious assemblies, even through Covid. Is
that right?

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[RL] Correct. This was in response
to some targeted new regulations by the
Governor

0:20:52.480,0:20:58.560
of New York for areas where there were really
high
incidences being recorded of coronavirus.

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There were stricter rules that, by the way, weren't just for houses of worship, but applied in fact, as

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Justice Sotomayor pointed out in her dissent, that there was actually religious privilege that

0:21:10.880,0:21:16.800
was being given to these houses of worship, because all non-essential businesses in the red zones were

0:21:16.800,0:21:22.560
barred from conducting in-person operations at all, and all in-restaurant dining was prohibited.

0:21:22.560,0:21:29.772
Frankly all of the logical comparators like movie theaters, concerts, and such, where people come together

0:21:29.772,0:21:35.040
and spend long periods of time together, we're all flatly barred in all of the zones.

0:21:35.040,0:21:39.360
[EP] It is difficult one though, I guess. I don't know whether this is a question of the difference

0:21:39.360,0:21:44.240
between the US constitution and, say, the Human Rights Act, which applies in the UK and in much

0:21:44.240,0:21:50.640
of Europe. So, in the Human Rights Act we have freedom of religion or belief as a right, but it

0:21:50.640,0:21:58.240
is limited by, or potentially subject to, concerns

which include public health. Whereas, is it not the

0:21:58.240,0:22:03.600
case that in the US constitution there's no such limitations on the right to freedom of religion?

0:22:04.400,0:22:12.160
[RL] No, in the sense that the Supreme Court has ruled plenty of times before that the constitution

0:22:12.160,0:22:18.000
forbids the misuse of religious freedom to harm others, and that this would be in public

0:22:18.000,0:22:24.480
health instances. That's the classic case. So, no. I think the confusion, Emma, is between

0:22:24.480,0:22:29.760
religious freedom and religious free exercise. I think what the American constitution does, which

0:22:29.760,0:22:35.440
is really clarifying, is it says: yeah there's a right to free exercise but there's also

0:22:35.440,0:22:40.640
the importance of not establishing any religion. And the way that the two work together is what

0:22:40.640,0:22:46.160
protects religious freedom. What Ruth Bader Ginsburg, our Justice, did such a wonderful

0:22:46.160,0:22:53.520
job, and Justice Sotomayor as well, of explaining is that: unbridled free exercise of religion is

0:22:53.520,0:23:00.880
not a recipe for religious freedom for all - in fact

it stands in the way of religious freedom for all.

0:23:00.880,0:23:05.920

[EP] Do Americans United, or other secularist groups in the US, have any information that you could

0:23:05.920,0:23:13.200

share with the NSS and similar secularist groups, on how best to resist the influence of the

0:23:13.200,0:23:19.440

Christian right?

[RL] Yeah. We're always actively working on that, thinking about that.

0:23:19.440,0:23:26.960

Some of the ways that we think about it are to think about broadening our coalition, and

0:23:26.960,0:23:33.760

to make sure that we're reaching younger people.

As to broadening our coalition, it's so important

0:23:33.760,0:23:40.720

to make sure that we're all banding together. There's a wonderful pastor in America called

0:23:40.720,0:23:46.560

Reverend William Barber. He's an African American pastor, and he's a real civil rights leader. He

0:23:46.560,0:23:51.920

leads something called the Poor People's Campaign here. He talks about the importance of having a

0:23:51.920,0:23:58.640

moral fusion movement. What he says is that in America we would have never succeeded in

0:23:58.640,0:24:04.720

our civil rights movement without people leaving their individual silos and coming together.

0:24:04.720,0:24:09.680

I think that what keeping religion and government separate and true religious freedom

0:24:09.680,0:24:19.840

for all invites is this rainbow coalition of religious leaders, secular leaders reproductive

0:24:19.840,0:24:25.200

freedom leaders, LGBTQ leaders religious, minority

leaders - that's part of the religious leaders -

0:24:26.800,0:24:32.800

black and brown leaders. There are so many ties between so many different causes: leaders who

0:24:32.800,0:24:38.720

care about science and the environment, leaders in this country who

0:24:38.720,0:24:44.240

care about public schools and who don't want to see money being diverted to what we talked about

0:24:44.240,0:24:49.920

earlier: this voucher agenda. So it's really exciting to bring everyone together. There's power

0:24:50.480,0:24:55.040

in all coming together to support the separation of religion and government. And number two:

0:24:55.040,0:24:59.600

I think, not just in America but all around the world, there has been this co-opting

0:24:59.600,0:25:07.280

of the term 'religious freedom', this fraud around it, this redefinition to mean religious privilege. It

0:25:07.280,0:25:11.440
doesn't mean religious freedom, it means religious privilege. We had a group of students

0:25:11.440,0:25:17.440
come spend their spring break on a class with me from Stanford University. I focus grouped

0:25:17.440,0:25:22.480
them, and I ask them what first came to mind when they thought about religious freedom.

0:25:22.480,0:25:30.160
The first thing that the group said is anti-LGBTQ. Wow! Right, That's a redefinition.

0:25:30.160,0:25:36.400
That's a sad day. I think it's really important that we all have programs,

0:25:36.400,0:25:41.680
and systematically be making sure that we're reaching out to the new generation of leaders so

0:25:41.680,0:25:47.920
that they understand and value what true religious freedom is.
[EP] Absolutely. Now, in your keynote speech

0:25:47.920,0:25:53.280
to the NSS last year, you mentioned that Americans United were really trying to engage with the

0:25:53.280,0:25:59.120
younger generation and with Americans from different social economic and ethnic backgrounds.

0:25:59.120,0:26:06.080

How much progress has Americans United made since then in developing this nationwide secular movement?

0:26:06.080,0:26:11.840
[RL] I think we're making tremendous strides. It's a lot about having a plan, and we do.

0:26:11.840,0:26:16.400
We have a five-year strategic roadmap and it really guides us. It's like

0:26:16.400,0:26:19.920
telling someone that you're gonna run a race and then you really have to run it. It gets

0:26:19.920,0:26:25.600
you there. It actually makes it happen. For us this past year I'm proud to say that we

0:26:25.600,0:26:30.960
launched our Youth Organizing Fellowship. It's our first one ever. It's a new leadership program,

0:26:30.960,0:26:36.480
that we're going to run every year, that provides emerging leaders, 10 of them,

0:26:36.480,0:26:42.800
ages 18 to 25, with training and also support to advocate for the separation of

0:26:42.800,0:26:47.920
religion and government, and mobilize support for Americans United in their communities. They're

0:26:47.920,0:26:53.920
a tremendous group. They're geographically diverse, racially diverse, religiously diverse,

0:26:53.920,0:26:59.520
non-theist, believers, of different religious backgrounds. They're each charged

0:26:59.520,0:27:05.840

with engaging at least a thousand young people through the activities that they organize in their

0:27:05.840,0:27:11.440
communities and on their campuses in this year, and creating tool kits for other youth leaders.

0:27:11.440,0:27:16.616
They have to each host 10 to 20 community or on-campus events, even if it's over Zoom.

0:27:16.616,0:27:23.760
We're so excited to have launched that program. More generally, we're going to be announcing our

0:27:23.760,0:27:30.320
first ever Faith Advisory Council at Americans United, because one of the contributions that we

0:27:30.320,0:27:34.960
really can make is bringing together - it's what I was just talking about: the importance of

0:27:34.960,0:27:41.120
weaving together our interests - and if there are two groups of people who are most committed

0:27:41.120,0:27:47.680
to true religious freedom it's people who deeply value their religious identities and understand

0:27:47.680,0:27:53.600
how important it is for others to have their own, and people who deeply value being able to have

0:27:53.600,0:28:00.000
a non-religious identity and understand that as well. So we're announcing our first

0:28:00.000,0:28:06.800
ever Faith Advisory Council, made up of a very diverse group of faith leaders, to be voices for

0:28:06.800,0:28:15.500
Americans United and also to refute this idea that to be for a secular government is somehow to be anti-religion.

0:28:15.500,0:28:19.360
[EP] Yeah. It's often perceived that way, I think. Secularism is often associated with

0:28:19.360,0:28:24.720
atheism or lack of religious belief, but there's no reason why that should necessarily be the case.

0:28:24.720,0:28:30.480
You mentioned the idea of the abuse of the right to religious freedom, not

0:28:30.480,0:28:35.680
just in the US, but around the world. In general, how strong would you say the parallels are between

0:28:35.680,0:28:41.360
authoritarian and conservative religious groups in the US and in other countries? Do you think the

0:28:41.360,0:28:46.560
US religious right has imposed its own views on other countries, for example in relation to

0:28:46.560,0:28:53.280
women's rights or to LGBT+ rights? Or would you say, in places like Poland or Hungary there

0:28:53.280,0:28:58.240
are already indigenous movements in favor of these conservative views which the

0:28:58.240,0:29:06.160
US Christian right has built on?
[RL] I think that there are ways that the religious right has

0:29:06.160,0:29:12.000
worked with the American government, they've had unparalleled access. President Obama had a

0:29:12.000,0:29:17.200
Faith Advisory Council that had non-theists, people of all different backgrounds, it had a narrow scope.

0:29:17.200,0:29:22.480
It was published in the Federal Register so it was open to the public and transparent.

0:29:22.480,0:29:29.200
This Faith Advisory Council that President Trump had was evangelical only and it had a really

0:29:29.200,0:29:33.440
broad scope. They bragged about everything. Some of the things that they did - and I think

0:29:33.440,0:29:39.840
the fact that this President issued the global gag rule again, that forbids anyone taking

0:29:39.840,0:29:44.880
US money from abroad, all the family planning clinics from doing their own advocacy and spending

0:29:44.880,0:29:50.960
their own money separated from US money, even referring for abortion let alone providing it.

0:29:50.960,0:29:56.800
That's something that is pandering to this religious right community. Many people

0:29:56.800,0:30:02.080
would point to some of the ways that President Trump has worked with Israel - moving the embassy

0:30:02.080,0:30:08.160
and such - as, again, pandering to evangelical Christians and their agenda for salvation .

0:30:08.160,0:30:13.870
[EP] Is it pandering rather than deliberately forcing what is not already there?

0:30:13.870,0:30:20.880
Is it pandering to movements that are very much there?
[RL] I think some of it is pandering - like

0:30:20.880,0:30:25.280
with the global gag rule - there's countries where that isn't already there, where

0:30:25.280,0:30:31.520
now we're imposing these restrictions. But I think that yes, there is a zeitgeist right now, in the

0:30:31.520,0:30:38.240
in the world really, where there's often these ties between nationalist populism and

0:30:38.240,0:30:45.851
and the religious right: Poland, Hungary, Russia, Turkey. I think we're seeing that happen.

0:30:45.851,0:30:48.720
I think, just as Christian nationalists here are really pushing

0:30:48.720,0:30:55.360
to maintain white Christian supremacy, that support for religious coercion abroad means that

0:30:55.360,0:31:00.320
Trump, and any future leaders like him, will have natural populist allies, and

0:31:00.320,0:31:07.200
vice versa with that kind of a movement.
I think there is something that is happening

0:31:07.200,0:31:10.800
across too many countries,
and we certainly saw this before -

0:31:10.800,0:31:15.840
before world war II - some parallels that
were taking place where there is this sort of

0:31:15.840,0:31:22.080
populism and nationalism, that's definitely
being
infused with the religion of the majority -

0:31:22.080,0:31:28.560
a relationship there that's mutually
beneficial.
And it's pretty scary.

0:31:28.560,0:31:35.316
[EP] So we can see, yes, certain
conservative forms of religion,
whether Christianity or other religions, when
they become

0:31:35.316,0:31:43.388
very orthodox they can often go with
nationalism.
[RL] Exactly. It's something to be aware of.

0:31:43.388,0:31:46.560
There are black faith leaders, here in America,
who

0:31:46.560,0:31:52.560
I've now spoken to, who've said things like
'there
isn't even such thing as religious freedom
without

0:31:52.560,0:31:59.280
it being associated with white supremacy' and
I
just think that there's a lot of mea culpa and

0:31:59.280,0:32:05.440

a lot of work to do. I don't believe in giving
up
on the concept of religious freedom, but
much like

0:32:05.440,0:32:10.320
the American flag has been too co-opted by
the
by the right over time. I don't think

0:32:10.320,0:32:14.080
that means we give up on the American flag -
I just wrote a column on this as well -

0:32:14.080,0:32:18.960
I think it means we reclaim it. But part of
reclaiming it is acknowledging the way that
it's

0:32:18.960,0:32:25.440
not always been inclusive, so that we can
then make it inclusive and own it again.

0:32:25.440,0:32:30.320
[EP] Just one final question, Rachel. You
mentioned
that obviously Joe Biden is Catholic and

0:32:30.320,0:32:36.480
Catholicism is important to him. Now we
might
ask a question about how far it's

0:32:36.480,0:32:42.480
appropriate for the President of the US to talk
a
lot about his religious beliefs in his capacity
as

0:32:42.480,0:32:47.920
President. But, looking ahead, in general,
what do you
think will be the main challenges for
Americans

0:32:47.920,0:32:54.720
United under Biden's presidency in the next
four years?
[RL] Well, apart from Biden's presidency, but
in

0:32:54.720,0:32:59.360
the next four years, I definitely think the Supreme Court and the courts are something that

0:32:59.360,0:33:04.880
we're really going to have to be strategic and tactical around. I think that is going to be

0:33:04.880,0:33:10.640
very challenging. I think it's going to be a time to again focus on educating the newer generation

0:33:10.640,0:33:15.760
to make sure that we can have a bench, a judiciary bench, that's better.

0:33:15.760,0:33:22.229
But in terms of challenges with the Biden administration?
Look, he's got a great background

0:33:22.229,0:33:26.080
and frankly his plank, the democratic platform under him,

0:33:26.080,0:33:31.488
has explicit language around not misusing religious freedom to hurt the LGBTQ community.

0:33:31.488,0:33:39.600
He actually said, quite some time ago, but still in an interview, he said, and I quote:

0:33:39.600,0:33:46.320
"This is a nation [talking about America] founded on the idea of the sep-aration of church and state.

0:33:46.320,0:33:52.241
After 200 years, why the hell would you want to go messing with that?"

0:33:52.241,0:34:00.620
I think that too often democrats will trade on religious

freedom in order to protect other rights.

0:34:00.620,0:34:07.583
It's like a give. I think they will feel like there's a vulnerability around what we talked about earlier, Emma.

0:34:07.583,0:34:13.591
Coming across as being anti-religion or anti-Christian in a country that's actually remarkably religious,

0:34:13.591,0:34:21.200
which a lot of scientists and political scientists have attributed to us, having the separation of religion and government, by the way.

0:34:21.200,0:34:25.200
I think it's great that, for example he's already said, and we're very proud that we've been part of this, that

0:34:25.200,0:34:30.160
one of his first actions is going to be to repeal the Muslim ban. That's excellent.

0:34:30.160,0:34:35.760
But I also think that we're going to have work, not just in competing with a bunch of very important

0:34:35.760,0:34:42.240
priorities in what needs to be undone and what needs to be done, but in dealing with some

0:34:42.240,0:34:49.440
of the vulnerabilities that democrats sometimes feel around our issue. I think we have

0:34:49.440,0:34:56.240
work ahead of us. I'll just point out that, if you go to our website at au.org, we have an agenda

0:34:56.240,0:35:02.560

that we've posted for the Biden administration:
10 steps that he can take to advance religious

0:35:02.560,0:35:08.065
freedom in this country. It's got not just negative things like the undoing stuff,

0:35:08.065,0:35:12.880
but it's got a bunch of positive things as well, proactive things. He should sign an Executive

0:35:12.880,0:35:17.280
Order to restore and protect religious freedom for all Americans, that makes clear what religious

0:35:17.280,0:35:21.760
freedom is and what it isn't. He should make sure that, throughout the administration, that its

0:35:21.760,0:35:27.760
workers are reflecting the diversity of America, which includes non-religious people by the way, and

0:35:27.760,0:35:32.919
religious people of all different religious backgrounds, that he should support the Do No Harm Act,

0:35:32.919,0:35:38.320
which would be a law to make clear that our religious freedom law, the Religious Freedom

0:35:38.320,0:35:43.840
Restoration Act, does not permit harm to others, that that's not what it's supposed to be about.

0:35:43.840,0:35:48.560
I think that we do have an agenda to guide this administration, and we look forward

0:35:48.560,0:35:53.920

to meeting with the administration, and I'm sure that we will, in many regards, work together.

0:35:53.920,0:35:58.819
[EP] Well, Rachel. That sounds like you've got your work cut out for you then
[[RL] I think so!

0:35:58.819,0:36:03.971
[EP] Thank you very much for a really interesting interview.
[RL] It's great to have allies like you, Emma.

0:36:03.971,0:36:14.292
Thanks for all you guys do as well.

0:36:14.720,0:36:18.973
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