

# Rachel Laser - Exploring religious freedom episode 02

Video available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6omAWhIKhek>

00:00:02,100 --> 00:00:06,190

(Alastair Lichten) Welcome to the National Secular society podcast and part two in our series

00:00:06,190 --> 00:00:12,070

exploring religious freedom. I'm Alastair Lichten, Head of Education at the NSS. In

00:00:12,070 --> 00:00:15,670

this series, I'm speaking to a variety of experts and activists to get their

00:00:15,670 --> 00:00:21,070

professional views and personal insights. What does religious freedom mean? how is

00:00:21,070 --> 00:00:27,010

it under threat? what are its limits? and how might it be abused? In this episode, I

00:00:27,010 --> 00:00:31,300

was joined by Rachel Laser, CEO of Americans United for separation of

00:00:31,300 --> 00:00:36,850

church and state and the keynote speaker at our major upcoming conference: Secularism 2019:

00:00:36,850 --> 00:00:41,920

Reclaiming Religious Freedom. Let's get straight into the interview

00:00:41,920 --> 00:00:46,560

and I'll be back at the end with a few remarks. Enjoy.

00:00:46,640 --> 00:00:49,140

(AL) So Rachel welcome to the NSS podcast.

00:00:49,940 --> 00:00:51,080

(Rachel Laser) Great to be here.

00:00:51,080 --> 00:00:52,479

(AL) Would you like to start

00:00:52,479 --> 00:00:56,319

by introducing yourself to the audience and maybe telling us how you became an

00:00:56,319 --> 00:00:58,765

activist for religious freedom?

00:00:58,765 --> 00:00:59,949

(RL) I would love to.

00:00:59,949 --> 00:01:06,100

So my name is Rachel Laser. I'm a mom of three teenagers and I'm actually married

00:01:06,100 --> 00:01:11,590

to a Brit -

a British Jew who came over to America

00:01:11,590 --> 00:01:19,570

when he was about seven. I am the first woman and non-christian president of

00:01:19,570 --> 00:01:25,330

Americans United for separation of church and state, which is my 71 year-old

00:01:25,330 --> 00:01:32,530

nonprofit here based in Washington DC but were a national organization and I

00:01:32,530 --> 00:01:39,390

feel like I'm a very natural fit for the separation of religion and government

00:01:39,390 --> 00:01:46,540

because I'm a religious minority and so for me the separation of religion and

00:01:46,540 --> 00:01:52,090

government brings me a feeling of personal security in America. It's

00:01:52,090 --> 00:01:56,620

enabled me to raise my kids sending them to public school without worrying that

00:01:56,620 --> 00:01:59,830  
they'd be taught a religion that isn't  
ours.

00:01:59,830 --> 00:02:05,740  
It's actually enabled my relatives to  
flee religious persecution and to

00:02:05,740 --> 00:02:11,739  
rebuild their lives here in America and  
even thrive so for me I have a lot of

00:02:11,739 --> 00:02:16,330  
gratitude towards this  
foundational principle that we have here

00:02:16,330 --> 00:02:20,680  
in America that's of course captured in  
the religion clauses of our First

00:02:20,680 --> 00:02:24,760  
Amendment of our Constitution.  
(AL) Well thanks for that and what's really nice

00:02:24,760 --> 00:02:29,050  
that is you spoke about the personal  
importance of religious

00:02:29,050 --> 00:02:33,310  
freedom to you there so we  
weren't immediately going down into

00:02:33,310 --> 00:02:39,700  
a theoretical philosophical discussion.  
We're very excited to have you as our

00:02:39,700 --> 00:02:44,500  
keynote speaker for Secularism 2019  
and I'm sure we'll cover it in more

00:02:44,500 --> 00:02:49,120  
detail then but I wonder if you could  
just expand on it for us of what does

00:02:49,120 --> 00:02:51,190  
religious freedom mean to you.

00:02:51,190 --> 00:02:54,640

(RL) Absolutely,  
and I just want to note that I love the

00:02:54,640 --> 00:02:59,290  
fact that you recognized that I made it  
personal instead of theoretical because

00:02:59,290 --> 00:03:04,720  
as a newcomer to this organization, I've  
been here a little less than a year and

00:03:04,720 --> 00:03:09,730  
a new leader in this space though, I've  
worked on these issues for many years, I

00:03:09,730 --> 00:03:15,730  
feel that one of our deficits as good  
advocates for separation of religion and

00:03:15,730 --> 00:03:23,200  
government and freedom of conscience for  
all has been the lack of personalizing

00:03:23,200 --> 00:03:29,440  
it, the lack of showing that human faces  
and what's at stake rather than only

00:03:29,440 --> 00:03:33,850  
speaking in abstract legal or  
philosophical terms, so I just wanted to

00:03:33,850 --> 00:03:38,170  
note that I love that you acknowledge  
the importance of making this issue

00:03:38,170 --> 00:03:45,040  
personal. I completely agree. You asked me to speak to the definition of religious

00:03:45,040 --> 00:03:51,040  
freedom and I have one that I tend  
to use which is that religious freedom

00:03:51,040 --> 00:03:58,030  
means that we all have the freedom of  
conscience to be religious, not to be

00:03:58,030 --> 00:04:04,989  
religious at all, to practice whatever

religion we want in whatever way we want,

00:04:04,989 --> 00:04:11,049

to change our belief system over the course of our lifetime or even to

00:04:11,049 --> 00:04:18,130

concoct our own spiritual brew and and I would add that to me religious freedom

00:04:18,130 --> 00:04:23,349

is part of America's commitment to diversity, you know, and in this case it's our

00:04:23,349 --> 00:04:27,430

embrace of the thousands of religions that are practiced across our

00:04:27,430 --> 00:04:35,410

shores and we recently saw this play out in the national election for

00:04:35,410 --> 00:04:41,650

Congress: we saw an unprecedented number of religious minorities, you know, for the

00:04:41,650 --> 00:04:48,120

first time two Muslim women, a Native American woman, you know folks that

00:04:48,120 --> 00:04:53,620

really wouldn't have been able to be elected in this country if it weren't

00:04:53,620 --> 00:04:58,630

for religious freedom and our commitment to it. I will just add one more thing

00:04:58,630 --> 00:05:04,150

Alastair, if I may, which is whenever I talk about what religious

00:05:04,150 --> 00:05:11,410

freedom is I think it's really important to also talk about what it's not. To me,

00:05:11,410 --> 00:05:16,950

religious freedom, and it's not just to me, I will say this more broadly,

00:05:16,950 --> 00:05:23,470  
religious freedom does not mean the  
right to impose your religion on others

00:05:23,470 --> 00:05:30,040  
because if you're doing that, then you're  
taking away your and my religious freedom.

00:05:30,040 --> 00:05:35,020  
If you're imposing  
your religious freedom on me by imposing

00:05:35,020 --> 00:05:41,530  
your religion on me, you're taking away  
my ability to believe what I want.

00:05:41,530 --> 00:05:47,470  
Similarly, religious freedom is not and  
the Supreme Court here in the United

00:05:47,470 --> 00:05:52,630  
States has even found this, religious  
freedom is not the right to hurt other

00:05:52,630 --> 00:05:57,880  
people or to cause harm to other people -  
that's not what this concept is about

00:05:57,880 --> 00:06:03,520  
and in fact one of our federal laws on  
religious freedom is called the

00:06:03,520 --> 00:06:09,040  
Religious Freedom Restoration Act and  
when it was passed in the early 1990s it

00:06:09,040 --> 00:06:16,150  
it bound together a really diverse and  
eclectic group across political divides,

00:06:16,150 --> 00:06:23,080  
across religious divides and these  
different communities - religious, secular

00:06:23,080 --> 00:06:30,340  
all really came together to say  
religious freedom means protections for

00:06:30,340 --> 00:06:36,310  
vulnerable populations so that they can  
believe what they want to or not believe.

00:06:36,310 --> 00:06:43,360  
Religious freedom is a shield  
that ensures that folks, particularly

00:06:43,360 --> 00:06:47,980  
those who've been marginalized in their  
beliefs, are able to believe what they

00:06:47,980 --> 00:06:55,540  
want. What religious freedom is not, and  
I'll repeat this, is a sword that should

00:06:55,540 --> 00:07:01,360  
be weaponized to hurt other people or  
discriminate against other people.

00:07:01,360 --> 00:07:04,780  
(AL) Yeah, that's really interesting, I mean at the NSS we talk about religious freedom

00:07:04,780 --> 00:07:09,940  
versus religious privilege and I noticed  
that this metaphor of religious freedom

00:07:09,940 --> 00:07:16,000  
as a shield and not a sword is very  
central to Americans United's rhetoric.

00:07:16,000 --> 00:07:16,940  
(RL) That's right.

00:07:16,940 --> 00:07:20,560  
(AL) I mean another way to look at it is about, sort of, the

00:07:20,560 --> 00:07:25,170  
right to manifest your religion not  
actually being absolute.

00:07:25,170 --> 00:07:32,590  
(RL) Right, right: the recognition that in order to have true religious freedom or true freedom of

00:07:32,590 --> 00:07:37,660  
conscience that I cannot impose my  
religion, right: I have to, I have to

00:07:37,660 --> 00:07:42,280  
recognize that I am one of many,  
right. That used to be our national motto

00:07:42,280 --> 00:07:48,580  
in this country- 'e pluribus unum': from  
many, one - unfortunately in the 1950s

00:07:48,580 --> 00:07:52,870  
around McCarthyism and a lot of the  
quote 'red fear' and fear of socialism

00:07:52,870 --> 00:07:59,350  
and communism and we decided as a  
country to make 'In God We Trust' the

00:07:59,350 --> 00:08:06,190  
national motto so it was a  
political backlash really to sort of a

00:08:06,190 --> 00:08:12,340  
fear driven moment and a very  
conservative backlash in the sense, in

00:08:12,340 --> 00:08:16,930  
the sense, of what you're saying which is  
it even that national motto gave

00:08:16,930 --> 00:08:22,990  
privilege to believers and frankly, as a  
Jewish person, even though we too have a

00:08:22,990 --> 00:08:29,560  
God, if there's an 'In God We Trust' sign  
posted on a federal building or in a

00:08:29,560 --> 00:08:33,490  
public school,  
I never feel that that's referencing my

00:08:33,490 --> 00:08:36,719  
god, right, so that would be an instance of

00:08:36,719 --> 00:08:44,920  
pure religious privilege in this country.  
(AL) mmm.... I mean take it, the example of the

00:08:44,920 --> 00:08:48,730  
plaques on the walls , you know, in  
public buildings - 'in god we trust',

00:08:48,730 --> 00:08:55,310  
if I'm a member of the privileged majority, I don't necessarily see

00:08:55,310 --> 00:09:01,160  
the problem with that and I might feel  
that that is just an example of

00:09:01,160 --> 00:09:06,110  
religious freedom or religious tolerance.  
If you're coming to it from a position

00:09:06,110 --> 00:09:11,660  
that you're not part of that privileged  
majority, how do you communicate

00:09:11,660 --> 00:09:14,135  
what your experience of that is?

00:09:14,135 --> 00:09:18,110  
(RL) Yes. Yes, you know, there are such strong parallels

00:09:18,110 --> 00:09:23,569  
to being privileged and disadvantaged  
with regard to race which is an issue

00:09:23,569 --> 00:09:28,279  
that America is also really facing and  
dealing with even more at the forefront

00:09:28,279 --> 00:09:34,370  
right now so let me make an analogy - when you're white in America and I would

00:09:34,370 --> 00:09:41,329  
suspect in the United Kingdom as well,  
you are the baseline and so when you

00:09:41,329 --> 00:09:47,389  
walk into hotel rooms and there is a  
certain type of shampoo that's available

00:09:47,389 --> 00:09:51,529  
and it's for white people's hair you  
don't notice. When you go to the store

00:09:51,529 --> 00:09:55,550  
and buy band-aids and they're colored  
for white people's skin to be quote

00:09:55,550 --> 00:10:01,550  
'neutral' you don't even notice, but if  
you're a person of color or a black or

00:10:01,550 --> 00:10:06,350  
brown person, you notice these things  
right away and that's because when we're

00:10:06,350 --> 00:10:10,970  
in the minority instead of in the  
majority is when we're most likely to

00:10:10,970 --> 00:10:16,459  
feel our difference and when we're in  
the majority, as opposed to being in the

00:10:16,459 --> 00:10:21,680  
minority, when we have the privilege of  
being in the majority we are so likely

00:10:21,680 --> 00:10:27,110  
to be oblivious and often, not always,  
often, it's harmless

00:10:27,110 --> 00:10:32,689  
and that's why people who have privilege  
can feel very attacked by having it

00:10:32,689 --> 00:10:40,130  
pointed out to them why they're missing  
what it's like to be a person who's in

00:10:40,130 --> 00:10:45,380  
the minority so this is true when it  
comes to religious privilege as well. So,

00:10:45,380 --> 00:10:50,000  
you know, I'll come back to the hotel  
room, you know, in fact, let me tell

00:10:50,000 --> 00:10:55,220  
you this - I was recently at a synagogue,  
speaking with mostly white Jews, as are

00:10:55,220 --> 00:11:00,620  
most synagogues in America and I was  
talking about white privilege and asking

00:11:00,620 --> 00:11:04,400  
this group to give me examples of  
white privilege and it was

00:11:04,400 --> 00:11:09,620  
harder although they were able to do it,  
and the minute I said "let's talk about

00:11:09,620 --> 00:11:14,840  
Christian privilege now" to this group of  
Jews, "now, can you give me some examples",

00:11:14,840 --> 00:11:19,820  
well I couldn't shut them up, you know, it  
was like the Bible in hotel rooms and

00:11:19,820 --> 00:11:24,200  
the national holidays and, you know, went  
on and on and on they had no problem and

00:11:24,200 --> 00:11:28,150  
that's because you know in that case  
they aren't part of the privileged group.

00:11:28,150 --> 00:11:34,700  
(AL) There is a perception, held by many and not by any means just people in the

00:11:34,700 --> 00:11:38,980  
religious majority or in United  
Kingdom's case the religious minority,

00:11:38,980 --> 00:11:45,290  
that secularism or the separation of  
church and state is in some way anti-

00:11:45,290 --> 00:11:51,620  
religious or anti-democratic. Why do you  
think that perception is there?

00:11:51,620 --> 00:11:56,390  
(RL) Right, that's a fantastic question. I actually think it relates to what we were just

00:11:56,390 --> 00:12:02,030  
talking about and perhaps that's why it

sprung to your mind which is when you

00:12:02,030 --> 00:12:06,620  
are in the privileged, let's say in  
America in the Christian privilege group,

00:12:06,620 --> 00:12:11,990  
and you're having pointed out to you  
that you have to share, you know, that

00:12:11,990 --> 00:12:16,340  
this isn't a Christian country and  
therefore there may be certain things

00:12:16,340 --> 00:12:22,040  
that you're not even aware of, ways that  
you're imposing your religion on others

00:12:22,040 --> 00:12:26,120  
or being oblivious to the fact that  
other people believe different things, it

00:12:26,120 --> 00:12:33,410  
feels like an attack on your religion  
rather than just the person who's part

00:12:33,410 --> 00:12:39,140  
of the religious minority pointing out  
that they're being left behind. And the

00:12:39,140 --> 00:12:43,870  
two are different, you know, it's not  
necessarily an attack- it's, it's a

00:12:43,870 --> 00:12:51,500  
constructive illumination of a situation  
that being part of the religious

00:12:51,500 --> 00:12:56,060  
majority, One might not see but it's the  
same, it plays out the same way with

00:12:56,060 --> 00:13:02,570  
racism - if an African American here  
points out to a white person ways in

00:13:02,570 --> 00:13:08,480  
which they're missing what the black or

brown experience may be like or even

00:13:08,480 --> 00:13:12,500

worse, you know, saying what we call a microaggression, right, which we can

00:13:12,500 --> 00:13:17,330

experience in the religious context as well, it's very common for the white person

00:13:17,330 --> 00:13:23,590

to attack the black or brown person and accuse them of quote 'reverse racism'

00:13:23,590 --> 00:13:28,840

right, whereas they're just pointing out their experience and how they're being

00:13:28,840 --> 00:13:35,090

ignored or not seen. It's very similar with being non-Christian, you know, in

00:13:35,090 --> 00:13:39,640

this country. When you point that out, you're very often accused of being

00:13:39,640 --> 00:13:48,560

anti-Christian or anti-religious so I think that's one explanation for how that that label gets attached to our movement.

00:13:48,560 --> 00:13:50,120

(AL) I think one of the clearest

00:13:50,120 --> 00:13:54,290

examples I see of this - I work on education NSS, and when we talk about

00:13:54,290 --> 00:13:58,580

prayer in school and you know why we think that you know having school

00:13:58,580 --> 00:14:04,730

mandated prayer is a bit of a problem and someone says "well I like it, and oh,

00:14:04,730 --> 00:14:09,380

you know you can withdraw yourself from

school prayers" but the person saying

00:14:09,380 --> 00:14:13,880

that is never the person who would be  
the person in the position of, you know,

00:14:13,880 --> 00:14:17,810

being the odd one out of withdrawing  
themselves from assembly you know and

00:14:17,810 --> 00:14:23,780

going through all of that in order to  
not partake in a religious ritual. I mean

00:14:23,780 --> 00:14:29,960

I'm sure if we had atheist's devotions in  
every assembly they would, they would

00:14:29,960 --> 00:14:31,840

very much see the the discrimination in  
that.

00:14:32,000 --> 00:14:35,240

(RL) That's right and that's why it's a

00:14:35,240 --> 00:14:41,450

very dangerous game to play but some  
people, some, some Christian friends say

00:14:41,450 --> 00:14:45,980

you know you should say back to these  
Christians that are not seeing their

00:14:45,980 --> 00:14:52,490

privilege, you should say let's say you  
move to a majority Muslim area and the

00:14:52,490 --> 00:14:58,370

public school is forcing Muslim prayer  
on everyone, how would you feel and I

00:14:58,370 --> 00:15:04,040

think at the same time as that is  
illustrative you know and may help the

00:15:04,040 --> 00:15:09,230

some of these Christians that are  
resistant, not all are, but some of them

00:15:09,230 --> 00:15:14,060  
understand your point it's a dangerous  
game to play here in America because of

00:15:14,060 --> 00:15:20,240  
the level of anti-muslim bigotry so, but  
to your point, I think when you know when

00:15:20,240 --> 00:15:25,940  
you sort of point out to those who are  
resistant what it would be like to be in

00:15:25,940 --> 00:15:29,520  
the minority they get it a little bit  
better.

00:15:29,520 --> 00:15:35,520  
(AL) I guess it would be that the fact that  
there are no bakers refusing to make cakes for Christians...

00:15:35,520 --> 00:15:40,170  
(RL) well but no, they  
would actually say that's not true,

00:15:40,170 --> 00:15:44,940  
I mean, Jack Phillips, the famous Baker  
from the Masterpiece cake shop case, his

00:15:44,940 --> 00:15:50,670  
brother, you know, went to a different  
baker and tried to get them to put, sort

00:15:50,670 --> 00:15:56,430  
of, an anti-gay slogan on the cake and  
professed that that was part of his

00:15:56,430 --> 00:16:01,050  
Christian values and that the refusal to  
do that means Christians are being

00:16:01,050 --> 00:16:06,899  
discriminated against so there is, there are  
such allegations here. (AL) Yeah and we I

00:16:06,899 --> 00:16:12,060  
think we'd see cases like that and there  
are certainly analogous cases in the UK

00:16:12,060 --> 00:16:18,360  
as part of a redefining of religious  
freedom. (RL) Right, exactly the redefining of

00:16:18,360 --> 00:16:23,370  
religious freedom, the co-opting of the  
term to mean the right to impose your

00:16:23,370 --> 00:16:27,690  
beliefs on others and the right to  
discriminate against people, the right to

00:16:27,690 --> 00:16:33,000  
cause harm to people, and if you think  
about it that definition of religious

00:16:33,000 --> 00:16:40,620  
freedom is one that actually undermines  
true religious freedom for all but today

00:16:40,620 --> 00:16:47,220  
in America the Religious Right - really a  
political movement backed by the Trump

00:16:47,220 --> 00:16:53,100  
Pence administration, is being incredibly  
successful in their efforts. (AL) I think that

00:16:53,100 --> 00:16:58,350  
leads to some people perhaps who very  
much would agree philosophically with

00:16:58,350 --> 00:17:04,020  
you or me being anti the term 'religious  
freedom' , I know now we have our

00:17:04,020 --> 00:17:08,760  
conference which is Secularism 2019:  
Reclaiming Religious Freedom and then

00:17:08,760 --> 00:17:14,189  
there's been a small but certain  
backlash to that term. Do you encounter

00:17:14,189 --> 00:17:19,890  
that? (RL) Tell me more about what you  
mean by the backlash where you are. (AL) Well, I mean,

00:17:19,890 --> 00:17:24,990  
some people are seeing this term  
religious freedom used to mean a freedom

00:17:24,990 --> 00:17:31,890  
to discriminate. (RL) Right, exactly.  
(AL) To use your shield and sword metaphor, some

00:17:31,890 --> 00:17:37,050  
people, you know, are saying, oh religious  
freedom means this sword, so why are you

00:17:37,050 --> 00:17:41,020  
defending it, when we all think in terms of  
this shield.

00:17:41,020 --> 00:17:46,750  
(RL) Absolutely and I think that's a very  
compelling reason for a lot of people of

00:17:46,750 --> 00:17:52,750  
faith to come along and support our  
movement because it really sullies the

00:17:52,750 --> 00:17:59,590  
name of religion to change and co-opt  
the meaning of religious freedom to the

00:17:59,590 --> 00:18:04,990  
right to discriminate or hurt other  
people so those who are deeply religious

00:18:04,990 --> 00:18:12,670  
and not politically religious should be  
highly concerned about this co-opting of

00:18:12,670 --> 00:18:17,440  
the term and should be joining all of  
our movement for the separation of

00:18:17,440 --> 00:18:20,860  
religion and government. (AL) It seems that  
Americans United is different to other

00:18:20,860 --> 00:18:26,020  
US organizations that are, you know,  
challenging religious privilege, arguing

00:18:26,020 --> 00:18:29,500  
for the separation of church and state  
however you'd like to phrase that, in that

00:18:29,500 --> 00:18:33,070  
you don't come at this from a  
specifically anti-religious or

00:18:33,070 --> 00:18:37,980  
irreligious point of view. What do you  
think the strengths of that approach are?

00:18:37,980 --> 00:18:44,740  
(RL) Well here in America, seventy percent of the country is Christian and it's very

00:18:44,740 --> 00:18:51,580  
very hard to win in the court of public  
opinion if you don't have Christian

00:18:51,580 --> 00:18:56,740  
validators and Christian support. It just  
is. Now, of course, I believe in all

00:18:56,740 --> 00:19:01,780  
different types of advocacy and there  
are, you know, there's death through a

00:19:01,780 --> 00:19:05,740  
thousand cuts and you know there's  
different ways to create those cuts for

00:19:05,740 --> 00:19:11,560  
bad bad beliefs and bad policies in this  
country however the strength of

00:19:11,560 --> 00:19:16,300  
Americans United is the number of  
different sectors that we can pull

00:19:16,300 --> 00:19:21,940  
together under the banner of separating  
religion and government because it

00:19:21,940 --> 00:19:28,030  
doesn't take much to connect the dots  
between separating religion and

00:19:28,030 --> 00:19:34,930  
government and a) being deeply religious,  
as we just talked about, and in fact it

00:19:34,930 --> 00:19:41,040  
was deeply religious pastors and clergy  
that were the primary advocates for

00:19:41,040 --> 00:19:47,590  
separation of church and state being in  
our Constitution, okay, and, separation of

00:19:47,590 --> 00:19:51,520  
religion and government obviously  
appeals to religious minorities and to

00:19:51,520 --> 00:19:55,339  
non-believers,  
separation of religion and government is

00:19:55,339 --> 00:20:03,399  
also at the heart of LGBTQ equality, of  
reproductive freedom for women, of

00:20:03,399 --> 00:20:12,829  
women's equality and even of immigration  
rights, fighting racism because of the

00:20:12,829 --> 00:20:18,589  
way in this country religious freedom  
has so often been used, even across

00:20:18,589 --> 00:20:26,359  
history, to promote regressive social  
agendas so in the Masterpiece cake shop

00:20:26,359 --> 00:20:30,950  
case that we just spoke about,  
the NAACP, which is one of the

00:20:30,950 --> 00:20:36,559  
premier racial justice groups in our  
country, submitted a beautiful front of

00:20:36,559 --> 00:20:44,479  
the court brief that laid out line by  
line the way religion has been used by

00:20:44,479 --> 00:20:50,149

the government over time to do things  
like promote slavery, promote

00:20:50,149 --> 00:20:55,129

anti-miscegenation laws - so prevent black  
people and white people from marrying,

00:20:55,129 --> 00:21:00,829

oppose civil rights laws and it's still  
being used today as we've spoken about

00:21:00,829 --> 00:21:06,679

to take away rights from women, to take  
away rights from people who identify as

00:21:06,679 --> 00:21:15,049

transgender or lesbian, gay or bisexual,  
so there is this enormous capacity to

00:21:15,049 --> 00:21:20,809

come together in this country under the  
banner of church-state separation and

00:21:20,809 --> 00:21:27,529

that's what Americans United is able, is  
sort of uniquely positioned to do. (AL) If we

00:21:27,529 --> 00:21:32,119

take this imaginary position that we've got  
two people and what the first person

00:21:32,119 --> 00:21:38,089

says, following up the example used,  
that to me religious freedom means that

00:21:38,089 --> 00:21:41,419

we shouldn't be able to discriminate on/  
against people based on our religious

00:21:41,419 --> 00:21:46,820

views and the other person says well, to  
me religious freedoms means that we get,

00:21:46,820 --> 00:21:50,299

we shouldn't be restricted in  
the practicing of our religion and that

00:21:50,299 --> 00:21:54,999  
means that we should be able to refuse  
to serve LGBT customers for example -

00:21:54,999 --> 00:21:59,779  
you've got there two fundamental philosophically different views of religious

00:21:59,779 --> 00:22:05,230  
freedom. Is there any way that  
people can try to

00:22:05,230 --> 00:22:07,990  
persuade someone else of that position or come to a common

00:22:07,990 --> 00:22:15,100  
understanding. (RL) I think if we can raise  
consciousness again successfully and

00:22:15,100 --> 00:22:21,250  
sort of win the battle of reasonableness  
about the fact that there are limits on

00:22:21,250 --> 00:22:26,140  
the free exercise of religion , that in  
this country in our First Amendment

00:22:26,140 --> 00:22:32,020  
there are two religion clauses right and  
if there just was the need for one we

00:22:32,020 --> 00:22:35,950  
would have had one - we would have had the  
right to the free exercise of religion

00:22:35,950 --> 00:22:42,400  
but instead we also have a companion  
clause that talks about not establishing

00:22:42,400 --> 00:22:48,930  
any religion in this country, right -  
'Congress shall make no law establishing

00:22:48,930 --> 00:22:55,480  
religion or preventing the free exercise  
thereof' so because these two clauses

00:22:55,480 --> 00:23:02,590  
exist they must both be important and

they actually work together to protect

00:23:02,590 --> 00:23:07,510

religious freedom for all and that's  
that's the point that we need to make

00:23:07,510 --> 00:23:14,470

which is, if there were no limits on the  
free exercise of religion, then too many

00:23:14,470 --> 00:23:19,570

people in this country would not enjoy  
the free exercise of religion. Let me put

00:23:19,570 --> 00:23:25,840

it one other way, that America is this  
intentionally diverse country, right. We

00:23:25,840 --> 00:23:30,910

have intentionally welcomed people from  
all shores, all different religious

00:23:30,910 --> 00:23:35,890

ethnic and other backgrounds to our  
country and right now we're at this

00:23:35,890 --> 00:23:42,550

exciting point in this experience where  
we have this vibrant diversity. How are

00:23:42,550 --> 00:23:48,730

we supposed to coexist constructively  
and peacefully with our neighbors if the

00:23:48,730 --> 00:23:54,310

free exercise of religion means that in  
the public square I can impose my

00:23:54,310 --> 00:24:03,280

religion on you? It fails. The experiment  
dies. So, in our view, the coexistence of

00:24:03,280 --> 00:24:09,520

the Establishment Clause with the Free  
Exercise Clause means there are limits

00:24:09,520 --> 00:24:14,080

on the free exercise of religion that

actually protect free exercise of

00:24:14,080 --> 00:24:18,370

religion for all. (AL) Oh Okay - that's, that's a really great way of putting it.

00:24:18,370 --> 00:24:24,400

So Americans United is very much not organized around being a non-religious

00:24:24,400 --> 00:24:29,890

organization. Why do you think that efforts to challenge religious privilege

00:24:29,890 --> 00:24:36,900

are often seen to be so dominated by the non-religious. (RL) Because being

00:24:36,900 --> 00:24:42,850

non-religious in America still makes you very vulnerable you know and I think we

00:24:42,850 --> 00:24:49,510

spoke earlier about the fact that atheists are a very very small minority

00:24:49,510 --> 00:24:56,380

of Americans or at least those are who are willing to identify as atheists are

00:24:56,380 --> 00:25:01,720

small minority in America and when you're a part of a minority, you know,

00:25:01,720 --> 00:25:08,230

you're already more likely to notice religious privilege, you know, both

00:25:08,230 --> 00:25:14,460

culturally and as the government is enforcing it illegally in this country

00:25:14,460 --> 00:25:20,020

so you're more likely to notice it but when you're a non-believer in this

00:25:20,020 --> 00:25:27,960

country unfortunately there is a special level of distrust reserved for you and

00:25:27,960 --> 00:25:34,090  
because that's true  
you are even, you feel and you are even

00:25:34,090 --> 00:25:40,450  
more vulnerable than certain religious  
minorities and therefore you know you

00:25:40,450 --> 00:25:47,080  
feel the privilege in a very strong and  
profound way and you notice the

00:25:47,080 --> 00:25:53,529  
privilege constantly around you. So I  
think that's pretty much why you see a

00:25:53,529 --> 00:25:58,779  
lot of the secular groups being so  
passionate in this space and leading in

00:25:58,779 --> 00:26:03,399  
this space but I will tell you that at  
Americans United for separation of

00:26:03,399 --> 00:26:10,480  
church and state I've noticed that our  
two biggest, most passionate, groups of

00:26:10,480 --> 00:26:17,860  
supporters are very deeply religious  
people like those responsible

00:26:17,860 --> 00:26:23,080  
for putting religious, true religious  
freedom, into the First Amendment of our

00:26:23,080 --> 00:26:30,360  
Constitution and very religiously  
non-religious people who are very very

00:26:30,360 --> 00:26:34,400  
strongly  
fighting for their right to not believe

00:26:34,400 --> 00:26:40,340  
and have equal standing in American  
society and it's really fun to get to

00:26:40,340 --> 00:26:45,230  
bring those two groups of people  
together at Americans United, it's really,

00:26:45,230 --> 00:26:49,790  
it's wonderful work to do that. (AL) Before  
you go, we always like to ask our guests

00:26:49,790 --> 00:26:53,980  
for some recommendations and so we want  
to know if there any books or films

00:26:53,980 --> 00:26:58,640  
exploring religious freedom that you  
found particularly inspiring or

00:26:58,640 --> 00:27:05,150  
informing or that are just top of your mind at the moment. (RL) Yeah, well I will I will list,

00:27:05,150 --> 00:27:10,280  
I had..., there are so many I just pulled a  
couple off of my shelf, and I've been

00:27:10,280 --> 00:27:14,810  
reading them as well, so I would  
recommend... yes....

00:27:14,810 --> 00:27:19,730  
I'd recommend 'God in Government' by  
Reverend Barry Lynn who led Americans

00:27:19,730 --> 00:27:25,580  
United for 25 years and wrote a book  
reflecting on fighting for equality,

00:27:25,580 --> 00:27:31,130  
secularism and freedom of conscience in  
America - it's a really interesting and

00:27:31,130 --> 00:27:36,980  
gripping sort of narrative about his  
different experiences. Another book that

00:27:36,980 --> 00:27:42,740  
I think is fascinating and explains a  
lot of the driver behind the co-opting

00:27:42,740 --> 00:27:46,970  
of religious freedom and what's going on  
in this debate today in America is

00:27:46,970 --> 00:27:53,720  
written by a friend of mine Robert P  
Jones and the book is called 'The end of

00:27:53,720 --> 00:27:59,480  
White Christian America" and it actually  
talks about the fact that starting in

00:27:59,480 --> 00:28:04,430  
2014, America ceased to be majority white

00:28:04,430 --> 00:28:10,790  
Christian so yes we still have 70  
percent Christian but starting in 2014

00:28:10,790 --> 00:28:15,890  
the majority that were left, fewer than 50  
percent were white and Christian so

00:28:15,890 --> 00:28:21,680  
there's a lot of fear, what I call white  
Christian fragility, that's alive and

00:28:21,680 --> 00:28:27,830  
well today in America and this book sort  
of explains the demographics and the

00:28:27,830 --> 00:28:33,170  
change, changes that are driving that  
fear so I love that book and then the

00:28:33,170 --> 00:28:37,550  
third book that I'll just sort of put on  
the table for now is - I just ordered it

00:28:37,550 --> 00:28:40,850  
actually, because there was a wonderful  
article about atheism in America you

00:28:40,850 --> 00:28:44,650  
know always here, still so unpopular I  
mean

00:28:44,650 --> 00:28:50,800

you know recent polls 3% of Americans identify as quote 'atheist' - of course, 9 to

00:28:50,800 --> 00:28:55,630  
10 percent identify as not believing in God - so that tells you what I'm about to

00:28:55,630 --> 00:29:01,780  
say which is you know and I visit with our members who are non-believers you

00:29:01,780 --> 00:29:06,070  
know one of the stories that I hear repeatedly is "oh no, you know I often

00:29:06,070 --> 00:29:11,470  
don't use the word atheist because it's so unpopular - I'd rather say humanist or

00:29:11,470 --> 00:29:16,510  
you know I try and couch it in other terms" you know they say so anyway this

00:29:16,510 --> 00:29:21,310  
book, which I have not read yet but which is on my bookshelf to read soon, and

00:29:21,310 --> 00:29:25,240  
before I go to your conference 'cos I'm just interested, is called 'Seven types

00:29:25,240 --> 00:29:31,060  
of atheism' by John Gray - G-R-A-Y .  
(AL) Okay, so uh we'll definitely put

00:29:31,060 --> 00:29:35,590  
links to that in the show notes. (RL) Great.  
(AL) Rachel, thanks so much for your time.

00:29:35,590 --> 00:29:39,160  
Is there anything else you'd like to plug before you go? (RL) Well I'd like to say how

00:29:39,160 --> 00:29:43,990  
excited I am to be with you all in May.  
I'm thrilled at the invitation and

00:29:43,990 --> 00:29:49,450

thrilled to have the opportunity to come together with folks who are leading on

00:29:49,450 --> 00:29:56,080

this in in your country and to look for parallels and even learn learn from the

00:29:56,080 --> 00:30:00,130

differences and learn from each other so thank you so much for this invitation

00:30:00,130 --> 00:30:04,930

I'm really looking forward to it and I'll just plug Americans United for

00:30:04,930 --> 00:30:09,850

separation of church and state - you can follow us on social media: Instagram,

00:30:09,850 --> 00:30:15,160

Twitter, Facebook @Americans United - it's pretty straight forward and our

00:30:15,160 --> 00:30:24,160

website is au.org - AU ( for Americans United) dot o-r-g, so with that I will say, I will bid

00:30:24,160 --> 00:30:29,230

you all adieu until May and I'm looking forward. (AL) Okay, well thanks so much for

00:30:29,230 --> 00:30:34,530

time and we'll see you in London in May. (RL) Thank you.

00:30:36,010 --> 00:30:40,520

(AL) Well, I hope that's whet your appetite. If you'd like to hear Rachel explore these

00:30:40,520 --> 00:30:44,510

issues in more detail, then please join us at the conference in central London

00:30:44,510 --> 00:30:48,530

on the 18th of May. You can find out more and check out the other speakers at

00:30:48,530 --> 00:30:54,950

secularism.org.uk/2019.

Tickets are just fifty pounds and members

00:30:54,950 --> 00:30:59,510  
get additional fifty percent discount. I  
was really interested in how Rachel

00:30:59,510 --> 00:31:02,660  
focused on the role of religious  
privilege in influencing our view of

00:31:02,660 --> 00:31:06,740  
religious freedom and how it can lead to  
some forms of discrimination being

00:31:06,740 --> 00:31:11,690  
ignored or even justified as a form of  
religious freedom themselves. I think the

00:31:11,690 --> 00:31:15,260  
work of Americans United really  
shows how secularism and the separation

00:31:15,260 --> 00:31:19,940  
of religion from government can be  
positive forces. There are a lot more

00:31:19,940 --> 00:31:22,340  
questions that I'd have loved to ask about  
what we can learn from each other's

00:31:22,340 --> 00:31:26,360  
experiences and I hope I'll get a chance  
at the conference. If you have any

00:31:26,360 --> 00:31:29,270  
feedback or comments on the episode  
please share them on Twitter or Facebook

00:31:29,270 --> 00:31:33,620  
the links are in the show notes and I'd  
be great if you could share the podcast

00:31:33,620 --> 00:31:37,790  
with your network and give us a rating  
on your player of choice. If you want to

00:31:37,790 --> 00:31:41,780  
help us defend everyone's freedom, often  
from religion, then please consider

00:31:41,780 --> 00:31:46,490

joining at [secularism.org.uk](http://secularism.org.uk).

Thanks for listening and we'll be back

00:31:46,490 --> 00:31:48,760

soon.