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The Christian Right and the Rising Power of the Evangelical Political Movement



We take a look at the rising power of the evangelical political movement in this country with journalist and author Chris Hedges and the Rev. Joseph Phelps, who led a counter-service to last month's "Justice Sunday: Stopping the Filibuster Against People of Faith." [includes rush transcript] Welcome to Democracy Now, we are broadcasting from

Louisville, Kentucky on our Unembed the Media Tour. Last month, an event called "Justice Sunday: Stopping the Filibuster Against People of Faith" took place at a Baptist church just east of Louisville. The event was organized by Christian Conservatives and it was simultaneously broadcast to churches around the country, as well as to 61 million households.

Justice Sunday featured some of America's most prominent evangelical leaders who lambasted the Democrats and accused them of blocking conservative Bush nominees for federal judicial posts. At the event they accused Democrats of an anti-religious bigotry comparable to racial bias.

Senate Majority leader Bill Frist delivered a taped speech at the event in a move many say inappropriately brought religion into a political debate. While Frist didn't mention religion in his speech, others who were headlining the event did.

- _ **Al Mohler**, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary speaking on "Justice Sunday."

To talk about the religious right in this country we are joined by two guests.

- _ **Rev. Joseph Phelps**, is the Pastor of Highland Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky
- _ **Chris Hedges**, journalist and author. He was a foreign correspondent for The New York Times and is currently a senior fellow at the Nation Institute. He is author of "War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning" and "Losing Moses on the Freeway." He has a master's degree in theology from Harvard University

AMY GOODMAN: Senate Majority Leader, Dr. Bill Frist delivered a taped speech at the event in a move many say inappropriately brought religion into a political debate. While Frist didn't mention religion in his speech, others who were headlining the event did. This is Al Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

AL MOHLER: We want to communicate to all that we are not calling for persons merely to be moral. We want them to be believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, because we don't just need instruction, we need salvation. Now, because of that, something has to explain why we would take this time on a Sunday night to talk about something like the federal judiciary. I want to make clear why there is such a sense of urgency that we would do this. It's because so much that is precious to us, so much that is essential to this civilization, this culture, this great democratic republic is in the hands of the courts. And we know that means that much is at risk. Because we have been watching. And we have been learning. For far too long, Christians have been concerned to elect the right people to office, and then go back home. We have learned the importance of the electoral process, and yet we're also discovering that that third branch of government, the judiciary, is so very, very important. We have been watching court cases come down the line. In 1973, *Roe v. Wade*, just declaring a woman's right to an abortion. We now know in the aftermath of that decision, that Justice Blackman, who was the author of the majority opinion, even has admitted that they were determined to legalize abortion, and they just went to the Constitution to try to find an argument that would get them where they wanted to go. And they did. Now, that was a wake-up call for Americans to say, now wait a minute, there's nothing in the Constitution about abortion. By no stretch of the imagination did the founders of this nation and the framers of that document intend for anyone to be able to read those words and find a right to kill unborn children.

AMY GOODMAN: That was Al Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, speaking at ""Justice Sunday."" We're joined in the studio here in Louisville by Pastor Joseph Phelps. Mohler was at Highview Baptist, Joseph Phelps at Highland Baptist Church, not to be confused. He criticized ""Justice Sunday"" and spoke at an alternative service that day called ""Social Justice Sunday."" We're also joined in our New York studio by author Chris Hedges, former foreign correspondent for *The New York Times*, currently Senior Fellow at the Nation Institute. He is author of *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning* and the book *Losing Moses on the Freeway*. He has a master's degree in theology from Harvard University and an article in the latest *Harper's* magazine called, ""Feeling the Hate with the National Religious Broadcasters." And we welcome you both to Democracy Now!

REV. JOSEPH PHELPS: Thank you.

CHRIS HEDGES: Thank you.

AMY GOODMAN: Reverend Phelps, let's begin with you. Describe this whole event that took place. How many thousands of people packed into this -- what's called a mega church for ""Justice Sunday?""

REV. JOSEPH PHELPS: Well, there were 3,000 there, but it was broadcast, they say, to some 60 million people nationwide. So, it's an enormous following. They made the assertion that they were simply trying to educate their people, but it's obvious that they're trying to get out a very clear message. And the message, it seems to me, is a message of domination. Of trying to conflate the Bible and the Constitution and create a whole new entity, which many of us fear would be a form of religious right theocracy.

AMY GOODMAN: Explain the Baptist Church here. I mean, you're Baptist. Mohler is Baptist. What's the difference?

REV. JOSEPH PHELPS: Well, we both -- we share in common our desire to see God's will done on earth as in heaven. I'm a graduate of the Southern Seminary back in the late 1970s, where our mission at the time was we're out to change the world, which sounds sort of domination-like, but our agenda was to try to follow the way of Jesus, of love, of unity, of hope, casting a different vision, the day when the lion and the lamb lie down together, or the elephant and the donkey lie down together. We work together in love. In the late 1970s there was a takeover. Ostensibly the issue was the Bible, but the real issue was control: who gets to decide how the Bible's interpreted, whether women could be ministers, what the agenda of the Church will be. And slowly, but effectively, they took over the leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention. As a result, we're able to appoint trustees, who then appointed Dr. Mohler as president, who completely cleaned house at the seminary. Southern Seminary used to be one of the top ten theological institutions in the world. All of those professors have now been fired or forced out, and --

AMY GOODMAN: On what grounds? On what grounds?

REV. JOSEPH PHELPS: Just on theological grounds, on the grounds that they weren't conforming to the strict literal in their interpretation of the Bible, as is prescribed by Dr. Mohler and the new takeover group. The reason this is important, I think, to your larger audience, as I said earlier, is because this group's agenda now bleeds over, not only into beyond the issue of the Southern Baptist Convention, to our larger culture. That same kind of domination agenda -- which says we're right, you're wrong; we're going to save you from yourself by telling you not only what the Bible says, but now what the Constitution says -- has enormous implications for our democracy.

AMY GOODMAN: Now, here in Louisville, this alternative service, you had more than 1,000 people there. You may not have been broadcasting to millions of people.

REV. JOSEPH PHELPS: Right. Right.

AMY GOODMAN: But what is the feeling here about where Baptists fit in, and about

the role of politics in religion?

REV. JOSEPH PHELPS: Well, Baptists, because of the domination of Southern Seminary on the national, and now Mohler, in particular, on the national landscape, it has fairly large footprint here in Louisville, Kentucky. But there's also a large presence of sort of the former ideology of Southern Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, which I think stands bravely and strongly over against this domination kind of mindset. It's ironic, because we both aspire to the same vision of God's will being done on earth as in heaven, proclaiming Jesus, talking about the Bible. We both do those things every Sunday. But how we play those out is enormously different. Here in Louisville, I would say the mood is greatly divided over whether the view espoused by Al Mohler, which was -- and ""Justice Sunday,"" which implied that that represented all people of faith -- was a legitimate one, and that's one of the reasons why we felt compelled to stand up and say, you don't represent people of faith, and besides that, what you're saying is inaccurate. And we don't know whether you are being inaccurate in your statement intentionally or accidentally, but this filibuster is not against these people because of their religious stand. Finally, I think that Baptists historically have been people who have espoused religious liberty. I'll make a prompt to the Baptist Joint Committee on Religious Liberty. one of the champions of religious liberty in Washington trying to hold a clear and, I believe, accurate understanding of what the First Amendment is about. The new Baptist regime, though, the takeover regime wants to fight that kind of mindset. They are anti-disestablishment people. They don't like the disestablishment of religion.

AMY GOODMAN: What do you mean disestablishment?

REV. JOSEPH PHELPS: Well, the Constitution, the First Amendment sought to disestablish religion, to not have an established religion. In junior high school, I learned this long word with 28 letters, antidisestablishmentarianism. I never knew what it meant. Now I do. It is Al Mohler and that group. They want to redesign, redefine our nation's history, no longer being disestablishment people, but going back and creating a strict religious theocracy.

AMY GOODMAN: We're talking with Reverend Joe Phelps of the Highland Baptist Church here in Louisville, Kentucky. In our New York studio, Chris Hedges, former *New York Times* reporter, just did a piece for *Harper's* where he describes going to a convention of national religious broadcasters. Welcome, Chris, to Democracy Now!

CHRIS HEDGES: Thank you.

AMY GOODMAN: Can you talk about that gathering?

CHRIS HEDGES: Well, this is the annual gathering of the most powerful religious broadcasters in the country. Over the last few decades these radical religious

broadcasters, who have essentially taken control of the airwaves, have built a parallel information and entertainment service that is piped into tens of millions of American homes as a way of essentially indoctrinating listeners and viewers with this very frightening ideology. I would second most of what your previous guest said, except that I don't believe, and -- I just, you know, for your listeners and viewers, will reiterate that I grew up in the Church. My father was a Presbyterian minister. I have a Master of Divinity from Harvard Divinity School, which is what you get if you are going to be a minister, although I was not ordained. For me, this is not a religious movement. It's a political movement.

If you look at the ideology that pervades this movement, and the term we use for it is dominionism, it comes from Genesis, where the sort of founders of this movement, Rousas Rushdoony and others, talk about how God gave man -- this is a very patriarchal movement -- dominion over the land. And dominionists believe that they have been tasked by God to create the Christian society through violence, I would add. Violence, the aesthetic of violence is a very powerful component within this movement. The ideology, when you parse it down and look what it's made up of, is essentially an ideology of exclusion and of hatred. It is a totalitarian ideology. It is not religious in any way. These people quote, as they did at this convention, selectively and with gross distortions from the Gospels. You cannot read the four Gospels and walk away and tell me that Jesus was not a pacifist. I'm not a pacifist, but Jesus clearly was. They draw from the Book of Revelations the only time in the Bible, and that's a very questionable book, as Biblical scholars have pointed out for centuries, the only time when you can argue that Jesus endorsed violence and the apocalyptic visions of Paul. And they do this to create an avenging Christ.

They have built a vision of America that is radically -- and a vision of this -- and latched onto a religious movement or awakening that is radically different from previous awakenings, and there have been several throughout American history. In all religious revivals, Christian religious revivals in American history, the pull was to get believers to remove themselves from the contaminants of secular society. This one is very, very different. It is about taking control of secular society. And, of course, I think, as you and others have done such a good job of pointing out, they have built this dangerous alliance with the neoconservatives to essentially create across denominational lines. And we saw this at the convention with the, you know, radical Catholics with -- even there were even people from the Salvation Army; they have recently begun reaching out to the Mormons -- a kind of united front. Those doctrinal differences are still there and still stock, but a front to create what they term a ""Christian America.""

And this is an America where people like you and me have no place. And you don't have to take my word for it, turn on Christian broadcasting, listen to Christian radio. Listen to

what they say about people like us. It's not a matter that we have an opinion they disagree with. It's not a matter of them de-legitimizing us, which they are. It's a matter of them demonizing us, of talking us -- describing us as militant secular humanists, moral relativists, both of which terms I would not use to describe myself, as a kind of counter-militant ideology that is anti-Christian and that essentially propelled by Satan that they must destroy. Listen to their own language. You know, when in ""Justice Sunday,"" listen -- you know, I urge everyone to go back and look closely at what James Dobson, head of Focus on the Family, said. He talked about *Roe v. Wade* causing the biggest holocaust in the 20th century. There is a frightening kind of revisionism and a kind of moral equation of a magnitude that, you know, having lived through disintegrating states in Yugoslavia and other places, essentially divides -- destroys the center, divides the American public, and creates a very dangerous and frightening culture war. And that's what these people are about.

AMY GOODMAN: You also talk, Chris Hedges, about the presence of the Israeli government, the tourism industry at this major convention of national religious broadcasters. Can you talk about why they were there?

CHRIS HEDGES: Yes. You know, this is an alliance that for those of us who covered Israel and the Middle East is not a new one. But -- and has been built up over the years, in purely economic terms, because of the second Palestinian uprising or Intifada, Israeli tourism, which is a large source, had been a large source of its revenue before this second uprising, has dropped off significantly. And the bulk of the visitors, foreign visitors, that come to Israel are these radical right Christian pilgrims. So there's an economic motive. That's why the Israeli tourism industry had the largest display booth at this convention in Anaheim. They also hosted a breakfast at which the very conservative Jewish social critic, Michael Medved, spoke along with the minister of tourism, along with a series of evangelical leaders.

And, you know, there is a funny kind of element to this alliance, because, of course, radical Christians believe in the Rapture, which by the way does not exist in the Bible. It's a creation. There's nothing about rapture anywhere in the Bible at all. The -- that Christ will return in the Middle East in actually an area around Iraq in the valley of Armageddon, there will be a final battle and believers will be lifted up into heaven and non-believers, which includes in the eyes of this movement, people who are what they call nominal Christians. People who they do not define as Bible-believing Christians, along with, of course, Jews, atheists, people of other faiths, will suffer the torments of hell. This is all chronicled in disgusting detail in the End Time series, these books by LaHaye that have sold 60 million copies. And that's never mentioned, because it's sort of the huge white elephant in the room that everyone tip-toes around. I mean, I think at its core, of course, it's a complete de-legitimization of Judaism itself, and a belief that

Jewish believers are, of course, damned, but what has been convenient between these two movements is that it has united Messianic Jews in Israel with Messianic Christians in the United States.

And this Messianic unity believes that they have been ordained through, I think, if you listen to their rhetoric, a high degree of racism to dominate the Middle East and, in particular, Muslims within the Middle East. The kind of language that they use against Muslims and that they used at this convention against Muslims, I don't think could be used against any other racial group in this country.

It's interesting that the people -- the attack dogs they send out are usually African Americans, those few African American people -- in this case it was a Reverend Glenn Plummer, who as a church in Detroit, and the filth that spewed out of his mouth against Muslims was really, to me, and I was sitting at the breakfast, startling and shocking. He -- the African Americans that -- I would also like to add that of the 5,000 people there, there were very few people of color and most of them were seated up on the podium. After attacking Muslims what they do, of course, is then turn on the Civil Rights Movement and turn on progressive African American leaders, such as Jesse Jackson. So, they do the dirty work for this movement, which, I think we have to be very clear, comes out of the segregationist movement of the South, and if you look at the bloodlines of the movement, you know, the -- in terms of the people who eventually formed what we now know as the Christian Right, they come out of the John Birch Society, the World Anti-Communist League, right back to the Ku Klux Klan. This is a movement that at its core embraces racism, a terrible degree of racism, which -- and, of course, the Christian schools themselves, Falwell School and others, were founded at the time of integration as a way to oppose integration and keep white children free from going to school with African Americans and other people of color.

AMY GOODMAN: Pastor Joseph Phelps, you can describe your experience?

REV. JOSEPH PHELPS: Well, I agree with much of what your speaker has said, but I would also say that not all of the folks who are now part of the Religious Right Movement come from the John Birch Society origins. I think there's another group who has sincerely and faithfully tried to follow what they have understood and been taught has been the Biblical mandates. And I agree with Mr. Hedges that they have confused some of the Old Testament readings, the Hebrew scripture readings, and sort of mixed and matched those to create this kind of domination system that they're now part of. So, I think some of -- I don't disagree that perhaps some of them came out of the segregationist and John Birch crowd, but I think there's another group that came out of simply trying to be faithful Bible followers. And for me, the problem is, you know, if you are going to follow the Bible, the central character for the Christians is Jesus, and what

kind of agenda did Jesus have? Well, it wasn't a political domination agenda. But rather, it was one of self-giving love that was embodied, finally and fully, with his death on the cross.

AMY GOODMAN: And where do women fit into this picture? By the way, I do want to say that we called the church of Reverend Mohler. We asked if they would join us, and they refused to come on. But where do women fit in?

REV. JOSEPH PHELPS: Well, in their system, women -- they will talk a game about women having, you know, an equal role, but it's a silent role. It's a silent role. They can't speak in Church. They can't teach any children over then about the age of 10. So, that's part of the problem here is they're unwilling to talk. They're unwilling to talk with their own women. They're unwilling to talk with the fellow Baptists like me, like you. I have tried to enter into dialogue for years with Dr. Mohler, with others in our city. They're not interested in dialogue, because, in their construct, they have the answer.

CHRIS HEDGES: Amy, I think, you know, Pastor Phelps makes a very good point that I want to second. I think it's very dangerous to demonize the followers of the movement, and we have to realize, and I want to make clear that when I'm speaking about those people, I'm speaking about primarily the leadership. I think also we have to realize that this is a very different type of evangelical movement from the one that I grew up with. These people are not Billy Graham. They are not Luis Palau. Essentially, these kinds of evangelicals, it's not a theology that I embraced, but it is one that I learned to live with, it's about personal salvation. It comes with a political conservatism, but not a political radicalism. Billy Graham did not, you know, spend a lot of time talking about creating the Christian state or even the fires of hell. He talked a lot more about the joys of salvation. These people have been shunted aside. And we saw it, as Pastor Phelps told us, with the destruction of the Southern Baptist Convention.

And there was -- you know, it was not accidental. These people in the early 1980s, late 1970s, people like Pat Robertson and others, met to create a political force, to take over religious institutions. They have now deeply divided the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church, as well as secular institutions. People would come down for seminars at Regent University and be taught, you know, Robert's Rules of Orders and told to run for local school boards and, of course, take over the Republican Party, which they did. And they have pushed out conservatives, not only conservative republicans, but people we would call conservative Christians, and created an entirely new and different movement. Many of the followers, and I count -- I come from Maine, and some of my own family can be counted as members, I suppose, of the religious right, are well-meaning, decent, hard-working good people who are responding to the kind of moral rot that we do have within our society. Unfortunately, I think they're being manipulated

and used by this leadership.

AMY GOODMAN: On that note, we're going to have to leave it there, as we move on to our last segment. But I want to thank you, Chris Hedges, for joining us, a piece in the latest issue of *Harper's* magazine, "'Feeling the Hate with the National Religious Broadcasters," and here in the Louisville studio, Pastor Joseph Phelps of the Highland Baptist Church.