

The Don Lemon Show

09/22/25

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25 minutes and 31 seconds

DON LEMON: I had to talk to you about something that is serious. I don't wanna be disrespectful, but you know how I like to tell the truth, so I'm glad that you're here this morning. And this one is particularly important and familiar to me, and because it involves something that I believe is controlling of people. Something that distorts people's thinking and something that is disrespectful of actual, true Christianity and the danger that religion poses. Now, I say this as a person of faith. As you know, I wrote a book about it. I'm not saying that you don't have to go out and buy it. I'm just saying, I'm just showing you this because I know. Just a year ago, it is September, a year ago this month, this book came out, and I warned people about the dangers of. Christian nationalism, white nationalism, but Christian wrapped in Christian nationalism. And that is a — that's a real thing. You can — you can want to believe that it's happening or not. That's your business, that's on you, whether you would like to believe what I'm saying or not. But good morning, and we're gonna get into it. And I'm gonna show you some of the things that happened this past weekend, but this is something that I need to say because I think it's very important, especially for my country. And for anyone of faith, regardless of whatever your faith is. Whatever it is, I want to talk to you about sanctified power. And what Charlie Kirk's memorial revealed about America. That's what I want to talk about. And I'm going to talk to you, and this is from, this is on page 77 of my book. And I went back and I read it and I — and I was a little bit late this morning with my producers cause I've been thinking about this all night and I was writing, and I said, do I wanna do this, do I want to write it as a Substack? What do I want to do? So let me just tell you, this is the pretext to what I'm about to tell you.

“True freedom of religion would support democracy, foster mutual understanding, and encourage critical thinking.” You guys with me? “True advocates of religion, of freedom of religion, would advocate for enlightenment, education, and open-hearted dialogue. Respectful conversations among people who disagree without judging or jockeying for power.” You see where I'm going? True freedom of religion is possibly only — is possible only if we honor the absolute separation of church and state. Remember I said the impetus of this book that I said on every single, every single time I had to promote it or talk about it, was the blurring or the erasing of the line between state and church. And that's what religious nationalists were doing, and many of them white nationalists wrapped in, it's white nationalism wrapped in religious nationalism. “We can have freedom of religion or we can have a Christian nation. We can't have both. Evangelicals know this, and it's clear which side of the narthex they're on. Even evangelical zealots preach freedom of religion and practice oppression. They're taking a familiar page from the time-worn authoritarian playbook. It's not about faith, it's about control. Get into people's heads.”

Are you listening? I hope you're with me. Because if you didn't go to church yesterday, we're about to go. “Get into people's heads by way of their hearts, swaddle the loss of liberty in religious dogma, and then use faith communities to mobilize voters and codify oppression into law. Religion does a great job of teaching people to suspend their disbelief and submit themselves to a higher power. If the higher power were a benevolent God, that would be nice.

But in this case, we're talking about ruthless, self-dealing men who use God's name for personal gain, promising salvation, and pitching nostalgia for a Christian nation that never existed. Right-wing power mongers conflate religious zeal with patriotism, then conflate patriotism with nationalism. And the effect is powerful enough to break the sacred bonds of the family, with a charismatic wannabe despot as their front man. They sampled the Bible and the Constitution, the way Ice Cube samples the Isley Brothers in *It Was a Good Day*.

"You hear it in there, that unmistakable riff of footsteps in the dark, but it is a whole new jam. That's how you persuade people to vote against their own interests in extreme self-sabotaging ways. That's how you get decent intelligent people to vote against their right to health care, their family's economic well-being, and their sexually diverse children's right to exist. I know how that feels. I know what it's like to need God so desperately, you're willing to listen to anyone who seems qualified to connect you to Him. There was a time when I begged God to extinguish that part of my spirit that made me my authentic self. Please make me not be gay. I ache for that little kid I was, the little kid" — Eduardo — who I wrote about earlier in the book — "was, and the millions of little kids who prayed that self-loathing prayer before and after us. All we can do now is stand up for the children of tomorrow and do our best to push this democracy towards a truer, more useful definition of religious freedom." And these are the things that they said Charlie Kirk stood for. He was a man of faith. And the reason that — that struck me so is because I got a text from a friend who said, I am a black woman. My — the person who — who babysits my child is a black woman from Jamaica. And she says Charlie Kirk was a person of faith. And I say to them, okay, so what does that mean, a person of faith? How does a person of faith act? How does a person who really believes And what God and the Scriptures say, the true meaning of it — not the distorted meaning — how would they treat the least of these?

So, what I say now, is that what happened in Arizona this weekend was not just a memorial, it was something else entirely. People will tell you that it is about grief. It was about grief, about honoring a man's life, about faith. And on the surface, you know, maybe it looked like that. Tens of thousands gathered, the music swelled. I'm sure some of you saw it. I — I watched, I just saw some of the sound bites. There were prayers and tears, and moments of silence. But if you stayed long enough for the for the little bit that I could stay. And then I said, you know what? I'm out. If you listen long enough and close enough, if you stayed long enough and you listen close enough, you could feel the ground shifting beneath you, because that wasn't just about a man who died. This was about a movement claiming divine permission to rule. Can I — can I get a witness? And all of the sound bites. And the words used. We'll tell you, we'll reveal to you exactly what I said. It was a revival meeting wrapped in a memorial. I'm from the South — Southern Baptist — went to Catholic school. You know what a revival meeting is, right? That is the holiest of holiest of holy rollers. Having a revival, let the church say amen. It was a revival meeting wrapped in a memorial, a political rally dressed as church, and by the end of the night, it was clear. This is not only about Charlie Kirk's death. It was about his afterlife in politics. Donald Trump stood on the stage like a man at the center of — of a prophecy. He called Charlie Kirk a martyr. Other politicians promised to carry out his mission. The crowd cheered, as if the passing of the man had lit some sort of sacred fire. To me, this was not mourning, this was a mobilization. And here is where we have to tell the truth here. What we saw in that arena was not simply faith finding public expression, it was religious nationalism on full display. That is the truth. That is my truth.

This is my freedom of expression. This is my First Amendment right to be able to tell you the truth from my point of view, not just from my point of view. This is what it is. The language was unmistakable. Take the nation back for God, restore America's covenant. This is a holy calling. That's what it sounded like. This is not the language of democracy. This is the language of domination because I feel many people, when I wrote this book, said I had no idea that you were a person of faith, that you uh had such strong belief in the Almighty. And I say, because faith is a private matter. It comforts, it convicts, it calls us to humility. But when faith fuses with power, it begins to ask for something else. It asks for obedience. It divides the country into the saved and the damned the chosen and the condemned. It turns opponents into enemies of God and when politicians wrap themselves in Scripture, they are not calling us to virtue. They are demanding submission. That is why this matters. It should it matters to me. That's why it should matter to you and to everyone. You have to see beneath. You have to see beyond the illusion. You have to remove the filter of ideology from your eyes and your spirit.

That's why this matters because the moment religion becomes a tool of politics, dissent starts to sound like blasphemy. That is the point. You cannot go against me. This is blasphemous. You cannot say the truth about and use someone's own words, so — because this is blasphemy. Now, not everyone in that arena call themselves white nationalists. Most wouldn't. But history teaches us to listen carefully when leaders start talking about taking the country back, about restoring a covenant, about returning to some imagined moral order. I'm gonna show you the proof, but I'm gonna have my — my piece first. Because this is not a new story, but just on this level. This is a new level of the same story, because this story has been told before. An America ordained by God, a people under siege, a hero struck down by outsiders. In this particular world, we are not all one human altogether. The person who doesn't carry your ideology or belief is made to be an outsider. That story built Jim Crow. It baptized segregation. It told generations of black Americans that freedom, faith, and democracy belong to someone else first, and in order to have yours, you gotta humble yourself, you gotta pray, you've gotta follow orders, you have to go along with the man and the system. Don't move too fast, don't offend, don't be too black. It's all — it always starts the same way, an appeal to God. It ends the same way too with power protecting itself at all costs. I don't think you guys heard me because when I am either on my knees or in my sacred place, even when I am walking down the street, or if I'm in a taxi, if I'm on an airplane or whatever, I am praying and making an appeal to my God that you don't know about, and you don't need to know because it's my relationship with Him. But this whole thing that's happening now, it always starts the same way, an appeal to God. Somewhat publicly. Performative faith, like we have performative patriotism. It ends the same way too, with power protecting itself at all costs.

And this is where the First Amendment comes in. Cause remember, You can't kneel to pay respect to our men and women in uniform and then protest something that you think is an injustice that's happening to people in this country. Remember the Colin Kaepernick of it all. But if you're Tim Tebow, you can kneel as much as you want in the end zone, and it is okay. Or you can be lauded for religious ideology or — or speaking out for Charlie Kirk, or with the — and the whole irony of it all, all of these NFL teams that are doing moments of silence, fine, do your moments of silence, but don't fire Colin Kaepernick for the same thing that you're doing, when you say, we just want football. We don't want to be, we don't want to bring anything else. We

just want to be entertained. If you want to be entertained, then don't do the thing. I'm not saying you should do it at all, but if you're gonna do it, then you need to be equal and fair with everyone. I — I — I — I don't think you guys heard me because this is for all the people I'm sure they're gonna attack me and say, oh my God, you're disrespect.

No, I'm not, I'm telling the truth. I'm not disrespecting and guess what, the memorial service is over, so let's analyze it. This is my First Amendment right to be able to do so. So this is where the First Amendment comes in. The First Amendment protects faith, it protects speech. It protects the freedom to believe or not to believe. To speak or to stay silent, to worship in private or in public. But it also protects us from the fusion of church and state. Now, if you don't think church and state fused yesterday, then you are blinded by the dark. The memorial in Arizona blurred that line until you could not tell where the Gospel ended and the campaign speech began. And when fate becomes the handmaiden of political power, freedom does not expand, it contracts. Because in a democracy, faith must be free, and politics must be accountable. The moment they fuse, democracy itself begins to wobble. Now, let me say this, for all of you haters and all of you people who are looking for something to hit me with, go for it. I don't care. There was one voice on that stage that did not follow that script, at least yesterday, and that is Charlie Kirk's widow. She spoke — and she, who, as far as I could see, was the only one who sounded like a Christian in the truest sense of the word. She spoke of forgiveness, she spoke of grace, of love that transcends politics. She didn't demand votes or vengeance. She did not call the faithful to arms. She honored her husband's life without turning it into a weapon and that moment deserves respect, because it was the only moment of humility on a night otherwise filled with ambition. She didn't do it at a memorial service honoring her late husband. We'll see what happens in the future, and that too may deserve criticism. It does. First Amendment, it will, regardless if you agree with her what she's doing in the future or not, people will talk about it, they will analyze it, and they will criticize it. It is your First Amendment right to do so. I'm sorry, for those of you who don't believe that. That was her, but the rest of the evening. The rest of the evening was like a MAGA rally. It was a political rally. A call to arms dressed up as a call to prayer. It turned a man into a symbol, a symbol into a banner, and a banner into a battle flag, and when you wrap power investments like that, history tells us it always demands more. It demands more loyalty, more silence, more control. And you know, that is the criticism of people who don't — who don't believe. They're like, I believe in God, but I'm not religious because religion demands control. Religion was used to — to control women, to subjugate women. It was used to enslave people. A tainted interpretation of Scriptures used to do that, and they twist them into anything that they want, and they're doing it right now.

It does not invite questions. That is a danger of religious nationalism. It does not share power. It sanctifies power. Doesn't invite questions. It treats them as heresy. You can't question this. That's heresy, blasphemy. You heathen, you non-believer. How dare you not believe in my ideology? If you don't believe in my ideology, then you don't believe in God. You're not a true Christian. You're not a true American. Control. And when you layer race into that story, And that as it is almost always is layered there, you begin to see the outlines of something even older, even more familiar. You know what I'm talking about. Faith should comfort the mourning. It should call the power to humility. It should speak truth to power. It should not sanctify it. Did you hear me? Faith should comfort the mourning, and I know about comfort, and I'm sure you do too. I've

had losses, so many losses in the last couple of years, I know about comforting the mourning.

And if I, if someone, if people had said what they said and behaved the way they behaved, Donald Trump, Stephen Miller, Tucker Carlson. Pete Hegseth, at a memorial for my sisters — plural and other members of my family who are close — who — who passed away. I would not be happy with them. I would have walked up there and said, get off the stage. That's not what this is about. It should call the powerful to humility. It should speak truth to power, not sanctify it. What we saw in Arizona did exactly the opposite of that. It's — it wrapped political ambition in sacred language. It baptized a campaign in grief. It told millions of Americans that loyalty to God and loyalty to one political leader were the same thing. And don't pretend you didn't see it, and don't pretend it wasn't on purpose because the truth of the matter is that as awful, as untimely, as unnecessary and unwarranted that Charlie Kirk's death was, for the most part, most people had no idea of who he was. And when they found out what he said, they had a lot of questions about why some on the right or in the MAGA movement were trying to sanctify or deify him. Was it real? Or was it a grift? Are they death grifting? Grifting on a man's untimely, unfortunate death?

Now, I know what I think. I know what I hear and see when I hear them on television, when I hear — what I heard or saw them at the memorial, I know what I thought. Wait, is this about Charlie Kirk or is this about policy? Is this about Charlie Kirk or is it about your big ballroom? Is this about Charlie Kirk or it's about the Big Beautiful Bill? Is this about Charlie Kirk or is it about black people? Is this about Charlie Kirk or is it about women subjugating women? Is this about Charlie Kirk or is it about demonizing gay people and transgender people? So, what was — what is this about actually? Don't — demonize someone who is doing a constructive criticism or who is using their free speech, don't demonize them to make excuses for your own grifting. Because the people who are actually speaking out and saying this is what I feel about Charlie Kirk — this is what he said actually they're doing him a service, they are actually honoring him in the way that he would want because that's why he stood, that's what he said in front of all those college kids in front of everyone, and he let them ask him all the questions that they wanted to and criticize them as much as they wanted to and then he responded in kind. But you are trying to stop that. What's that all about? What is the best way for me to expand my MAGA political bona fides? What is the best way for me to get more clicks? What is the best way to elevate myself in this movement in the world, in my podcast, in my, whatever, what is? Hmm. And if that offends you, then check yourself. If it doesn't, then you know what I'm talking about.

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56:22 mark

1 minute and 4 seconds

LEMON: Christian nationalism all wrapped into one. Christian nationalism all wrapped up in an American flag with a Bible. Is that — what is that? The America that was founded on religious freedom, the freedom of expression, the separation of church and state. Is that what this is? No one — does anyone — does anyone care about nuance anymore? Does anyone care about hypocrisy anymore? What a hypocrite Donald Trump is. What a hypocrite many in the MAGA

movement are almost all of them — almost all the folks in the MAGA movement have — have — have hypocritical stances on things because they have different roles for Donald Trump and their leaders than they have for other people. Somehow they don't hear or see what Donald Trump says.

(....)

1:02:02 mark

6 minutes and 47 seconds

LEMON: There's no question. If you say racist things, what does that make you? And not like someone can say something racist and not, you know, if they do it's a one-off for you some where they don't, where — where — it's unconscious bias or they don't know, and then you correct them, they go, oh my God, I'm sorry, I didn't realize that. But when you continually repeat something over and over and over and over again, what does that make you if you say racist things that makes you a racist. If you say shit like this, Charlie Kirk.

[CLIP ABOUT DEI PILOTS]

LEMON: That is some racist shit right there. That is some racist shit. There's no question. There's no — there's no both sides, like, well, he just said he's a civil rights leader for saying that. That is to say, to say that you are praying that your pilot isn't black and you don't want Laquisha or whatever you said — what kind of shit is that? That's racist. And just because you say, well, if you say they're gonna call you racist and you go, well, yeah, they are because you are what you said is racist and you said enough things about racism and I keep — I — I'm tired of people sort of trying to change what he said about black women and say oh, it's out of context. No, it's not out of context, go back and listen. He has the context wrong. When he talks about, first of all, in that sound bite, if you have it — if you have it quickly, let me know and if not, don't worry about it. But in the soundbite where he talks about black women and their lack of brain processing power, and he is conflating diversity, equity, and inclusion with affirmative action, and those are different things, and at different times. What those women were talking about, they were talking about being a qualified woman, black woman, who through affirmative action was offered or given an opportunity that would not have been given to her because of racism if not for affirmative action. This is not about putting someone in a position who was unqualified. This is about putting someone in — what? Giving someone an opportunity to be able to excel when you guys, if you guys work in corporate America, don't try to pretend you don't know. Let's start with the people who get the opportunities from the very beginning. Friend of the boss. Ivy League, whatever. My daughter is dating your son. They need an internship. Okay, start them off in the mailroom. It's always some sort of nepotism. That is usually what? From the people who are running the companies and who's running the companies. And people hire people who look like them. People who are like them usually. So that's what they were talking about. This wasn't some diversity, equity, and inclusion for him to even have that thought about it is what? Racist. This is what he said. Watch.

CHARLIE KIRK: Joy Reid and Michelle Obama, and Sheila Jackson Lee and Ketanji Brown

Jackson were affirmative action picks. We would have been called the racist. But now they're coming out and they're saying it for us. They're coming out and they're saying, I'm only here because of affirmative action. Yeah, we know you do not have the brain processing power to otherwise be taken really seriously. You had to go steal a white person's slot to go be taken somewhat seriously. Play cut 52.

CONGRESSWOMAN SHELIA JACKSON-LEE (D-TX): I rise today as a clear recipient of affirmative action, and particularly in higher education. I may have been admitted on affirmative action both in terms of being a woman and a woman of color, but I can declare that I did not graduate on affirmative action. This is my personal story.

KIRK: I — I hear because of action affirmative. She can't even say that. We know — we know It's very obvious to us that you were not smart enough to be able to get it on your own. I couldn't make it on — on my own, so I needed to make, take opportunities from someone more deserving. You know, this is how arrogant Joy Reid and Ketanji Brown Jackson and Michelle Obama and Sheila Jackson Lee are. They're so narcissistic, they think this is persuasive. They think we're like, oh, of course, that's why we need affirmative action, because you have impressed us with your brilliance. Of course. Oh no, imagine the world without Joy Reid. Imagine the world without heila Jackson Lee or Michelle Obama, or Ketanji Brown Jackson. They think this is persuasive. They think as they kind of now reveal that I'm only here because of anti-white, anti-Asian forced discrimination policies. That turned me into a bitter resentful activist that hates white people honestly through our — [CLIP CUTS OFF]

LEMON: Let me just go through this. Okay, so that was racist. And let me tell you why, because you said you, he actually said what he meant in the end of that.

(...)

1:12:57 mark

4 minutes and 21 seconds

LEMON: So don't give me that bullshit about brain processing power and that — just because you get — you — just because you play someone's own words and you analyze their own words, that somehow you're being disrespectful. I'm not being disrespectful. I'm just telling you who you are. That's what you said. So let's stop it now. The memorial service is over. And so people, you have a First Amendment. Speak your mind of how you feel about Charlie Kirk, and speak your mind about how you feel about this administration, because and MAGA, because there are people in the MAGA movement, thank you very much, Candace Owens who are using or have used, who are using Charlie Kirk's death for their own political and professional expedients. And she's not the only one. There are others who are saying the same thing. So, don't be afraid, America, to speak your truth. You have a First Amendment right under the Constitution, and especially, let me be clear, especially you, black people, you have the right because of your and our unique relationship with this country, more unique than anybody else. The only group of people who did not come here voluntarily and who helped to build this country for free, and are still not reaping the rewards and the benefits that you deserve, that others reaped on your back.

You know, they say, that cleanliness is next to godliness, right? The longer clip. This is what was left after the Charlie Kirk Memorial. Watch this. This. Look at that. Cleanliness is next to godliness. Everybody's talking about how Godly they are, and Christian they are and all of that. I'm just saying. And what I will say, everyone. Don't be afraid. Don't let them make you afraid. You have the, you have a First Amendment right to be able to speak your piece. Don't let people try to hinder you. Be fearless. Be willing to stand up for something, to sacrifice something, be in community, be together, stand in unison. And if anything, in unison, and if anything, Democrats, take a note from what you saw this weekend. I don't have to go through with all of it. I just — take note of what you saw this weekend, about people who understand whether you agree with it or not of how to build power. Whether you like it or not, they took someone who was a divisive figure, didn't cancel them, they elevated him. And they made him a part of their movement. Democrats, learn something from this. Do something in this moment to help transform the country, to bring the country together, to stand up against tyranny, and support your journalists and your voices and your — the people who are telling the truth, who are fighting the fight for you because at this point, the only thing standing between us and democracy is a weak Democratic Party.

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1:18:00 mark
43 seconds

LEMON: I gave Charlie Kirk's widow her due for how she conducted herself, and my heart goes out to her — her or anyone who is lost someone. I know loss. I'm still dealing with loss. My entire family is, so I'm not gonna sit here and shit on his widow, because it's just not appropriate. But for someone who said they're a free speech absolutist, and they believe in free speech and the First Amendment, and they — there is no hate speech, and the only way to counter hate speech or whatever is more speech. That's what I'm doing right now. So if anything, wouldn't I be honoring Charlie Kirk?