**American Heretics Panel\_10.27.19**

[00:00:00] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Hello. Good afternoon on Sunday. My name is Kurtis Schaeffer. I'm the chair of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Virginia. I'm also the co-director with my colleague Martien Halvorson-Taylor of the Religion, Race and Democracy Lab, also at the University of Virginia. We promote the documentary arts and storytelling from students and faculty about those three things religion, race and democracy. So when we saw the butler's film, American Heretics, we knew we wanted to play a role in it coming to Charlottesville in some very small way. And we are so proud that we've been able to do so. And for the next 30 minutes or so, we can speak with our wonderful panel and I'll start by asking some questions of the panelists and then I'll open it up for questions from all of you. So first, let me introduce the makers of the film, Jeanine and Catherine Butler. We have two other guests who will be joining us. The first is Larycia Hawkins, professor in the Religious Studies Department and the Department of Politics and a lab partner in our Religion, Race and Democracy Lab. Here's Larycia. And Dr. Sabrina Dent from the Religious Freedom Center in Washington, D.C..

[00:01:51] **Kurtis Schaeffer** So thank you so much. I learned so much. I'm from California, so when I hear about Oklahoma in some depth, I feel like sometimes I'm hearing about a part of the U.S. Sometimes I feel like I'm hearing about a difference, a different part of the world entirely.

[00:02:08] **Larycia Hawkins** Careful, I'm from there.

[00:02:09] **Kurtis Schaeffer** I know. I'm getting there. I'm getting there. Yeah, yeah. Larycia and I've been on the stage before, so I know Larycia's got a lot to say about the film. So but let me ask you just a real simple question. How did you come to make this film? It's a complex film. We have multiple, multiple storylines going on. We've got Robin Meyers. We've got the walkies. We've got Carlton Pearson's amazing story. And we've got a long, long history told to us by Brandon Scott, I believe. Yeah. So four stories, it's a complex vision of religion in Oklahoma. So how did you how did you come to tell this story?

[00:02:48] **Catherine Butler** Well, the director leads.

[00:02:51] **Jeanine Butler** Well, we definitely packed a lot in. You are right about that. We started out we were doing a short on for a group of biblical scholars and they were very varied. There were archaeologists and Pauline scholars. And during the course of that, we met Robyn Meyers and Lori Walkie and Brandon Scott. Dr. Scott. And we started hatching plans over a really a bar scene, with a napkin.

[00:03:18] **Kurtis Schaeffer** The way that so many things start.

[00:03:19] **Jeanine Butler** Exactly. And we started really we were intrigued by what was going on in Oklahoma by their story. And we kept seeing we kept seeing it as they were, small stories with big, big messages that resonated across the country. And what I think is a lot of us are going what's going on now? And we couldn't resist Brandon's line of In Oklahoma where you're either your future or your past. I'm not sure which. We're just not sure which.

[00:03:53] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Do you have a better feeling now, at the end?

[00:03:56] **Catherine Butler** I think we defer to the audience and all of you.

[00:04:04] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Let me move to Larycia because I'm dying to ask, Larycia's from Oklahoma. Larycia has also been the subject of a documentary, so she knows the process of making a documentary and she knows what it's like to have her home in the spotlight, too. So why did you feel like watching this film and how does it relate to your own experience?

[00:04:27] **Larycia Hawkins** Well, my experience intersects on multiple levels with this film. And the more I watched it, this is maybe the third or fourth time I've seen it now. I kept remembering more ways that my life intersects. One way is that Oklahoma... My grandfather, was a pastor in a conservative Black Baptist church and the Southern Baptist Convention that Lori grew up in provides a lot of support to black Baptist churches throughout the South. And a lot of people don't know that. It doesn't mean that these churches are Southern Baptist. He was very affiliated with the American Baptist and National Baptist Convention's, which are primarily black. But my experience was similar in that regard to Lori's actually growing up and my own narrative flows through hers in some ways. But then I've preached from the pulpit of Mayflower. Well, we don't say that because my granny is still alive and women don't preach. So I've spoken from the pulpit. And it was it was really right after Philando Castile. And so this one I kept asking Robin like, well, what do you want me to focus on? Like what you want me to focus on? And he said, Larycia, you can say anything you want from my pulpit. So Robin and my dad golf together. And so one day Robin said, my dad said, Robin, you might know my daughter. And he was like, who is your daughter? I was like, Latricia Hawkins. She got fired from Wheaton College for wearing a hijab in solidarity with Muslim women. So that's how Robin and I's paths kind of came together in that way. And Bishop Carlton Pearson, I was trying to interview for my own dissertation on the faith based and community initiatives, but I could never get him to return a call. But what I didn't know is he was going through his own being exiled from his religious community. So that's one of the other ways that I could read myself into this broader narrative, not knowing at the time how much I would be able to relate to Bishop Pearson's experience. So a lot of personal kind of intersections there for me in terms of thinking about how the film reads, but also thinking about the future and that it really is a crossroads of the United States in many ways, not just the highways that flow through it. So.

[00:06:54] **Kurtis Schaeffer** I want to get to larger issues because as you said, these are small stories that tell big stories about the USA. So but I want to stick just a little bit on characters for a moment if we can. And just I'll just call out one moment that that got me. And it was when Lori was driving back from her grandmother's house. And you chose to have an instrumental version of Leonard Cohen's Hallelujah. Right. Which, of course, if you're if you grew up with that song, it it grabs you every second. Right. So but my question is, I want to hear more about the grandmother. I want to hear more about that generation of people, because part of what's happening here is a generational change. But you you get at that a little bit through the grandmother. So tell us more about her. Tell us more about that generation in this film.

[00:07:52] **Jeanine Butler** We, we really thought her grandmother was very brave because her community is the church and that she grew up with and she doesn't agree with Lori and I'm pretty sure may no longer be true. But I'm pretty sure that they had never seen Lori preach before, her family members. But her grandmother did choose to stand up in solidarity with her to talk to us. And we really respected that. And Lori and Colin, both, they both, you know, grew up in families that were very conservative and they broke from them, but they've managed to keep a dialogue going. And I don't know if it's as simple as they agree to disagree, but they're still family. And it's a testament to Lori and Colin that they did choose to stay because they had opportunities, obviously, not to.

[00:08:48] **Catherine Butler** I would also say that Novella, Lori's grandmother, you know, she, I think, she said it all when she said, who am I to judge? She, I asked her afterwards when we had a few moments together and she said, you after her husband died, she wound up working for social services in the county there. And she was exposed to so many more people, so many more people struggling and suffering, they're people that she would never have met outside of her own community or church community. And, you know, her world opened up as well. And she felt very, very strongly about that. And in fact, at the local beauty parlor where the ladies from church are kind of going back and forth about the gossip of the day, I think she generally was, you know, really kicking a little, you know, kicking it up a bit. She she was not, you know. And so it was it was there. It was such a poignant moment. And I will say, like Jeanine, incredibly brave. I mean, Novella did not come to the Oklahoma premieres and Lori's mother and father did. And I think it was the first time they had seen her also preaching from the pulpit and also even at the capital. And, you know, just really just loving, brave people, you know, that we we want to stand by our daughter, but we may not agree. And so this film is the ability to make that conversation open. We hoped and that was, I think, Novella's hope as well.

[00:10:29] **Kurtis Schaeffer** There's a certain brilliance in the way that she expressed her connection. Right. Who am I to judge? That's it. That's a common starting point. And I thought that's what to me, that was a kind of preface to the latter part of the film when you give us such a rich example of the creation of common ground in Oklahoma. Maybe we can turn to some larger issues from the perspective of someone who works on religious freedom issues in Washington, D.C.. And let me just ask you very simply, what were your initial impressions of the film and what are you going to take back to your to your day job?

[00:11:09] **Sabrina Dent** Absolutely. First of all, I think the film is brilliant. It tells a necessary story about American history from a perspective that many people have not heard. One of the things that I appreciate about the film, is you just mentioned, common ground. It's important for us to know that in doing this type of work, it requires that we find common ground and that we do so using effective dialogue. Right. That scene with the grandmother was very powerful because they had differences in terms of their views. They had a similar upbringing. But to be able to say, I still see you, I still value you. I'm still going to stand with you is so important. And that's necessary for us to move forward as humanity and the work that I do, we're a nonpartisan nonsectarian organization, nonprofit that both focuses on educating the American public about religion, specifically religious freedom as a constitutional human right. And so when I think about this film, one is not my first time seeing it, I've seen it about four times, too, because we hosted a screening at the Newseum in Washington, D.C., because this is such an important film that speaks to the work that we do in educating the public and especially religious and civic leaders. At the same time, there's still a connection because we hosted the screening of Same God at the Newseum as well. And so for us, it's about sharing those narratives like Larycia is a living example for us to see as far as someone who stands up for someone who has been othered. Right. And then in the process, it gets othered. Right. And so what does it mean to find common ground to live with our deepest differences in spite of, you know, what could possibly happen to us and still move forward? I think a lot of that is necessary for humanity, as I said before, to move forward. And people haven't quite figured it out. But this film provides a great entry way for us to have that conversation, not just in these large groups, but in our homes. Like to think about what are you doing every day as another human being to help understand the perspectives of others and to learn really about what they believe. So in that I will say this and the work that we do, we focus a lot on religious literacy. Right. So this film gave a great example of how people might say, well, I'm a Christian. OK, let's unpack that. What does that mean? Because that's different for different people. So in the work that we do, my colleague Ben [00:14:10]Markus [0.0s] focuses on what is called the three B's framework, looking at behavior, belief and belonging. There are different reasons why people may ascribe to a particular religious identity or not. And so for some people, it might be about the sacred texts. For other people, it might be about the rituals, but other people is just their community. So a lot of times people might say, why would you stay in a community that doesn't affirm you? Well, maybe they were there with them when tight and when life was tough. There are many different reasons and not just for Christianity, but also many different other religious traditions. So for me, this film brings up the importance of effective dialogue, about understanding the history of race in this country, the history of religion in this country, and which is very complex. But we have to talk about it and also looking at religious identity just so there's so much that we can use. And actually we're using this. We're using this film in our course that we offer on African-Americans of religious freedom. Again, another perspective in which people do not look at religious freedom in this country.

[00:15:20] **Larycia Hawkins** And can I add one thing, Kurtis?

[00:15:21] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Of course. Go ahead.

[00:15:22] **Larycia Hawkins** There is a point in the film, just to Sabrina's point, beautiful points, multiple points, that when Lori is driving away in the truck, she says she's able to say and I think this is really important when you're talking about the ability of this film to create common ground. Because Lori says, if my grandmother didn't love me, she wouldn't ask me whether I was saved or not. And this is her recognition that while she disavows the faith of her past that the variant of Christianity, of her past, she still cognizes the beauty of that conversion question and the way that her grandmother shapes the question, she doesn't condemn it. She embraces it, says, this is my grandmother's way of loving me. And what the film does beautifully is it's it's what social scientists call both bridging social capital and bonding. You can further identify with your group. I mean, a conservative Christian might watch this film and go, well, this is precisely why I'm not one of those wishy washy liberal Christians, because that's what some of them will say. Right? Because everyone's included. And for some people, Christianity is about the exclusive part. And that's part and parcel of their belief formation, their identity formation, as you pointed to. And what's beautiful about this film is it allows people to read themselves in and not read other people out necessarily. And this is the kind of work that in some ways only art can do in the time that we're in. And so I'm thankful for this film on multiple levels pedagogically, personally, but then also in a broader sense. I think it's it is doing the work of peace that we need and giving that example of people choosing to continue to live in a space and a place generationally. Because the thing I will say about Mayflower to this question about it only being a generational divide. Mayflower is like mostly an old church. This isn't an old people, young people issue. Mayflower is very graying. Many of the liberal Protestant churches are. And so it's important to note that, yes, there are older people who are hewing to the older traditions of Christianity, if you will, or the more conservative forms. But there are also older people who are on the front lines of these kinds of social justice and reform movements into their very old and retiring age. And so there's also a beauty that and it's not quite so easy to say that for the 40 percent of those who identify as none are the young ones. That's that's true. There are also 60 percent who are still identifying with religion. So anyway.

[00:18:16] **Sabrina Dent** I just want to weigh in and say, I think this film is also important from this standpoint. This summer, the Public Religion Research Institute did a new survey about the state of American values. And so in their survey, they asked the question, how many people believed that, but based on their religious beliefs, they were allowed to discriminate against certain groups? When it came to gay, and I might be off by percentage when it became to the gay population based on their religious beliefs. Twenty nine percent of the people said they thought they could discriminate against gay people. Thirty percent said that they could discriminate against transgender people. I believe just 24 percent said that they could discriminate against people that identified as Jewish. And then it was, either Jewish or Muslim that got number and then it was like 19 percent. Fifteen percent said they believed, based on their religious beliefs, that they could discriminate against African-American people. So this film, it helps. Like, again, the conversation is so important, because when that type of data is coming out, it's a little scary as to where we are right now in the United States and what is happening in our so-called democracy. And so we have to have these conversations if you want to go back to the film. Also, one of the reasons why I celebrate the work of the film is because I come from the tradition that Carlton Pearson was a part of. And so although my journey to being who I am as a person spiritually evolved happened long before him, I celebrated the fact that he took this courageous moment to stand with people and then acknowledge that he was sorry. He said, I'm sorry that I'm creating pain for these people. But at the same time, he still had to affirm his beliefs and where he is. So again, it goes back to the fact that, you know, we have to really have a deep understanding for religious identity in this country, for the foundations of religious freedom and the complexities of it. Because keep in mind, the founding framers of the Constitution were fighting for religious freedom, but not necessarily, human freedom. So there a conversation that we have to have there, too. But it just points to there is a lot of work that has to happen. But all of which humanity was recognized in this film and it was done in such a compassionate way. And I celebrate you all for that.

[00:20:51] **Jeanine Butler**  We had a great team.

[00:20:52] **Catherine Butler** We had a great team. We had a great team. And I will say in Jeanine and I right from the get go and we've talked about this with you as well, that right at the beginning of the editorial brainstorming, we're like, whatever we do, we are going to make sure everybody is respected, their faith is respected, the importance of faith to themselves personally and their communities. And how do we create a larger kind of context historically and invite people in and say these are the these are the many facets to this? And how can we create a story through the narrative journeys of characters who are very compelling and very brave?

[00:21:35] **Kurtis Schaeffer** I think at this point we'll move to all of you and I'll open it up for questions for the director, the co producer or our panelists. Yes.

[00:21:48] **audience question** I would like to ask about film distribution its such an important film, so how do we tell other people they can see it?

[00:21:55] **Catherine Butler** Thank you very much for that important question. Well, we are actually where we have had a limited theatrical release that all that is wrapping up in November. But if you go to our Web site, American Heretics the film dot com, we are now organizing local community and church screenings. And people can. There is an e-mail contact on there that you can reach out to us on and we will get back to you and we're hoping, it's in front of Netflix and Amazon and all the streaming platforms right now, which given their schedules. You know, once it gets selected, it won't be till next spring or early summer for streaming. But in the meantime, if you're interested in bringing it to your community, please go to our Web site and reach out to us. We will make it happen for you.

[00:22:50] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Yes.

[00:22:52] **audience question** So just for a sort of background context, my mother is an Episcopal Priest and that's sort of the context I grew up in. So much religious discourse in this country, I like focuses on Roman Catholic vs Evangelicals. And there's not much focus on the inbetween? So where do you see the worlds, mainline protestants... where do you see their role in this broader conversation about religioun and politics and quote on quote taking back religion from the ...?

[00:23:30] **Catherine Butler** I think we like to defer to our two experts here. We're the storytellers.

[00:23:38] **Larycia Hawkins** So this is an interesting question. I teach in religious studies and politics and UCC is a mainline church. So the two churches featured in the film are both mainline churches as both Carlton Pearson and Robin Myers pointed to, while church membership is declining. Right. If you look at other data, people remain quite spiritual. And so there's it's not evident that there is a lack of interest in spirituality in this country by young people. Right. So that is where we see the greatest, quote, losses in terms of church membership, as I mentioned. Church of any sort. Right. So, I mean, mosque membership, synagogue attendance and membership, depending on what survey different metrics. Right. But what the metrics do point out is there is not a lack of interest in either spirituality and or inter faith, multi faith kinds of movements and efforts. And the religious studies department is one of the most popular departments at University of Virginia in terms of courses taken for electives, et cetera. Now, we do happen to be in the buckle of not the buckle or in the Bible Belt. Right. Oklahoma's pretty much the buckle. People fight about that. But I'm from there. I can tell you it's the buckle, too. But it's it is true. As someone who studies evangelicals, the black church, which is not necessarily evangelical, also it's hard to place. Right. But you have Pentecostals who are not evangelicals, by the way. Pentecostals and evangelicals are not the same, nor are fundamentalists the same. That's a whole different conversation. Right. But mainline Protestant churches, for those who don't know, are the traditional Protestant churches that came to the United States, that congregational church that you saw in the film. Episcopals, Methodists, and Presbyterians e.g. the frozen chosen. I mean, we've got names to make fun of all of them. Right. The predestined ones, you know, they think they're the only ones in heaven; chosen. But to your point, what evidence we have is who is on the front lines of social movements, justice movements. It's the mainline Protestants. Right. And so what's interesting is the churches that are losing market share the most because they're graying the most, like the denominations you saw on the film are those who are reforming socially the most. And this is why Robbins says not without basis. He says that these churches will be the churches that these young people will gravitate to. And I think he's right. I think what we'll see because of generational cycles. Right. Twenty year olds didn't go to church when my parents were 20 because they were smoking pot in 1968. Right. They didn't go. So that being said, in 20 years, what the evidence shows is that people began going to church again. It's more than likely that these are the churches that will attract them given their platforms on social issues. In the 50s and 60s, we called it the social gospel and those were the churches that were innovating and reforming and on the frontlines of the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement. And those are the churches that are tending to grow again. So, you know, you should read your mom in her church in because those are the kinds of churches that are doing the kinds of things that young people say, Gen X, Gen Y, Gen Z say that they're most interested in in terms of lifestyle and how they want to be and how they want to live out their faith, their belief in a practical sense in the world.

[00:27:34] **Catherine Butler** Go, mom.

[00:27:39] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Sabrina, did you have some comments?

[00:27:40] **Sabrina Dent** I would just add to that because Larycia did an awesome job, Dr. Hawkins in explaining that. But I would say being that you're here, right, now, you have an opportunity to share with others that may not know about this film like and to get that out there and get the word out. So it's important that, you know, where we go to events and where we go to screenings and that we then walk away with the responsibility of what is my next action step. What am I going to do to advance the conversation? And that's a big part of the work that we do at the Religious Freedom Center is to make sure that people are not just coming to get the information, trying to feel good about the moment. But there's something that you need to do after that moment and you need to do. But the next moment that again, society and humanity depends upon the work that all of us do, the positive work that all of us do. So.

[00:28:36] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Did you have any follow up to that question?

[00:28:40] **Jeanine Butler** That's pretty fabulous.

[00:28:41] **Kurtis Schaeffer** All right. Sounds good.

[00:28:42] **Catherine Butler** They covered it.

[00:28:44] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Other questions. Yes, sir.

[00:28:48] **audience question** I think one of the untold theological stories in America is the extent to which creating universalism that is the lack of belief in hell where the idea that God will condemn people on the basis of belief to serve offer basically that's been a creeping belief. Across mainlain Protestantism not really strongly asserted, but there in the pews and among the ministers and also in Catholicism and that the Evangelical and Pentacostal churhces are the last bastion of a various sort of belief in the consequences of being in hell this way so strongly for that; so I am interested in your comment. I thought the hinge point in the film between the first part and the second part was that scene in the trial where Lori was saying a response to reflect that this was the grandmother who was so concerned that she would be going ahead. Lori's responsew was to say I'm going to heaven, but I don't believe in hell. And that's kind of the position that an awful lot of traditional Christians are, in the African American communities as well. There's a lot of adversity in belief in the African American community.

[00:30:17] **Sabrina Dent** So I weigh in on that. And although I like I said, I'm here as the Religious Freedom Center. Personally, I am the daughter of a Pentecostal preacher. And so I grew up in a household where even if I was interested in someone, my parents were asked, are they saved? That was the question. There was very fire and brimstone type teaching in my life. And so I am seminary trained as I was licensed as a Baptist minister. So, yes, that is a very strong belief. As far as the heaven and hell about sending someone to hell. But what Reverend Lavanhar has said in the film is that, you know, he's not about sending someone to hell because there are people that're facing hell every day of their lives. Right. And so, yes, those traditions may continue to preach that belief and that narrative. But when you're dealing with everyday situations where, for example, police brutality. Right. For me personally, this is Sabrina speaking for me personally, I'm less concerned about a hell than I am about the human being that may possibly be killed. Right. And so when we think about it that way, I'm not dismissing anyone's beliefs, but I think it may be helpful to think more critically about our theological positions on some things and to really do a lot more historical work behind that. Why was hell created? In terms of the idea of it. So there are some things that people need to reflect on. And yes, those traditions will still speak that personally. I will share this about my narrative. I remember when I was a part of even the Baptist church wanted to things that I worked with the children's church and I had the responsibility of during children's Church of a child wanted to give their life to God that, you know, I was supposed to go talk to them in the back. And there was this whole [00:32:17]cube [0.0s] if you do this one thing, if you do that, then you could go to hell if you don't profess Jesus and that. And that didn't work for me, because at that time I was also a parent. And I said, I don't want anyone telling my child what their future holds based on this idea. So, yes, there are traditions that heavily lean on that even today, and not the Baptist church, but in the Pentecostal church, that is true. But I can't say it enough. What Reverend Lover has said is so real. There are people that are dealing with immigration issues. There are people that are trying to figure out how they're going to feed their family next week. And so for me personally, I think that people need to think about what are we doing to help the person now that then may eventually get them to a position that they'll feel some type of connection where spiritually they'll believe something else. But yet that that is very strong. And those traditions and those may never change. And that's that's OK for them to have that belief. But for me personally, I have to value the human being and humanity that's in front of me.

[00:33:28] **Larycia Hawkins** Just quickly, on a theological level and many evangelical and or Catholic churches, there has been a revision in how people talk about hell, even if they believe in it, as in thinking about Christianity, that from the perspective of as opposed to hell being something you're saved from, Jesus saves you from hell. Jesus saves you too good works. So salvation as being from something as toward others, toward good works. So.

[00:34:05] **Sabrina Dent** I mean, they're the thing. The challenge with that also is that there are many people in congregations around the world that live in fear because of that type of theological believe I'm gonna do good for humanity because I don't want to burn in hell eternally. Right. Whereas why not just do good? Because it's the right thing to do.

[00:34:26] **Larycia Hawkins** And I mean, a deep emphasis on the, on the hell narrative at all. And that's a way that people have done that. Maybe it's subtle. Maybe it's still part of the same stream that you see. But I don't think it's as axiomatic as it might appear, maybe in certain denominations. But within evangelicalism, there's a deemphasization a sophistication, if you will, about how people talk about and deal with, even if they retain that belief, that kind of playtonic. You know, dualism of heaven hell.

[00:35:00] **Kurtis Schaeffer** Sabrina and Larycia, thank you so much for talking with us today. And please join me in thanking again Jeanine and Catherine for bringing us such a lovely and important film.

[00:35:11] **Jeanine Butler** Thank you for coming out. Applause.