

LIEBERMAN'S DECLARATIONS OF FAITH OFFER GRIST FOR POLITICAL MILL

Al Gore's selection of Senator Joseph Lieberman was received well by most Americans. But when the Connecticut senator started invoking the name of God in his speeches, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and American Atheists got nervous.

The ADL said the remarks given by Senator Lieberman at a Protestant church on August 27 were inappropriate: "Language such as this risks alienating the American people." Similarly, American Atheists said that Senator Lieberman's "'assurances' about the role of religion and politics ring hollow considering his hostility toward rational thinking Americans."

The Catholic League got into the action by defending Senator Lieberman's freedom of speech while questioning the propriety of his venue:

"Senator Lieberman is to be commended, not criticized, for discussing the public role of religion. For too long, public office holders have succumbed to elite pressure by silencing themselves on this issue. Senator Lieberman not only has a First Amendment right to exercise his freedom of speech, he has a moral obligation to share with Americans his religiously-informed vision of the polity.

"The problem the Catholic League has with the speech that Senator Lieberman gave last Sunday at the Fellowship Chapel in Detroit is not with its content, but with its venue: elected officials and candidates for public office should not be stumping in houses of worship. Take, for example, what happened last Sunday. Just before Lieberman took to the pulpit, the pastor of the church (who is also the president of

the local NAACP chapter), Rev. Wendell Anthony, gave Lieberman a tacit endorsement and then criticized George W. Bush and Dick Cheney.

“Republicans and Democrats alike are guilty of campaigning in Protestant churches and synagogues. It is time this abuse was ended and it is time for ministers and rabbis to follow the lead of Catholic priests by not extending invitations to speak from the pulpit in the first place.”

The ADL's negative reaction was not uniformly mirrored in the Jewish community. For example, the Jewish fraternal organization that founded the ADL, B'nai B'rith, sided with Lieberman. Nonetheless, it was the ADL's reaction that created the most stir.

Jews for Morality was critical of Lieberman as well, though their criticism was not based on secular considerations. “In Joe Lieberman's Bible, **HOMOSEXUALITY** is a legitimate ‘sexual preference,’ and **MURDER** is O.K., if the victim is a newborn baby (‘Partial-Birth’ Abortion).” The Brooklyn, New York-based group also told ADL “not to worry” about Lieberman's religious convictions as he “doesn't really mean it.” Lieberman was accused of ‘sanctimonious fraud and hypocrisy.”

Lieberman, an orthodox Jew, told Larry King that abortion is “a matter of personal judgment.” “And like everything else in Judaism,” Lieberman contended, “ultimately, it's up to each of us to decide what we think is right.”

Orthodox Jews like Michael Medved took immediate offense charging that this was flatly wrong. Worse, “Viewers of the senator's comments to Mr. King might well take away the impression that Orthodox Judaism is strict and unbending when it comes to kosher catering or avoiding automobiles on the Sabbath, but infinitely flexible concerning respect for human life and other tormenting moral issues.”

From the perspective of the Catholic League, what troubled us

most was the prevalence of the ever-existing double standard. David Harris of the National Jewish Democratic Council explained, "Bush's declarations [of faith] have an air of exclusivity. But Gore and Lieberman appear all-inclusive on faith, that all must be made to feel welcome."

Eliot Minberg, vice president of People for the American Way, showed that he, too, was blessed with this uncanny ability: "When Republicans talk about their faith, most know what that talk means...That's not as true for Democrats."

William Raspberry of the *Washington Post* also noted the inclusive-exclusive distinction that evaded most other observers. "Hardly anyone is put off by a politician's public invocation of 'the Almighty' or the 'Creator,' terms general enough to embrace adherents of virtually any religion—or no religion. References to 'the Blessed Virgin,' on the other hand—or even, in mixed gatherings, to 'Our Lord and Savior'—can make some people feel like outsiders."

What absolutely no one objected to was the following comment by Lieberman: "My religion decides what's right. And what's right for me as vice president will be what's right for America." Now if a Catholic running for office had said this, some would call for his arrest. But with Lieberman, it's different.

We're not sure what to make of this. If what Lieberman told Larry King I right, namely that under Judaism "it's up to each of us to decide what's right," then he must have been thinking of some other religion when he said, "My religion decides what's right." Logically, he can't have it both ways. But in reality he can—the media will never ask him to explain his contradictory positions.