

COLUMNISTS

Lieberman no threat to church-state separation

In his first public address following his selection as the Democratic candidate for vice president of the United States, Sen. Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, an Orthodox Jew who prefers "observant Jew", quoted freely from the Bible and mentioned God more than a dozen times — and in an openly prayerful fashion.

Several pundits pointed out that if a conservative Christian politician had done that, the media would have pilloried him for breaching the wall of separation between church and state. For these commentators, the pass given to Sen. Lieberman is only one more example of the double standard which liberals employ in such matters. Even though his Senate voting record is on the moderate-to-conservative side, Lieberman is still a Democrat, with liberal views on such hot-button issues as abortion rights and gun control.

What is one to make of this charge? Is there a double standard here? Is it acceptable, after all, for the Democratic candidate for vice president to appeal in an explicitly religious fashion to God and the Bible in a political address, but not acceptable for the Republican nominee for president, Gov. George W. Bush, to confess his own faith in Jesus Christ and to refer to him, as he did in an earlier debate with other Republican candidates, as the



essays in theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

"philosopher" who has had the greatest influence on his thinking and values?

There is a plausible answer to these questions and it comes from a recent *New York Times* op-ed piece (8/15/00) by a distinguished Lutheran scholar, Martin E. Marty, emeritus professor in the Divinity School, University of Chicago, and one of the most respected observers of the U.S. religious scene.

"Nonevangelical Americans," he writes, "do not fear that orthodox Jews will try to convert them, or impose their beliefs on the nation. But many people do see a threat in the efforts by evangelical Christians like Pat Robertson to change laws to conform to their beliefs and in effect produce a uniformly Christian America."

Therein lies the difference. American Jews have never made the claim that this

is a Jewish nation, subject to the laws of the Old Testament. They have not pressed for the teaching of the Torah in public schools nor for making shopping illegal on the Sabbath (sundown Friday until sundown Saturday). Neither have they ever asserted that no one can be saved apart from explicit adherence to the Jewish faith.

It is not that Jews are constitutionally incapable of adopting a stance similar to that taken by many evangelical and fundamentalist Protestants. One has only to look at the deep divisions in Israel today between religious, i.e., Orthodox, and secular Jews. The former have done everything in their power to prevent their secular counterparts from engaging in normal business and leisure activities on the Sabbath, at times even stoning their cars. For such Jews, there can be no separation of religion and state.

But that is not, and never has been, the situation in the United States. Even if the American Jewish community were suddenly to lose its collective mind and do a spectacular flip-flop in its understanding of the relationship between religion and politics, it would have no impact. Jews constitute a tiny percentage of the U.S. population, and it is getting smaller, not larger.

The possibility cannot be so easily dismissed, however, in the case of the evan-

gelical and fundamentalist Protestant communities. Many in these communities continue to insist that this is a "Christian nation" (notwithstanding the lip-service paid to its hyphenated "Judeo" element) and that the laws of the land must faithfully embody the laws of God contained in the Bible (as they interpret it).

This group's collective political clout was on dramatic display in 1919 with the passage of a constitutional amendment (repealed in 1933) to prohibit the manufacture, sale, and distribution of alcoholic beverages. They have continued their efforts to mold the nation's legal system in accordance with their understanding of Scripture. Their determined opposition to laws that seek to protect the civil rights of gays and lesbians is one of several examples.

It should not be surprising, therefore, that while conservative Christian politicians are still roundly criticized whenever they try to bring their faith to bear in the public forum, most Americans have been untroubled by Sen. Lieberman's public expressions of his own religious faith.

Martin Marty has it right. Nonevangelical Americans can tell the difference.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Knowing Jesus' nature is essential part of faith

24th Sunday of the Year (Sept. 17): (R3) Mark 8:27-35; (R1) Isaiah 50:5-9; (R2) James 2:14-18.

Jesus and his disciples set out for the villages around Caesarea Philippi. He asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" They replied, "Some, John the Baptist, others, Elijah, still others, one of the prophets."

"And you, who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah."

This was an appropriate place for Jesus to ask. For Caesarea Philippi was the center of Baal worship and worship of the Greek god, Pan. Everywhere in that area there was a monument or a temple to some god or another. And yet, when confronted with the question of who Jesus was, Peter looked at this common carpenter and declared him to be the Messiah. This was a climactic point in the Gospel. Jesus had little time left and was going to his death, so he needed to know if he had communicated the essential to his followers.

What matters in our faith is, who do you say Jesus is? The Christian faith is not a philosophy about the nature of the universe, nor an attempt to explain life. It is an acknowledgment that God has invaded



a word for sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

our universe and has revealed himself to us in the life of Jesus, God-made-man.

In Matthew's Gospel, when Peter made this confession, Jesus called him a "rock" and said that "upon this rock I will build my church and all the powers of hell shall not prevail against it" (16:18). This is critical. Our church is built upon the truth that Jesus is the Son of God made man.

People often wonder, "What is God like?" God is like Jesus. Somebody said that "Jesus is the best photograph God ever had taken."

A young priest asked his pastor what he thought of the sermon he had preached. The pastor said, "A very poor sermon, indeed."

"A poor sermon! It took me a long

time to prepare it."

"No doubt of it," said the pastor. "Still it was not a good sermon, for there was no Christ in it. As the English say, 'All roads lead to London,' so every sermon should lead to Christ."

Jesus is the standard by which we judge right and wrong. The question to solve every moral decision should be, "What would Jesus do?" How would Jesus feel today about abortion, premarital sex, cheating in a marriage, euthanasia, birth control? We can find out by reading the Gospel or listening to the church he founded.

Mike Minor saw the Ironman competition televised from Hawaii. It included a 2½-mile swim, then a 115-mile bike ride, finishing up with a 26.2-mile marathon. He saw a man swimming with a harness tied to a small inflatable raft. In this raft was a man who had cerebral palsy. They were father and son. The father climbed out of the water, picked up his son from the raft and carried him to the next course, the 115-mile bike ride. The father was 59, the son, 37. The race was won in just over 8 hours. The father and son team crossed the finish line in just over 16 hours. But they finished!

One may not be physically challenged,

but may suffer from loneliness, depression, alcoholism, or impurity. It is then that Christ, like a father, gently pulls one out of the water to carry to the next challenge. His love is always there to keep us going. When we cross the finish line, he is there to embrace us. Jesus saves!

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

Monday, September 18
1 Corinthians 11:17-26, 33;
Luke 7:1-10

Tuesday, September 19
1 Corinthians 12:12-14, 27-31;
Luke 7:11-17

Wednesday, September 20
1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13;
Luke 7:31-35

Thursday, September 21
Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-13;
Matthew 9:9-13

Friday, September 22
1 Corinthians 15:12-20; Luke 8:1-3

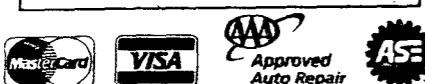
Saturday, September 23
1 Corinthians 15:35-37, 42-49;
Luke 8:4-15

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