A Religion, and a Politics, for Our Time

By Seth Forman

Religion is big in politics these days. Both Democrats and Republicans are appropriating Biblical language and making references to God at almost every available opportunity. George W. Bush claims that his favorite political philosopher is Jesus Christ. Al Gore asks himself "What would Jesus do?" when pondering policy issues. Vice Presidential candidate Joseph Lieberman calls upon the American people to "renew the dedication of our nation and ourselves to God and God's purpose."

It is possible that these religious references reflect a return to a belief that religion deserves a respected place in the public square. It is more likely, though, that all this religious talk is political rhetoric, and there will be no translation into specific policies or positions. If that is true, what is happening in America as a whole is thus something of a replay of what has gone on for a long time now in New York City.

New York politicians know to speak only in the broadest religious generalities, for fear of offending one of the many religious voting blocs in the city. This may explain why race and ethnicity have become larger factors than religion in New York City politics, a fact that Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan discovered as early as 1970. In the revised version of Beyond the Melting Pot, their groundbreaking study of New York ethnic groups, the authors wrote that "religion as a major line of division in the city is for the moment in eclipse. Ethnicity and race dominate the city, more than ever seemed possible."

Today, New York City is even more diverse than when Glazer and Moynihan were writing. The 1990 census showed that 43.4 percent of New Yorkers identify themselves as Catholic, 27.4 percent as Protestant, 10.9 percent as Jewish, 1.5 percent as Muslim, and 1.4 percent as one or another "eastern religion." Add to this a high number of atheists, agnostics and others, and one can understand how religion has become the "third rail" of New York City Politics. Norman Adler, a political advisor for both Democrats and Republicans in New York, recently told the Village Voice that "God is a live hand grenade in New York politics. If you invoke a blessing in the name of Jesus Christ, there's lots of Jews and Muslims and Unitarians, not to mention lots and lots of secular people, who are very bothered by that."

The wariness with which many New York politicians negotiate the annual St. Patrick's Day parade, which, in deference to the Catholic Church, excludes gay activists from marching, is one indication of the difficulty in showing political support for a particular religious viewpoint. The New York City citizenry seems naturally repelled by any strong
action taken on behalf of any one religious group or principle. One of Mayor Rudy
Giuliani's most unpopular and divisive policy decisions was to cut funding for the
Brooklyn Museum after the controversial "Sensation" exhibit of 1999, which included a
painting of the Virgin Mary dotted with cow-dung and pornographic photos.

The caution with which New York politicians have had to approach religion in public life
seems to have served as a model for the approach to religion we are seeing at the national
level, a rather surprising development for the city Christian evangelist Billy Graham
likened in 1957 to Sodom and Gomorrah.

While America is not as religiously diverse as New York City, it is divided enough so
that most attempts to integrate religious viewpoints into public policy are trumped by the
overriding desire not to give offense to any particular religionists or religious viewpoints.

In her recent book One Nation, Two Cultures, the historian Gertrude Himmelfarb reports
that while 96 percent of Americans profess to believe in God, Americans are divided
deeply over religious beliefs and practices. Southern Baptists differ sharply with Northern
Baptists on such subjects as the ordination of women and homosexuals, and on cultural
and moral values in general, as do Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Jews.
Traditionalist Catholics disagree with modernist Catholics even on abortion. Protestants
allied with the Christian Coalition have little in common with the National Council of
Churches. "We are," in the words of sociologist James Q. Wilson, "a partially religious
nation, and our cultural conflicts do not pit one religion against another so much as they
set nonreligious Americans against their religious rivals."

While the divide between the religiously devout and the more moderately religious and
nonreligious is real, it would be wrong to believe that the sides are evenly split. Most
Americans (one study said about three-quarters of all Americans) are decidedly of the
moderately religious or non-religious stripe. Most of the people in this group claim to
hold deep religious convictions: the most recent Gallup poll found that 68 percent say
they belong to a church and 87 percent claim that religion is very important or fairly
important in their lives. But, for the most part, they don't believe their religious views
should affect public policy decisions. The Pew Research Center found that 64 percent of
Americans surveyed believe that clergymen should not discuss politics, and 50 percent
are uncomfortable when politicians discuss how religious they are. Significant majorities
of Americans claim to hold themselves to a high moral standard based on religious
beliefs, but are extremely reluctant to impose these standards on others.

This is what Alan Wolfe found in his much-heralded 1998 study One Nation, After All.
The majority of Americans, according to Wolfe, share an unshakable belief in the
autonomy of the individual and the primacy of free choice, and they adhere to one
cardinal virtue: tolerance. It is the primacy of the tolerance principle that has convinced
Americans they must abstain from all judgements. Free choice for all, Americans seem to
think, is the key to the good life. The end result is that Americans go out of their way to
avoid publicly disapproving of other people's behavior or "lifestyle," lest it bring
reciprocal condemnation of their own.
Middle-class values - particularly those associated with respect for work and commerce - have made a comeback since what has been called the "Great Disruption" of the 1960s, when what mattered was "doing your own thing." But the spread of affluence has kept the regime of "choice" alive. The consumer economy has made a fetish of choice, and choices have multiplied as people have more money to invest in them.

Today, for the vast majority of Americans, adhering to the rigorous moral guidelines of traditional religion restricts life opportunities in every sphere. Students who refuse to live in co-ed dorms may not find accommodations at elite universities. Travel and fine dining are virtually impossible for those observing strict ritual and dietary laws. Entertainment venues are limited for those offended by violence, nudity, and obscenity. Individual Americans may choose to opt out of certain opportunities for themselves. But, as Wolfe writes, "if there is one commandment to which Americans pay homage, it is . . . 'Thou shalt not judge.'"

George W. Bush can thus feel comfortable claiming that he likes his party's anti-abortion "tenor," but say that he is also a "realistic enough person to know that America is not ready to ban abortions." Polls have found upwards of 60 percent of Americans favoring the outlaw of "partial-birth" abortions. But, of that 60 percent, more than half want an exception made for the health of the mother. With maternal death rates at only a fraction of a percent, people who oppose partial-birth abortion seem to be looking for an escape valve. As Christopher Caldwell writes in The New Republic, "Americans want to register disapproval and keep the procedure available at the same time."

Similarly, Senator Lieberman can take Hollywood to task for its vulgarity, but make no binding demands on the studios. Lieberman can also tell listeners of the "Imus in the Morning" radio show that "there is no ban whatsoever" in Judaism on interreligious marriage, when Deut. 7:3 states: "You shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughter to his son, nor take his daughter for your son." These positions send one clear message: it is perfectly fine, even beneficial, for a candidate to say they believe strongly in a religious principle. But for heaven's sake, those principles must never result in putting limits on people's choices.

Even when public laws become more faith-friendly, it is in the service of sanctifying choice. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act of 1996 (i.e. welfare reform), for example, contains Section 104, ironically called the "Charitable Choice" provision, which encourages states to utilize "faith-based organizations in serving the poor and needy" and requires that religious organizations be permitted to receive contracts, vouchers, and other government funding on the same basis as any other non-governmental provider. The idea is to expand the potential universe of welfare reform alternatives.

Similarly, religious leaders, particularly those in minority communities like the Reverend Wyatt Tee Walker and the Reverend Floyd Flake in Queens, have been at the forefront of the charter school and school voucher movement. The Sisulu Children's Academy, one of
two charter schools located in Harlem, is independently run, as required by law, but is housed in a building owned by the Canaan Baptist Church. Church leaders have been successful in lobbying for these initiatives precisely because they have successfully framed the issue as one of school choice for the lowest income students. In general, when religion is seen as an agent of choice it is welcomed in the public sphere; when it is an enemy of choice it is vanquished.

That is perhaps why the religion of this year's campaign is so uninspiring. If politicians never ask the tough questions or take difficult positions, it is because they have discovered America's preference for a religion of choices, not one of consequences. The candidates can't be blamed. They did not create this sordid state of affairs. They have merely exploited a moral void largely of our own making.

Seth Forman is the author of "Blacks in the Jewish Mind: A Crisis of Liberalism" (NYU Press 1998) and teaches Political Science at SUNY at Stony Brook.