

Lieberman gets unusual amen corner

By Larry Witham
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A funny thing is happening to Joe Lieberman on the road to the White House.

Most of the people unhappy with the celebration of his Jewish faith are Jews.

A lot of people cheering his unabashed talk of religious faith are conservative Christians. They hear it as a welcome call for a revival of the older secular values.

Fears that the nomination of the first Jew on a major national ticket would provoke prejudice against Jews have been turned awry.

Jewish leaders, particularly of the more liberal congregations and organizations always vigilant for expressions of anti-Jewish sentiment in public discourse, have criticized the Connecticut senator and Democratic vice presidential candidate for obscuring the line between church and state.

The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) asked the Democratic vice-presidential nominee to tone down his references to God. Several Jewish leaders and ethnic newspapers have questioned the wisdom and propriety of his rhetoric.

"I think Lieberman has gone over the line on that, as the other candidates have," says Rabbi Charles A. Kroloff, president of the Reform rab-

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bis in America. "I feel that religious piety is about to become a test for public office."

The Forward, a New York Jewish weekly, agreed with an ADL warning last week that Mr. Lieberman's use of religious rhetoric would "alienate" Americans. The weekly editorialized that Mr. Lieberman "stumbled badly" with "his reckless declaration" that the Constitution guaranteed freedom of religion, "not freedom from religion."

Prominent Christian conservatives disagree heartily. "Our kids are not really being overcome by piety," says William Bennett, a Roman Catholic and former secretary of education. "This is not the major problem in American life."

Christian Coalition founder Pat Robertson, an evangelical Baptist, supports this view. "[Mr. Lieber-

man] feels this deeply, and that's why the religious conservatives like him a lot and they like Orthodox Jews," Mr. Robertson says. "They like people who will stand up for their faith."

Says the Rev. Jerry Falwell, chancellor of Liberty Baptist University and pastor of the Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Va.: "To limit someone's expression of free speech on any subject, including religion, is a violation of the First Amendment."

Not all Jewish leaders are Lieberman critics. Rabbi Kroloff's Central Conference of American Rabbis represents the largest bloc of American Jewry, but some Orthodox leaders argue that under the circumstances of moral decline in America, religious talk doesn't hurt.

The Orthodox policy group Agudath Israel says the ADL "is right that there are times when a public official can cross the line of propriety in speaking about religion, but this is not such a time."

Instead, Agudath Israel says, talk about "religious values in these troubled times is actually a most welcome development."

Agudath Israel spokesman Rabbi Avi Shafran says of the ADL complaint that "the amens for that come from the less ritually observant Jewish world" — liberal and secular Jews. Yet even for Orthodox, he says, "there are mixed feelings."

Some conservative Christian commentators, who usually have kind words for Republican candidates, say Mr. Lieberman's talk of religious values is a good strategy for the Democrats.

Mr. Lieberman, who has defended his campaign style on several occasions, taking issue with the Anti-Defamation League, nevertheless seems wary of dividing the leaders of his faith.

"My own expressions ... were really meant to be inclusive and tolerant, including tolerant of that minority of the American public that does not believe in God," Mr.

Lieberman says.

He endorsed religion as part of public life but earlier this week offered a clarification of his remarks quoting George Washington that without religion there is no morality. He said he did not imply that non-religious people are necessarily immoral.

"In an open society, [Washington] was saying, religion is one good source of good values," Mr. Lieberman said.

The debate with Jewish leaders and the ADL began with remarks in the Midwest, where Mr. Lieberman spoke of how the nation could come together under God. He cited the Old Testament story of Moses parting the Red Sea as a metaphor to describe the Clinton-Gore administration's economic policy.

Early last year, as the Gore campaign began to plan strategy, campaign adviser Elaine Kamarck told the Boston Globe that "the Democratic Party is going to take back God this time," and conservative

Christian leaders are taking them at their strategic word.

Says Mr. Bennett, "As natural as that is to him, I think the political calculation is the most natural thing to the Gore campaign. I'm sure they're seeing how this is playing and they're saying, 'Stay at it, Joe.'"

The Clinton-Gore administration won an important segment of the evangelical vote in 1992 and 1996, and Pat Robertson worries that the God-talk by Democrats may draw them to that party again.

"As a Republican, I'm not particularly pleased because he's gaining a lot of votes for Al Gore," Mr. Robertson says. "This is a brilliant strategic move, and the Democrats are chortling enormously."

Rabbi Kroloff says he does not expect to emphasize this issue again, in hopes the policy topics will come to the fore in the presidential race. "I think I'm going to wait and see what happens in the next few weeks."