

Religion Today
August 20-26, 2000
Religion and Politics in the New Millennium
Paul V.M. Flesher

Al Gore's pick of Joseph Lieberman as his running mate makes a strong statement that the new millennium will usher in an era not just of religious tolerance, but of religious inclusion. While the past 100 years have been a time of religious intolerance, especially against Jews, Gore's choice symbolically expresses a hope that the new millennium will be a time of religious freedom and acceptance of religious difference. The ability to practice any religion will become not just toleration for people of different religions, but rather the joining together of Americans of all religions to work together for the common good.

While that sentiment is an important hope for the new millennium, the practical impact of Lieberman's religion is best explained by defining each word of his faith, Orthodox Judaism.

Judaism's formative period is well known to Christians since it is largely recorded in the Old Testament, which Jews call the Hebrew Bible or Tanach. But Judaism is as much a post-Old Testament religion as is Christianity. While Christianity created itself by writing the books of the New Testament, Judaism transformed itself by writing a series of books, the greatest of which is known as the Talmud. This book is many times the size of the Old Testament and contains the teaching of the rabbis and their interpretations of scripture.

The Talmud takes the Judaism of the Hebrew Bible, which is based on the Jerusalem Temple, and recasts it into a religion that can be practiced without a temple. This was an important step in Judaism's development, for although Judaism had a temple in Jerusalem for approximately 1000 years, it became a non-temple religion

which has been practiced for twice as long, nearly 2000 years. So just as early Christianity defined itself as a Judaism without a temple (read the letters of Paul for further detail), so too post-Old Testament Judaism transformed itself into a temple-less form of worship.

Within Judaism, Orthodoxy indicates a particular attitude towards both Judaism's past tradition and its place in the modern world. Modern Judaism spans the range from those who have adapted to the present at the expense of the past to those who have enshrined tradition and rejected the present. Most Jews stand between these extremes, somewhere close to the middle. Lieberman belongs to Modern Orthodoxy, which strongly emphasizes tradition in religious matters but not in matters outside religious concerns. Thus Lieberman is quite strict about his religious beliefs and practices, but in non-religious areas enjoys and participates in social, cultural, and public activities like everyone else.

The area where Lieberman's Orthodox Judaism will be most apparent will be in his ritual practices. He observes the Sabbath from sundown Friday evening to sundown Saturday evening. He observes the Jewish religious holidays and follows the Jewish dietary regulations (i.e., he "keeps kosher"), which require the strict separation of meat products and dairy products. Judaism, like Christianity, is about worshiping God. The Sabbath, the holidays, and even meals are times when Jews worship God.

Will Gore and Lieberman win in the fall? I certainly do not know. But Lieberman's presence in the campaign will provide opportunities to consider the place of religions in American life.