



## The Jewish Week

SERVING THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF GREATER NEW YORK

(04/13/2007)

### **God, Back On The Trail**

Mounting fears from Jewish leaders of a religious test for candidates.

James D. Besser - Washington Correspondent

For Jewish leaders concerned about the growing mingling of sectarian religion and presidential politics, the surging campaign of former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney is taking some ominous turns.

The Republican Romney, facing polls indicating that only 29 of Americans believe the nation is “ready” for a Mormon president, has been working frantically to reinforce his religious credentials with the conservative Christian leaders who could play a big role in deciding the outcome of key GOP primaries next year.

And those credentials aren’t entirely confined to his positions on the issues so-called “values” voters care about the most.

In a recent conference call with voters in Iowa, he said “my faith includes a fundamental belief that we are all sons and daughters of a loving God,” and added that “I happen to believe that Jesus Christ is my personal savior and the son of God.”

ultimately undercut the huge political gains Jews and other religious minorities have made in recent years.

Increasingly, the media cooperates by focusing on the religious beliefs of candidates and featuring pundits who assess those beliefs.

“The Constitution says the government can’t impose a religious test,” said the Rev. C. Welton Gaddy, President of The Interfaith Alliance, a church-state watchdog group, in a recent fundraising letter. “But apparently they don’t have to since the media is happy to do it for them.”

Some top Jewish leaders are troubled.

“Every four years, it rises up a notch,” said Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL). “We’re hearing more of it in this campaign, and we’ve just started; it’s taking on a life of its own.”

Foxman, who criticized Sen. Joe Lieberman in 2000 for repeatedly raising his Judaism on the campaign trail, said that it’s more of an issue today because so many “values issues” — like abortion, stem cell research and gay marriage — have moved to the fore in public policy debates.

It gets difficult, he conceded, because “values have been made a political issue, and for most Americans, values come out of their religious beliefs. So there’s more of an embrace of religiosity and faith. And how do you establish your values without talking about your faith?”

But more and more, Foxman continued, religious interest groups are setting religious tests for candidates — and “the problem comes when the candidates respond.

Some voters are fed up, analysts say, especially with a GOP that they see as too tied to Evangelical Christian activists like James Dobson, the powerful head of the Focus on the Family mega-ministry.

“There has been a backlash against the GOP in suburbs populated with upper-income, highly educated people who do not identify at all with the socially conservative positions of Dobson,” said University of Virginia political scientist Larry Sabato. “Look at the large skew to the Democrats among graduate-educated Americans, who used to be heavily GOP.”

Sabato pointed to a particularly graphic illustration of the willingness of prominent evangelical leaders to make political judgments based mostly on the candidates’ personal faith.

Earlier in the month Dobson seemed to dismiss former senator and TV star Fred Thompson — a not-yet-announced candidate for the Republican nomination — as not “Christian” enough.

“Everyone knows he’s conservative and has come out strongly for the things that the pro-family movement stands for,” Dobson told Dan Gilgoff of U.S. News and World Report. “[But] I don’t think he’s a Christian; at least that’s my impression.”

And that, Dobson said, could make it hard for Thompson to win the support of the party’s Evangelical base.

That kind of comment could spell trouble for the Republicans, Sabato said. “The Republicans’ challenge is to show that they are not controlled by the narrow likes of Jim Dobson, Jerry Falwell, and the others,” he said. “Dobson’s comment about Fred Thompson was truly outrageous. Who is he to determine such things?”

Dobson’s comments about Thompson stood out all the more because of his warm embrace of former House speaker Newt Gingrich, who confessed on Dobson’s radio program that he was having an affair even as he was leading the House effort to impeach former President Bill Clinton because of Clinton’s indiscretions.

“So the thrice-married Gingrich, he of many affairs, is a ‘good Christian,’ while Thompson is not,” Sabato said. “I’m still scratching my head over that one.”

Many voters will do the same, he said.

But Gingrich’s preemptive repentance and Dobson’s obvious blessing could pay big dividends if the former speaker decides to enter key Republican primaries. And he is not alone in courting the evangelical political elite.

Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), who once criticized Moral Majority founder Jerry Falwell as one of the nation’s top “agents of intolerance,” has apologized and last year atoned with a speech at Falwell’s Liberty University. Former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, a GOP dark horse, is an ordained Southern Baptist preacher who said in 1998 that “I hope we answer the alarm clock and take this nation back for Christ,” although in an interview this year he backtracked.

Experts warn the Republicans of a possible backlash; the religious right factor was widely seen as one reason the GOP lost the House and the Senate in last year’s elections.

Still, a strong majority of voters demand candidates of faith. In a study by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 63 percent of those surveyed said they would be “less likely” to vote for a candidate who is a professed atheist — the highest negative rating for any trait.

“Polls show that voters have ambivalent feelings about religion and politics,” said John Green, a sociologist who specializes in religion and politics. “By and large, they like the idea that candidates are religious people and they accept the legitimacy of religious voices in politics. However, they are opposed to overtly sectarian religious appeals and are suspicious

of religious organizations seeking power.”

But that’s a fine line to walk, especially in an age of aggressive, sophisticated sectarian advocacy groups like Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council.

For Republican candidates, the need to court the religious right to survive the primaries could prove a liability in the general election, said Green, currently a senior fellow at the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life.

But it’s not just a GOP dilemma. As the campaigns heat up, many Democrats, worried about the much-analyzed “God gap,” are scurrying to establish their faith credentials.

Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) has raised some Democratic eyebrows with his explicit talk about his faith and its impact on his politics. That talk has also prompted attacks from right-wing Christians who argue his African American church is outside their version of the Christian mainstream.

Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.), a favorite punching bag for the religious right, has talked more about the role of religion in her life and career. Late last year, she beefed up her campaign with a faith-based adviser, and the campaign let it be known that Clinton participates in two Washington prayer groups — including one led by a member of a suburban Washington church known for its lineup of conservative Christians.

Former Sen. John Edwards (D-N.C.) has steadily cranked up his talk about faith and religion.

But analysts warn that Democratic hopefuls face risks as they embrace public religiosity — including the risk of a backlash from the party’s liberal core and the danger they will be seen as insincere on the critical question of faith. “Candidates must be themselves,” said political scientist Sabato. “If a Democrat is religious, he or she should be open about it on the trail. But if he or she is not, the phoniness of stressing religiosity will also become apparent over time.”

Despite the risks, Democrats and Republicans alike are playing the religion game with growing fervor as the 2008 campaigns begin in earnest.

“Everywhere we’re seeing campaigns saturated with religiosity,” said Rabbi James Rudin. That poses a danger for the Jewish community on two levels, he said.

“Strategically, if it’s repeated enough that you have to be a certain kind of Christian, and get the approval of the Dobsons for any high office, it begins to be perceived that this is a Christian nation.”

And tactically, Rabbi Rudin continued, the growing focus on religion will work against all religious minority candidates, including Jews. “In the future, it may make it much harder for an acknowledged Jewish politician to win elections as we move toward this kind of religious

test,” he said. “And the politicians who go along with this are contributing to the problem.”

© 2000 - 2002 The Jewish Week, Inc. All rights reserved. Please refer to the [legal notice](#) for other important information.