

Professor assesses how well candidates 'thump the Bible'

WASHINGTON - Presidential politics might seem like an unusual topic for an associate professor of Jewish civilization at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service to tackle.

But the Jesuit-run university's Jacques Berlinerblau sees his latest book, "Thumpin' It: The Use and Abuse of the Bible in Today's Presidential Politics," as a natural follow-up to his 2005 work, "The Secular Bible: Why Nonbelievers Must Take Religion Seriously."

"Thumpin' It" was published by Westminster John Knox Press in January.

The earlier book focused primarily on the Hebrew Bible and the way it is used in modern American society. A move from the New York area to the U.S. political capital of Washington led Berlinerblau to a heightened interest in politics and he began analyzing the presidential candidates in terms of how well they were responding to the religious sensibilities of their fellow citizens.

So far, the candidates who are getting the highest marks from Berlinerblau for using - but not overusing - the Bible in their campaigns are Democratic Sens. Barack Obama of Illinois and Hillary Clinton of New York. They are following in the footsteps of two people dubbed "masters of the craft" by the Georgetown professor - President George W. Bush and his predecessor, former President Bill Clinton.

"Both routinely salt their presidential rhetoric, ever so lightly, with scriptural allusions," Berlinerblau writes in his book. "Their consistent, albeit understated, invocation of Scripture convincingly established their bona fides with an electorate for whom such things are important."

"In addition," he writes, "their forays into the Bible did not endanger their campaigns by generating scads of negative publicity," something the author says former Democratic candidates Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts and Sen. Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut did.

Less successful in his religious references was former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, who withdrew from the Republican presidential race at the end of January. Berlinerblau said it was not surprising that Giuliani, a Catholic, did not often cite Scripture in his talks because Catholics in general “are not given to paroxysms of scriptural citation.”

But the Georgetown professor said Giuliani’s “unshakeable, though imperfect” relationship with his faith made him similar to most religious Americans – a resemblance he believes could have helped Giuliani with Catholic voters down the road.

“Very few of my good Catholic friends are perfect Catholics,” Berlinerblau said in an interview with Catholic News Service.

He believes the problem that sunk the Giuliani campaign was a failure to “let Rudy be Rudy.”

“He changed his persona, became Mr. Friendly,” he said. “It was as if he’d been lobotomized. He wasn’t the Rudy that New Yorkers have come to know and love and hate. He wasn’t being Rudy except with Hillary Clinton.”

Berlinerblau isn’t the only one focusing on the faith connection in the 2008 presidential race.

Beliefnet.com, an independent online resource on faith and spirituality recently acquired by Fox Entertainment Group, has its God-o-Meter, which ranks the presidential candidates on a scale that ranges from secularist at 0 to theocrat at 10.

In an end-of-January assessment, Obama was ranked highest at 9, with Democrats Hillary Clinton and New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, who has withdrawn from the race, each receiving 8 points. Among Republicans, former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, a Baptist minister, received an 8, as did former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, who also has withdrawn, and Rep. Ron Paul of Texas.

At the bottom of the pack – at least in the view of God-o-Meter blogger Dan Gilgoff – are former Democratic Sen. Mike Gravel, a Unitarian Universalist, ranked at 4, and former Republican Sen. Fred Thompson, at 3. Thompson, a member of the Church of

Christ, pulled out of the presidential race Jan. 22; Gravel is still in the race.

Gilgoff moves the candidates up and down on the God-o-Meter based on a complicated set of criteria, including whether he or she delivers a speech or makes an appearance in an overtly religious setting, whether he or she buys ads in religious media or grants an interview to a religious broadcaster or publication, and whether he or she discusses publicly how faith would influence his or her presidency.

Those are just the kind of discussions that an alliance of Catholic, evangelical and mainline Protestant academics, pastors and social justice leaders say they don't want to see from political candidates.

"We are troubled to see candidates pressed to pronounce the nature of their religious beliefs, asked if they believe every word of the Bible, forced to fend off warnings by a few religious authorities about reception of sacraments, ... and faced with prejudicial analyses of their denominational doctrines," said the signers of a January statement, called "Keeping Faith: Principles to Protect Religion on the Campaign Trail."

Berlinerblau isn't saying whether religion should or should not be a part of presidential politics. But he does warn that when the Bible enters the political arena, care must be taken.

"Scripture and politics are highly combustible materials. Mix them together and the possibilities for an occasional 'work accident' are considerable," he said. "When discussing the Bible in public, an element of volatility is always present."

But that is not likely to keep presidential candidates present and future from citing the Bible as evidence that God backs their political stands.

"Not only the American experience but 2,000 years of biblical interpretation have demonstrated that no empire, no society and rarely even one denomination has ever been able to agree on what the Bible says," Berlinerblau said.