

Senator, archbishop discuss faith and politics at Jewish school

ATLANTA – In a presentation at a Jewish academy in Atlanta, a U.S. senator and an archbishop spoke about the role of faith in public life, how it shapes their outlook on public service and how faith should inform but not dictate a politician's position.

The keynote speakers, Sen. Joe Lieberman, I-Conn., and Atlanta Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory, spoke at a fundraising event at the Katherine and Jacob Greenfield Hebrew Academy of Atlanta, which is headed by Matt Lieberman, the senator's son.

The event, sponsored April 29 by the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta and Greenfield Academy, raised more than \$130,000 for a fund for teacher excellence for the Jewish school founded in 1953.

Matt Lieberman opened the event by saying, "What unites us as a people of faith is so much more important than what divides, so we are very, very honored to be presenting a dialogue that speaks directly to unity among faiths."

The Connecticut senator first entered politics in 1970 when he was elected to the state Senate. He is a former chairman of the Democratic Leadership Council and was a vice presidential candidate in 2000. He is chairman of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee.

Archbishop Gregory became the sixth archbishop of Atlanta in 2005. In 2001 he was elected to a three-year term as president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, following three years as vice president.

The men spoke philosophically about the role of faith in their lives and in a pluralistic democracy and steered away from specific political positions. They answered selected questions that were submitted beforehand by attendees.

The archbishop spoke of how his own faith was shaped in childhood by the African-American spirituality he received from his parents, as well as by growing up in a nondenominational Christian environment and attending a Catholic school, which

led him to become a Catholic as a boy.

“Those two personal experiences have made me the man I am, my African-American spiritual heritage, of which I am very proud, and my Roman Catholicism, which has defined my life,” he said.

He stressed the importance of parents encouraging their children to talk to them about issues they are facing, and of passing down the faith, as most eventually come back to those values. When asked how to define faith, Archbishop Gregory said it is a relationship of trust with God that is mediated on both an individual level and in community and involves a humble submission to God.

“God has been used to justify every war and act of violence that we have probably encountered in the human condition, but faith does not destroy humanity,” he stated. “Faith and reason are not opposed to each other, and they function best in dialogue.”

Sen. Lieberman agreed that faith should not be used to justify violence but must protect, preserve and advance life. “If faith is used and abused to end life as it is used by certain types of Islamic extremists to justify killing themselves and others, that is just not acceptable,” he said.

“We all know in the end the war will be won in the struggle between hearts and minds, and this will be won by dialogue between faith communities,” he added.

The senator noted that he was raised in a loving Jewish family that followed the Jewish calendar. Faith was one of the most important gifts he was given. After a time of disinterest in religion in college, he returned to it as he began to raise a family.

Now the father of four and grandfather of four believes that “faith reminds you there is a master of the universe, and he’s not a member of Congress.”

The senator noted that people of faith have a right under the freedom of speech provision of the Bill of Rights to be involved in politics and to mobilize over issues.

For him, “when I come to a big vote in the Senate, I don’t call my rabbi. But there are times when I will call my rabbi for some context.”

Archbishop Gregory said that “the voice of religion, of faith, has a profound contribution to make to society. It’s not the final voice, but it must be heard and raised” on everything from the dignity of the person to worker rights. But as a clergyman, “I shouldn’t be in Congress voting,” he added.

He said Catholic lay men and women “must take their faith into the political arena. And when they are elected, their actions and behaviors must be informed by their faith but not limited by it.”