

Moral Leadership in a Post-Covid World

A conversation with Dr. Julian Zelizer

National Council of Churches/ National Council of Synagogues

February 2, 2021

On-line meeting

MINUTES

Attendance: NCS – Rabbi David Straus, Rabbi Wayne Franklin, Rabbi Lewis Eron, Rabbi A. Nathan Abramowitz, Rabbi Jacob Blumenthal, Leslie Brier, Martin Budd, Rabbi Barry Cytron, Rabbi Leonard Gordon, Rabbi Steve Gutow, Rabbi Noam Marans, Rabbi Daniel Polish, Rabbi David Sandmel, Rabbi David Saperstein, Rabbi Burton Visotzky, Rabbi Jeffrey Wohlberg, Rabbi Elyse Wechterman, Rabbi Harold Berman

Attendance: NCC – Rev. Dr. Donnie Anderson, Rev. Dr. Peter Baktis, Rev. Dr. Whit Bodman, Rev. Dr. Jeanette Bouknight, Rev. Nicole Diroff, Rev. Dr. Darrell Jodock,, Rev. Dr. Cliff Kirkpatrick, Ms. Kathryn Lohre, Dr. Peter Makari, Rev. Dr. Al Moss, Rev. Mark Pettis, Rev. Margaret Rose, Ms. Maryl Walters, Dr. Don Thorsen, Rev. Dr. Leslie Copeland Tune, Dr. Tony Kireopoulos, Mr. Jim Winkler

Guest: Dr. Julian Zelizer

Opening

Dr. Tony Kireopoulos and Rabbi Harold Berman opened the meeting and welcomed those participating.

Rev. Nicole Diroff led self-introductions of those in the Zoom call and invited people to ask questions through the Chat Box.

Text Studies

Rev. Dr. Jeanette Bouknight spoke of the power of unity and faith in sharing an opening reflection.

Rabbi Burton Visotzky shared a Talmudic story about respect and dignity as reflected in each and in all of God's creatures.

Guest Speaker

Rabbi Harold Berman introduced **Dr. Julian Zelizer**, Professor of History and Public Affairs at Princeton University, CNN political analyst and prolific author.

Dr. Zelizer spoke about the current moment in American politics in the aftermath of the 2020 elections. He began by noting the challenges that liberal forces are facing in that those who are fighting against them seem to be fighting harder and with more determination.

Dr. Zelizer reflected that since the 1960's liberal religious voices have had a strong impact on American political developments. Movement activists, with leadership from churches and synagogues, using the umbrella of the **Leadership Conference on Civil Rights** and other national coalitions, made possible much that defined the Civil Rights era.

At this point, the leaders of the religious right are often the loudest and most identifiable voices. But on both sides of the spectrum, religious groups retain unique organizational resources and important moral stature.

Many issues, **Dr. Zelizer** noted, are international in scope and call for action by international bodies, including issues of war and peace, economic and social development and climate change.

In American politics, profound changes have taken place in the forces of both the right and the left. But **Dr. Zelizer** noted that it is not exclusively a matter of numbers that determines impact on society and on politics. He used the example of the **Black Lives Matter** movement to note that something which began as a cause among a small number of people emerged to have significant resonance among politicians and voters. He noted that there will always be divisions and disagreements within coalitions, but the important goal is to find common ground and not to allow the discussion to shut down.

Discussion that followed included a number of further reflections:

President Biden's use of religious language has impressed many, as religious language has been used effectively by others in previous administrations.

It is harder for churches and synagogues to raise their moral voice when their resources are weaker and they are concerned for their very survival. But **Dr. Zelizer** noted that strong moral stands may bring some people back to institutions they had not previously been part of.

Asked whether the Republican Party is now the party of the working class, **Dr. Zelizer** noted that the previous administration actually did very little for working people, and there is still a strong constituency of working people that is associated with liberal causes.

Climate change, an issue that does not seem to have wide groundswell support, is another moral issue on which it is important for religious institutions to take a stand.

Dr. Zelizer encouraged those participating to think of the important impact religious leaders can have on the local level, as there is much respect for the clergy and religious institutions and much opportunity for **impact on many issues in people's lives**. Religious coalitions around specific issues of local concern can be extremely effective.

In closing, **Dr. Zelizer** encouraged all those participating not to underestimate the role they can play in uniting people who care and making creative contributions to the quality of life in all parts of our country.

Closing

Rabbi Wayne Franklin and **Rev. Donnie Anderson** closed the meeting with thanks to **Dr. Zelizer** and to all who participated. The next dialogue consultation is scheduled for **May 10, 2021**, to be held virtually.

Respectfully submitted,

Rabbi Harold J. Berman
Executive Director
National Council of Synagogues