

What is the proper place of religion in presidential politics?

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What is the proper place of religion in presidential politics? This question can be decomposed into at least three more specific questions. One is the question of religion as political speech: Is there anything wrong with candidates talking publicly about God, scripture, distinctively religious ethics, and so on? For example, the Republican candidate has all but said God wants you to vote for him. The Democratic ticket says that America needs a president who doesn't use religion to divide the citizenry.

I'll not concentrate on this issue, and for two reasons. First, it is a general issue about the relationship of religion and politics, and is not unique to electoral politics as such, the subject of tonight's forum. Second, I suspect that my interlocutor and I mostly agree on this issue.

Another way to think about the proper place of religion in electoral politics is to look at religion as a campaign strategy. Is it acceptable for political organizations to partner with or target religious organizations in an effort to influence votes? For instance, in September 2004 the Republican Party sponsored a direct mail campaign directed to religious conservatives in which it was claimed that liberals are trying to ban the Bible. The Christian Coalition claims to have distributed some 70 million voter guides to churches in the 2000 presidential season. Liberal groups aggressively police pulpits and

file IRS complaints when religious representatives appear to endorse or oppose candidates for office.

Again, I will not focus on this issue. My impression is that the legal constraints on partisan political activity by houses of worship are fairly straightforward under the U.S. tax codes. In exchange for tax exempt status, religious groups agree not to campaign for or against candidates for office. The rationale for this is a kind of campaign finance regulation: the electoral process can be protected from various kinds of entanglements and conflicts of interest by separating political campaigns from all charitable organizations receiving tax-deductible contributions. Now, some people might object to the very notion of giving tax exemption to religious groups, but that is a broad subject for another discussion.

Others might argue that on top of the legal obligations, it is just imprudent for faith communities to get too involved in partisan politics. This is the line taken by some liberal groups like the Interfaith Alliance. A spokesperson, Rev. C. Welton Gaddy, put it this way: “Imagine having a church meeting in which people try to decide which candidate to endorse. Clergy are responsible to interpret aspects of our lives from the perspective of scriptures, but that's different from bestowing divine blessing on a candidate.”¹ I don't agree with this line of argument. Electoral politics can be difficult and divisive, and so some believers may wish to shield their faith community from it. Then again, others may find it worth the trouble, or even essential. It's not up to Reverend Gaddy, let alone an unbeliever like me, to say what level of involvement is in the interest of a given faith community, legal considerations aside. I can say that were I a believer, I would be deeply

¹ Jane Lampman, “Does US law mute voices of churches?” *Christian Science Monitor* (September 23, 2004).

troubled by the way faith gets turned into a political football every four years, and otherwise secular candidates start quoting scripture simply to win votes.

Leaving this to one side, we come to a third possible understanding of the question, What is the proper place of religion in electoral politics? This has to do with religion as a job qualification (if not a requirement) for public office. In 2003, the Pew Research Center found that for a majority of Americans, a candidate's religion has a big impact on their vote. 64% of Americans admit that the religion or irreligion could determine their vote, even when the candidate is an otherwise well-qualified member of their own party. For instance, 38% would be reluctant to vote for a Muslim, and 52% would be reluctant to vote for a non-religious candidate. When Larry King asked Ron Reagan, Jr. whether he aspired to elected office, Reagan said, I'm an atheist, so there's no chance.

On this question I will argue the following. While it would be illegal and unconstitutional to impose religious tests for public office, there is nothing illegal or unconstitutional about religious preferences on the part of voters. However, it is typically not rational to place much weight on candidate's religion. Religious identification is not a good guide to selecting the best public official. Furthermore, it is contrary to the obligations of good democratic citizenship to support a candidate who makes religion central to his public identity.

The prudence of religious preference voting

The U.S. Constitution forbids religious tests for office. For instance, it cannot be part of the formal eligibility requirements that a candidate is a Christian, or a theist. However, most legal scholars agree that voters' preferences for candidates of faith does not

constitute a religious test, even though they might have the effect of barring an atheist or Muslim from holding public office, at least at this point in the nation's history.

Nevertheless, I think such preferences are a bad idea. Why?

First, a candidate's religion is often a poor predictor of how he will behave in office and what policies he will pursue. The religion of the current presidential hopefuls is a perfect example. George W. Bush is openly Christian, but his Christianity is highly idiosyncratic, non-doctrinal, and individualistic. He told the journalist Bob Woodward "I was praying for strength to do the Lord's will. . . . I pray that I will be as good a messenger of His will as possible." Bush simply aims to do God's will, but relies on his own intuitions and judgment—rather than church dogma or clerical leaders—to indicate what God wills.

The result? Policy decisions that would have been difficult to predict on the basis of his denominational background. For instance, Bush disappointed many religious conservatives by constructing a compromise on stem cell research that permitted the destruction of embryos by private researchers (is a privately funded murder less wrong than a publicly funded one?). On abortion, Bush has spoken up for a "culture of life" but stopped well short of condemning all abortion as murder. And then there is his highly controversial justification of preemptive war. On each of these issues, Christians might well feel that Bush is straying from important teaching of their faith.

In fact, one might argue that it is precisely Bush's peculiarly confessional brand of Protestantism that makes his decisions unpredictable. In June 2003, Mahmoud Abbas, then the Palestinian prime minister, said that in a conversation with Bush, the president told him: "God told me to strike at al-Qaida, and I struck them, and then he instructed me

to strike at Saddam, which I did.” Bush’s reliance on raw revelation means that he is unconstrained by any principled religious ethics that voters could either endorse or reject.

John Kerry must be equally frustrating for religion-preference voters. Kerry describes himself as a committed Catholic but he has said, “I’m running to uphold the constitution of our country which has a strict separation of the affairs of Church and state, and that’s what we lived by with President Kennedy and that’s what we’ve lived by for over 228 years, that’s what I will live by.” The result? In his public life he departs from Church doctrine on abortion, stem cell research, same-sex unions, and war.

On abortion, Kerry has said: “I oppose abortion, personally. I don’t like abortion. I believe life does begin at conception. But I can’t take my Catholic belief, my article of faith, and legislate it on a Protestant or a Jew or an atheist ... who doesn’t share it. We have separation of church and state in the United States of America.” He may be a Catholic, but he’s a Kennedy Catholic.

A responsible citizen will want to know what a candidate stands for, what he will do in office. To that end, it is better to look at his record in politics, his party platform, the political philosophy of his advisors, his campaign promises, and so on. In other words, a candidate’s values in action are a better predictor of his behavior in office than his religion.

As a side note, it would be interesting to find out whether American voters care about religion per se when they go to the polls or whether they care about religion as indicator of “moral values,” or the kind of person they would like to have dinner with. Some suggestive statistics: Last year, Pew found only that 42 percent of us said politicians should be guided by religious principles, and 46 percent said “religion and politics don’t

mix.” A 2000 survey by Public Agenda found that among those who want and politics to mix more, three-quarters don’t care which religion it is, only that it’s sincere. Meanwhile, Pew has 64 percent of likely voters saying “moral values” are very important to their vote. On this score, Kerry and Bush were equally attractive to voters. Sociologically, the American preference for religious candidates is not necessarily a preference for religious politics.

Some believers might object to my point about the disconnect between policy and belief by saying that they simply want a candidate who shares their religious identity. They want someone in office who is like them in this regard. Again, there is nothing in this attitude that is contrary to the spirit of American law. However, I would maintain that it is contrary to the ethics of good citizenship in a democracy. Suppose I am a sheepdog enthusiast, and I just can’t feel a special affinity with someone in Congress or the White House who has a terrier, a retriever, or a pug. Clearly it would be frivolous and irresponsible of me as a citizen to cast my vote on this basis. Why? Because the kind of dog one keeps tells us nothing about her values and commitments that will have a real impact on the shared life of the country. Of course, the kind of God one worships tell us a good deal more. But as I have already argued, a far more reliable guide is to look to those values and commitments themselves.

Suppose that unlike Bush and Kerry, a religious candidate is explicit and entirely honest about how his or her faith will cash out in concrete political behavior. In such cases, religious preference voting could be prudent. However, I would argue that this is not an instance of preferring the holier *qua* holier. Here the candidates’ faith functions merely as a convenient generalization or an indicator of their substantive political

positions. So, I think religious preference voting faces a dilemma. On the one hand, to the extent that creed serves as an indicator of a candidate's politics, religious preferences are redundant. But to the extent that creed as such is preferred, religious preferences are arbitrary, as described above, in a way that is objectionable by the lights of democratic values. It is wrong to vote for someone simply because he is like you.

The democratic ethics of religious preference voting

Finally, a good citizen in contemporary American should prefer candidates who, even if they are religious believers, will not discharge their public service as believers per se.

There are two main reasons for this. First, presidents (and vice presidents) have the unique role as the only nationally elected representatives of the entire public. As such they have a special obligation to represent the nation and its ideals as a whole. Given the religious diversity of the nation (3 million Jews, over 1 million Muslims, over 1 million Buddhists, just under 1 million Hindus, 27 million nonreligious) it would be contrary to this obligation for an executive to act in his official capacity as a believer. What's more, this would be contrary to the spirit of the Constitution as the establishment clause of the First Amendment has been interpreted to hold that government actions must be neutral with respect to religion and irreligion. When a president acts as a representative of the government, such actions should be religiously neutral.

Second, the executives of a government serve as its representatives on the international stage, where religious neutrality is arguably even more important. Consider the Vatican's campaign for the exclusion of Turkey from the European Union on the basis of its Islamic character, or the role of Hindu-Muslim tensions in the bloody history

of conflict between Pakistan and India. Identifying governments with religions does not serve the cause of international development, cooperation and peace between peoples. This is nowhere more pressing than in the relationship of America to predominantly or officially Muslim nations. We are in the midst of a religious war, and it is not an exaggeration to say that America's explicitly Christian character under the Bush Administration has helped create new enemies. Osama bin Laden wanted a global clash between Muslims and Christians and Jews, and he got it. The irony is that at the same moment when America has the opportunity to become an ambassador of secular democracy and scientific modernity among Islamic societies, the country is being run by God-intoxicated men who disavow America's own secular traditions and haven't made up their minds yet about evolution.

Conclusion

To sum up: I distinguished between three kinds of concerns about the proper place of religion in presidential politics: (1) concerns about religious speech in the discourse of presidential campaigns; (2) concerns about using religion as to win votes; (3) concerns about citizens preferring candidates on the basis of their religion. I have focused on the third kind of concern. I maintained that religious preference voting is often not prudent since, as in the case of Bush and Kerry, a candidate's expressed religion is a poor predictor of his actual political behavior; track record, philosophy of government, party affiliation, current political realities, and campaign promises would be better guides. But to the extent that a candidate's creed is reliably linked to some substantive political positions and values that a citizen endorses, citizens' will reasonably prefer those

positions and values themselves, and not creed per se. To prefer a candidate just because he or she shares one's creed, without regard to anticipated political behavior, would be irresponsible citizenship. Further, it is contrary to the spirit of secular democracy to seek a national chief executive who acts in a way that affirms the value of one faith over others or none at all.