

Deities & Dialogue: the proper role of religion in presidential elections

The 2012 Religious Liberty Essay Scholarship Contest asked high school juniors and seniors to examine the role religion should play during a presidential campaign. The grand prize winner was Scott Remer, a 2012 graduate of Beachwood High School in Beachwood, Ohio. As part of his grand prize, Remer won a \$1,000 scholarship. His essay is reprinted below.

By
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2012 Religious Liberty Essay
Scholarship Contest
Grand Prize Winner

On February 26, 2012, Republican presidential candidate Rick Santorum said that John F. Kennedy's landmark speech about religious freedom made him want to "throw up" and intimated that Kennedy's speech, which advocated religious pluralism, tolerance, and open dialogue between people of diverse faiths, was an unequivocal rejection of religion.¹ Although Santorum's remarks misconstrued Kennedy's speech, they highlight the extent to which religion has become an issue in the 2012 presidential campaign. Considering elections of years past, our Founding Fathers' original intent (as best as we can interpret it), and the purpose of the presidential campaign, we can say that religion should play a role in a presidential campaign, albeit a very limited, carefully circumscribed one. Whereas candidates' religious beliefs and affiliations are important to understand as expressions of their personal philosophies and worldviews, candidates' political stances should be of the utmost importance, and voters should not cast their ballots based solely or primarily upon candidates' faith. Moreover, candidates must be cautious and courteous when discussing religion; they must always keep in mind the potential for religion to divide the people.

Since the first days of the Republic, there has been a body of thought that holds that candidates should be reticent about their faith and that faith should play no role in presidential politics. Rooted in the Constitution, it points to Article Six, which specifies that "no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public

Trust under the United States"² and the First Amendment ("Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion"), interpreting them as advocating a clear-cut distinction between the "civil" and the "ecclesiastical," to use the phrasing of Isaac Backus, an eighteenth-century Baptist preacher, in his *Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty*.³ Thomas Jefferson formulated the opinion of this school of thought best when he called for "a wall of separation between Church & State" in an 1802 letter, stating, "Religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God ... he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship."⁴ John F. Kennedy echoed this idea over a century and a half later, declaring in a 1960 address, "I believe in a President whose religious views are his own private affair, neither imposed by him upon the nation or imposed by the nation upon him as a condition to holding that office."⁵ The religious reserve that Kennedy and Jefferson championed serves a prophylactic function, insulating the public from fractious arguments over theology.

The possibility that a discussion of candidates' religious beliefs might sow discord and engender friction within the body politic is very real and very dangerous. Unfortunately, it has been with us throughout our nation's history: in the 1800 presidential election, seeking electoral gain, John Adams and the Federalists accused Thomas Jefferson of being an atheist; in the 1928 election, Al Smith faced considerable anti-Catholic sentiment; and in 1960, John F. Kennedy, like Smith, was forced to confront widespread suspicion that he would be subservient to Rome if elected.⁶ More recently, President Obama's religious identity has been attacked by crude e-mail smear campaigns that suggest that he is secretly a Muslim, simultaneously insulting Muslims by insinuating that it is somehow wrong to be a Muslim,⁷ and by bloviating commentators who seek to cast aspersions on his Christianity for political reasons.⁸ In addition, as underscored by Rick Santorum's frequent speeches about his own religious faith and his recent comments about Obama adhering to a "phony theology,"⁹ a discussion of one's religious and moral principles can quickly descend into a denunciation of one's opponents' beliefs.

Since religion is such a deeply personal and profoundly important part of people's lives, vilipending others' faiths is extremely hurtful and divisive. It corrodes the sense of unity and civility that knits together the disparate groups in our multicultural land. Ultimately, the undeniable danger to unsightly introducing religion — one hot-button issue — into politics — another hot-button issue — is that it exacerbates divisions in both realms of life. Using reli-

gion, a vehicle for love, human unity, and transcendence, for the mundane purpose of fracturing and fragmenting the body politic and fomenting rancor and division is a perversion of everything that religion stands for.

All of that being said, there is a legitimate conversation to be had regarding candidates' religious life, and perfectly reasonable religion-related questions abound. For instance: If a candidate is deeply religious, would she be able to make a decision that goes against her personal religious beliefs for the greater good of the country? Does a candidate believe in using his spiritual principles to guide his decision-making? What do the actions that a candidate took when serving a clerical capacity in the past say about her character or conscience? When deciding who the next leader of the most powerful nation on Earth will be, the public has a right to know about the totality of factors that have shaped the candidates' worldview. The media already discusses such trivial issues as how much money candidates' haircuts cost and how they treat their dogs — why not begin a discussion on something with actual philosophical heft and import?

By necessity, the conversation must have ground rules. Candidates should agree to use religion as an instrument of unity, not of divisiveness, rejecting the ugly religious stereotyping that Smith and Kennedy had to contend with and appeals to religion that exclude minority faiths, agnostics, and atheists. The public should agree not to vote for candidates based on religion and not to hold candidates responsible for their religion's every foible. Moreover, in accordance with Article Six of the Constitution, disclosure and discussion

of religious affiliation should be completely optional for presidential candidates.

Should candidates choose to discuss their beliefs in a non-divisive way, everyone would benefit. If a candidate is proudly religious, he should share how it has influenced his thoughts. Since he can speak eloquently and passionately about his religion, evincing his authenticity, he can only benefit. As the case of Mitt Romney illustrates, there is still a great deal of latent prejudice when it comes to Mormonism and less well-known religions, so if a candidate practices a non-mainstream religion which the public is wary of, explaining the rudiments of his religion helps dispel any misconceptions the public may have and promotes religious tolerance and harmony. Naturally, the public would benefit as well. The public would see the candidates through yet another prism, which aids in the difficult process of deciding which candidate is best, and voters would be educated on different faiths.

An inclusive, respectful dialogue about religion can elevate our national civic discourse and create more well-informed voters. As long as presidential hopefuls and voters focus chiefly on political issues, and as long as candidates refrain from using their religion as a means of obtaining votes or belittling their opponents or potential constituents, initiating a candid conversation with clear limits can enlighten our politics. As Kennedy so eloquently put it, once religion is no longer used to cultivate "attitudes of disdain and division," we can turn our attention to the promotion of "the American ideal of brotherhood."¹⁰

The prizes for the 2013 Religious Liberty Essay Scholarship Contest have increased! Visit www.BJOnline.org/contest for details on the 2013 contest and to read the three winning entries from 2012.

Endnotes

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9. Kaleem, Jaweed. "Religion And Politics Don't Mix, Major Religious Groups Tell Presidential Candidates." *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 21 Feb. 2012. Web. 14 Mar. 2012. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/21/religion-politics_n_1291624.html>.
10. see 5.

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