

EDITORIAL

Is This Going to be on the Test? Religion in the '08 Election

The 2008 presidential campaign revealed that there may be, in practice, a religious test for the highest elected office in the United States. Consider a few pivotal moments:

Mitt Romney's speech about religion on December 6, 2007, tried to address suspicions about a Mormon seeking the presidency. Barack Obama's speech about race in America on March 18, 2008, took place amid reactions to excerpts from the preaching of Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright, which brought complex tenets of black liberation theology into public debate for the first time in a generation. Other controversial religious figures like Pastor John Hagee and Pastor Rod Parsley were both sought out for endorsement, and then later publicly repudiated by John McCain as he clumsily tried to connect to evangelical Christian voters, a group that eluded him. The beliefs of and prejudices against Mormons, black liberation theologians, and evangelicals emerged in the 2008 presidential campaign and they push us to think more deeply about the role of religion in American politics.

Mormons

When Mitt Romney was a serious contender for the Republican nomination, suspicions that many have about Mormons in America came to the forefront. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, of which Romney is a member, believes that Joseph Smith was a latter-day prophet of God. The church also adheres to the sacred texts revealed to Smith in the early nineteenth century as well as the traditional Christian bible. Because of these details, some Christians do not consider Mormons to actually be Christian. The fact that this was a problem for many Americans reveals one thing that we might not like to admit: Americans expect their president to be Christian. The theological questions about Mormonism are almost beside the point: Why does the religion of a presidential candidate matter, when Article VI of the constitution states that "no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust

under the United States”?¹ Right or wrong, religion apparently does matter and serves as a test for some American voters.

Black Liberation Theology

False rumors about Barack Obama’s religious identity also emerged during the early phase of the 2008 campaign. Obama, a Christian about whose church affiliations we now know much more, was rumored to secretly be a Muslim by right-wing bloggers and radio hosts. Again, the question: Why would it matter? It is very clear why it mattered to those who used such a falsehood to derail Obama’s candidacy: It plays on the fear-based prejudices against Muslims that too many Americans still harbor after 9/11.

As we all learned more about Obama and his now former church home, Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, excerpts from a sermon of his pastor, Rev. Dr Jeremiah Wright, surfaced on the internet. We heard Wright proclaim, “Not God bless America. God damn America!” As a media sound bite, these words and the images of a fired-up black preacher shocked much of the country. However, the longer clip and transcript of Wright’s sermon makes clear that he was preaching on texts from Deuteronomy where the people of Israel are described as stubborn and rebellious, having “provoked the Lord your God to wrath” (Deut. 6:6-7). There, as Wright emphasized in an interview with Bill Moyers, scripture makes it clear that God does not bless everything that humans do. God certainly does not bless everything that governments do, he goes on to say. In the sermon, Wright used a long list of examples of things God does not bless: the self-righteousness of ancient Israel in this biblical text, the British government colonizing Africa and Asia, the US government colonizing and exterminating native people on this continent, as well as its enslaving the people of Africa. After a litany of ways in which the US has institutionalized racism, Wright reaches the sound bite heard round the world and this line that follows: “God damn America for treating her citizen as less than human.”²

The theological point of Wright’s sermon and of the text on which he was preaching is that the love of God does not give license for people and governments to act any way that they want. James Cone, widely regarded as the father of black liberation theology, describes the wrath of God as “God’s almighty no” to things that oppress and dehumanize. Reactions

1. Article VI, The US Constitution. http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution_transcript.html.

2. See the full transcript at the website for *Bill Moyers Journal*, April 25, 2008. <http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/04252008/watch.html>.

to Wright can be analyzed on many levels, one of them theological. Many Christians are often uncomfortable articulating the idea that God is against anything. On another level, though, it is also true that many Americans are uncomfortable taking seriously the ways that their government has mistreated people.

Barack Obama was compelled to respond to the media coverage of Wright in his March speech in Philadelphia, and ultimately he and his wife withdrew from membership of Trinity UCC. Like Romney's response to criticisms and concerns, this reveals that Americans harbor particular ideas about what kind of religiosity they want to see in their president. Yes, Obama is a Christian. But, for many, Christian black liberation theology was not the proper type of Christianity.

Evangelical Christians

Theological controversy also dogged the candidacy of John McCain with the involvement of Pastor John Hagee of the Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, and Pastor Rod Parsley of the World Harvest Church in Columbus, Ohio. Among their claims are the false statements about Islam by Parsley in his book, *Silent No More*, that America was founded with the intent of destroying Islam.³ This idea is clearly repudiated by Article 11 of the Treaty of Tripoli. That document, brought to the Senate by John Adams in 1797, states unequivocally that the United States of America is “not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion” and has “no character of enmity” against Islam.⁴

Pastor John Hagee preached a sermon in 1999 based in part on Jeremiah 16:15 in which he reflected on how the Jews got back to their homeland, aided by Hitler and the Nazis. The transcript of the sermon, where Hagee interweaves the biblical text and his own comments, reads in part that “‘they the hunters shall hunt them’—that would be the Jews... If that doesn't describe what Hitler did in the Holocaust...you can't see that.”⁵ These comments were construed by many as anti-Semitic, because the Jews' return to Israel is an important part of evangelical Christian end-time theorizing, and Hagee pointed out how Hitler helped that process along. On June 13, 2008, Hagee sent a letter to the leader of the Anti-Defamation League apologizing for his remarks.

3. 2008 Elections, Council on American Islamic Relations. http://www.cair2008election.com/viewpage.php?page_id=7.

4. “The Barbary Treaties” (1796/97). <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/diplomacy/barbary/bar1796t.htm>

5. “McCain Backer Hagee Said Hitler Was Fulfilling God's Will (Audio),” May 21, 2008. Sam Stein, *The Huffington Post*. <http://tinyurl.com/huffington>.

The fact that McCain repudiated both of these preachers after seeking their endorsements demonstrates first that he felt a need to connect with evangelical voters through high profile endorsements, and second that the views of the leaders who endorsed him proved historically as well as theologically problematic.

Conclusion

These episodes in the 2008 presidential campaign demonstrate that some form of a religious test is in fact functioning in our American democracy. How have we reached this point where voters are judging the intricacies of the beliefs of candidates as well as their personal pastors and religious endorsers? More importantly, is the separation of church and state still part of the bedrock of our constitution or do we want this more intimate relationship between religion and politics to continue?

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