Campaign Attention to "Religion"

There is certainly plenty of attention being given to "religion" in this year's presidential campaign. But why? And what is assumed about the meaning of "religion"? At least two major "faith forums" have been broadcast nationally, trying to get confessions from the presidential candidates. Many Americans and some commentators think this is a good thing. Religion is important, they say, and we need to know where the candidates stand. Are they religious and do they respect religion, or are they secularists who look askance at religion or want to cordon it off in private?

Michael Gerson, former speechwriter for President Bush, thinks the attention to religion is a good thing. In a column the day before Barack Obama gave his acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention in Denver, Gerson advised Obama to "deepen his arguments about the essential public role of religion and deliver his party from its recent secularism. Religious values should not merely be tolerated out of politeness; they are, in American history, inseparable from the search for justice. They assert a divine source of human dignity—a firm basis for human equality—that no law or tyrant or prejudice can erase" (Washington Post, 27 August 2008). And for it to be a memorable speech, writes Gerson, Obama "must find some way to reassert his initial theme of national unity, recently drowned out by the daily gunfire of presidential politics."

Which “religious values” and what kind of “religion” does Gerson have in mind here? Surely, as an evangelical Christian, Gerson is not meaning to praise all religions indiscriminately. If Obama, who is a Christian, were a Muslim, as some accuse him of being, or an ardent pagan, which a growing number of Americans are becoming, it is hard to imagine that Gerson would be urging Obama to laud all religious values indiscriminately as pointing to the "divine source of human dignity."

One thing Gerson may be looking for is a statement by Obama (and by John McCain) that expresses strong support for government’s equal treatment of religious faiths in public life: religious freedom for all Americans and not only for those who insist on privatizing religious practice. Yet, if that's what Gerson means, he is speaking about how the Constitution and government should treat citizens with respect to their religions, not about what constitutes true religion in contrast to false religions.
If, however, Gerson is pleading for particular religious values in their own right, then he seems to want Obama (and McCain) to come out in support of the religious character of America itself as the basis of its unity. His appeal is to a religion of America or to an American civil religion, not to the religion of the Bible, or the Koran, or Confucius. Gerson is among those who want a religious America, not a secularist America. Recognizing this allows us to see that the battle over (and between) the presidential candidates is, at its deepest level, a battle over whom voters should authorize to uphold and represent the true American faith and way of life. And in this respect, a deep tension exists between two poles of the American civil religion.

For many at the Reagan, Bush, McCain pole, true religion is the religion of God’s covenant with America, the religion of American exceptionalism, of America as the lead nation in history on behalf of freedom and against evil—whether terrorism or communism—that might threaten what we represent. For many at the Gore, Kerry, Clinton pole, the American civil religion unites us in working for progress in the securing of individual rights—civil rights for women, for African Americans, for homosexual partners, as well as progress in achieving greater economic equality among citizens.

The tension at work here helps to explain why, at this stage in the campaign, Obama and McCain are running neck and neck. Given strong dissatisfaction with the Bush administration and with current economic conditions, Obama should be way out in front of McCain. But McCain, as POW and ardent American military man, represents a faith in freedom and in America’s God-ordained preeminence in the world, a faith that a majority of Americans still hold. Obama, on the other hand, is still something of a question. To be sure, he represents the "progress-of-rights" camp and the "economic-fairness" wing. Yet as a Christ-confessing, race-transcending senator from Illinois who wants to unite the country and recover America’s high standing in the world from the low point to which it has sunk under President Bush, Obama sounds different than McCain’s opposite. Perhaps Obama can unite Americans from both poles into a synthesis that overcomes the antagonisms that have produced our decades-long culture war. Many, however, believe the opposite—that his color, his life history, his voting record, and his criticism of the "war" in Iraq would make him untrustworthy as America’s civil-religious leader.

Whatever the Christian (or other) personal confessions of faith that Obama and McCain have made, whatever their church membership, or baptismal status, or sincerity about the legitimacy of faith-based morality, all of that, I think, is largely personal and inconsequential as far as the election campaign is concerned. What Americans are really trying to figure out is which candidate can legitimately fill the office of head of state, an office of civil-religious representation as much as of governing authority. If, as now seems unlikely, John McCain wins the election, it will probably be because more Americans are still committed to the old fashioned civil religion. If Obama wins, it could be the beginning of something new, or it might simply signal the next alternating phase in the continuing battle over who has the right to define and represent America’s civil-religious nationalism.

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