Faith and the Presidency

The Religion and Society Debate

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Thus far in the presidential campaign we have heard more about religion and politics than ever before. An entire CNN program, Mitt Romney’s Texas speech, individual interviews, campaign-trail confessions, and more . . . and more. But has anything new come from it? Are we more enlightened now about religion and the qualifications of the candidates to serve as president?

Over the last 40-50 years, competition over the right to define America’s cultural foundations has intensified. When John F. Kennedy gave his now famous Texas speech, he and most Americans were agreed on the simple formula of “separation of church and state.” Once Kennedy assured voters that the Roman Catholic Church would not interfere in his presidential decisions, he was off and running.

Today, however, after Vietnam, the Civil Rights Movement, Roe v Wade, Jimmy Carter’s evangelicalism, the rise of the Religious Right, the decline of the Protestant mainline, the explosion of home schooling, the faith-based initiative, and more, voters are much more concerned than in 1960 about where the candidates are coming from culturally, morally, and religiously. A pledge of allegiance to separation is not enough.

While Romney’s speech restated much of Kennedy’s argument, it tried to do more by drawing on a theme from those American Founders who emphasized religion’s political importance. A self-governing people, Washington and Adams believed, must be a moral people and morality depends on religion. Their appeal to religion was largely for political and public moral purposes not for ecclesiastical reasons. Thus, for all of Romney’s confession of personal faith in Jesus Christ as “the Son of God and the Savior of mankind,” what was central in his December 6 speech was this: “It is important to recognize that while differences in theology exist between the churches in America, we share a common creed of moral convictions. . . . Perhaps the most important question to ask a person of faith who seeks a political office, is this: does he share these American values: the equality of human kind, the obligation to serve one another, and a steadfast commitment to liberty?”

The religious affirmation in Romney’s speech is quite thin, the values claim general, and the political relevance indirect and largely unhelpful. Yet the gist of Romney’s presentation is essentially the same as that of the other candidates. Reference to one’s faith shows voters that one values religion. And the most important value of one’s
religion—whatever it is—is the support it provides for American values. Even Mike Huckabee, who wants to amend the Constitution to comply with God’s moral standards on unborn life and marriage, and who says that his faith does not merely “influence my decisions, it drives them,” concludes his web-site statement in this vague way: “Our nation was birthed in a spirit of faith—not a prescriptive one telling us whether to believe, but one acknowledging that a providence pervades our world.”

Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and John Edwards have also told their stories of personal Christian faith, and each story leads in the same direction—to faith in America and its promise. In that regard, the concluding words of John McCain’s New Hampshire victory speech are the most fulsome of all in civil-religious fervor: “For me that greater cause [to which to give oneself] has always been my country, which I have served imperfectly for many years, but have loved without any reservation every day of my life. . . . America is our cause—yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Her greatness is our hope; her strength is our protection; her ideals our greatest treasure; her prosperity the promise we keep to our children; her goodness the hope of mankind.”

There is an added ingredient, to be sure, in Huckabee’s approach—a kind of postmodern identity politics. He is direct in urging Evangelicals to vote for him because he is one of them. He is not a Mormon; he is neither black nor female; he is neither a businessman nor a lawyer. He is a born-again believer in Jesus Christ.

What does all of this confessing and posturing tell us? Eventually—rather quickly, in fact—we and the candidates must get back to the war and the economy, to health care and immigration, to climate change and education. Yet not much has been achieved by means of the religious rhetoric to illuminate these political realities because the candidates have offered only vintage, if intensified, American moral rhetoric when talking about faith. Separation of church and state is boilerplate. To express personal faith as a mode of character-witness and as a motivation for service is no longer unusual. To locate one’s faith within America’s civil religion is obligatory. But after that it is a quick and disconnected flight to most public policy issues.

What we have, then, in the campaign rhetoric is civil religion as ground for moral values and morality as ground for self-government. Yet as we know, the policy proposals offered by the candidates are as diverse as what liberal Democrats, conservative Republicans, and those in the middle have always offered. The common values of liberty, equality, and service open onto the familiar disputes about how much (or how little) government the self-governing people want.

What is missing from the candidates’ professions of Christian (and Mormon) faith is a philosophy of the political community that clarifies the responsibilities of government in relation to the responsibilities that belong to all the other institutions, organizations, and relationships of human society. What we need is a Christian public philosophy that connects directly to office holding, policy formulation, and governing. Americanism and the liberal political tradition do not generate such a philosophy, and that is why we have what we have.

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