

Religion and the presidency

by Herbert_G_Klein

Forty-seven years after voters appeared to have settled the question of whether a candidate's religion should have any bearing on his ability to serve as president of the United States, the issue again is looming as a question in the 2008 race for the White House.

The current debate is focused on Mitt Romney and his membership in the Mormon Church, but even Rudolph Giuliani is caught up in questions regarding his stand on abortion rights and Pope Benedict XVI's recent hard line against Mexican lawmakers who advocate for women's reproductive rights.

Add to those factors the sudden death of Jerry Falwell, the conservative Christian leader, and rightly or wrongly, religion is again in the presidential spotlight. Does opposition to Mitt Romney based on his Mormon religion represent bigotry, or is it a fair factor in judging the character of a man who aspires to be president? What role, if any, should a candidate's personal religious belief play in a presidential campaign?

In 1928, Catholicism was considered a major issue when New York Gov. Al Smith, a Catholic, gained the Democratic nomination after three tries and then lost to Herbert Hoover, a Protestant, by 6 million votes. There were other issues such as a Tammany Hall scandal and prohibition, but the question of whether the pope would be able to dictate to the president was a key issue.

In 1960, John Kennedy attacked the religious problem early and aggressively. The Democratic nominee arranged to meet with a group of prominent Houston Protestant ministers in September and emerged from the meeting with the declaration from the pastors and from the candidate that church and state always should be separated. Kennedy said his religious beliefs were his private affair, but "if the time should ever come when my office would violate my conscience or violate the national interest, then I would resign from office."

Long before the Kennedy meeting with the Houston ministers, Richard Nixon had given firm instructions to all of us on his staff that we must avoid making Kennedy's Catholicism an issue. That order remained in effect throughout the campaign.

Looking back, Kennedy probably gained support from some who did not want to be labeled "bigots."

Once in office, Kennedy on numerous occasions proved that "he did not take orders from the pope," and it appeared that religion was a past issue as far as the presidency was concerned.

John Kerry, a Catholic, ran against George Bush in 2004 but Kerry's religion was never an issue.

It is interesting that in the current contest for president, except for Romney and Giuliani, few people know what church the current candidates attend. Hillary Clinton and John Edwards are Methodists, Fred Thompson is a member of the Church of Christ and Barack Obama has been active in the United Church of Christ. John McCain is an Episcopalian, and Giuliani and Chris Dodd are Catholics. Duncan Hunter is a Baptist.

President Bush states his church denomination as Methodist, but he frequently attends St. John's Episcopal Church in Washington and the Prairie Chapel Church near his ranch in Crawford, Texas.

Except for the flare-up over Giuliani, a Catholic who supports a woman's right to choose, no questions regarding religious affiliation have been directed at anyone other than Romney, a Mormon, who has served as a governor of Massachusetts, a predominantly Catholic state.

In an answer to a question whether the president believes a candidate's personal religion should be an issue in selecting a president, Dan Bartlett, assistant to the president for communications, says: "The president believes his faith is an important part of who he is as a person and a leader. However, he believes the great strengths of our country is that people from all walks of life and faiths are treated equally. The American people choose a president based upon their qualifications and fitness to do the job."

The Mormon issue was not raised strongly when Mitt Romney's father, Gov. George Romney of Michigan, ran for president against Richard Nixon, Nelson Rockefeller and others in 1960. Catholicism, not Mormonism, was the issue. Few, if any, have questioned the Mormon affiliation of Harry Reid, Democratic leader of the Senate.

Some evangelicals look at the rapid growth of the Mormon Church on a worldwide basis and label it a cult. They have a right to their own views, and, yet, in the ordinary life of American communities, Mormon leaders are considered mainstream.

Some question the secrecy of Mormon services in the church's temples, and yet in recent years some of the most liberal doctrines have been enunciated by Presbyterian and Methodist leaders with only limited outcries in local congregations. I have been among those quiet Presbyterians.

A few years ago a friend of mine, Leon Parma, and I met with the first and second presidents of the Mormon Church to discuss an anti-Mormon column published in The San Diego Union-Tribune. We found no mysteries as we settled the dispute in a few moments and spent the rest of an hour discussing topics ranging from Mormonism in South Africa to football at Brigham Young and the University of Utah.

Judge J. Clifford Wallace, a Mormon, was honored in 2006 as the American attorney of the year. He tells the story of approaching Harold B. Lee, a member of the Mormon Quorum of 12, and asking for advice when he was about to become a federal judge. Wallace later was under serious consideration by Nixon to become a Supreme Court justice. "If there is a dispute between church and state," Lee said, "obey the law of the land." Wallace has followed that as he has traveled the world preaching on the importance of the "rule of law."

In my view, anyone who criticizes a presidential candidate for his personal religion is likely to be a bigot or someone playing politics. Our Constitution clearly separates church and state. Concern over which church or synagogue or any house of worship a candidate attends should not be an issue in the year 2008 or after.

Richard Land, a Southern Baptist, states the issue clearly: "We vote for commander in chief, not theologian in chief."

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