

Religion analyzed as a factor in presidential race

WASHINGTON - In contrast to the 2000 and 2004 presidential election cycles, when some saw Republican candidates as too cozy with religious leaders and too willing to bring their faith into the public sphere, this year's GOP candidates for president have been relatively quiet on the topic of religion.

The Democratic presidential candidates, on the other hand, have lost the reticence of recent years and are talking openly about their faith experiences and how that would affect their political decisions.

But the Rev. C. Welton Gaddy, a Baptist minister who is president of the Interfaith Alliance, isn't any happier with the Democrats now than he was with the Republicans then.

"We're electing a commander in chief, not a pastor in chief," he said at an Oct. 10 panel discussion with Diana Eck, director of the Pluralism Project at Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass., and Amy Caiazza, study director for democracy and society programs at the Institute for Women's Policy Research in Washington.

The panelists were critical of several recent developments in the faith and politics arena, including:

- An Oct. 7 talk by Democratic Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois at Redemption World Outreach Center in Greenville, S.C., in which he said "God's spirit is traveling with us and he wants us to do the right thing" and asked the congregation to "pray that I can be an instrument of God."
- A recent statement by Republican Sen. John McCain of Arizona that the United States was created as "a Christian nation" under the Constitution.
- Moderator Tim Russert's request during the Democratic debate at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire in late September for each candidate to name his or her favorite Bible verse.

Not one candidate said the question had no place in a debate about the leadership of

the country for the next four years, Eck said. The candidates “are not running to be president of all Christians, but to be president of all Americans,” she added.

For the record, Obama named the Sermon on the Mount, Sen. Hillary Clinton of New York said the golden rule and former Sen. John Edwards of North Carolina said, “What you do unto the least of those, you do unto me.”

The Dartmouth debate also included four Catholic candidates whose bids for the presidency are considered long shots. In response to the Bible verse question, Rep. Dennis Kucinich of Ohio named the prayer of St. Francis; New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson the Sermon on the Mount; Sen. Christopher Dodd of Connecticut the parable of the good Samaritan; and Sen. Joseph Biden of Delaware “Christ’s warning of the Pharisees.”

“There are many Pharisees, and it’s part of what has bankrupted some people’s view about religion,” Biden said. “And I worry about the Pharisees.”

The latest poll on religion and politics by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life found that nearly seven in 10 Americans think it is important for a president to have strong religious beliefs and 58 percent think it is proper for journalists to ask candidates about their religious beliefs.

Although Republicans, Southerners and evangelical Christians were more likely to agree that a president’s religious beliefs are important, the numbers were fairly consistent across religious, regional and other lines. The only group in which a majority disagreed about its importance was those without any religious affiliation.

Asked to assess various candidates and the current president in terms of how religious they are, 46 percent of respondents to the Pew survey released Sept. 6 said former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, a Republican, was very religious. President George W. Bush was second, at 43 percent.

But the two candidates considered the frontrunners for their parties’ nomination – former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, a Republican, and Clinton – were judged the least religious, with 14 percent and 16 percent, respectively, saying they were very religious.

Rev. Gaddy said he believes a concentration on candidates' religious beliefs can distract voters from looking in-depth at the candidates' stands on important issues of domestic and foreign policy.

He said the best response on the question of candidates and faith came from the nation's first Catholic president, John F. Kennedy, in a televised September 1960 speech to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association. In that talk, Kennedy said communism, poverty, education and the space race were far more critical election issues but had been obscured by debate about his Catholicism.

He described his belief "in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute - where no Catholic prelate would tell the president (should he be Catholic) how to act and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote."

"We're not saying that candidates should not identify themselves as religious," Rev. Gaddy said. "But the line is drawn when someone says, 'You should vote for me because I'm a member of x church' or 'you shouldn't vote for x'" because he or she does not belong to a particular church.

"There are too many issues facing the nation for candidates to spend time discussing how they pray or what their biggest sin is," he added.