

Religion in the political debate - enough already!

Pope Benedict XVI won't be drawn into American politics when he comes to the U.S. in April in the middle of a heated presidential race. That's what the Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, told an Italian Catholic magazine, and I'm glad to hear it.

Of course the likelihood of Pope Benedict's talking politics here was always virtually nil, but Cardinal Bertone's comment reduces the chances that anything the Holy Father does choose to do or say will be misinterpreted - accidentally or on purpose - by some journalist stretching for a story.

So much for the pope. Now maybe we can hope that politicians will take a leaf from his book and stop talking about religion. That would come as a big relief.

To be sure, this is a situation that may be on the way to resolving itself as the campaign moves into a new phase and new venues. But I wouldn't be too sure. Some of these people seem likely to return to religious themes whenever it suits their purposes.

Even as it stands, I can't recall another campaign in which candidates have gone on at such great length about their religious affiliation and personal faith.

On the Republican side, Mike Huckabee, former Arkansas governor and a Baptist minister, has made his religion a core element in reaching out to his evangelical Protestant base. Among Democrats, Sen. Barack Obama (D-IL) and Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-NY) have been competing for months to win the God-talk prize. Obama is a member of the United Church of Christ, Clinton a Methodist.

As someone who's written often over the years in defense of religion's right to a voice in the public square, and specifically in the political debate, my reaction to all this religious rhetoric is simple: Enough already! Find something else to talk about, folks.

I'm willing to assume that Clinton, Obama, and Huckabee are sincere. But their sincerity doesn't alter the unpleasant fact that there's something inherently exploitative of religion itself in a candidate's using his or her faith this way. Inescapably, a certain message comes through: Vote for me because I go to church. To which my reply is: Glad to hear it, but it takes more than churchgoing to get my vote.

The one candidate whom I'd exempt from this complaint is Mitt Romney. Back in December, it will be recalled, the former Massachusetts governor gave a speech defending his right as a Mormon to seek the presidency. Say what you will about it, Romney wasn't cashing in on his religious affiliation. He spoke under duress in the face of an apparently rising tide of anti-Mormon sentiment. I wouldn't vote for Romney just because he's a Mormon, but it's shameful that some Americans apparently would vote against him on those same grounds.

Does a candidate's religion therefore count for nothing? On the whole, knowing that an office seeker is a practicing member of some respectable religious body (I tend to exclude snake-handlers and devil-worshippers) leads me to take a somewhat more positive view of him or her than might otherwise be the case. When it comes to voting, though, what matters isn't religious affiliation, but the candidate's policy stands, competence, and character.

Put it like this. As far as I'm aware, what Americans currently are busy doing, in our long drawn-out, lumpy, noisy American way, is choosing a president, not a pope. The job descriptions for the two positions - and therefore the qualifications for the offices - just aren't the same. I bet Pope Benedict agrees.

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