

# Targeting Mormon faith should be off-limits in election, statement says

WASHINGTON - Comments made recently about the religious affiliation of presidential candidates - notably the Mormon faith of former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney - have no place in American political campaigns, say several dozen academics, diplomats and other prominent Catholics.

In a statement released Nov. 2 at a Washington news conference led by former U.S. ambassador to the Vatican Thomas Melady, the statement says there is "significant danger to the goal of our forefathers; maintaining harmony and understanding among all faiths and rejecting bigoted questions and comments about personal religious beliefs."

Melady said the impetus to issue the statement arose from comments made in early October at the Values Voter Summit in Washington by the Rev. Robert Jeffress, senior pastor of a megachurch, First Baptist Church of Dallas. Rev. Jeffress told reporters that Mormonism is a "cult," and that Romney is not a Christian.

In their statement, the Catholic signers recalled the history of anti-Catholic rhetoric in elections, from the 1928 campaign of Al Smith through John F. Kennedy's 1960 race and the 2004 campaign of Sen. John Kerry. It noted that there has been less expression of religious bias or bigotry in recent elections, but that the comments at the Values Voter Summit "bring to the forefront the unfortunate prospect that the discussion of a man's particular religious belief may become a major divisive political issue."

It said that as Catholics of different political persuasions, they "wish to cite our concern and our determination to assure that not only civility be maintained in the public discourse but that all inclinations to raise the issue of personal religious affiliation be avoided.

“As Catholics we have felt the sting of bias in previous national elections. We share the concern of many of our citizens of all religious faiths that allowing the question of a candidate’s religion to be subject to public ridicule is a grave regression from what we have accomplished in our forward movement as Americans since the establishment of our Republic.”

Steve Schneck, director of the Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies at The Catholic University of America, one of the signers, said at the news conference that discussion about whether someone of a particular religion is suitable to be elected has never really gone away and that it’s not only surfaced recently in relation to the Mormon faith of Romney and fellow candidate Jon Huntsman, the former governor of Utah.

Margaret Melady, former president of the American University of Rome and wife of the former ambassador, said she found particularly disturbing the subtext in Jeffress’ comments that “there is only an interest in electing a Protestant Christian,” and that “Protestant” would be narrowly defined. She said it was troubling during the 1960 election when Catholics were told by some people that they had a religious obligation to vote for Kennedy because he was Catholic.

Instead, she said, people should feel free to make their election choices on where candidates stand on the issues, based on the moral values one gets from the teachings of religion.

Coverage of the Jeffress comments has focused on the attack on Mormonism, she said, “but not on the other part of it.”

Signers of the statement also included Alfred E. Smith IV, great-grandson of the 1928 presidential candidate; Raymond Flynn and Corinne “Lindy” Boggs, both former U.S. ambassadors to the Vatican; former ambassadors Paul Russo, Aldona Wos, Sally Novetzke and Douglas Kmiec; former U.S. Sen. Larry Pressler, from South Dakota; former chairman of the Republican National Committee Frank Fahrenkopf, university presidents Mary Meehan of Alverno College, Thomas Powell of Mount St. Mary’s University, John J. Hurley of Canisius College, Brennan O’Donnell of Manhattan College and James Towey of Ave Maria University.

Other signers were former university presidents Daniel DeLuca of Alvernia University, James Gallagher of Philadelphia University; and Lawrence DeNardis of the University of New Haven, Conn., also a former congressman from Connecticut.

Signers also included attorneys in private and public practice, and professors from schools including The Catholic University of America, St. Joseph's University, Georgetown University, Seton Hall University, Molloy College and the Institute of World Politics.