

Keeping Faith: Principles to Protect Religion on the Campaign Trail

The role of religion in public life is a pivotal and contested question this election year. Republican and Democratic candidates alike have drawn on Biblical language and highlighted the importance of faith to articulate their personal and political values. As believers, we will always stand up for religious expression and the importance of religion for America, but we are troubled by some current trends in political campaigns.

Religion forms virtues vital to democratic citizenship. Religion calls citizens to transcend self-interest in service to others—to those in need, to neighbor, to community, to country and to the world. Religion promotes fundamental moral values necessary for civilized public life—honor and honesty, charity and justice. Religion has brought hope and liberty to America's powerless and disenfranchised, and its teachings have inspired our country's most admirable achievements.

Yet in this year's presidential campaign, we are troubled to see candidates pressed to pronounce the nature of their religious beliefs, asked if they believe every word of the Bible, forced to fend off warnings by a few religious authorities about reception of sacraments, compelled to confront derogatory and false allegations of radical Muslim childhood education, and faced with prejudicial analyses of their denominational doctrines.

Exclusionary religious rhetoric by candidates and constant scrutiny of the minutiae of their faiths undermine religion's valuable role in public life. It also runs contrary to the unique American commitment to both religious freedom and non-establishment of religion. History is replete with examples of religion compromised by its collusion with power, and the role of religion in the current campaign raises concern that it is once again being misused.

As citizens of faith united in efforts to reinvigorate religion's role in the public square, we are convinced that the greatest protection for that role is clear and unambiguous support for both religious expression and non-establishment of religion. Following Article VI of the U. S. Constitution and the First Amendment, we identify three basic principles.

- No person should be expected to leave their faith at the door when operating in the public square. But it is inappropriate to use religious or doctrinal differences to marginalize or disparage candidates, by either comparison or assertion. No religious test may be applied to candidates for public office - not by the law, not by candidates, not by campaigns.
- Candidates for public office should welcome the contributions that religion brings to society. But just as government may not endorse or favor a religious faith, candidates for public office are obliged, in their official capacity, to acknowledge that no faith can lay exclusive claim to the moral values that enrich our public life.
- Just as government policies must be in service to the nation and not to any religious faith, the same holds true for candidates' positions on policies. While it is appropriate for candidates to connect their faith to their policy positions, their positions on policy must respect all citizens regardless of religious belief.

As the 2008 campaign charges forward, we call upon all candidates, regardless of whether or not or how often they choose to talk about religion, to protect it. We call upon all candidates to join us in affirming these principles.

Stephen Schneck
Director, Life Cycle Institute
Catholic University of America

Lisa Sowell Cahill
J. Donald Monan Professor of Theology
Boston College

Rev. Les Schmidt
U.S. Catholic Bishops' Liaison
Catholic Committee of the South

Dr. Randall Balmer
Professor of American Religious History
Barnard College, Columbia University

Brian McLaren
Author and Founding Pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church
Spencerville, MD

Sr. Simone Campbell, SSS
Executive Director
NETWORK, A Catholic Social Justice Lobby

Rev. Joseph Darby
Senior Pastor
Morris Brown AME Church
Charleston, SC

Rev. Don Flowers
Senior Pastor
Providence Baptist Church
Charleston, SC

Dr. Baxter M. Wynn
Minister of Pastoral Care
First Baptist Church
Greenville, SC

Rev. Jennifer Butler
Executive Director
Faith in Public Life

Richard Gaillardetz
Professor of Catholic Studies
The University of Toledo

Rev. Jennifer Kottler
Executive Director
Let Justice Roll

Alexia Kelley
Executive Director
Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good

Chris Korzen
Executive Director
Catholics United

Rev. Dr. Paul de Vries
President
NY Divinity School
Board Member, National Association of Evangelicals

Rev. Fred L. Thelen
Pastor
Christo Rey Church
Lansing, MI

Rev. Tim Ahrens
Senior Pastor
First Congregational Church
Columbus, OH

Rev. David Hollenbach, S.J.
Center for Human Rights and International Justice
Theology Department
Boston College

J. Brent Walker
Executive Director
Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty

Sr. Sharon Dillon, SSJ-TOSF
Executive Director
Franciscan Mission Service of North American

Rev. Derrick Harkins
Senior Pastor, Nineteenth St. Baptist Church
Washington, DC
Board of Directors, World Relief

Dr. Glen Stassen
Lewis B. Smedes Professor of Christian Ethics
Fuller Theological Seminary

Rev. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite
President
Chicago Theological Seminary

Marie Dennis
Director
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns

Rev. Stephen Copley
Senior Pastor
First United Methodist Church
North Little Rock, Ark.

Sr. Mary Waskowiak, RSM
President
The Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas

Dr. Ken Brooker Langston
Director, Disciples Justice Action Network (Disciples of Christ)
Coordinator, Disciples Center for Public Witness

Diana Butler Bass
Author, speaker on American Religion