

ASK THE QUESTION



WHY WE MUST DEMAND RELIGIOUS CLARITY
FROM OUR PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

STEPHEN MANSFIELD



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TO
JOHN SEIGENTHALER SR.,
friend and inspiration

Contents

Foreword by David Aikman 13

Prologue 19

Introduction 27

Profile: Forty-Nine Truths about Religion in America 41

1. Kennedy at Houston 45

2. Test of the Fathers 65

3. Noah's Wife Was Joan of Arc 83

Profile: Religion, Politics, and the Media 101

4. Three Words 105

5. Thomas Jefferson Was a None 125

Profile: Milestones in American Religion and Politics 145

6. A Faith to Shape Her Politics 151

7. The Narrative of Faith 173

Contents

Epilogue 201

Three Speeches 205

John F. Kennedy's Speech to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association

Ronald Reagan's "Remarks at a Dallas Ecumenical Prayer Breakfast"

Barack Obama's "Call to Renewal" Speech

Acknowledgments 233

Select Bibliography 237

Notes 241

In religion and politics people's beliefs and convictions are in almost every case gotten at second-hand, and without examination, from authorities who have not themselves examined the questions at issue but have taken them at second-hand from other non-examiners, whose opinions about them were not worth a brass farthing.

Mark Twain

Foreword

by David Aikman

The year was 1976, and *Newsweek* magazine had declared it “The Year of the Evangelical.” Pollster George Gallup had estimated that the number of Americans who considered themselves “evangelical” might be as high as fifty million. The greatest political event of that year was the emergence of former Georgia governor Jimmy Carter as the Democratic presidential candidate. Carter had declared himself a Christian early in his political campaign, and he had made it clear that he was of the “born-again” variety.

As one of the only two born-again Christian reporters at the news organization where I worked, I was tickled with amusement at the groans both in print and in ordinary conversation from seasoned Washington journalists who simply hadn’t a clue what Jimmy Carter was talking about. The phone lines between Washington, DC, and parts of rural Kansas or the Bible Belt were soon buzzing, with reporters asking their back-home “religious” relatives what being “born again” meant. It was a classic example of journalistic ignorance generated by a lack of education and a lack even of interest in a phenomenon that was at the time ricocheting through the

United States. You really had to be intentionally neglectful of the American cultural scene to miss the fact that the United States was going through a surging evangelical revival in the late 1970s.

Unfortunately, the same provincialism about religious faith sprung up in a much more dangerous environment when the exiled Ayatollah Khomeini returned in triumph to Iran in early 1979. He was welcomed by crowds in the hundreds of thousands and quickly established a hard-line Shiite Islamic regime that overcame all democratic and secular resistance. Americans learned painfully how new and unexpected the environment of Iran had become when in November 1979 the United States Embassy in Tehran was taken over by radical protesters and fifty-two American diplomats were held hostage for 444 days.

Anyone who had taken seriously the pronouncements of the Iranian leader Khomeini when he was still in exile in Iraq and France would not have been surprised at all that he was going to establish a tyrannical dictatorship. Nevertheless, that did not prevent senior American diplomats and experienced journalists from uttering the idiotic comment that Khomeini was some sort of “saint.” I recall a strenuous argument with a fellow writer at the magazine where I worked. She insisted—purely on the basis that, as an opponent of the Shah, who had made some serious Islamic religious pronouncements—he was a sort of Gandhi-like figure. That, in my view, was tantamount to how out of touch an American would have been in the 1930s if he had declared Adolf Hitler to be a European mystic because he talked a lot about “Providence” and had not officially renounced his birth religion of Roman Catholicism.

Stephen Mansfield is certainly correct that most Americans today, particularly in the political arena, subscribe to a smorgasbord of beliefs that together constitute their personal worldview. The actual word *worldview* is not one generally used by most journalists or academics, probably because they don’t acknowledge that their own perception of the reality on which they are reporting was acquired

during their education and subsequent journalistic experience. A failure to acknowledge that you yourself have a worldview makes it extremely difficult to assess what the worldview might be of campaigning political leaders. Indeed, ignorance of one's own galaxy of perceptions makes it all but impossible even to pose sensible and astute questions to any person or political figure about what that person believes.

One of the most interesting examples in my experience of the lack of awareness of a worldview and therefore the lack of ability to perceive the worldview of others occurred during the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe in the year 1989. Most of my journalistic colleagues believed that communism was being run out of town because it had failed to deliver economically. But I had met with many Czechoslovak dissidents long before they were in a position to take over the government of the country. They all had made it clear that their objection to the system had nothing to do with its economic performance and everything to do with the way it controlled every area of human life. One of the great “aha! moments” in my own reporting career was hearing the Czechoslovak dissident Václav Havel explain to an audience of several thousand people assembled in Prague, the capital of Czechoslovakia, that the issue of the revolt against the regime was really an issue of the country rejoining the mainstream of European history. The poor economic performance of communism was only a minute part of the collapse of the system throughout Eastern Europe. The Czechoslovak protest against communism was a moral revolt before it became a politically effective revolt.

As a reporter in Washington throughout much of the decade of the 1980s, I was always surprised by how little attention was given by reporters to the actual beliefs of the politicians and leaders on whom they were reporting. The early 1980s found most otherwise skeptical Americans almost sophomoric in their optimism about

China's future political development. Thus, when the Tiananmen Square student protests got on the way in April 1989, there was a widespread reluctance to believe that the regime might be willing to crush it with great violence. The assumption was that since China's leader Deng Xiaoping had visited the United States at the beginning of the decade and had donned a cowboy hat, he wasn't really a serious communist. Yet anybody who knew anything about Deng's career knew that he not only was a serious communist but also had used violence at various times on his upward political pathway to crush opposition to the communist regime in China. How did anyone know that Deng was a serious communist? By reading what he had written about his own beliefs.

I came to the conclusion that deep philosophical beliefs about anything had been marginalized in the minds of reporters because in most cases they lacked any conscious philosophical or faith beliefs of their own and had been educated to believe that religious faith was always a private issue, was probably a historical relic, and had nothing to do with real life or the policies that elected or unelected leaders might actually implement once they were in power.

There is, of course, another factor in the reluctance of reporters to ask profound questions about the beliefs of the people on whom they are reporting. There exists a completely false assumption among some reporters that if you ask what a person believes about religion, you are violating the constitutional line of the separation of church and state. That is tantamount to refusing to pose a question to an aspiring physicist about whether or not he or she believes the world to be flat.

It is entirely fair to ask of any person, whether or not he or she is aspiring to political power, what he or she believes about life in general and about particular expressions of human culture and politics. What the person asking the question then has to do is be truthful and accurate in writing down the answer. There is a natural human

tendency to report inaccurately on beliefs we do not agree with. But the public can only benefit from the asking of important questions about faith if the answer is accurately reported. The pronounced secular tilt of cultural elites throughout the West in general and in the United States in particular makes them very reluctant to acknowledge any worldview or attitude with which they do not personally have sympathy. This was surely one factor in the gross misjudgment of the Iranian regime by Americans who saw it taking form before their very eyes. Indeed, a failure to take seriously the beliefs of others surely had a lot to do with the failure of the United States to anticipate the events of September 11, 2001, and, after they happened, to account for them.

There is now a greater need than ever for aspiring political leaders to be honest and truthful about what they believe. But there is a concomitant need for reporters or observers of the comments they make to be fair, accurate, and truthful in making those opinions known to the larger public. A common Latin rubric that is well known in American life is *caveat emptor*—“let the buyer beware.” A consumer of news reports or broadcasts should surely adopt a similar motto: *caveat lector*—“let the reader [or viewer] beware.” After all, “What do you believe?” is something that posers of the question of faith to others should be willing to ask of themselves. Truthfulness and fairness, after all, ought to be the common coin of all communication among people.

David Aikman
Oxford University
Former Senior Correspondent and Station Chief, *Time* magazine

Prologue

The problem with writing about religion is that you run the risk of offending sincerely religious people, and then they come after you with machetes.

Dave Barry

It is Saturday, April 25, 2015, and the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner is just beginning. Most of the twenty-six hundred guests have arrived, the more famous and fashionably attired having strolled a press-lined red carpet as they entered the stylish Washington Hilton. The president and first lady have been seated, along with the other luminaries, at the head table. All have been publicly introduced. Scholarships and awards have been announced. Now Christi Parsons, the association's president, is concluding her remarks. The 101st occasion of this capital city tradition is well underway.

There is a hint of sadness this evening. Earlier today a massive earthquake struck Katmandu in Nepal. It killed thousands, made tens of thousands homeless, and caused an avalanche on Mount Everest that crushed nineteen people to death. Four of them were Americans, including Dan Fredinburg, a Google executive. Many here knew him. Some of the news anchors at the dinner were on the

air all day giving updates and recountings for viewers just tuning in. The earthquake had been much discussed over cocktails earlier this evening.

Still, it is the glitziest night of the year on the Washington social calendar, and spirits are rising. This event has been called the “Nerds Prom.” Tonight it seems the cool kids have decided to invade. Appearing with nearly every news anchor and reporter in the city, as well as with the network executives who keep them in check, are the dazzling stars of sport, stage, and screen. Some news veterans have been heard to complain that the dinner is no longer about the correspondents and their networks. Now it is all about the parent companies that own them and who crassly invite the famous as part of building a brand. It means that for one evening a year, Washington, DC, turns into Hollywood West. Tonight, judging by the number of selfies newsmen are taking with starlets, the nerds don’t seem to mind the change.

All the network news royalty are here, of course, but so are Bradley Cooper, Lucy Liu, Jane Seymour, Alfre Woodard, Jane Fonda, and *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue cover model Hannah Davis. Connie Britton, producer and star of the TV show *Nashville*, seems in constant need of help with the train of her dress. Kardashians and Trumps are ever present. Bill Belichick, coach of the New England Patriots, is here, and so is Seattle Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson, who brought his grandmother with him. An actor from the HBO series *Game of Thrones* is seated, as is singing star John Legend, who can’t stop snapping iPhone photos of his supermodel wife, Chrissy Teigen. Executives at ABC shocked everyone by bringing the entire cast of their hit TV comedy *Modern Family*.

It is an evening of stunning glamour—a boozy, raucous, self-conscious occasion of cavernous cleavage and sparkling dresses stretched tightly over unavoidable derrieres. There are tuxedoed men with oversized heads and famous people trying not to embarrass

themselves by fawning over those more famous still. It is a night to see and be seen, a night to be remembered. After appetizers of jumbo lump crabmeat with jicama have been served, mango pepitas and baby oak salad, smoked paprika rubbed filet, foraged wild mushroom ragout, and mascarpone cheese stone grits will be served with a Chateau Ste. Michelle and a Simi Cabernet Sauvignon.

Cecily Strong of *Saturday Night Live* is the celebrity host. She is now bringing the edgy humor all expect. “Let’s give it up for the Secret Service,” she has just said. “They’re the only law enforcement agency in the nation that will get in trouble if a black man gets shot.” This is her tone all night. She started with, “The Washington Hilton, you guys! If these walls could talk, they’d probably say, ‘Clean me.’”

The president spoke just before her. He took the traditional jabs: “Just this week Michele Bachmann predicted I would bring about the biblical end of days. Now, that’s a legacy! That’s big! I mean, Lincoln, Washington, they didn’t do that!” He was also, as expected, self-deprecating: “Six years into my presidency people still say I’m arrogant. Aloof. Condescending. People are so dumb. That’s why I don’t meet with them.”

Midway into his speech Mr. Obama was joined by comedian Keegan-Michael Key, who played his “anger translator.” When the president assured, “Despite our differences we count on the press to shed light,” his anger translator continued, “And we can count on *FOX News* to terrify all white people with some nonsense!” And so it went.

It has all been memorable. Now it is over. Guests say their good-byes and rush to limousines. Some call Uber. The after-parties await. The hottest ticket this year is the Vanity Fair/Bloomberg Party at the French ambassador’s residence in Sheridan-Kalorama. It will go all night. Those not invited will be glued to Instagram tomorrow to see photos of Chrissy Teigen’s legs and confirmation that Bradley Cooper was indeed flirting with Nancy Pelosi.

Prologue

It is the great night of the year, a self-congratulatory, high-dollar gathering that assures the DC establishment of its importance and strength. It also helps meld the press and the politician, the staffs of the powerful and the interview/comment machines that desperately need them. Those who weren't here likely aren't important. Those who were here know the rarified air they have breathed.¹

Someone was missing, though. Only a few even noticed. They were not among the grandmothers and underwear models or the moms of receptionists or celebrity chefs. They did not arrive with the actresses, were certainly not with the personal assistants who clogged the halls. Nor did they accompany the woman a White House correspondent said was invited for “her breasts and her blogs, but mainly her breasts.”

No. They were not here. Among the twenty-six hundred guests present this night, not one was a journalist who specializes in reporting religion. Not one. Not a single journalist at that dinner—a dinner specifically designed to celebrate all things news and Washington, DC—made it their life's work to inform the American people about the influence of faith in national affairs. There were people sipping chardonnay who are known for lengthy stories about the first lady's attire, but there was not a faith and culture, faith and politics, faith and anything writer to be found among the twenty-six hundred.

The White House Correspondents' Association could have invited Bob Smietana. He's the former president of the Religion Newswriters Association and a senior news editor for *Christianity Today*. He formerly wrote for the *Nashville Tennessean*, the paper where John Seigenthaler, David Halberstam, and Al Gore honed their craft.

Cathleen Falsani should have been sent an invitation. She looks good in a dress. She has worked for the *Chicago Tribune* and for *Religion Dispatches* at the University of Southern California. Her 2004 interview with Barack Obama is one of the most important in the history of presidential faith.

Paul Raushenbush probably owns a tux. He's the former associate dean of religious life at Princeton University and the executive editor of global spirituality and religion for *Huffington Post*. Arianna Huffington could have asked someone for a favor and gotten him in.

Lauren Green of *FOX News* would have done the event justice. She's both a faith journalist and a former runner-up Miss America. Jaweed Kaleem at *CNN* is an award-winning writer, as well as a Henry Luce Fellow in global religion at the International Center for Journalists. There are dozens of others: Sarah Pulliam Bailey of the *Washington Post* and Tom Gjelten of *National Public Radio* and Rachel Zoll of the *Associated Press*, to name a few.

Yet no room was found for them—not even one seat among three thousand.

It is, disturbingly, a common occurrence. It does not happen only at star-spangled dinners. There is also no room for religion reporters on the buses of presidential candidates. In fact, rarely are religion reporters even assigned to national campaigns. A very few will gain access to major events, but this is far more likely to happen if the pope or the Dalai Lama is in town. There is rarely time in a president's or a candidate's schedule for those who write about religion. Candidates routinely pass them on to their heads of "faith outreach." Even their own newspapers are often unsure of how to assign religion reporters. This is largely because advertisers and readers rarely get excited about the religion section of the paper. Isn't that where they announce church bazaars?

The neglect showed, tragically, nowhere more than during the 2012 presidential campaign. In that race, a Mormon Republican presidential candidate, the first of his faith to be a party nominee, ran against a sitting president whose faith story had played a decisive role in his initial presidential race in 2008. During that race, Mr. Obama had never stopped talking about how his faith inspired his policies. Surely then, in 2012, faith themes would be front and

center. Surely they would be much aired and much debated. Surely this is what the times demanded, the faiths involved required, and the candidates themselves expected. Of course 2012 would be a high-water mark for religion reporting in America.

Yet it wasn't.

The statistics tell the pitiful story. The Pew Research Center concluded that only 6 percent of stories about that election made any reference to religion. Nearly 5 percent of that coverage was about a single event: the time a Baptist minister in Texas called Mitt Romney's Mormon religion a cult, which happened a full year before the election!²

There was a reason for this meager attention to religion in 2012. Neither presidential candidate wanted to talk about it. Only one in seven religion-related stories in that heated race began with either of the campaigns. Religion reporters were left to themselves to think up angles that readers might like. That's the reason 30 percent of the reporting on religion during the 2012 campaign was about how white evangelicals would vote.³ This is not the kind of thing candidates want to talk about or readers ask to hear more about. This is the kind of stuff journalists write about when trying to get some traction.

Religion simply didn't receive the serious attention the 2012 election required. Even the voters said so. After it was all over, 82 percent of Americans said they had learned "not very much" or "nothing at all" about the Mormon religion. More than a quarter of the US population still thought Obama was a Muslim. Almost no one learned anything about how religion might impact the presidency. This was because only 16 percent of all religion coverage dealt with the vital issue of how religion would impact policies or governing.⁴

In the years after that election, faith coverage continued to decline. Faith as a factor in politics continued to rise. Religion reporters were in trouble. The headlines told the tale. When religion writer Michael Paulson left the religion beat of the *New York Times* for

the theater beat, one news outlet's headline was "Another One Bites the Dust? New York Times Religion Writer Taking His Talents to Broadway."⁵ When more journalists specializing in faith found other work, the *American Conservative* asked, "Why Are Newspaper Religion Reporters Quitting?"⁶ It got so bad that when the industry-leading Poynter Institute announced in a headline, "Three Religion Reporters Leave Dailies," it was compelled to add, "but the Job Isn't Vanishing."⁷ Few in the trade were assured.

This trend continued well into the start of the 2016 presidential race. Again, religion played a role. One candidate announced his run at the chapel service of one of the most fundamentalist Christian colleges in the country. Nearly all candidates claimed that religion determined their approach to policy issues, abortion in particular—a matter moved to center stage by the release of video recordings purporting to expose organ-harvesting practices by Planned Parenthood. One candidate claimed that religion is at the heart of a woman's decision to seek an abortion. Every candidate and the sitting president claimed religion shaped their view of same-sex marriage. Indeed, every contender for the White House at the start of the 2016 race claimed profound religious underpinnings.

The state of the union of religion and politics in America is clear. Religion is thriving. The nation's politics are as faith-based as ever. Yet reporting on religion is near an all-time low—and there is much the voters still need to know.

It does seem that at least one seat could have been found for a religion reporter at the most important press and politics event in the nation's capital. Just one?

Introduction

I go the way that Providence dictates with the assurance
of a sleepwalker.

Adolf Hitler

His name was Auguste. His parents preferred Isidore. He once signed a legal document as “Brutus Napoleon.”

He was an odd man. In 1824, he began a common-law marriage to a woman about to be arrested for prostitution. The union lasted eighteen years and was an agonizing disaster. He later proclaimed it “the only error of my life.” Humility was not among his gifts.

He was a cantankerous soul, often at the edge of sanity. After a rebellious childhood, he became secretary and “spiritually adopted son” to a famous philosopher. The two fought and eventually parted company over which of them should receive credit for their work. Episodes like this deepened the depression that deformed his life. He was repeatedly hospitalized for mental illness and once tried to kill himself by jumping from a bridge.

He made what living he could as a lecturer and writer. Poverty and hardship filled his days. The woman he regarded as his muse died horribly the same year he met her. His grief left him imbalanced. He

decided upon a course of “cerebral hygiene” during which he refused to allow the inferior thoughts of others to enter his mind. In time, he declared himself the high priest of his own religion.

He might have left this life unmourned and unremembered, just another unremarkable madman slipping quietly into eternity. Yet by the time he died in 1857, some of his ideas had begun to change the world.



He was certain, for example, that the scientific study of society would solve the problems of mankind. No more the tyranny of religion, philosophy, and tradition. Men of science must rule, he believed. Their exacting methods would solve the problems of the world and lead humanity into a golden age. This certainty became known as positivism. It was fruit of the turbulent mind of our beleaguered visionary Auguste Comte, the father of sociology.¹

Among all that he will be remembered for—and there is much—one prediction in particular has profoundly shaped the modern world. Comte was thoroughly convinced that mankind would eventually evolve beyond religion. Indeed, he believed that a world free of religion was dawning even in his day.

He taught that human history began in a theological stage, an era marked by faith in gods and supernatural happenings. Despising religion as he did, Comte called this the fictitious stage. Then came a metaphysical stage in which philosophy ruled the minds of men. Ultimately, he believed, humanity would step into the positive or scientific stage. Men would discard their infantile fascination with religion and other misguided ideas. They would devote themselves instead to logical solutions for all the wrongs that beset the human race. Religion would dissolve forever in the brilliant light of a new and scientific age.

It was an idea that set minds aflame. A world without religion! A world ruled only by scientific fact! A world untroubled by prophets and priests, free of gods and supernatural concerns!

Introduction

It was a vision that enflamed the mind of Karl Marx, among many others, shaping his vision of a world remade by revolution. It also put fire into the mind of John Stuart Mill and through him into the heart of the Victorian age. It found its way into such diverse places as the novels of Thomas Hardy and George Eliot and the thinking of Kemal Atatürk, the father of modern Turkey.



This confidence in the death of religion fashioned the way millions came to view the future, particularly in universities and among the ruling classes. The modern would be secular. The modern would be scientific. Comte had predicted it all.

And we believed. We had to. Our sociology professors told us it was true.

Yet Comte's prediction is among the greatest miscalculations in the history of ideas. It has left Western society largely uninformed, inept, and ineffective in dealing with one of the most defining forces in the modern world: religion.

The truth is that religion has not faded from history, nor is it in danger of doing so. There is no indication that mankind will one day abandon faith forever. In fact, the trends of our times indicate quite the opposite. The Islamic world is exploding in nearly every way. The Russian Orthodox Church is undergoing an unexpected resurrection.² Pentecostalism is dramatically on the rise in South America. Druidism, Wicca, and neo-pagan religions are sweeping through Europe. Christianity is expanding exponentially in China and sub-Saharan Africa. In some regions of the world, Roman Catholicism has survived its recent scandals and is thriving. Even ancient and otherworldly Hinduism and Buddhism are holding their own.

Were Comte alive he would be stunned—and widely criticized for getting it so wrong.

Introduction



Nowhere is this more so than in the United States, where Comte's intellectual heirs have long predicted the demise of faith. As early as 1880, leading atheist Robert Ingersoll declared, "The churches are dying out all over the land."³ These words were badly timed. Within decades, two religious movements arose from American soil and spread throughout the world: Pentecostalism and fundamentalism. American churches didn't die out. They multiplied.

Still came the dire predictions. In the middle of the next century, a new generation of experts announced, "God is dead." These words were intended as the secular benediction for a departed age of faith. Esteemed sociologist Peter Berger wrote that by "the twenty-first century, religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture."⁴ Anthropologist Anthony Wallace went further, assuring that the "evolutionary future of religion is extinction. . . . Belief in supernatural powers is doomed to die out, all over the world."⁵ These warnings—perhaps they were hopes—and others like them have echoed endlessly ever since, particularly in American university classrooms.

Yet none of it has proven true. The United States is today among the most religious nations in the world. Some experts doubt this simply because American religion is changing forms. It is morphing along generational lines, remaking itself in the image of the young as it does. Yet whatever the trends—whatever recent shifts in church attendance, immigration, sexual ethics, and cultural influence have occurred—it is an undeniable fact that the vast majority of Americans are, in some form, religious.⁶



There are some Americans today, then, who are best described as the stunned descendants of Comte. They live in shock that religion

still plays any role in American society, American politics in particular. Disappointment descends upon them each time a faith rears its unfashionable head. They view the religiously devoted as holdovers from a bygone era, anachronisms who keep all things American from evolving into their destined, religion-free state.

Nothing scares Comte's heirs like these religious Americans. They are a tribe apart, citizens of another world, worshipers who cling not only to God but also to far different predictions about religion and the nation's future than those proclaimed by Comte. They are foreign and at the same time deeply embedded in the flow of American history. When G. K. Chesterton wrote a century ago of "a nation with the soul of a church," he was thinking of Americans like these.⁷

This tribe is not disappointed by the presence of religion in modern American life. Instead, they celebrate it as the intended way, the fulfillment of the founding vision. They cannot forget that the Pilgrims sailed to the New World "for the glory of God and the advancement of the Christian faith."⁸ They are comforted that it was on an "altar of God" that Thomas Jefferson swore "eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man."⁹ They understand why Lincoln was driven to his knees "by the overwhelming conviction I had nowhere else to go" and why Barack Obama would echo Lincoln a century and a half later.¹⁰

These Americans delight in every piece of evidence for an historic national faith. They take pride in the fact that signers of the Declaration of Independence relied "on the protection of divine Providence" as they affirmed rights endowed by a Creator. It seems completely natural to them that the First Congress approved an ordinance extolling "religion and morality" as "necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind."¹¹ Nor are they surprised that many of the monuments in their nation's capital, the motto inscribed on their money, and even the oath they take in court all assume the existence

Introduction

of God. This is merely what comes of having a church at the soul of the nation, in Chesterton's reworked phrase.

When religion surfaces in American politics, this tribe is grateful. They would wish nothing else, be disturbed by anything less. It is why they cannot envision electing an atheist to the presidency and are willing to entrust themselves politically only to men and women who believe in God. This is as it has always been, they believe. It is in keeping with the way of the fathers, with the founding faith of the land.



We Americans find ourselves, then, a feuding family born of very different parents. We were sired by visions of both the sacred and the secular. We descend from both the Renaissance and the Reformation. We are children of both Comte the atheist prophet and George Washington the Christian warrior. We are the siblings of both the outspoken skeptic Bill Maher and the outspoken evangelical Rick Warren. We find ourselves the parents of both students who wish to pray at football games and, well, Miley Cyrus.



This all leads us to a great mystery. It is a mystery that reveals itself constantly in American politics, every four years during presidential campaigns in particular. That mystery is this: Why are Americans so unwilling to demand religious clarity from their presidential candidates?

It is a mystery that seems—somehow—un-American. We would expect that those who harbor Comtean, secular hopes in their hearts would scour every religious pronouncement by a presidential candidate in order to fiercely demand exactitude and explanation. We would expect religious Americans to demand this same exactitude and explanation, though in their case for the sake of assuring orthodoxy and then taking up the cause. In other words, we would

expect the secular to take religious statements by candidates seriously because they think them untrue. We would also expect religious Americans to take such statements seriously because they think they might be true. Either way, religious statements by presidential candidates ought to be among the most scrutinized and debated of all political pronouncements.

They aren't. Instead, presidential campaigns are filled with pious mush, airy declarations of faith, and broad-brush assurances of devotion that go largely unscrutinized. We hardly hear them anymore. All candidates assure the voters of their faith. Every candidate offers the required phrases: "God bless America" at the end of a speech or "With God's help we will march forward." Few candidates offer—and fewer still are asked to offer—any reasonable explanation of what they believe. We are left with feelings more than facts, intimations more than concrete beliefs.

Yet behind the usual religious gush of the campaign are core beliefs and years of defining experience. The gush conceals the reality—and sometimes the genuine soul—of the candidate. We do not want our politicians to act like theologians to appease us. We do not want to invade their prayers. We do, though, want to understand the inner compass of those we elect to power. The truth is that we seldom do.

The great oddity of this is that we live in a shockingly intrusive media culture. Nearly every detail of a political candidate's life is now put fully on display. It is nothing today for the entire nation to know what kind of underwear a presidential candidate prefers. We may also be required to know, whether we wish to or not, the name of a candidate's dog, the song that was playing at the dawn of first love, the outcome of recent medical exams, and even the circumstances of lost virginity. Yet most Americans would not dare expect this same degree of detail about a presidential candidate's religious beliefs—beliefs that could lead the nation into war, upend economies, or transform culture.

It is all difficult to explain. Some say the fault is in our manners. We Americans tend to think religion is a private matter and that no one should be pressed publicly about what they believe. Perhaps this makes us unwilling to grill political candidates about their faith.

Others say this tendency in our culture comes from our understanding of the First Amendment. If church and state are to be separate, then perhaps personal faith and governing should be too. Maybe it doesn't matter what a candidate believes. He isn't supposed to take his faith with him into office anyway.

A more cynical view is that we don't take political candidates seriously when they talk about religion, and so we've long ceased to care what they say. Or it could be that the silence of voters about religion in presidential campaigns is a result of our national ignorance about religion as a whole. Surveys often show that Americans barely know what their own faith teaches, much less the relevant details of religions not their own.¹²

Whatever the cause, we cannot afford to leave faith unexamined among those aspiring to the highest office in our land. Religion not only has proven too influential upon what most presidents do in office but also plays too great a role in the crises of our age to be ignored.

In recent decades, Americans have watched as a president reversed his position on same-sex marriage and cited the Sermon on the Mount as a reason. Another president appealed to a distinctly Christian definition of "just war" prior to deploying US forces in Muslim lands. A president has cited the Koran in urging legislation pertaining to the poor, the Bhagavad Gita in contending for immigration policy, and the Torah in arguing for economic reform. One president questioned whether atheists are qualified to hold US citizenship. Religious principle has directly shaped what presidents have done about prison reform, about abortion, about welfare, about capital punishment, and about a host of other vital national issues.

Introduction

Perhaps this is as it should be. Perhaps it is not. Yet none of it ought to occur without voter scrutiny, without prior knowledge, without the open forums, media examination, and insistence upon clarity that befit American democracy in an age of religious fervor. Without these, religion can come close to being an unelected co-president. It can become an unknown and unanticipated factor in the decision-making of the most powerful official in the world.



This urgent need for understanding the faith of presidential candidates is all the more pressing given our postmodern culture. We are a generation that does not accept unaltered the faiths delivered from our ancestors. Instead, we customize, we refashion, we make religion our own. We give old faiths new purpose, old words new meaning—or a variety of meanings.

This can make labels obsolete, or at least unhelpful. What does it mean for a candidate to declare himself a Roman Catholic, for example? Will he oppose abortion rights, or same-sex marriage, or legalized marijuana, or distributing condoms in public schools? Will the pope be of influence in his decision-making? Will Catholicism be merely the most influential of several religions that color the lens through which this candidate views the world? What if the candidate is a Methodist? Can we know anything about his views from this word alone? Or the word *evangelical*? What does it tell us? There was a time when the labels largely told the tale. Now they fail us. We have to “ask the question.”

This will be no easier in the years to come. As these words are being written, there are a Muslim and a Hindu in the US Congress. There are also several “nones.” We can expect people of each of these faiths to one day run for president. Yet what is the Muslim approach to gay marriage? Is there a Hindu approach to governing? Or are there many Hindu approaches to governing? Can we know from the name alone anything about how a “none” will lead?

Introduction

Again, we will have to “ask the question.” We will have to demand clarity. We will have to insist that we understand the influence of religion on the lives of presidential candidates before they take office.



Comte was wrong. He left us unprepared for the age in which we live. We can forgive him.¹³ Generations of his academic disciples were equally wrong. It is understandable. What will be neither forgivable nor understandable is if our generation of Americans, with all the evidence amassed before us, continues to allow religion in American politics to be the sentimental, barely comprehensible, shadowy thing it has been. Those in Munich who heard Adolf Hitler speak the words that began this chapter eventually wished they had asked more questions. We, too, must ask the questions of faith that need to be asked. It is time for the mysteries, the uncertainties, and the gambling with the nation’s future to end.



A Personal Word

I first entered the contentious arena of American faith and politics in 2003 when I wrote *The Faith of George W. Bush*. It was a book designed to fill a void. Americans knew that Mr. Bush’s presidency was among the most faith-based in their history, but they did not know the contours of that faith. The president, who was just then seeking a second term, had absorbed his family’s insistence that religion is a private matter. He said little about his faith, and what he did say was famously unclear. His administration’s spokespersons were thus forced into silence about matters of faith, and this left both his supporters and his critics sometimes frustrated and often unsure.

My book helped to ease this frustration, and I was grateful. Yet I believed then as I believe now that its most important contribution was not the recounting of Bush's religious journey but its insistence that faith can define a presidency by first defining the soul of the one who becomes president. As I wrote in the introduction to *The Faith of George W. Bush*, "An underlying assumption of this book is that a man's religion permeates all he does whether he knows it or not. What he believes works itself out practically in his life, so there is a connection between his view of grace and his garden, between his idea of Providence and his way of parenting."¹⁴

It was this view that led me to write *The Faith of Barack Obama* in 2008. Though Mr. Obama's faith was far different from the faith of George W. Bush, both men were, I believed, equally faith-based. To either stand with Obama or to defeat him, it was essential to understand the religious ideals that framed his life and politics.

His critics weren't having it. To them, Obama was at best a Muslim and at worst a man playing at Christianity to win votes. Their ire spilled over onto me. Speeches were canceled. My life was threatened. It was as though I had written a book extolling the virtues of the Antichrist.

Yet the book sold well, and the reason was that Americans were as mystified by Obama's faith as they had been by Bush's. The one was both guarded and inarticulate about his faith. The other was a confusing work in progress, a man who had been tutored by the theological radicalism of Jeremiah Wright for twenty years, had then parted company with his fiery pastor just before entering office, and soon after had welcomed theological conservatives and evangelicals among his closest spiritual advisors. Obama's faith was difficult to know, but Americans sensed it was an essential part of him. They were right.

Again, my book helped to clear the fog, but again, I was most interested in its underlying assumption. As I wrote in its pages, "If a man's faith is sincere, it is the most important thing about him, and

it is impossible to understand who he is and how he will lead without first understanding the religious vision that informs his life.”¹⁵

Among my more fascinating and enjoyable experiences in the wake of these two books were the many calls I received from journalists as they attempted to decode the meaning of religion in American politics. If someone spoke of George W. Bush as being “anointed,” a friend at the *New York Times* would inevitably call and say something like, “Look, I’m Jewish. It sounds to me like the man is anointing himself king. What’s going on?” A journalist in the Middle East read Barack Obama’s “Call to Renewal” speech and came upon the conversion story in which Obama says, “I didn’t fall out.” Then came the call: “What eez theez ‘fell out’? Stephen, I ask you. Is theez what I see weeth Benny Hinn on American TV?” These conversations and dozens like them are among my most cherished memories of those days.

Since that time I coauthored a book about the faith of Sarah Palin and wrote another about Mormonism during Mitt Romney’s presidential campaign. For perspective, I also wrote about Abraham Lincoln’s religious struggles and their impact on his presidency and the country.

What has emerged from my years as a student of religion in American politics—from a thousand interviews, hundreds of articles, and dozens of debates—are three certainties. First, there is beauty to a life informed by faith that is inspiring to behold. This alone rewards the investment in time and study. Second, there is an ignorance of religion in our generation that has become a threat of its own. Confusion and uncertainty about religion envelop voters, journalists, and aspiring statesmen alike. We can fix this. Whatever the cause of this confusion and uncertainty—Comte, laziness, a misreading of the First Amendment—our institutions and our educators are capable of offering a remedy. May it happen soon. The need is urgent given the faith factor in the crises of our time.

Introduction

Finally, I am more convinced now than when I first began that there is an inherent connection between faith and public policy, between belief and governing. In order to make laws and policies, we first ask ourselves about what is right, what is fair, and what is true. Action springs from the answer to the question, “What ought to be done?” These are often religious questions, matters of faith and values rather than of science and laboratory certainties. It means that faiths of various kinds will always shape governing, so we must know the nature of those faiths before the governing begins. It is the obligation that falls to a democratic people who are heirs to the kind of legacy of freedom our national parents left us.

Ours is not a secular age. It is an age of faith. We should conduct ourselves so as to navigate its currents skillfully.

Though I am grateful to have made my contributions in this field, there is much more to be done. Better minds and writers than I must enlist in this cause. Many have, and we should be thankful. The role of religion in American politics should be the subject of careful analysis and reasoned debate, not just the stuff of cable news screamfests as it often is today. Religion is not going away. It is shaping our world. We may not like it. We may not understand it. Yet it rules us all the same. Better that we awaken from our dreams of a secular world to contend with the world as it truly is.