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Religion, politics collide at interfaith Notre Dame forum

by Catherine M. Odell



Fr. John Jenkins, left, chats with panelist Rick Warren, right, in the green room prior to the forum. (University of Notre Dame/Barbara Johnston)

NOTRE DAME, Ind. -- "When I go to the doctor and I have a brain tumor, I don't ask, 'Are you an

evangelical?' I just ask, 'Have you done this surgery before?' Is this person competent? When I go into a voting booth, I'm electing a president, not a pastor."

What Americans most need to know when they vote, Pastor Rick Warren said, is whether the person is competent to lead.

Warren -- an evangelical, the founding pastor of the Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, Calif., and author of the best-selling book *The Purpose Driven Life* -- had been asked at a University of Notre Dame panel if he thought it was fair to consider the faith of a person running for president.

Concerns about the intersection of religion and politics occupied Warren and four other American religious leaders in a panel Sept. 4 at the first forum in a yearlong series at Notre Dame titled "A More Perfect Union: The Future of America's Democracy."

Also addressing the Notre Dame crowd were the Rev. Richard Cizik of The New Evangelical Partnership for the Common Good; Catholic Archbishop Joseph E. Kurtz of Louisville, Ky.; Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; and Rabbi David Saperstein, director of Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism.

It was the Mormon spokesman who received the first question: "What should your fellow Americans know about the LDS (Mormon) faith and its teachings about political involvement?"

Oaks, a lawyer and a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, understood why Americans were suddenly curious about a religious group that numbers no more than 6 million in the U.S. The recent nomination of Mormon Mitt Romney as the Republican candidate for president has ushered in a so-called "Mormon moment."

"Our church tries to stay away from political activity," Oaks said, adding that this is Mormon policy in all 150 nations with a Mormon presence. Within the U.S. Mormon membership, he said, there are Democrats, like Sen. Harry Reid of Nevada, and Republicans, like former Gov. Romney. The elder made it clear the Mormon leadership remains neutral with respect to individual candidates, political parties and platforms.

"We don't advise our members how to vote," he said.

Kurtz said the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops also doesn't endorse candidates or coerce voters to vote certain ways. Instead, during election cycles, the bishops urge Catholics to inform their consciences in the light of church teaching. An excellent tool, he said, is the conference's 35-page booklet, "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship."

The church is about "lifelong formation of conscience," Kurtz said. But the church doesn't hesitate to say certain moral issues have more weight than others. "So the Catholic church will say that the taking of innocent life, as in abortion, will always be morally wrong."

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"I represent the National Reform Jewish Movement," said Saperstein, an attorney and congressional lobbyist. He said the worldwide Jewish population is about 15 million, with 6 million Jews in Israel and 6 million in the United States. "We have a long tradition of speaking out," he said of the American Jewish

community.

He acknowledged that Jews -- like Mormons, Catholics and Protestants -- also look to their own rich religious tradition in the process of conscience formation. But, he added, there is also a high value placed on the individual Jew's right to draw from education and experience as he or she makes moral choices.



Saperstein said he'd been bothered to hear that some American

Catholics were denied the Eucharist because of political positions or votes. He was also "very heartened," he quickly added, that Pope Benedict disavowed the practice unless the individual's vote or action supported a great evil. Saperstein spoke extensively about the way Jews in the U.S. cherish separation of church and state in America.

"We do it because we think it's good for religion," he said. "There are those who think that support for the separation of church and state is anti-God and anti-religion. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is the law that has kept government out of religion and has allowed religion to flourish in America in a way that's unmatched anywhere else in the democratic world."

He said Jews, as a small religious minority, are particularly grateful for this freedom. "What an extraordinary thing for us. America has given us more opportunities and freedoms than we've had anywhere else."

Cizik reported that the evangelical contribution to American political discourse has been positive -- but not completely so.

"We have an iron-clad allegiance to one political party, and I bet you can guess which one it is," he said. He also bemoaned the fact that the evangelical movement doesn't have a "common good" philosophy that would sensitize them to the world's growing needs.

Cizik shared the story of his own painful "excommunication" from the National Association of Evangelical leadership after 28 years of involvement. He was asked to resign from the organization after a 2008 radio broadcast on National Public Radio's "Fresh Air" program during which he offered support for same-sex civil unions. He also said to Terry Gross, the program's host, that he'd voted for Barack Obama in the 2008 Virginia primary election.

Cizik said he believes evangelical political participation has often had a divisive effect in American politics. There is too much talk, he said, "about the war on Christians, which is a base appeal to resentment, which results in polarization and contributes to the divide we have today." He formed the New Evangelical Partnership for the Common Good with other evangelical leaders in 2010. This group promotes the search for common ground on issues such as climate change, economic justice and civil liberties.

All panelists agreed that maintaining civility in American political dialogue is extremely important, but becoming more difficult.

"The truth is that our civilization is losing its civility, and the Internet is increasing personal attacks," Warren said. "It's very easy to be blatantly rude behind the safety of the screen."



Warren, who hosted a forum in 2008 at his church for the then-

Republican and Democratic presidential candidates, John McCain and Barack Obama, declined to host this year's candidates, Romney and Obama. Warren cited a lack of civil discourse between the two campaigns.

Warren also said it's crucial for religiously committed Americans to remember that politics has its limitations as a force for change.

"No matter who gets elected, the maximum influence they are going to have is four years, maybe eight," he said. "The church has been around for 2,000 years. If I thought you could change the human heart through politics, I would be a politician. People often ask me, 'Are you left-wing or right-wing?' I say, 'I'm for the whole bird.' "

[Catherine Odell is a freelance writer and editor who lives in South Bend, Ind.]

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