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When does religion matter in a political campaign?

Maureen Fiedler | Oct. 29, 2012 NCR Today

A few years ago, I interviewed an author named Damon Linker. His book *The Religious Test* provides, I believe, helpful guidelines for asking questions about a candidate's religion during a political campaign.

Now, of course, our Constitution says flatly: There is no religious test for public office. Yet ever since Al Smith ran for president in 1928 -- as the first Catholic major party nominee -- and since John F. Kennedy actually won as our first Catholic president, questions about religion have been raised in election forums. This year, Mitt Romney is the first Mormon nominee of a major party.

And interestingly, the contrasting "Catholicisms" of Joe Biden and Paul Ryan have raised a lot of questions for voters.

But how is religion relevant in a political campaign? What religious questions are OK to ask, and which are not? Linker provides a line of demarcation that makes sense (at least to me): It is both relevant and acceptable, he says, to ask candidates questions about their religion when it affects, or might affect, their policy choices and preferences. Religious beliefs and practices that are personal with no wider implications are off-limits.

To get specific about it: We do not need to know if a Jewish candidate keeps kosher or if a Catholic believes in transubstantiation. We do not need to hear evangelical candidates talking about Jesus as their "personal lord and savior," and we don't need weird queries about Mormon underwear.

We do need to know if a candidate's Judaism affects his or her stand on U.S. policy toward Israel, or if a Catholic who is personally anti-abortion would want to make that the law of the land. We do need to know if an evangelical is such a biblical fundamentalist that he or she rejects the theory of evolution and would not want it taught in public schools. And we need to understand if the Mormon belief that Jesus came to America affects his or her views on the U.S. being an "exceptional" nation.

Today, many voters want to know if a candidate's religious views on homosexuality would keep him or her from approving laws that ban discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Again -- fair game.

In other words, if we probe or vilify a candidate's private religious practices as the basis for a voting decision, that's bigotry. If we ask about how their religion as shapes their views or votes on public policy, that's fair game. Makes sense to me.

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