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The proper role of religion in the life of our country

Pat Perriello | Nov. 5, 2012 NCR Today

The United States is today one of the more religious countries in the world. Even recent surveys that show a diminution of religious sentiment do not diminish the religious fervor in this country as compared to other countries, such as those in Europe. Americans have a strong belief in God and a belief that religion should play a major role in their individual lives. But what is the proper positive role for religion in public life? In an interview with *America* [1], Vice President Joe Biden makes a strong case for how his Catholic faith informs his own life in politics.

Biden believes in the goodness of people. He feels if they are given real opportunities, they will want to take responsibility for themselves. He believes government needs to promote policies that will enable those in need to have a real chance to succeed. He does not see government's role as one of prohibiting and punishing certain behaviors, but of promoting the general welfare so all citizens can be free to live in accordance with their own consciences.

The vice president references his Catholic family and his Catholic education as what has formed him into the person he is. President John F. Kennedy inspired him to enter politics, which he saw as a noble profession. Living through the civil rights struggle and following Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. convinced him that through politics, he could change the world for the better.

Catholics of our era did not see the world as an evil and dangerous place to be avoided by the Christian. Instead, someone like Joe Biden believed his vocation was to get involved in the world. He saw an obligation to speak out against injustice. Catholics had a strong sense of idealism and faith in themselves and the future. If as Catholics we thought about sexual issues, it was to worry about our own sins and failings. It was not to think about condemning our neighbor.

Those who seek to return the church to a pre-Vatican II era know little about what the church of the 1950s.was like. We grew up in a very pastoral church. While the rules were clear, they were not rigid, and they were implemented in a common-sense fashion. We were also conscious of growing up in a multicultural society. We understood that we needed to respect the beliefs of others and acknowledge and value individual differences.

There can be no doubt that our religion impacts who we are and what we do. As an elected official, the vice president performs his duties from the perspective of a practicing Catholic. That does not mean he will pursue policies to ensure that all Americans adopt uniform Catholic beliefs. Growing up, we learned we were to lead and teach others through our example. As scripture reminds us, "You will know they are Christians by their love." That represents quite a challenge for all of us. As Biden suggested in his debate with Paul Ryan, imposing one's values on other free people is not part of how religion should impact the public policy forum.

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[1] http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=13646