

The GOP's Unmasked 'Religious' Questions

In the Republican race, the hottest "religious issue" is the Mormonism of Mitt Romney and Jon Huntsman, which many commentators have ruled out of bounds. But there are broader issues of religion and politics that should be part of the presidential debate, says Rev. Howard Bess.

By the Rev. Howard Bess

Listening to the current series of Republican presidential candidate debates, I have wearied hearing about policy prescriptions regarding jobs and economic recovery. Granted those issues are important, but there is a long line of subjects that are waiting in the wings, including many where a candidate's religious principles are central.

Yet, the debate moderators have shied away from these subjects. They also have avoided probing how a candidate's religious views might influence his or her behavior as president. Possibly the people asking the questions are uncomfortable with issues that religion raises or perhaps they are reticent to put the competing candidates' views in a religious context.



However, because of the absence of questions about how a candidate's religion connects to policy, the American public is being poorly served. While the issues of jobs and economics carry religious implications, other issues do so even more. Let's look at the list of neglected topics:

WAR AND PEACE: All religions of which I am aware address the path to peace. Yet, war has never achieved its promised goal of establishing peace. War has only cultivated the seed bed for the next war.

So, I'd like to hear the questions, "What does your religion say about the path to peace? As president, would you pursue the teachings of your religion regarding peace?" I want some answers.

POPULATION CONTROL, BIRTH CONTROL AND ABORTION SERVICES: Hunger and poverty in the world are concentrated where population is expanding by birthrate. The world is speeding toward the limit of the earth's ability to sustain the needs of the population. Yet, some religions are promoting population expansion, not family planning.

So, "How does your religion speak to the coming crisis? Will religion inform your actions regarding these pressures on meeting human needs? Will you act in defiance of your religious teachings if population control is needed to avert mass starvation?" As a voter, I want to know.

FULL RIGHTS FOR GAY, LESBIAN, TRANSGENDERED AND BISEXUAL PERSONS: Major American religions have actively opposed equal rights for gay people. Without religious opposition in America, gay rights likely would have been embraced long ago.

"As U.S. president, would you actively oppose or support gay rights. Would you support equal rights even if that conflicts with the tenets of your religion?" American voters need to know.

PRESERVATION OF THE INTEGRITY OF THE WORLD'S ENVIRONMENT: Some religious leaders have led the way in denying the scientific evidence that our industrialized societies are responsible for degrading the water, the air and the planet's survivability. The stakes are very high for the world's population and there is not much time to lose.

"What is your response when scientific evidence comes in serious conflict with your religion? Would you put your religion or empirical facts first?" American voters have a right to know where religion will take their candidates.

PUBLIC SCHOOL EDUCATION: There has long been tension between public school education and parochial education. One of the byproducts of American religious freedom has been the establishment and maintenance of very large parochial education systems.

Today about one in every five young people receives his or her entire education without ever attending a public school. Yet, whether by intent or not, parochial education in America often has become segregated by race and economics. Public schools are mandated to accept every student. Parochial schools generally do not.

Meanwhile, many religious people and their organizations have not supported the financing of public schools. Thus, adequate support of public schools has become a religious issue in America. So, I'd ask the candidates, "Are you committed to public school education and how do your religious views affect your position?"

PROVISION FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE LESS FORTUNATE: One of the most important issues in Western religions is encapsulated in the question, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Today, the attack on that standard is coming in the form of "entitlement reform," which translates into reducing assistance to the poor, the sick, the old and the vulnerable. This discussion is, in reality, an attack on the ethical standard of responsibility for our neighbor/brother/sister. Affordability is the smoke screen.

The presidential candidates should be asked how their religious views regarding being "my brother's keeper" fit with their policy prescriptions. They should be pinned to the wall on this issue in the context of religion.

The First Amendment prohibits the intrusion of government into the world of religion. But the First Amendment DOES NOT bar religion from being part of the nation's discussions in the public square and from helping to shape government policies in general.

The Rev. Howard Bess is a retired American Baptist minister, who lives in Palmer, Alaska. His email address is hdbss@mtaonline.net.
