

***Audio news conference transcript
VOTING ON FAITH
-- Experts Discuss the Role and Significance of Religion in the
2008 Presidential Election --
October 10, 2007***

Operator: Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for standing by. Welcome to the Faith and Politics Conference Call. During the presentation, all participants will be in a listen-only mode. Afterwards, we will conduct a question and answer session. At that time, if you have a question, please press the "1" followed by the "4" on your telephone. As a reminder, this conference is being recorded.

Your speakers for today, October 10th, 2007 are Diana Eck, Harvard professor and Director of the Pluralism project, Welton Gaddy, President of the Interfaith Alliance and Amy Caiazza, Study Director, Democracy and Society Programs at the Institute for Women's Policy Research.

I would now like to turn the conference over to Diana Eck.

Diana Eck: Good morning. I'm Diana Eck, a professor of Religion at Harvard University and I should tell you I'm actually a specialist in India. But during the last 15 years or so, I've also turned my attention to the United States because of the multitude of immigrants from Asia that are now part of the American fabric who have brought with them their religious beliefs, like the Muslims, Hindus,

Sikhs, Buddhist and others. Both India and the US are complex and multi-religious democracies.

The pluralism project that was mentioned studies this changing religious landscape of the US with an eye to how we the people are doing. And that means as I look at the things that we're talking about today, I'm keeping an eye on how it might look to Americans who are Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists who cherish the freedom of religious faith and practice that is guaranteed by our constitution.

What does this campaign look like to them? I really believe that a society's strength is measured by its treatment of minorities who, to tell you the truth, in this election campaign, are almost invisible.

So how does it sound to hear Senator McCain claim, as he did last week, seemingly without a thought that the Constitution establishes the US as a Christian nation? And indeed the USA today poll found that 55% of Americans actually think the Constitution establishes a Christian nation.

My question would be: do we really need to continue asking candidates about their faith without asking whether they understand the basic principles of the Constitution, the Constitution which does not mention Christianity, and frankly does not mention God? And that is not because they didn't think about it, because they thought about it and we're rejecting the idea of including that language in the Constitution.

So last week all the Democratic candidates were asked to name their favorite Bible verse in a debate at (Dartmouth). And they all responded without batting an eye.

But what if just one of them had said, “Of course as a Christian, I have many favorites, the golden rule for example, but I want to be crystal clear that as a candidate for President of the United States, I know there are people listening to us now who are of many faiths and of none.”

And I'm not running to be President of all America's Christians but to be the protector of America's Constitution which guarantees freedom of faith and conscience to all of us, even those who don't think of themselves as religious. That's what America is about.”

But we do not hear candidates in this campaign speaking that way. They take these questions at face value without so much as saying, “This is a multi-religious nation.” Christians make up an important part of it but we are in the midst of Ramadan now in which the Republic Iftars and breaking of Ramadan fast between Christians and Jews and Muslims is happening all over America. And in which we're looking forward to eat (out iftar) as well.

What if our candidates for President could even signal in their language that this is not a Christian nation by law? I think it would make a huge difference and I'm still sort of waiting for a candidate who has the courage to say the kind of thing that John Kennedy said in Houston in 1960, “It's not what Bible verses I believe in or what kind of church I believe in but what kind of America I believe in.”

So, that's it for me for the time being and I look forward to your questions.

Now I'd like to turn the call over to Welton Gaddy, the President of the Interfaith Alliance who also said at one point, “You know, we're not really electing a Pastor-in-Chief but a Commander-in-Chief.”

Welton it's up to you.

Welton Gaddy: Thanks Diana. You're right. Once again, candidates seeking the Presidency of the United States are wearing religion on their sleeves like campaign pins on the lapels of their clothes. Undiscerning observers well could conclude that the American people are more interested in electing a Pastor-in-Chief than a Commander-in-Chief.

So what's going on here? Why are our presidential candidates pointing to their Christian commitments rather than to their political competence in the most religiously pluralistic nation in the world? It seems to me only one answer makes sense. Because not only strategists think that displaying an affinity for Christianity is a good campaign strategy.

And primary elections could prove close enough that every vote counts. Apparently no candidate wants to risk not being seen as a person devoted to religion as well as an individual dedicated to good government.

In recent days, Barack Obama has sounded precisely like George W. Bush. "God is with us and He wants us to do the right thing," Obama has said. Speaking in an evangelical church in South Carolina last weekend, Obama said, "I am confident that we can create a kingdom right here on earth." "Pray that I can be an instrument of God," Obama has told his supporters.

Well, who has access to that kingdom? And is that kingdom an over way of the United States? If not, who or what territory is left out?

Diana mentioned Senator McCain. Senator John McCain has explained that the Constitution that he would pledge to defend is a Constitution that established the United States of America as a Christian nation.

Given that view, no wonder when talking about his religious identity, McCain told The Associated Press, "The most important thing is that I'm a Christian." Frankly, I think that strategy may be flawed. Religious fundamentalists are loud but they are not that strong in the nation.

Recent polling has showed, interestingly, the two candidates that are considered least religious are the same two candidates leading the race for the Presidential nomination in their respective parties.

This is a teachable moment. May I be bold enough to suggest some lessons to be learned? One, the US Constitution forbids a religious task for public office. The founders of our nation feared democracy becoming a tool in the hands of any religious majority.

Citizens have a right to ask John McCain what his vision of the nation as a Christian nation implies for his attentiveness to the rights of non-Christians in the nation.

Second, a concentration on the religion of the candidates is a distraction from a careful analysis of the candidate's capabilities for leadership and issue positions related to domestic and foreign policy.

What benefit to the nation would it be for us to allot the most religious person running for the White House, though that person may not be the best CEO, for the nation and our best ambassador to the world?

Third, if candidates continue to talk about religion, prospective voters must demand explanations as to precisely how a candidate's faith will impact policy decisions required of the President.

Let me also, as Diana did, refer to John F. Kennedy. Presidential candidate John F. Kennedy has promise that the American people is worthy of emulation. We should ask the candidates the question, "If you're elected President of the United States and you have to make a decision that brings into conflict a conviction of your religion and your pledge to uphold the Constitution, what will you do?"

It's not surprising that religion is a part of the campaign. Religion remains important in this nation at least as a matter for discussion. The prominence of religious rhetoric on the campaign trail is not so much a violation of Church-State separation as it is a diversion from the attention that needs to be pressing issues of the economy, war and peace, the environment and promoting the public's welfare.

It is time for the American electorate to insist on campaign discussions that enable us to discern the person best able to fill the most political office in the world, and to do so with appreciation for religion but with no interest in promoting any one religion over another or religion over non-religion. In other words, a person ready to uphold the Constitution even before his or her election.

And I turn now to Amy Caiazza, Program Director of the Institute of Women's Policy Research. Amy you (face it up).

Amy Caiazza: Thanks Welton.

Women really have the potential to shape the coming election. And I think the question of values, including religion, could be a big part of that. Women are

more religious than men and they are more likely to say that their religion shapes their political views.

That said, I have a huge caveat that I think stems well from what Diana and Welton have just said.

Debate of religion and politics I think often confuses the question of values with the question of religion. Many Americans including women want to know that their candidates are driven by values and by a moral vision for the US.

Often that's described in religious terms because those are the terms that many of us use to talk about our values. But I also think that the concern that's voiced (through polls and surveys that talk about more values) is in many cases much more a cry for inspiration.

And from knowing that we and our political leaders are engaged in a search and a journey to make our country and our life better, to make the world a better place.

Most of us do make decisions in both our public and private lives based on how we perceive that journey. And we want to know that our leaders do the same in a thoughtful way. We do want to know about their values and, in many cases, use religion as short hand for that.

Of course the conversation needs to be deeper than just about religion. Our values can include values that are as diverse as compassion, as freedom, as individual rights - even the desire for power is a value in and of itself.

Those values can be shaped by religion or not. And sometimes it's not clear what those connections are. In that sense, it is important for our politicians to be upfront about what their values are and where they come from.

That may help us see that some of our basic ideas are shaped by religion - Christianity, Islam, whatever it maybe - in ways we that we don't realize and help us examine the appropriateness of that.

But we really can't deny the importance of values. In my own research I've seen women from all walks of life and from all different faiths come together to be socially active and to spark social and political change based on their values.

When you look at some of the hot button issues of the day, from immigration to healthcare, -the most vocal activists are women working in their communities. They're angry about the injustice of our policies and proposed policies. They want to build a more inclusive and mutually supportive society.

Many see those values as linked to their religious traditions, whether it's Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Ba'haism, whatever. We need those kinds of voices in both religion and politics.

Of course, the women this year will be a watershed because of the candidacy of Hillary Clinton. Already, it's clear that women are more likely to support her than men. There's a huge gender gap, and so, women are more inclined towards her.

It's really important to note, that according to research, when women run for office, women as voters are more interested in the election and are more likely to vote.

In many cases, we've seen women voters turn out significantly just because women are running for office. So I wouldn't be surprised if women vote in record numbers in both the upcoming primaries since Hillary Clinton is the Democratic candidate in the 2008 presidential election.

In terms of religion, Clinton has taken on the question of morality and values. She engages issues of religion and values in many of her stump speeches. Like most of the candidates, she often links her values to social justice issues such as poverty and healthcare.

She does have to be extremely careful about this. Yet, it could be groundbreaking in some ways for women. What this means is that she's taking on not only a form of political authority but a form of religious authority - standing up and talking about her own take on religion.

Women, traditionally, have not had religious authority and so, this is a potentially empowering thing that could have a role modeling effect on women.

But I think as both Welton and Diana have pointed out, it's really important that she and other candidates not run rampant over the kind of polls and that we value in this country.

And if she can give us a truly refreshing new model of talking about religion within the political round, so that it's not just a Christian version, it could be also a great contribution to US politics.

I'd also like to note that there hasn't been much of a difference in men and women in the polling on the importance of moral values to politics. In most

cases, women are now pointing to issues like healthcare, the war in Iraq as the top issues that are driving their political opinions. And as opposed to moral values, men have some similar concerns.

Again, now I think it's very difficult for most people to think of morality and values as separate from these. What many women are looking for is the sense that values are part of the conversation about all kinds of political issues including healthcare or terrorism.

It's about knowing that we're trying to create a better country, a beloved community that embraces us all regardless of our gender, race, class and religion. That is what should be the focus of the discussion so that values are not distracting us from issues and competence, as Welton rightly says, but allows us to understand the candidates that we're voting for.

Now we will open up the call for questions.

Operator: Thank you. Ladies and gentlemen, if you would like to register a question, please press the "1" followed by the "4" on your telephone. You will hear a three-tone prompt to acknowledge your request. If your question has been answered and you would like to withdraw your registration, please press the "1" followed by the "3".

If you're using a speaker phone, please lift your handset before entering your request. One moment please for the first question.

Our first question comes from the line of (Thomas Burr), Salt Lake Tribune. Please proceed with your question.

(Thomas Burr): Hi. Thank you for taking the call. I wanted to ask you about Mitt Romney and his Mormon religion. He was on the cover of Newsweek last week and I just want to get your impressions of how he has discussed his religion in the campaign so far and how do you think voters will respond to his religion?

Welton Gaddy: This is Welton Gaddy. I think that Mitt Romney has placed before the nation the demand that we pay attention to the Constitution, especially Article 6 that prohibits a religious test for public office. You know, because of where you sit and write there are a lot of misunderstanding, myths and misperceptions about the Mormon faith.

I have a sense that as the race goes on and particularly if Mitt Romney gets the Republican nomination, that he's going to be forced to do a statement such as John F. Kennedy did in Houston saying precisely what role religion plays in his life and how it would impact his presidency.

(Thomas Burr): Thank you. Anyone else?

Diana Eck: This is Diana Eck. I would also say that I think Mitt Romney's candidacy raises some of the questions of America's relative religious illiteracy in relation to many faiths. That we have more opinions and more stereotypes than we have knowledge.

And I think for that reason we need to take seriously the fact that we have stereotypes about the faiths of some of our candidates and about some of our neighbors.

Operator: Ladies and gentlemen as a reminder, to register for a question, please press the "1", "4".

Our next question comes from the line of Liza Riley Roche from Deseret News. Please proceed with your question.

Liza Riley Roche: Thank you. This is for all the panelists and I'm calling from a newspaper based in Salt Lake City as the previous caller.

I'm curious. You talked about the need to move away from candidates identifying themselves as members of a particular faith and talking more about how their own values were shaped, and what they'll do as president. And yet, at the same time, you've just talked about the need to perhaps explain more carefully what the Mormon faith entails.

How do you reconcile those two viewpoints? Isn't there a danger that the campaign can get bogged down? We've seen in some cases in a debate between one particular branch of Christianity and another over whose faith is more legitimate and who deserves the support of a particular branch of Christianity.

Welton Gaddy: Ah, Liza this is Welton Gaddy. I appreciate you asking the question because it lets me talk a little bit more about that subject.

I don't see the suggestions in conflict because my goal is precisely the achievement of what you just described - that we not make judgments between branches - not only branches of Christianity but judgment about a person's candidacy on the basis of religion alone or lack of religion.

What - the reason that I have suggested the Kennedy's statement maybe necessary for Romney if he stays on the race is because in the - let me just say

before I go on that I actually did not say what was the preface that - the preface that you begin with that Kennedy shouldn't identify themselves as religious.

I'd think that is an appropriate expression of a candidate in a campaign. I mean in a nation that is interested in all facets of a person's life, a candidate should be able to say, "I am a member of the Mormon faith or I'm a member of the First Presbyterian Church or I am a Roman Catholic" - that's the part of identifying who the candidate is.

Where the line gets crossed is when someone says, "You should vote for me because I'm a member of the First Presbyterian Church." Or in Romney's case, someone says, "You should not vote for Mitt Romney because he's a Mormon. And here's what Mormons do or here's what Mormons are about."

I think it's a clearing of the air for him to say, "Look, there are a lot myths about what Mormonism is all about, let me speak to that I'm a Mormon." But the key to Kennedy's statement was not his identification with the Roman Catholic Church.

What he said was "What's important is not how America views me but how I view America." And he said, "I view America as a nation in which the separation of church and state is absolute. And if in the oval office I'm ever presented a challenge in which my personal religious faith conflicts with my duty to uphold this constitution to the United States, I will resign, the Office of President at that time."

So, that's what I'm asking for. I'm not asking to elevate a discussion of Mormonism as a Catholic strength or fault. I'm just saying let's get the facts

out there and then move on beyond a religious task for public office and talk about what the candidate believes about the Constitution.

Liza Riley Roche: Do you think that's possible in this campaign with the first serious Mormon candidate that the electorate at large can learn enough about the faith to move on and stop asking the kinds of questions that are being asked now and move on to this larger issues of values and how the values, rather than particular elements of their particular faith, were applied to their decision making (let's go)?

Diana Eck: Liza, this is Diana. Could I just say, I think the person in the driver seat there is the candidate. And a candidate has to be clear and more nuanced about their voice as a Christian, as a Mormon or Presbyterian, a Muslim, whatever, and their voice as a candidate for public office. And they can say quite clearly, as a Christian, I say (X) or whatever.

But - and the "but" is important as a candidate for public office - this is what I would say. And I think people have to be able to make that transition and recognize that - that those two voices are different voices. And that's not a contradiction but that is an essential aspect of what it means to run for public office.

Welton Gaddy: And Liza, I would add - I agree with Diana wholeheartedly but I would just say to you, yes I do think it is possible for that to happen because I grew up in a part of the country and in a religious tradition that had as many myths and misunderstandings about the policies as I encounter in some places about Mormonism.

And the pressing need is not for a comprehensive understanding of the Mormon faith. The pressing need is for the candidate to say "I'm going to

function as the President of the United States not as a Mormon when I'm in the White House. And you can be sure that I understand the demand of the Constitution that we keep the institutions of church and state separately."

Liza Riley Roche: Uh hmm.

Operator: Ladies and gentlemen, as a reminder to register for a question, please press the "1" followed by the "4" on your telephone.

Our next question comes from the line of Eric Gorski, The Associated Press. Please proceed with your question.

Mr. Gorski your line is open. Please proceed with your question.

Eric Gorski: Oh, sorry about that. This refers to something that Welton Gaddy had to say but any of you can answer. Reverent Gaddy, you highlighted what Senator Obama had to say at church in South Carolina over the weekend, and had likened his language to that of President Bush.

His campaign amongst the Democrats has probably been the most public and robust in terms of talking about faith during state outreach. And if he talks to the campaign, I'll emphasize that they want to talk to people of all faiths and of people of no faith but who want to engage in the conversation about the place of religion in the public square.

So, I'm wondering if you see a disconnect in that stated goal and what he had to say over the weekend and what your general impressions are of how his campaign has framed the question about the role of religion in public life?

Welton Gaddy: I'll answer quickly to that. I've talked too much. Eric, I'm glad to talk with you again.

I think there is somewhat a disconnect there. I would simply say that for a person running for the presidency of the United States, it is important that person know the pluralism and diversity of this nation well enough to stay away from the kind of comment that he made about establishing a kingdom here on Earth and making that statement in an evangelical church in which that terminology has a very specific indisputable definition that is exclusive rather than inclusive.

Eric Gorski: Thank you.

Operator: Our next question comes from the line of Michael Paulson, Boston Globe. Please proceed with your question.

Michael Paulson: Hi. Are you there? Am I on?

Welton Gaddy: Yes, we're here.

Diana Eck: Yes.

Michael Paulson: Hi. I'm just curious because there was a lot of discussion in the last election cycle about how the Republican Party had essentially cornered the discussion of faith in the political arena.

And I wonder what you make of the Democrats' efforts generally to enter that world. They've all hired faith outreach people and they're all using much more explicitly religious language.

And do you think that that is helpful ultimately to the political dialogue in this country or am I hearing from what you're saying that they are just joining the Republican Party in some kind of discussion that is ultimately somehow contrary to the way that our democracy will be functioning?

Welton Gaddy: Personally - this is Welton Gaddy. I don't think it's helpful to religion or democracy. I, as a person who values religion, I resist religion being used as a campaign strategy. If a person wants to acknowledge his or her tradition, fine. But this campaign has too many issues at stake in it for the candidate to spend time talking about what they pray about or what their greatest sin is.

We need to know what they're going to do to revitalize democracy in our nation to defend some of the basic components of the Constitution and to restore our ability as a responsible citizen of the world.

Amy Caiazza: This is Amy. I'd like to add too. I think that part of the issue with how it's been done, how the Democrats have come to embrace religion is that it does not seem to be particularly subtle or nuance on the ways that, particularly Diana and Welton have been talking about.

It seems fairly superficial, very Christian in most cases, often in ways that I don't think even the candidates understand - in terms of the impact of their imagery as Welton just suggested. But more poll and focus-group driven than driven by a sort of deeper analysis of candidates that could reveal something about them.

Diana Eck: I would also add that I think it's quite clear that some of the big values issues that were pertinent in the last couple of elections have really diminished in caliber and size and impact in this election.

The issue of opposition to abortion, opposition to civil marriage for gays, opposition to stem-cell research, these are, according to most of the polls, simply not the core values issues that people are paying attention to.

And so to steer away from that and relate one's faith, if you're going to do it at all, to issues like poverty and global warming and healthcare and war, for example. These are strategies that I think are important -maybe not by wearing your faith on your sleeve but by recognizing that those really are the values issues of this campaign.

Operator: Ladies and gentlemen, as a reminder to register for a question, please press "1" followed by the "4" on your telephone.

At this time, there are no further questions. I would like to thank you all for your participation.

Reporters who want to arrange interviews or receive additional materials should contact Kate Roberts of Douglas Gould & Company at (914)833-7093. Again, that's Kate Roberts of Douglas Gould & Company at (914)833-7093.

This now concludes the Audio News Conference.

END