

Candidates on Religion

A look at the views of the current presidential candidates
and their religious beliefs

Vivienne D'Avalon

In 2006 Barak Obama gave a speech in Washington, DC on “the connection between religion and politics.”¹ He’s the candidate I support, despite some of the things he says in this speech, because I feel he can understand the opposing viewpoint if I can explain it well enough. Hillary Clinton, on the other hand, shows all the hallmarks of a theocrat who may have given George W. his inspiration for the twisted, anti-Constitutional policies of his regime.²

Obama’s main point is his wish to come to some sort of a compromise between believers and non-believers, specifically between Christians and, well – everyone else. He refers specifically for the need for the dialogue on both sides to be “fair-minded,” to quote a letter from one of the Christians who challenged his pro-choice stance.

Obama describes being brought up in a family atmosphere that was not particularly religious, and how he came from that to join the denomination to which he currently belongs. But to truly understand “the mutual suspicion that sometimes exists between religious America and secular America” (Obama), I think we need to take that narrative a step further with a little thought experiment.

Imagine being raised as an atheist, never “believing” in anything supernatural, and being told that people who had faith in such things were superstitious, ignorant, or even crazy. Try not to be judgmental of such a position, or to imagine how bereft your

¹ His “Call to Renewal Keynote Address” given on June 28, 2006 in Washington, DC.

The video is here: <http://www.barackobama.com/issues/faith/>

The text is here:

http://www.barackobama.com/2006/06/28/call_to_renewal_keynote_address.php

² “Clinton has championed federal funding of faith-based social services, which she embraced years before George W. Bush did; Marci Hamilton, author of *God vs. the Gavel*, says that the Clintons' approach to faith-based initiatives ‘set the stage for Bush.’ has also long supported the Defense of Marriage Act, a measure that has become a purity test for any candidate wishing to avoid war with the Christian right.”
[Clinton]

current self would feel without belief – the point is to try and put yourself into the shoes of someone who feels that would be an intellectual advantage, not a handicap, and to look at Americans from this temporary perspective.

Look, with these new eyes, at what religious people believe – particularly American Christians, particularly evangelicals or those who believe in a literal interpretation of the *Bible*³ – a book, in the minds of Atheists, which is no more truth than the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, and yet people firmly believe in this myth, as strongly as the ancient Greeks believed in the physical existence of Zeus and Achilles. More to the point, they feel justified in forcing other people to accept the “fact” that the fictional stories in this book depict reality -- physical, practical, truth, on which we should supposedly base the laws of the land.⁴ "I have opponents in this race who do not want to change the Constitution," Presidential candidate Huckabee said recently,

"But I believe it's a lot easier to change the Constitution than it would be to change the word of the living god. And that's what we need to do -- to amend the Constitution so it's in God's standards rather than try to change God's standards so it lines up with some contemporary view."⁵

This is not some fringe radical. This is a candidate for the Presidency of the United States, who is winning states and delegates in the Republican primaries. Fortunately, Obama does not share this opinion:

³ Since I don't believe religions of “the Book” have any more claim to God with a capital “G” than any pagan tradition, who are typically treated to description of their gods with a little “g,” I will not follow the “accepted convention,” (i.e., the tyranny of the majority), of capitalizing god in reference to Yahweh. And when I refer to the book called “the *Bible*,” I will format it as I would the title of any other published work.

⁴ “I had to take Mr. Keyes seriously, for he claimed to speak for my religion, and my God. He claimed knowledge of certain truths.” [Obama]

⁵ Edwards, David and Muriel Kane. “Huckabee: Amend Constitution to be in 'God's standards.’”
Published: Tuesday January 15, 2008.
http://rawstory.com/news/2007/Huckabee_Amend_Constitution_to_meet_Gods_0115.html

Politics depends on our ability to persuade each other of common aims based on a common reality. It involves the compromise, the art of what's possible. At some fundamental level, religion does not allow for compromise. It's the art of the impossible. If God has spoken, then followers are expected to live up to God's edicts, regardless of the consequences. To base... our policy making on such commitments would be a dangerous thing.

...So the best we can do is act in accordance with those things that we all see, and that we all hear, be it common laws or basic reason. **[Obama]**

On the other hand, he says, “The tensions and the suspicions on each side of the religious divide will have to be squarely addressed. And each side will need to accept some ground rules for collaboration.” **[Obama]**. How, I wonder, does he plan on compromising his own reasonable views to bring them more in line with those of people like Huckabee? I shudder to think.

“Democrats, for the most part, have taken the bait” Obama says.

At best, we may try to avoid the conversation about religious values altogether, fearful of offending anyone and claiming that - regardless of our personal beliefs - constitutional principles tie our hands. At worst, there are some liberals who dismiss religion in the public square as inherently irrational or intolerant, insisting on a caricature of religious Americans that paints them as fanatical, or thinking that the very word "Christian" describes one's political opponents, not people of faith. **[Obama]**

But that is not how such liberals view all Christians, just the extremists -- who, though a minority, do a hell of a lot of damage to our democracy. Extremist Christian fascists, or “Christianists” as I’ve heard them called (to make the correlation to the so-called “Islamofascists,” or Islamists), feel justified in forcing me to bear a child against my will – even if it kills me; they believe that child should be taught in school that the creationist myth is science, and that science is myth; that scientific research on stem cells is rightfully prohibited by law, condemning untold millions to needless suffering; that it

is ok to beat and torture someone for being homosexual, “a lifestyle that the Bible calls an abomination,” according to one of Obama’s detractors **[Obama]**; and all the while they believe they are righteous in doing so, because their god, in that book, is so frequently hateful, vicious, bitter, jealous, and sadistic.⁶ If it’s good enough for god, they seem to think, it’s good enough for them. Is it any wonder that “Conservative leaders ... consistently remind[] evangelical Christians that Democrats disrespect their values and dislike their Church,” or that “the rest of the country [believes] that religious Americans care only about issues like abortion and gay marriage; school prayer and intelligent design”? **[Obama]**

These same people routinely take women’s children away from them on grounds they are unfit mothers because they are lesbians or witches. In other words, custody decisions are being based on whether someone conforms well enough to the Christianist beliefs of the judges.

The status quo in America today is the outcome of an ages-long battle between religious intolerance and free thought. In Europe, during the Inquisition, witches were burned, and atheists were hanged as heretics, from the 11th right into the 19th century. Catholics and Protestants killed each other over whether they possessed a bible written in Latin or English. People in 17th century Salem, Massachusetts, were hanged for supposedly practicing witchcraft, and 21st century Muslims are being imprisoned and tortured on American ground as suspected terrorists. Anyone who believes something other than the official religion of the government, who – let us not forget -- controls the guns, the laws, and the prisons, is risking their livelihood, their children, even their lives.

Mother Jones says of Clinton:

⁶ Just read the *Old Testament*. There are far too many illustrative examples to quote here.

...references to spiritual warfare—prayer as battle against Satan, evil, and sin—might seem like heavy evangelical rhetoric for the senator from New York, but they went over well with the Sojourners audience, as did her call to "inject faith into policy."

...

The spirit, believe theological conservatives, matters more than the flesh.
[Clinton]

That was the argument used during the Inquisition to justify burning heretics at the stake because the “purification” of their soul was considered more important than the life and welfare of their body. This kind of lunacy is what our founding fathers feared. They had first hand knowledge of the dangerous nature of that kind of mob insanity.

How can we speak fairly when we have to worry about being endangered by our fellow citizens as we walk down the street, as transgendered individuals are so often made to feel? How can we be “fair” when we are afraid of losing our jobs, and in consequence, the very roof over our heads, the food on our tables? When our very survival is at stake, and we therefore feel we have to hide our minority religious beliefs?

“Sadly, the year 2007 ended with a maddening reminder that violence is a popular tool of oppression. From the most powerful leaders in the world, to the tyrant next door, those who aim to exploit, control and silence others predictably turn to aggression and brutality.” (Gandy)

Gandy’s point, though made about an assassination in Pakistan, was that we also have abusive personalities here at home, perhaps even living “next door,” who brutalize their fellow Americans. Let us not forget that, in this country, when an Atheist like Madelyn Murray stands up for her Constitutional rights, she gets tormented by her own community and driven out of town. What true Christian honestly believes this is ok? What kind of horrible god do Christianists and other religious fundamentalists believe in to commit such heinous acts? “No matter how religious they may or may not be, people are tired of seeing faith used as a tool of attack” Obama says. Then why isn’t more being

done to prevent it? When abusive behavior is pervasive, it is considered normal and acceptable. That still doesn't make it right.

It doesn't matter what laws protect us if people choose to deliberately break those laws, and worse, know they'll get away with it. New laws are even being written to make it legal to break old laws:

With Santorum, Clinton co-sponsored the Workplace Religious Freedom Act; she didn't back off even after Republican senators such as Pennsylvania's Arlen Specter pulled their names from the bill citing concerns that the measure would protect those refusing to perform key aspects of their jobs—say, pharmacists who won't fill birth control prescriptions, or police officers who won't guard abortion clinics.
[Clinton]

Wiccans' homes are often vandalized, and the perpetrators never caught. Not only is it difficult to solve such crimes, but sometimes local law enforcement in a small community, being from that community, sympathize with the criminals, rather than the victims. They look the other way, or even run interference with more main stream governmental authority, as happened when lynchings were common. Isolation protects such communities from justice; that's why it is so important to turn national attention on someplace like Jena, LA, and let abusive personalities know that people are watching who still believe in the rule of law, in the Constitution, in common decency, and in humane behavior, and will stop them from doing harm.

Right now it is the former, abusive personality type that occupies the White House, and is in charge of this country's weapons, prisons, and laws, which they choose to ignore or to rewrite, including the very Constitution itself. Aggressive proselytizing is ongoing in all branches of the U.S. military; presidential candidate John McCain "went to

the Naval Academy where chapel attendance was mandatory.” [McCain] Chapel, mandatory??? In a United States military academy?!

George W. Bush and his administration are paying lip service to the most violent, evil Old Testament version of Yahweh, on the one hand, while practicing worship of the amoral god, Mammon, on the other, as greed and power become the motivating factors for every official government action. Desire for personal gain has led to mimicry of the most popular god because it’s the most expedient choice,⁷ the most profitable, the most politically powerful – Christianity is the *de facto* official state religion.

“Through all of her years in Washington, Clinton has been an active participant in conservative Bible study and prayer circles that are part of a secretive Capitol Hill group known as the Fellowship. Her collaborations with right-wingers such as Senator Sam Brownback (R-Kan.) and former Senator Rick Santorum (R-Pa.) grow in part from that connection. “A lot of evangelicals would see that as just cynical exploitation,” says the Reverend Rob Schenck, a former leader of the militant anti-abortion group Operation Rescue who now ministers to decision makers in Washington. “I don’t...there is a real good that is infected in people when they are around Jesus talk, and open Bibles, and prayer.”

...

Grace Nelson used to be the organizer of the Florida Governor's Prayer Breakfast, which makes her a piety broker in Florida politics—she would decide who could share the head table with Jeb Bush.... Cells like these, Nelson added, exist in "parliaments all over the world," with all welcome so long as they submit to "the person of Jesus" as the source of their power. [Clinton]

People like this form not just the history of the world’s religions, but of the worlds’ governments.

How could we come to such a pass? How as a people could we allow this to happen and to continue?! Maybe because we are being brainwashed into believing that

⁷ “And if we're going to do that then we first need to understand that Americans are a religious people. 90 percent of us believe in God, 70 percent affiliate themselves with an organized religion, 38 percent call themselves committed Christians, and substantially more people in America believe in angels than they do in evolution.” [Obama]

that's the way it's always been, that we were founded as a Christian nation and that is what make us great? "...[W]hat I am suggesting is this-" Obama says:

secularists are wrong when they ask believers to leave their religion at the door before entering into the public square. Frederick Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, Williams Jennings Bryant, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King - indeed, the majority of great reformers in American history - were not only motivated by faith, but repeatedly used religious language to argue for their cause. So to say that men and women should not inject their "personal morality" into public policy debates is a practical absurdity. Our law is by definition a codification of morality, much of it grounded in the Judeo-Christian tradition. **[Obama]**

John McCain was asked, "A recent poll found that 55 percent of Americans believe the U.S. Constitution establishes a Christian nation. What do you think?" He responded, "I would probably have to say yes, that the Constitution established the United States of America as a Christian nation.... We were founded as a nation on Judeo-Christian principles. There's very little debate about that." **[McCain]** "That's how it works" says Mother Jones of Hillary's prayer group:

The Fellowship isn't out to turn liberals into conservatives; rather, it convinces politicians they can transcend left and right with an ecumenical faith that rises above politics. Only the faith is always evangelical, and the politics always move rightward.

This is in line with the Christian right's long-term strategy. **[Clinton]**

What is the truth? "...[T]he 1796 Treaty of Tripoli... declared in Article XI: 'the government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion.'" (Farrell). Thomas Jefferson, author of our Declaration of Independence, our third President, and a Deist, said "Christianity neither is, nor ever was a part of the common law" (Jefferson letter to Cooper) and "... the day will come when the mystical generation of Jesus, by the supreme being as his father in the womb of a virgin will be

classed with the fable of the generation of Minerva in the brain of Jupiter.” (Jefferson letter to Adams).

I have examined all the known superstitions of the World, and I do not find in our particular superstition of Christianity one redeeming feature. They are all alike, founded on fables and mythology. Millions of innocent men, women and children, since the introduction of Christianity, have been burnt, tortured, fined and imprisoned. What has been the effect of this coercion? To make one half the world fools and the other half hypocrites; to support roguery and error all over the world....

The clergy converted the simple teachings of Jesus into an engine for enslaving mankind ... to filch wealth and power to themselves. [They], in fact, constitute the real Anti-Christ.⁸

Our founding fathers had first hand experience of the atrocities that are committed by governments who pass secular laws based on one brand of religious dogma.

One of the most popular fiction series in the United States, the Left Behind series by Timothy La Hay, depicts all who do not belong to a specific sect of Christianity dying horribly in a divinely sanctioned slaughter. These books spawned a video game in which the player is awarded points for converting Catholics, Jews, Pagans, and Atheists, and, barring conversion, garners points for murdering them, thus doing this supposed god's will. And yet it is the Pagans and Santerians, the Atheists and the Secular Humanists, who are called demonic by such people.

No one can survive the hardships of this world without finding coping mechanisms that keep us from going completely off the deep end, so we can keep on functioning, keep on surviving. Religion is one of those coping mechanisms – each of us finds our own meaning and purpose in life, our own relationship to the reason that we're here, that everything is here. Some find satisfaction of this need in the explanations

⁸ Religion and the Founding Fathers
<http://www.anotherperspective.org/advoc550.html>

provided by science. Others find their solace in Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Paganism, or Islam.

The problem arises when the people who use one survival mechanism feel it necessary, even desirable, even pleasurable, to threaten the survival of others who use different mechanisms, and follow a different path. When the traditions and beliefs that are supposed to offer us solace and a degree of relative sanity become twisted to become psychopathologies, then the rest of us should be afraid -- very afraid -- at the threat such people and such groups represent to the rest of us.

“If the tolerant tolerate the intolerant, then tolerance, and the tolerant, disappear.” We cannot allow this to happen in our nation. Intolerant religious fanaticism is just the kind of darkness that our founding fathers fought against, and tried to inure us against by setting down the rules they did in the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the principle of separation of Church and State. They would be horrified (though probably not surprised) at the Christianist rhetoric that has been coming out of the White House and both parties; they would be horrified that as much as 30% of the staff at the White House are graduates of the Christianist “Colleges” run by Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson. Make no mistake, these people are fascists wearing a Christian mask, and they have been taking over our government year by year.

We have to roll back the damage that has been done. We have to stop allowing religious dogma to influence the laws of the United States government.⁹ We have to put an end to the current state of affairs in which a Mormon Republican and a Democrat with

⁹ “And by the way, we need Christians on Capitol Hill, Jews on Capitol Hill and Muslims on Capitol Hill talking about the estate tax.” [Obama] But not pagans or atheists, or anyone else of a faith not “of the Book?”

an Islamic-sounding name,¹⁰ have to fall over backwards “proving” that they’re “Christian enough” to be elected President and to hold that office.¹¹ What happened to “there shall be no religious test for political office?” Apparently, no one told the voters, or the candidates, for that matter.¹² And those that do know, don’t seem to care. They are so sure they are right, that they believe it is up to them to “save” everyone else by forcing them to tow the line.

This brings me to my second point. Democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific, values. It requires that their proposals be subject to argument, and amenable to reason. I may be opposed to abortion for religious reasons, but if I seek to pass a law banning the practice, I cannot simply point to the teachings of my church or evoke God's will. I have to explain why abortion violates some principle that is accessible to people of all faiths, including those with no faith at all. **[Obama]**

I applaud your effort, Senator Obama, to encourage such people to couch their moral values in secular terms rather than religious ones, so that the rest of us may hear, instead of shutting them out. What I fear is that the end result will simply be for them to hide their religious dogma behind politically correct terminology in an effort to deceive the rest of us as to their motives, and sneak legislation through. Lord knows this is what has been happening all along, they are just getting bolder, more obvious, letting the façade crumble because they feel enough hubris to think they don’t need it any more.

¹⁰ McCain: “But, no, I just have to say in all candor that since this nation was founded primarily on Christian principles.... personally, I prefer someone who I know who has a solid grounding in my faith. But that doesn't mean that I'm sure that someone who is Muslim would not make a good president. I don't say that we would rule out under any circumstances someone of a different faith. I just would--I just feel that that's an important part of our qualifications to lead.” **[McCain]**

¹¹ McCain: “I am a Christian and I attend a Baptist church. ... I have attended the North Phoenix Baptist Church for many years and I am a Christian... I am a practicing Christian.” **[McCain]**

¹² **“Has the candidates’ personal faith become too big an issue in the presidential race?”** McCain: Questions about that are very legitimate.... I think the number one issue people should make [in the] selection of the President of the United States is, “Will this person carry on in the Judeo Christian principled tradition that has made this nation the greatest experiment in the history of mankind?” **[McCain]**

What we have to strive for in this country is sanity -- a realization that those who do not believe as we do have as much right to believe what they believe as we do -- it helps them survive, and no one should take that away from anyone else. But when these belief systems clash, we have to have a sane way of resolving those differences, and the founding fathers, in their wisdom, knew that the only way to do that was to see that dogmatism had no place in the creation or enforcement of legislation and public policy designed to set the rules for everyone, both those who believe (in anything and everything) and those that do not. You yourself said,

I do not believe that religious people have a monopoly on morality[.] I would rather have someone who is grounded in morality and ethics, and who is also secular, affirm their morality and ethics and values without pretending that they're something they're not. They don't need to do that. None of us need to do that. **[Obama]**

We must change the attitude of the one-third of Americans who are authoritarians and think that it is ok for them to bully the rest of us. We must change the attitudes that allow people to believe that it's ok to label someone as being "demon-possessed," of questioning the Christianity of Presidential candidates, to beat a homosexual to death and leave him crucified on a fence because their "god" tells them its laudable. I am heartily encouraged to hear you say:

Solving these problems will require changes in government policy, but it will also require changes in hearts and a change in minds.

I believe in vigorous enforcement of our non-discrimination laws. But I also believe that a transformation of conscience and a genuine commitment to diversity on the part of the nation's CEOs could bring about quicker results than a battalion of lawyers. They have more lawyers than us anyway. **[Obama]**

I couldn't agree more. It is time for the tolerant to stop tolerating the hatred and intolerance that are running rampant through one third of our country, in one of every three people in my community, your community, every community in America.

And it is the responsibly of sane Christians to stand up to such people, so that we Pagans, Atheists, Jews, Muslims and secularists no longer have to stand alone at the dike, using all our fingers and toes trying to block up the leaks and cracks in the wall separating Church and State.¹³ Our country and its people are already up to our waist in fetid water, and the flood is threatening to drown us all.

¹³ For one, they need to understand the critical role that the separation of church and state has played in preserving not only our democracy, but the robustness of our religious practice. Folks tend to forget that during our founding, it wasn't the atheists or the civil libertarians who were the most effective champions of the First Amendment. It was the persecuted minorities, it was Baptists like John Leland who didn't want the established churches to impose their views on folks who were getting happy out in the fields and teaching the scripture to slaves. It was the forbearers of the evangelicals who were the most adamant about not mingling government with religious, because they did not want state-sponsored religion hindering their ability to practice their faith as they understood it. **[Obama]**

Bibliography

Gandy, Kim. "Below the Belt." January 4, 2008.

<http://www.now.org/news/note/010408.html> downloaded 2/9/08

Gilgoff, Dan. "John McCain: Constitution Established a 'Christian Nation.'" Accessed

2/9/08. http://www.beliefnet.com/story/220/story_22001_1.html

Joyce, Kathryn and Jeff Sharlet. "Hillary's Prayer: Hillary Clinton's Religion and Politic"s. September 1, 2007

<http://www.motherjones.com/news/feature/2007/09/hillarys-prayer.html>

Obama, Barak. "Call to Renewal Keynote Address," June 28, 2006. Washington, DC. Accessed 2/8/08.

http://www.barackobama.com/2006/06/28/call_to_renewal_keynote_address.php

Edwards, David and Muriel Kane. "Huckabee: Amend Constitution to be in 'God's standards.'" Published: Tuesday January 15, 2008.

http://rawstory.com/news/2007/Huckabee_Amend_Constitution_to_meet_Gods_0115.html

The Great Pillars of American Liberty, by Steve Farrell 5/11/05

<http://www.radicalacademy.com/studentrefpoliticslibltr23.htm>

Thomas Jefferson, letter to Dr. Thomas Cooper, February 10, 1814. THOMAS JEFFERSON ON CHRISTIANITY & RELIGION, Compiled by Jim Walker.

<http://www.nobeliefs.com/jefferson.htm>

The Letters of Thomas Jefferson: 1743-1826. CALVIN AND COSMOLOGY - To John Adams Monticello, April 11, 1823

<http://odur.let.rug.nl/~usa/P/tj3/writings/brf/jefl271.htm>

NOW President Kim Gandy, January 4, 2008 on the assassination of Bhuto in Pakistan.

<http://www.now.org/news/note/010408.html> downloaded 2/9/08