

## REVEREND PRESIDENT?

A sermon preached by Forrest Church  
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(For an extended version of the second half of this sermon,  
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### READING

For any among you who may be lamenting the seemingly recent interjection of religion and theology into presidential politics, let me offer for your reflection a brief blasts from the pen of H. L. Mencken. In the mid-1920s, during the ramp up for the 1928 presidential election, which pitted, for the first time a Roman Catholic (Al Smith) and a Quaker (Herbert Hoover), with typical insouciance Mencken observed:

“The fact is that the United States, save for a short while in its infancy, while the primal infidels survived, has always diluted democracy with theocracy. Practically all our political campaigns have resolved themselves into witch hunts by the consecrated, and all our wars have been fought to hymn tunes. It remains so today. . . . The event of November 6 will be determined, not on political grounds, nor even on economic grounds, but mainly if not solely on theological grounds.” (H. L. Mencken. Baltimore Evening Sun, Dec. 7, 1925; American Mercury, October 1928)

## SERMON

What struck me about Mitt Romney's well-crafted speech on "Faith in America" this past week is that, barring several small if not insignificant particulars, almost any of our past presidents could have delivered it. That, of course, was the idea, and certainly not a bad one. He sounded the same major chords that presidents of both parties have struck, not only in his paean to religious freedom, but also in his invocation of God and summation of the spirit of American faith, grounded explicitly, if not in the Bible as his words at times may suggest, then certainly in the Declaration of Independence.

"Perhaps the most important question to ask a person of faith who seeks a political office, is this," Romney asks. "[D]oes he share these American values: the equality of human kind, the obligation to serve one another, and a steadfast commitment to liberty? They are not unique to any one denomination. They belong to the great moral inheritance we hold in common. They are the firm ground on which Americans of different faiths meet and stand as a nation, united."

Beyond this eloquent summation of American writ, Romney further vowed to place "no doctrine of any church above the plain duties of the office and the sovereign authority of the law," adding that he would "serve no one religion, no one group, no one cause, and no one interest. A President must serve only the common cause of the people of the United States." In short, Governor Romney did precisely what he had to do, answering many legitimate concerns voters may have had about how his Mormon faith and his American faith might jibe.

If the devil entered this chaste, yet pious address it was in the details. Unitarian layman Theodore Sorenson drafted John Kennedy's famous speech to the Houston Ministers' Association in 1960. This fact may, in part, explain why its tone was much more soothing to my Unitarian ears than Mr. Romney's speech was, but he did touch a number of live wires in the debate over church and state in America today. In so doing, Romney aligned himself with a distinct, often minority, tradition in American politics, one that views the United States as first and foremost a Christian commonwealth, not as a secular republic. John Adams, whom Romney cited with appreciation elsewhere, could indeed have said as Romney did, "Freedom requires religion just as religion requires freedom. . . . Freedom and religion endure together, or perish alone." Yet, given Romney's

definition of religion, which seems to exclude the 20 per cent of the American people unaffiliated with any organized faith, Thomas Jefferson, who cherished universal liberty of conscience, would surely have called foul. When drafting Washington's Farewell Address, Alexander Hamilton tilted on this very point with General Washington, who was more hesitant than Hamilton to lump freedom, morality, and religion together as mutually conditioned concepts. That aside, together with his confession of faith in Jesus Christ and his Lord and Savior, a confession that Washington and Jefferson would have kept to themselves even if they believed it (which they did not), neither iconic figure would have found much, I suspect, to quibble about in the basic thrust of Romney's address.

In perhaps the speech's strongest moment, Romney coupled American religious freedom with the vitality of faith here in the United States, in contrast to Europe, where the churches are empty. Civil religion in America is by definition a lowest common denominator. Governor Romney conceded as much himself, when he deemed it inappropriate for specific theological views to extrude themselves into the larger, by definition ecumenical, political landscape. For the sake of the church not that of the state, he might reflect on this same point further, before urging more infiltration of religious ceremony and symbol into the public square.

Much is being made of comparisons between Romney's address and Kennedy's. Many of these differences, especially Kennedy's unqualified affirmation of church-state separation, can be explained by a difference in the times. In 1960, Evangelical and Mainstream Protestants were alike terrified that the election of a Catholic president would mortgage the White House to the Vatican. Proclaiming that he would separate not only church and state but also religion and politics was music to the clergy's ears.

Governor Romney passed over a second difference between then and now without mention: the growing minority of Americans who consider themselves unchurched and may reasonably feel excluded from what Mr. Romney surely intends as the largest tent imaginable. In the true Madisonian spirit that informed the Constitution and Bill of Rights, freedom of religion guarantees not only freedom for religion but also freedom from religion.

Such concerns aside, especially given Mr. Romney's audience (the Republican presidential primary voter), he did as good a job as perhaps was possible on a difficult subject.

As the commentators parse the impact Romney's Mormon faith may have on his electoral fortunes, a second question of perhaps greater moment in the tortured field of church-state relations remains unasked. Are the

American people actually ready, in fact, should they be ready, to elect an ordained minister of the gospel president of the United States. As if the prospect of electing a Black president or addressing the nation's next chief executive as "Madam President" were insufficiently novel for one quadrennial season, we must also prepare ourselves for the advent of our first reverend president.

Mike Huckabee makes no bones about being a Baptist pastor. His faith is, in fact, his political meal ticket. Before entering politics as Arkansas's lieutenant governor, Huckabee served several congregations and then as president of the Arkansas Baptist Convention. Yet, the one seemingly obvious question that I haven't heard asked this political season, is "What might it mean to elect a man ordained to the service of God to the highest office in the land?" Put another way, if a candidate has been ordained, presumably by God, into a religious office, how appropriate (or practicable) might it be for him to aspire to take a civic oath that almost certainly will prompt, perhaps at a critical moment, a conflict of loyalties? Apart from Pat Robertson's brief run for the presidency, this issue has never arisen before.

The founders did ponder whether clergy should be permitted to run for office. Predictably, they split on the question. Even John Adams, though, confessed his doubts. At the outset of the Revolution, the Rev. John Zubly, a Georgia Presbyterian émigré from Switzerland, was, as Adams wrote to his wife, "the first gentleman of the cloth who has appeared in Congress." He couldn't resist adding, "I cannot but wish he may be the last."

The moralistic Zubly was on a mission. God had called him to Congress to elevate America into a Christian nation. "A republican government," Dr. Zubly avowed, "is little better than [a] government of devils." Civil liberty was worthless as long as the people remained slaves to lust, he irreverently preached into the howling wind of a British military occupation. The good reverend's political service to his country was short lived, however. Zubly's frustration with Congress's impious agenda drove him home first to Georgia and then into the arms of the Tories.

In the early nineteenth century, thirteen states, mostly southern and border states, featured clauses in their Constitutions prohibiting clergy from holding political office. This placed ministers of the gospel in the same select category with convicted felons. Maryland and Tennessee were the last states to drop such restrictions, both in 1978. Maryland acted by popular amendment and Tennessee in response to a decision by the Supreme Court that the Tennessee law violated minister's First Amendment rights.

Especially in the libertarian South, where, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, people held church-state separation sacrosanct, concern for protecting clerical piety was less the driving force behind such legislation than was the long-standing American resistance to clerical interference in government affairs.

New York, by the way, was the only Northeastern state to ban clergy from office. From 1777 to 1846, when the statute was dropped, the New York Constitution read as follows:

Whereas the ministers of the gospel are, by their profession, dedicated to the service of God and the cure of souls, and ought not to be diverted from the great duties of their function; therefore, no minister of the gospel, or priest of any denomination whatsoever shall, at any time hereafter, under any pretence or description whatsoever, be eligible to, or capable of holding, any civil . . . office or place within this State.

Adams was not the only founder to look askance at clerical meddling with government business. George Washington was so opposed to religious lobbying that he cursed church interference in government affairs even when he agreed with those (Quaker abolitionists, for instance) who were trying to reverse national policy. Thomas Jefferson flip-flopped on the subject (another thing that is hardly new to American politics). Near the end of his life, Jefferson declared preachers who dabbled in politics guilty of “a breach of contract,” but at the outset of his presidency, he wrote that at least those ministers who had “absorbed democratic principles” and therefore had “relinquished all pretensions to privilege,” ought to possess the same right to stand for office as lawyers, say, or doctors. In the Virginia Constitution Convention of 1829, delegate James Monroe voted in favor of a motion that “no minister of the Gospel or Priest of any denomination . . . be eligible to either House of the General Assembly,” while James Madison voted “Nay.” The Ayes had it, 81 to 14, a vote expressive of the Southern attitude toward reverend politicians throughout much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The church too has bristled at times when individual clergy have entered into public service. The Rev. Peter Cartwright, the Methodist politico whom Abraham Lincoln defeated for Congress, simultaneously almost lost his standing in the Methodist Church. Neither the Baptists nor the Methodists approved their pastors profaning the clerical office by standing for any other than divine election.

More recently, in 1970 the pope prohibited all Roman Catholic clergymen from elected or appointed state service, exclusive, of course, of the Vatican. Rather than disobey his sacred vows, Congressman Robert Drinan, an anti-war Democrat from Massachusetts and Jesuit priest, who wore his clerical collar on the floor of the House, stepped down from Congress in 1970 at Pope John Paul II's behest. "Why not just ignore the pope?" an aide recalls people asking Representative Drinan at the time. "That," he replied, "would be unthinkable."

I remember bristling at the papal ban, mourning the disappearance of Drinan's eloquent moral witness from the halls of Congress. Today I am more ambivalent. Chief Justice Berger was certainly correct when he ruled that state laws against ministers running for public office capriciously deny this group of citizens their full civil rights. On the other hand, is it really fair to expect a minister of the gospel to take an oath that may bind him to betray his fidelity to a higher law in order to fulfill his civic responsibilities.

Mitt Romney too holds lay office in the Mormon Church as a Bishop, and should perhaps be scrutinized according to the same proviso. Having listened carefully to Mitt Romney, however, I believe that, if elected, his primary loyalties will indeed be, as he says, to the U. S. people, and not dictated by the specifics of his faith. Because he is so beguiling—in some respects at least, the very embodiment of that elusive creature, the compassionate conservative—I should like to feel the same about Governor Huckabee, but his clerical office gives me pause. For one thing, he seems to be brokering his pastorate into a major qualification for the White House. Illustrative of this, the Huckabee campaign trumpets on his web site an AP report from Rock Hill, S. C., "Huckabee ran the Arkansas Baptist State Convention for three years . . . giving him immediate standing in overwhelmingly Christian and increasingly conservative York County."

He is unquestionably a very funny man, even about his faith. "When I first started running for office," Huckabee recounted recently on the stump, "a lady asked me, 'Are you one of those narrow-minded Baptist ministers who think only Baptists will go to heaven?' Actually I'm more narrow than that," he replied. "I don't think all the Baptists are going to make it."

Without being silly about it, this same joke sums up my concern. Speaking to a mega-church in Plano, Texas, Huckabee testified eloquently to his faith. "There's no guarantee that following Jesus means that we're going to be wealthy," Huckabee preached. "His goal is to . . . put in us the character of Christ so that whatever happens in our lives, we're able to reflect the personhood and the very life of the Savior who is in us." Rev. Huckabee, who has won the support of Christian apocalyptic writer, Tim

LaHaye, went on to say, “The only thing in this world that really makes sense is to follow Him. If you lose everything but you still have Jesus, you have what you need to finish at the finish line with success.” To thundering applause, Huckabee closed his sermon by urging the congregation to unite in prayer for the United States of America, which arose, he believes, not as the result of “human wisdom” but as “the result of divine intervention.” “[I]f His people will pray, will turn from their sins, will seek His face, [then] He will answer our prayers.”

These words are fine from the pulpit. To be fair, they would not seem surprising coming from Abraham Lincoln, who more than any other president presided over a Christian republic. But they strike an ominous tone in today’s America, especially given the religious dimension already present in the war against terror, and the tendency for those on the religious right, including Governor Romney, symbolically to disenfranchise those citizens whose lack of religious faith would seem to brand them as something less than American.

One supportive preacher perceives God’s hand behind Huckabee’s rise in the polls. “The Almighty, who chose a Goliath-slayer to reign over Israel years ago, apparently has selected an Arkansan to rule over the United States,” Irving, Texas pastor Larry Huch announced to his flock, with Governor Huckabee beaming by his side. Calling out, “Arise and anoint [David to lead the nation ] for this is the one,” Huch expressed his fervent belief “that Sen. Huckabee is the David that you’ve brought in to be a head over this nation’s house.”

“We do not have the right to move the standards of God to meet cultural norms,” Governor Huckabee believes. “We need to move cultural norms to meet God’s standards.” This conviction strays far from Thomas Jefferson’s sage criterion: “Leave no authority standing not answerable to man.”

However religious our nation may be, is this country truly ready for a president who is only answerable to God. Perhaps Governor Huckabee should begin preparing a speech like the one Governor Romney delivered this week. By so doing, he may well lay the concerns I have shared with you this morning to rest. For the time being, however, we must ponder a new question, unique to this political season. Do we really want a minister of the gospel serving as President of the United States?

Amen. I love you. And may God bless us all.