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## Religion, Rhetoric, and Running for Office: Public Reason on the US Campaign Trail

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# Religion, Rhetoric, and Running for Office

## Public Reason on the US Campaign Trail

*Brian Stiltner and Steven Michels*

It is common, almost expected, for candidates for office in the United States to affirm their religious identity and to employ broad religious themes in support of their political agendas. During a campaign, candidates have to withstand the scrutiny of church leaders, religious organizations, and advocacy groups with religious and moral agendas. And on election day, they have to face an electorate, nearly two-thirds of which claim religion as important in their lives.<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, it is the rare candidate, particularly for the Senate or the presidency, who completely eschews religious language.

Many American politicians, especially those associated with the 'Religious Right', use explicitly Christian language, and a vast majority employ the tropes of America's civil religion, such as 'God bless America'. Democrats who wish to run competitively for national office have found it useful in the past few election cycles to get more comfortable with religion. More prominent Democrats are using religious rhetoric and explicitly Christian language than at any time in recent memory, and the Democratic Party has made a point of recruiting candidates who are culturally moderate-to-conservative and more willing to speak religiously.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Newport, 'Religious Intensity Predicts Support for McCain', Gallup, 8 July 2008, <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/108688/Religious-Intensity-Predicts-Support-McCain.aspx>>.

<sup>2</sup> Amy Sullivan, *The Party Faithful: How and Why the Democrats are Closing the God Gap* (New York: Scribner, 2008).

Some Americans are distinctly uncomfortable with this. In the past few years, books that are highly critical of religion—and not only of the Religious Right—have been best-sellers in the USA. Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris argue that religious belief has no intellectual credibility, and that religion, in Hitchens's words, 'poisons everything'.<sup>3</sup> Other Americans seek to increase the presence of religion in public life; and even though some partisan pastors were a source of embarrassment for candidates running for president in 2008, Americans by and large still expect their politicians to be people of faith. A Pew Forum poll found that 63 per cent of Americans would be *less likely* to vote for a candidate who does not believe in God, while only 4 per cent would prefer that. More specifically, 39 per cent would be more likely to support a Christian candidate.<sup>4</sup> Hence while Americans firmly embrace the 'separation of church and state', they differ about—and are sometimes confused about—the precise nature of it.

In this heady mix of talk about church and state; religion and politics; right, left, and centre; many fear that American public life has become balkanized and that a sense of the common good has been lost. It is a matter for debate, both popular and scholarly, whether this is really true. It is also a matter for debate—and for our investigation in this chapter—whether the use of religious rhetoric and concepts in the context of political campaigning is a benefit or harm to public life.

## 1. PUBLIC REASON AND POLITICAL CAMPAIGNING

Objections to religious rhetoric have been put on the table by advocates of public reason, of whom John Rawls is one. Rawls's political liberalism has generally been taken, by supporters and critics alike, as supporting a sharp separation of political life from particular views of the good, whether religious or not. In Rawls's view, all modern democracies are marked by permanent moral pluralism. Thus, the great political need for these societies is for their members to be able to agree on basic political structures. Citizens can come to such agreement only if certain conditions obtain. Chief among these is the

<sup>3</sup> This phrase is from the subtitle of Hitchens's book *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2007). See also Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006) and Sam Harris, *The End of Faith* (New York: Norton, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> 'Religion in Campaign '08: Clinton and Giuliani Seen as Not Highly Religious; Romney's Religion Raises Concerns', *Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*, 6 September 2007, <<http://pewforum.org/surveys/campaign08/>>, 2.

requirement that each person debate in terms that others can understand. This condition therefore asks that all citizens exercise care to justify their political positions and actions in terms that others can see as rational and reasonable. As Rawls writes: 'The point of the ideal of public reason is that citizens are to conduct their fundamental discussions within the framework of what each regards as a political conception of justice based on values that the others can reasonably be expected to endorse and each is, in good faith, prepared to defend that conception so understood.'<sup>5</sup> Public reason straightforwardly entails that political debate, at least on 'constitutional essentials', avoid any appeal to religious or other comprehensive moral values.<sup>6</sup> Rawls specifically distinguishes three parts of the 'public political forum' to which the idea of public reason applies: judges, elected officials, and 'the discourse of candidates for public office and their campaign managers, especially in their public oratory, party platforms, and political statements'.<sup>7</sup> The ideal 'does not apply to our personal deliberations and reflections about political questions', but it 'does hold for citizens when they engage in political advocacy in the public forum. . . . It holds equally for how citizens are to vote in elections when constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice are at stake'.<sup>8</sup>

Many of Rawls's critics counter that the ideal of public reason and the political principles that support it either unnecessarily or unjustifiably exclude the possibility of religious believers giving expression to their beliefs in the public sphere. For instance, Stephen Carter discerns a general problem when contemporary philosophical liberals propose rules to govern political discourse. These rules 'are constructed in such a way that requires some members of society to remake themselves before they are allowed to press policy arguments. To suppose that this remaking is desirable—to say nothing of its being possible—reinforces the vision of religion as an arbitrary and essentially unimportant factor in the makeup of one's personality'.<sup>9</sup> It has also been charged that many versions of the standard of public reason fail to give room for the constructive and transformative role of religious vision and ethical ideals in political debate.

However, these charges seem overblown: is there anyone actually policing the public square in such a way that some people have not been 'allowed to press policy arguments'? In fact, the public square has been open to any and

<sup>5</sup> John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 226.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 227–30.

<sup>7</sup> John Rawls, 'The Idea of Public Reason Revisited', in id., *Collected Papers*, ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 575.

<sup>8</sup> Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 215.

<sup>9</sup> Steven L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 56.

all voices; and even if the mainstream media filter out third-party candidates and less popular opinions, the rise of the internet has broadened public discussion considerably. It should be remembered that public reason is an ethic of citizenship, as Rawls himself says in his chapter on public reason in *Political Liberalism*: to speak and act on the basis of public reason is a 'duty of civility'.<sup>10</sup> There is no question here of forcing people not to say what they think; yet this aspect of Rawls's argument has not always been given due attention by critics who focus on what the standard of public reason would deem unreasonable and therefore exclude. Comparing many proposals about the nature of public political advocacy, Kent Greenawalt uses the term 'self-restraint' to identify what they have in common: they are all versions of an ethic for citizens in a liberal polity, an ethic that citizens are expected to endorse on their own grounds and according to which they will *voluntarily* forbear from using in political discussion certain personal reasons (religious, moral, or cultural) for positions they hold and advocate.<sup>11</sup>

Critics observe that this is not the way people really think and act. Some liberal theorists, however, seem to want to reach into the conscience of citizens and stipulate (again, as an ideal) that they should be motivated by secular reasons when advocating positions on matters of basic justice. Thus, Robert Audi frames not only a principle of 'secular rationale' but a principle of 'secular motivation': the latter means that 'one has a (prima facie) obligation to abstain from advocacy or support of a law or public policy that restricts human conduct, unless one is sufficiently motivated by (normatively) adequate secular reason'.<sup>12</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff replies that the problem with this account is that 'either the religious person almost automatically has secular reasons along with religious reasons for his political positions, or it is going to be very difficult for him to acquire those reasons'.<sup>13</sup> Wolterstorff means that either people already have a number of motivating reasons for their political positions, not all of them explicitly religious—in which case Audi's principle is redundant—or people would have to be able to articulate rationales in terms of secular (philosophical) theories and be motivated by those rationales, which is far too high a bar to set. Human psychology and the political world simply do not work that way.

<sup>10</sup> Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 217.

<sup>11</sup> Kent Greenawalt, *Private Choices and Public Reasons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>12</sup> Robert Audi and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Square: The Place of Religious Convictions in Political Debate* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), 28–9. This book is a dialogue between the two authors, with two chapters by Wolterstorff and three by Audi.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 163.

Commentators differ on whether Audi's approach is more or less restrictive than Rawls's,<sup>14</sup> but both Audi and Rawls backpedal in subsequent writings as they try to make their accounts of public reason comport with reality. Rawls, for instance, when he revisited the ideal of public reason a few years after first proposing it, specified that citizens could support political policies with language from religious and other reasonable comprehensive doctrines, subject to the proviso that they eventually translate that support into the terms of public reason and political justice.<sup>15</sup> Audi, responding to Wolterstorff's criticism that his principles are too stringent, stressed his low-flying expectation for citizens when they give political reasons in public (that they 'have and be willing to offer at least one secular reason'<sup>16</sup>) and emphasized the practical nature of his approach: 'I take it to be largely a matter of practical wisdom what reasons to bring to public political debate, though I note that using religious reasons may be highly divisive.'<sup>17</sup>

We believe that a practice of public reason as an ethic of citizenship is valuable in a liberal democracy. To give publicly accessible reasons is to show respect for fellow citizens whose fundamental beliefs differ from one's own. To give such reasons in part to make a more effective argument in a pluralistic forum is to be prudent. However, we differ from Rawls and Audi because we do not think that non-public reasons, including ones framed in religious language, can be excised from political debate without loss. As citizens put forward their views concerning public issues, it is less important to fit these views into a terminology that theorists deem reasonable than to make their ideas intelligible to their fellow citizens.<sup>18</sup> When the goal of public discourse is intelligibility, citizens and institutions can draw upon a wide array of strategies for building coalitions and persuading their fellow citizens; such strategies might include employing religious rhetoric. Audi is correct that deciding how to speak and what to say in political debate is a matter of practical wisdom. We propose that a Rawlsian or Audian theory of public reason could be successfully revised to be more open to religious rhetoric by focusing more on virtuous practice than on rules for reason giving and by being more

<sup>14</sup> Phillip L. Quinn, 'Political Liberalisms and their Exclusions of the Religious', in Paul J. Weithman (ed.), *Religion and Contemporary Liberalism* (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 138–61.

<sup>15</sup> Rawls first described the proviso in the introduction to the paperback edition of *Political Liberalism*, and then developed it in 'The Idea of Public Reason Revisited' in *Collected Papers*, 591–4.

<sup>16</sup> Audi and Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Square*, 123.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 135.

<sup>18</sup> On public reason and the duty of intelligibility, see Brian Stiltner, *Religion and the Common Good* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 63–5.

cognizant of the realities of the political process. Whenever we affirm the use of public reason in the rest of the chapter, we are indicating a broader, a more 'inclusive' (to use Rawls's word) use of public reason—one in which religious language might have a helpful place.

Our task in this chapter is not to develop the theory, but to reflect on the demands of practical wisdom through case studies. Theorists should consider *how* citizens, elected officials, and religious leaders actually give reasons, and with what effect. This is what we shall do in the present chapter, focusing especially on campaigning and elections—a topic that has received relatively scant attention in the literature on public reason. Such a focus points to three dimensions of the debate that need more attention. The first is the blending of the 'public political forum' and the 'background civic culture'. Rawls distinguishes these two fora sharply in theory, and presumably also in practice. This distinction is the source of his caveats that his ideal is not so restrictive after all; for it is in the background culture that religious rhetoric may flourish.<sup>19</sup> But critics of Rawlsian public reason see these two fora as mingled throughout public life. There is hardly a place, even the Supreme Court, that is not influenced by all the ideas and values that Americans hold. To focus on campaigning reminds us how mingled these fora are.

Second, the debate over public reason lays bare assumptions about the nature of political discussion. Advocates of public reason seek to rule some kinds of reasons out, and to downplay or marginalize others, for the sake of securing political consensus and legitimacy. Rawls and Audi conceive of political dialogue as a discussion that would lead to an agreement that every citizen could, in principle, join. Critics of public reason see these constraints as either unfair or unrealistic or both. Some would say that political discussion is by its very nature messy and that it is never the case that we have consensus in a large, pluralistic society. As Wolterstorff says, 'We must learn to live with a politics of multiple communities.'<sup>20</sup>

Third, the electoral process draws attention to the significance of a politician's personality, character, and vision. Rawls's ideal of public reason focuses on the rationales for policies that will result from political deliberation. When candidates campaign, however, they are really trying to sell themselves as a complete package to the voters. Voters certainly consider the policies a candidate might advance in office, but they also take into account many other factors, such as a candidate's leadership style, temperament, and moral

<sup>19</sup> In addition to the texts already cited, see Rawls's interview with *Commonweal* magazine (*Collected Papers*, 616–22) in which he denies that his theory of public reason favours secularism or keeps religious arguments out of political debates.

<sup>20</sup> Audi and Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Square*, 109.

character. A large majority of American voters find moral values important, and most mean by this that they are concerned with candidates' characters.<sup>21</sup> Though Rawls would not forbid weighing such considerations, he does not acknowledge enough their powerful role in the political process. Precisely what might seem irrelevant in a discussion of public policy is relevant if the candidate who will advance a policy has to get into office first. The relevance is descriptive: we are not saying that the significance of character means that religious rhetoric *should* be used in campaigning, but it shows why conservatives have often been electorally successful when making overt appeals to religious values and why liberals have started doing the same.

We proceed, then, to some case studies from the US presidential campaign of 2008 with an eye for these characteristics of the electoral process. We will summarize our understanding of how each candidate presented a religious identity in public via rhetoric and action, and how he or she addressed controversial issues having to do with religious values or religious segments of the electorate. What we are seeking in each study is to see whether it makes sense for candidates to practise an explicit standard of self-restraint concerning religion. We will also consider whether discussion of religion benefits or harms the public.

## 2. BARACK OBAMA: RELIGION IN THE SERVICE OF A MORE PERFECT UNION?

To become the first African American candidate to win a major party nomination for president, Barack Obama had to prevail over a rather strong field of Democratic contenders, including the early front-runner Hillary Rodham Clinton. Obama is known for his ability to electrify stadium-sized crowds with his stirring rhetoric. But what are we to make of his religious persona and the language he has used in fashioning his 'new kind of politics'?

From Obama's earliest moments in the national political arena, it was notable that he addressed religion in an explicit manner that has not been common among Democratic candidates for national office, especially non-southerners. In his speech at the Democratic convention, for instance, he put forth the notion that religious faith is not a source of cultural division: 'The pundits . . . like to slice and dice our country into red states and blue states:—

<sup>21</sup> 'The Words, "Moral Values" Mean Very Different Things to the Public and to Pundits', Harris Poll, 9 January 2008, <[http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris\\_poll/index.asp?PID=856](http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris_poll/index.asp?PID=856)>.



red states for Republicans, blue states for Democrats. But I've got news for them, too. We worship an awesome God in the blue states . . . and, yes, we've got some gay friends in the red states.'<sup>22</sup> Here and elsewhere Obama has displayed a clear and consistent refusal to take part in the culture war over 'God, guns, and gays.'<sup>23</sup> But more important has been his recognition that progressives can and should approach matters of faith and morals unapologetically.

This proposition was most forcefully articulated in his address of June 2006 to the 'Call to Renewal' conference sponsored by Sojourners, a politically progressive Christian organization. Obama's campaign website identified this speech as his most important pronouncement on the issue of religion and faith. In it, he spoke in a rather personal tone about his conversion to Christianity: 'It came about as a choice, and not an epiphany. I didn't fall out in church. The questions I had didn't magically disappear. But kneeling beneath that cross on the South Side, I felt that I heard God's spirit beckoning me. I submitted myself to His will, and dedicated myself to discovering His truth.'<sup>24</sup> This is rarefied air for a liberal Democrat. More than just explaining to the public that he is a person of faith, however, Obama has attempted to downplay the uniqueness of his biography: 'The path I travelled has been shared by millions upon millions of Americans—evangelicals, Catholics, Protestants, Jews and Muslims alike; some since birth, others at a turning point in their lives. It is not something they set apart from the rest of their beliefs and values. In fact, it is often what drives them.'

The fundamental problem with liberals and progressives, Obama alleges, is not that they are secularists; they are not in need of a religious awakening. What they need is to stop shying away from using a rhetoric that reflects their values: 'This is why, if we truly hope to speak to people where they're at—to communicate our hopes and values in a way that's relevant to their own—we cannot abandon the field of religious discourse.' Conservatives have cornered the market on values, as it were, not because they are more moral people, but because they are better at presenting their policies in a way that is consistent

<sup>22</sup> Barack Obama, 'Keynote Address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention', 27 July 2004, <[http://www.barackobama.com/2004/07/27/keynote\\_address\\_at\\_the\\_2004\\_de.php](http://www.barackobama.com/2004/07/27/keynote_address_at_the_2004_de.php)>.

<sup>23</sup> This phrase, meant to describe the United States as riven by a culture war over moral values, was often used in journalistic and internet commentary on the 2004 presidential election.

<sup>24</sup> Barack Obama, 'Call to Renewal Keynote Address', 28 June 2006, <[http://www.barackobama.com/2006/06/28/call\\_to\\_renewal\\_keynote\\_address.php](http://www.barackobama.com/2006/06/28/call_to_renewal_keynote_address.php)>. Several quotations from this speech in the remainder of this section will be obvious from the context, so the citation will not be repeated. Many of the concepts and anecdotes from this speech are incorporated in Obama's chapter 'Faith' in his book *The Audacity of Hope* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006), 195–226.

with the religious values and attitudes of the American people. Although he has been challenged for being more style than substance, Obama recognizes that faith is more than words; and he cautions against empty rhetoric. 'I am not suggesting that every progressive suddenly latch on to religious terminology—that can be dangerous,' he said. 'Nothing is more transparent than inauthentic expressions of faith.' For Obama, the liberal 'fear of getting "preachy"' can undermine office-holders' ability to address a whole host of social issues.

'Obama also has some words of advice for the right. 'Now this is going to be difficult for some who believe in the inerrancy of the Bible, as many evangelicals do,' he said. 'But in a pluralistic democracy, we have no choice. . . . To base one's life on such uncompromising commitments may be sublime, but to base our policy making on such commitments would be a dangerous thing.' In this context of ever-increasing religious diversity, separation of church and state remains essential not only to protect individual rights, but also to preserve 'the robustness of our religious practice'.

E. J. Dionne, a commentator on politics and religion for the *Washington Post*, wrote at the time that Obama's speech on faith 'may be the most important pronouncement by a Democrat on faith and politics since John F. Kennedy's Houston speech in 1960 declaring his independence from the Vatican. . . . Obama offers the first faith testimony I have heard from any politician that speaks honestly about the uncertainties of belief.'<sup>25</sup> Obama's reasons for speaking openly about his faith were, of course, twofold. Foremost was his desire to transcend traditional party lines and build a broad-based coalition from the ground up. This is why after securing the Democratic nomination, he proposed to expand President Bush's faith-based initiative programme, which he wanted to rename the 'Council for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships'.<sup>26</sup> This proposal was not particularly well received by the more liberal parts of his base, but since it is completely consistent with what he has been saying for years and with his past work as a community organizer, they should have seen it coming. It is clear that Obama sees churches as essential players in his larger project of bringing people together, and he is more than comfortable speaking their language.

Speaking Americans' language has also had practical value for Obama, for he has had to convince the American electorate that he is a safe choice for president—an act complicated by his unusual background, his relative youth, and what he calls 'a funny name'. Polls taken well into the campaign season

<sup>25</sup> E. J. Dionne, Jr., 'Obama's Eloquent Faith', *Washington Post*, 30 June 2006, A27. See also Stephen Mansfield, *The Faith of Barack Obama* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008).

<sup>26</sup> E. J. Dionne, Jr., 'Obama's Faith-Based Reform', *Washington Post*, 4 July 2008, A17.

found that over a tenth of the population thought that Obama is a Muslim, despite his efforts to introduce and reintroduce himself to voters.<sup>27</sup> It would seem that the average American voter should have known more about him, if for no other reason than that he took a great deal of criticism for his association with the radicalism of the Revd Jeremiah Wright of the Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. In February 2007, video clips from some of Wright's sermons began circulating on the internet and then in mainstream media. The clips highlighted his harsh invectives against powerful structures in the USA—sometimes targeting the Bush administration, the government, the economy, or the social status quo—for purveying such injustices as the Iraq war, racism, and poverty. Those supporting Wright, and those wanting to minimize the public-relations damage to Obama, explained that the clips were taken out of context; that Wright's provocative style of preaching is common in African American churches; and that his bold language stands in the tradition of prophetic criticism of society starting with the biblical prophets.<sup>28</sup> Obama himself made such arguments, notably in a major speech in Philadelphia on 18 March 2008.<sup>29</sup> In this speech, he continued to distance himself from the clips; he affirmed the basic decency of Wright's character despite his flaws; and he explained that he and his family remained at Trinity because a church is much more than its pastor. He tried to leverage the embarrassing incident into an opportunity for the country to talk about race relations frankly in its quest to become 'a more perfect union'. Many pundits thought that Obama had effectively laid the controversy to rest with this speech, but it flared up again when Wright spouted his radical ideas at the National Press Club and after a visiting Catholic priest preached outrageously against Hillary Clinton from Trinity's pulpit. These incidents led Obama to terminate his membership of the church. This episode hurt Obama's reputation with some of the electorate and helped feed some voters' opinions that he is too liberal or that he secretly harbours racial resentment against white Americans.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> For example, a June 2008 survey found that 12% of those polled thought Obama was Muslim; 25% did not know what his religion was, and 1% ventured that he was Jewish ('Voter Attitudes Survey', Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, June 2008, <<http://people.pew.org/reports/questionnaires/436.pdf>>, 80).

<sup>28</sup> The commentary on the Wright controversy is enormous. For a representative argument that Obama's association with Trinity reflects badly on Obama, see Cinque Henderson, 'Maybe We Can't: The Black Case for Obama-Skepticism', *New Republic*, 28 May 2008, 16–18. For a representative argument of the opposite view, see E. J. Dionne, Jr., 'Full Faith: Despite Jeremiah Wright, Obama Gets Religion', *New Republic*, 9 April 2008, 23–4.

<sup>29</sup> Barack Obama, 'A More Perfect Union', 18 March 2008, <[www.barackobama.com/2008/03/18/remarks\\_of\\_senator\\_barack\\_obama\\_53.php](http://www.barackobama.com/2008/03/18/remarks_of_senator_barack_obama_53.php)>.

<sup>30</sup> Susan Page, 'Poll: Flap over Pastor Hurts Obama', *USA Today*, 6 May 2008, <[http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/election2008/2008-05-04-obama\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/election2008/2008-05-04-obama_N.htm)>.

That was unfortunate for Obama, and not only because he wanted to win the election. Many times over he asserted his desire to move beyond the stale divisions of the past, and he organized his campaign at the 'grass roots' to reflect that view. Beyond his campaign strategy his very strategy for government depends in part on his ability to foster a constructive public conversation. For this reason, when it comes to religion, Obama articulates principles for productive dialogue. In the 'Call to Renewal' speech, he said: '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.' This might seem to be a recommendation for self-restraint, but it is basically the same as Rawls's proviso, with three substantive differences. First, his principle of public reason comes in the context of a much more positive exposition of religion's public role. Second, he acknowledges that the regnant concept of public reason has at times been presented as a rebuff to believers, a view more akin to Steven Carter than to John Rawls. Finally, Obama concludes with an appeal for 'a sense of proportion' that applies to religious believers and secularists alike: For religious believers, this means accepting that some of their culturally specific beliefs have to be accommodated to modern life, or at least cannot be legislated onto a hostile majority.

Obama spends much of his 'Call to Renewal' speech laying out principles for the healthy role of religion in American public life. One major thrust of his address hits the key themes of the recent progressive-religious agenda: progressives should address matters of faith and morals, religion should not be used as a political wedge, and religion is an inspiration for action on behalf of social justice. As a political progressive who is a person of faith, and who values the role of churches in community organizing and social reform, Obama thinks it a mistake to leave the field of values discourse to the Religious Right. His proposal about the role of religion in public life satisfies the intelligibility requirements of public reason, and it would substantially broaden the nature of political discourse by having progressives act and speak more explicitly from a foundation of faith. His overall approach to religion in public life no doubt played a role in his victory; he was helped, for instance, by mobilizing religious progressives and winning over some religious moderates. His philosophy of community organizing seems already to be influencing his mode of governing; it will be interesting to see if his philosophy of religious activism does so as well.

### 3. HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON: THE VALUE OF A QUIET FAITH?

Hillary Rodham Clinton was narrowly defeated by Obama in her campaign for the Democratic nomination for president in 2008. Despite being a well-known public figure, as First Lady during the 1990s and senator from New York since 2001, Clinton found it necessary during the spirited and drawn-out primary campaign to reintroduce herself to the voters—to recount her biography and to stress her personal qualities. All candidates have to do this, but in Clinton's case the need was more to undo the negative opinions that some people had formed of her during her long time in the public eye. She also was facing two main contenders (Obama and John Edwards) with strong personal charisma. Given that her campaigning strategy chiefly involved showing a strong personality and a concern for ordinary Americans, one might have expected to see Clinton refer to her Christian faith as a strong component of her character.

And so she did, but not as often or as overtly as Obama or most of the Republicans. Clinton is a lifelong member of the United Methodist Church. The biography on her campaign website gives the following account.

Faith was central to her family. Her mother taught Sunday school, and Hillary was a regular in her church youth group. She was deeply influenced by her youth minister who taught her about 'faith in action'. There were trips to the inner city, babysitting for the children of migrant farm workers, and an extraordinary night when Hillary was fourteen and her youth group went to hear a speech by Martin Luther King Jr.<sup>31</sup>

This is the only mention of her faith on the website. Unlike Obama, she chose not to list 'faith' as a topic under the 'biography' or 'issues' sections of her website. Nor did she make accessible any speeches on the topics of faith and religion. For instance, like Obama, Clinton gave a speech at the 2006 'Call to Renewal' conference. Her speech was covered in the news at the time, but it was not published on either her campaign or Senate website. In her speech, she mentioned the biographical points from her website and spoke to issues of poverty, housing, and hunger. She obliquely chastised political leaders who

<sup>31</sup> Hillary Clinton website, <<http://www.hillaryclinton.com/about/growingup/>>, accessed 13 July 2008. Clinton's memoir *Living History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003) expands on this background at 21–3.

lecture about moral values yet fail to help those in need with concrete policies, such as raising the minimum wage.<sup>32</sup>

Another notable instance of her speaking about faith was a year later in a televised forum in June 2007 sponsored by CNN and Sojourners. Clinton was asked about her personal faith, what she prays for, and how she had dealt with Bill Clinton's infidelity. She was also asked about her vote for the Iraq war, about abortion, and about individualism. In response to the moderator's comment that there are not many speeches or interviews in which she talks about her faith, Clinton said, 'I take my faith very seriously and very personally. And I come from a tradition that is perhaps a little too suspicious of people who wear their faith on their sleeves.'<sup>33</sup> This last line, which garnered applause from the sympathetic audience, was a way for Clinton to explain her reserve when talking about her personal faith as well as to criticize the hypocrisy of the Religious Right. Clinton said that faith was always a crucial support to her during difficult moments, such as the time when her husband's infidelity with Monica Lewinsky was revealed. Clinton said she relied on her 'extended faith family, people whom I knew who were literally praying for me in prayer chains, who were prayer warriors for me, and people whom I didn't know' who were doing the same.<sup>34</sup> Faith gave her 'the courage and the strength to do what I thought was right, regardless of what the world thought'.

The public seemed to agree with Clinton's self-assessment of her religious privacy: a September 2007 poll by the Pew Forum found that respondents judged her to be the least religious of the Democratic candidates. For those offering an opinion about how religious the various candidates are, only 16 per cent saw Clinton as 'very religious' and 53 per cent saw her as 'somewhat religious'. These results were akin to the two lowest scorers among the Republicans (Rudy Giuliani was seen as 'very religious' by 14 per cent and Fred Thompson by 16 per cent), but Clinton's being seen as 'not very' or 'not

<sup>32</sup> Mark Preston, 'Hillary Clinton Talks Religion', CNN, 29 June 2006, <<http://edition.cnn.com/2006/POLITICS/06/29/mg.thy/>>.

<sup>33</sup> 'Democrats at the Sojourners Forum', *New York Times*, 4 June 2007, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/04/us/politics/04text-dems.html>>. The remaining quotations in this paragraph are from the same source.

<sup>34</sup> Clinton's mention of 'extended faith family', 'prayer chains', and 'prayer warriors' suggested her connection to a 'publicity-shy network of mostly evangelical elites in government, military, and business known to the world as The Fellowship—and to its adherents as The Family'. According to Jeff Sharlet, The Family's philosophy is that God anoints key elites to carry out his plans for the benefit of the masses. 'It's a trickle-down religion, classical political paternalism' and 'a faith in things-as-they-are'. It would take us too far afield to explore this little-reported connection of Clinton's, but Sharlet's report strikes us as consistent with Clinton's political attitudes. See Jeff Sharlet, 'Family Ties', *New Republic*, 28 May 2008, 18–19, and *The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).

at all religious' by 31 per cent of respondents was the highest mark for any of the seven Democratic and Republican candidates named.<sup>35</sup> This is not to say that Clinton faced special trouble on this account. Nine in ten Democrats saw her as very or somewhat religious, and respondents who see a candidate as religious tend to have a positive view of the candidate.<sup>36</sup> In addition, Democrats and independents were less concerned that a president has a strong religious faith than were Republicans (26 per cent and 23 per cent against 44 per cent, respectively).<sup>37</sup> Thus, there is no evidence that Clinton was disadvantaged among primary voters because of her comparatively quieter religiosity.

Indeed, religion did not become a problem for Clinton during the campaign, for at least two reasons. First, Obama's controversies around religion drew attention away from Clinton on the issue. Second, the main problem posed to Clinton by religion would have been during the general election campaign, namely, the possible reluctance of evangelicals and Catholics to vote for her. Some of their distaste would have been personal: she retained high negative popularity ratings going all the way back to 1992. Some of Clinton's policy positions—particularly being staunchly pro-choice on abortion—would have driven away conservative and some moderate voters in the general election; yet that is a position that all the Democratic candidates held and it would have driven away the same voters from all of them. Clinton did not have a religion problem in the primary season, but she would have probably had the same type of religion problem that has faced most Democratic presidential candidates since 1980: the activism of conservative churches and religious movements and the voting fluctuations of the 'Reagan Democrats'.

So it seems that Clinton's restraint in speaking about her religious views was largely personal. Given Americans' expectations of political religiosity and the attempt of the Democratic party to be more comfortable with religion, perhaps Clinton might have been forcing herself to be more overt than she wanted to be; yet this does not mean that she presented a false persona, only that she tried to show in public a side of herself that takes religion 'very seriously and very personally'. Presumably, she shared just as much of her personal religious beliefs as she thought was true to herself and relevant to voters. She communicated that she is a religious person, whose faith informs her sense of social justice while guiding and sustaining her, especially during the difficult times in her public life. Furthermore, Clinton spoke about faith in a way that suggested she honoured this important facet of

<sup>35</sup> 'Religion in Campaign '08', 2.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 6.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* 4.

most Americans' lives. At the same time, she did not take any risks. Her use of religious rhetoric was mainly a testimony to her character. She did not stake out new territory in the public discussion of religion and politics, nor did she map out a specific role for religious voters and groups in public life.

#### 4. JOHN MCCAIN: CAN THE 'STRAIGHT-TALKER' SURVIVE THE REPUBLICAN BASE?

John McCain, a Republican senator from Arizona since 1986, ran unsuccessfully for president in 2000 and secured the Republican nomination in 2008. He was raised an Episcopalian, but for the fifteen years prior to the 2008 election campaign he had attended a Southern Baptist megachurch in Phoenix. His pastor, Dan Yeary, was described in a news profile as 'a folksy patriotic Southern Baptist who opposes abortion and believes homosexuality to be a biblical sin, but says Christians have an obligation to love such sinners'.<sup>38</sup> Yeary and his church are thus squarely in the mainstream of Christian evangelicalism, which itself is right in the mainstream of contemporary Republican politics.

Yet unlike many Republicans running for president in recent years, McCain was not one to broadcast his faith. Many news articles noted McCain's reticence about religion. 'He has not been baptized and rarely talks of his faith in anything but the broadest terms or as it relates to how it enabled him to survive five-and-a-half years in captivity as a prisoner-of-war. In this way, McCain, 71, is a throwback to an earlier generation, when such personal matters were kept personal. To talk of Jesus Christ in the comfortable, matter-of-fact fashion of the past two baby-boom-era presidents would be unthinkable'.<sup>39</sup> One moment in the campaign when McCain revealed a bit of himself was an interview on the website Beliefnet. When the questions turned to his personal faith, McCain said, 'I pray every day. I ask for guidance. I ask for strength. I don't ask for personal success. I think it's wrong. . . . So, it's a very important part of my life. But, I cannot tell you that I've ever had a revelation from God—it's been kind of plotting [*sic*]. I pray, I receive comfort, I think I receive guidance, I know I receive guidance and I pray and it's, you know, it's-

<sup>38</sup> Ed Stoddard, 'McCain's Pastor a Sharp Contrast to Obama's', Reuters, 22 March 2008, <<http://www.reuters.com/article/politicsNews/idUSN2043191420080322>>.

<sup>39</sup> Jonathan Martin, 'McCain Shies Away from Religion Talk', *Politico*, 3 April 2008, <<http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0408/9361.html>>.



not a spectacular kind of thing.’<sup>40</sup> This sounds a note similar to Hillary Clinton: faith is important to me, and I do not make a big deal of it. The symbolism of ‘faith’ that links patriotism and religious belief is central to McCain’s self-understanding. He entitled his war memoir *Faith of My Fathers*,<sup>41</sup> and in the Beliefnet interview he spoke eloquently of his service as informal chaplain among his fellow POWs in Vietnam: ‘I would like to tell you that I was selected to be room chaplain because I had an abundance of religiosity. . . . I think that there were better men than I, better Christians than I in that room. But I loved it. . . . When I was in prison, I told my fellow prisoners, don’t pray to go home. Pray to go home with honor, if it be God’s will, not just under any circumstances.’

During his quest for the nomination in 2000, McCain garnered a reputation as a maverick and ‘straight-talker’. On several issues—including maintaining troops in Iraq, campaign finance reform, and immigration policy—McCain was unambiguous and unaffected by the opposition to his sometimes minority opinions, even when it came from his fellow Republicans. For this reason, McCain enjoyed a strong appeal with moderate Republicans and independents in both the 2000 and 2008 campaigns. In the 2000 campaign, his direct approach also applied to his rhetoric on religion. He famously called Religious Right leaders Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson ‘agents of intolerance’ for criticizing him so strongly.<sup>42</sup> It was McCain’s ambiguous position on various cultural issues, but especially the legal status of abortion, that provoked their ire. Early in the primary campaign, McCain told the *San Francisco Chronicle*, ‘I’d love to see a point where it [*Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 Supreme Court case legalizing most abortions] is irrelevant, and could be repealed because abortion is no longer necessary. But certainly in the short term, or even the long term, I would not support repeal of *Roe vs. Wade*, which would then force X number of women in America to [undergo] illegal and dangerous operations.’<sup>43</sup> In response to outcries from conservatives, McCain’s campaign released statements explaining that he did indeed seek the reversal of *Roe*; but the damage was done already among many Religious Right leaders and anti-abortion activists. Even McCain’s supporters found his statements

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Dan Gilgoff, ‘John McCain: Constitution Established a “Christian Nation”’, Beliefnet, September 2007, <[http://www.beliefnet.com/story/220/story\\_22001\\_1.html](http://www.beliefnet.com/story/220/story_22001_1.html)>. Several quotations from this interview in the remainder of this section will be obvious from the context, so the citation will not be repeated.

<sup>41</sup> John McCain with Mark Salter, *Faith of My Fathers* (New York: Random House, 1999).

<sup>42</sup> McCain used the phrase in a speech on the eve of the Virginia Republican primary, in response to a Robertson’s organized campaign of anti-McCain telephone calls to voters. See ‘Sen. John McCain Attacks Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, Republican Establishment as Harming GOP Ideals’, CNN, 29 February 2000, <<http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0002/28/se.01.html>>.

<sup>43</sup> Terry M. Neal, ‘McCain Softens Abortion Stand’, *Washington Post*, 24 August 1999, A4.

perplexing. Cyndi Mosteller, an anti-abortion activist and consultant for McCain, was at pains to defend him: 'I think the comments are somewhat confusing, and I think Senator McCain regrets them also.'<sup>44</sup>

For the 2008 contest, McCain made a more concerted effort to appeal to the Republican base. For example, he refashioned his earlier comments to emphasize a desire to see *Roe* overturned, to the point of supporting a constitutional amendment making abortion illegal except in cases of rape, incest, or to protect the life of the mother.<sup>45</sup> He repeatedly promised to appoint conservative judges to the courts. He appeared on a platform with, and accepted the endorsement of, Pastor John Hagee, an influential but venomous 'televangelist'. Liberals hoped this story would generate as much controversy for McCain as the Revd Wright did for Obama, but that did not turn out to be the case.<sup>46</sup> In the Beliefnet interview, McCain said that the Constitution set up a 'Christian nation' and expressed his preference that a president be Christian. Evangelical leaders nonetheless remained wary of McCain. Richard Land, a leader in the Southern Baptist Convention, said in early 2007, 'The problem with McCain, and I don't know how he fixes it, is that he's so unpredictable. What makes him appealing to independents makes him worrisome to social conservatives. . . . People don't like unpredictability in their candidates.'<sup>47</sup> One way that McCain partly fixed the problem was by being the last Republican standing from the primary season. That reality may have begun to thaw the Religious Right's icy relationship with him in the summer of 2008, but how far this went is uncertain: evangelical leaders started to come around to supporting McCain, even as many evangelical voters in key swing states remained unconvinced.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, even as McCain's selection of Alaska governor Sarah Palin for his running mate thrilled social conservatives, it weakened his support among Democrats.<sup>49</sup>

McCain might well feel that he has not got due credit for trying to put together a package of religion and politics that was both nuanced and tolerant. He did not have Obama's felicity of speaking about Christianity

<sup>44</sup> Neal, 'McCain Softens Abortion Stand'.

<sup>45</sup> Jim Davenport, 'McCain: Legalized Abortion Should Be Overturned', *Associated Press*, 19 February 2007.

<sup>46</sup> Glenn Greenwald, 'The McCain/Hagee Story Picks Up Steam', *Salon.com*, 29 February 2008, <<http://www.salon.com/opinion/greenwald/2008/02/29/hagee/#>>.

<sup>47</sup> Karen Tumulty, 'How the Right Went Wrong', *Time*, 26 March 2007, 32.

<sup>48</sup> Ed Stoddard, 'Baptists Reluctantly Embrace "Liberal" McCain', *Reuters*, 10 June 2008, <<http://www.reuters.com/article/vcCandidateFeed4/idUSN0935340120080610>>; Mike Glover, 'McCain Hasn't Ignited the Passions of Evangelicals', *My Way News*, 17 July 2008, <<http://apnews.myway.com/article/20080717/D91VMU7O0.html>>.

<sup>49</sup> Martha T. Moore, 'Poll: Huge Effect of Palin Pick Cuts Both Ways', *USA Today*, 11 September 2008, <[http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/election2008/2008-09-11-veep\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/election2008/2008-09-11-veep_N.htm)>.

active in society in a way that would not worry members of minority religions. Nor did he try to articulate a comprehensive philosophy of religion's role in public life, and so he lacked a blueprint to fall back on. His instincts seemed generous and broad-minded, but he allowed the tropes of the Religious Right to garble his language and perhaps cloud his vision. For instance, in the Beliefnet interview, he was asked what he thought about a recent poll finding that 55 per cent of Americans believe the US Constitution establishes a Christian nation. He responded:

I would probably have to say, yes, that the Constitution established the United States of America as a Christian nation. But I say that in the broadest sense. The lady that holds her lamp beside the golden door doesn't say, 'I only welcome Christians.' We welcome the poor, the tired, the huddled masses. But when they come here they know that they are in a nation founded on Christian principles.

This statement about the Constitution establishing a Christian nation became Beliefnet's headline for the interview, and prompted critical reactions from Jewish and Muslim groups.<sup>50</sup> This was only just, for McCain's claim is historically wrong and it is troubling for a contemporary political leader to hold such a model of the church-state relationship. Charitably read, however, the rest of the quotation suggests, first, that he was responding off the top of his head without thinking carefully and, second, that he actually wanted to identify the inspiration behind America's civic culture. His model was different from Obama's, who did not privilege Christianity in the civic culture, but McCain probably wanted to make a similar move to Obama: to use religion-laced language to inspire citizens to civic commitment.

An interesting, specific attempt McCain made in this regard was when he told voters in Michigan that 'we are Judeo-Christian nation'. Taken out of context, the statement sounds like a wink to the Religious Right. Given a little context—that the speech was given at a Christian high school—the quotation sounds even more suspect. Its meaning, however, was that Judaeo-Christian values require Americans to care for the less fortunate, even illegal immigrants. 'There are situations where we have to look at this issue [immigration] from a humane and compassionate fashion. We are a Judeo-Christian valued nation. These are God's children. But also, our first priority has to be our nation's security and that will be my first and foremost priority.'<sup>51</sup> While it is

<sup>50</sup> 'Groups Criticize McCain for Calling US "Christian Nation"; CNN, 1 October 2007, <<http://www.cnn.com/2007/POLITICS/10/01/mccain.christian.nation/index.html>>.

<sup>51</sup> Rick Pearson, 'McCain in Michigan: "We are Judeo-Christian" Nation', The Swamp (Baltimore Sun's political blog), 14 January 2008, <[http://weblogs.baltimoresun.com/news/politics/blog/2008/01/mccain\\_in\\_michigan\\_we\\_are\\_jude.html](http://weblogs.baltimoresun.com/news/politics/blog/2008/01/mccain_in_michigan_we_are_jude.html)>.

troubling that McCain did not acknowledge that the American 'we' includes non-Christians; it is refreshing that he challenged the crowd to support a policy that they were uncomfortable supporting (such as a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants), and for moral reasons lodged in their own religious tradition. It is refreshing when Republicans start leveraging their religious rhetoric to nudge their base into facing up to issues other than 'guns and gays'. A similar approach was made by two of the minor Republican candidates, Mike Huckabee and Sam Brownback. Such developments on the political right complemented developments on the political left, for example, as when Democrats described abortion as a moral issue and recognized the potential of faith-based initiatives.

McCain, however, remained throughout his campaign an imperfect vehicle for a rejuvenated conversation on the right. Although he came around to stating a firm position on abortion, he fell into the parallel trap that Obama identified: he gave the typically conservative answer to cultural questions. When McCain challenged the intolerance of Religious Right leaders in 2000 and reached for some moral nuance on abortion in 1999, he was provocative even if not entirely consistent. When he talked about Reinhold Niebuhr in the *Beliefnet* interview, he revealed a sensitivity about the uncertainties of religious belief (as Dionné claims Obama does). McCain's problem, however, was that he was not a Democrat. His inability to speak to the religious base of his party in 2000 quite possibly cost him the nomination, and his reluctant and awkward attempts to correct this oversight in 2008 created an additional barrier to the presidency. After the election, Republicans began debating whether they had underemphasized or overemphasized cultural and religious issues. The question is far from simple and so the debate must be a searching and nuanced one. It is clear, at a minimum, that it would be a mistake for Republicans to seek a solution to their electoral woes in candidates who are inept at conveying a political vision that appeals broadly to the diverse American populace.

## 5. MITT ROMNEY: BREAKING THE MORMON BARRIER?

Regarding public reason and the religiosity of political candidates, one of the more interesting figures is Mitt Romney, a businessman and one-term Republican governor of Massachusetts. Romney, a Mormon, did not exactly

catch fire with primary voters, despite an atypical absence of a viable and official religious conservative candidate. A CBS poll taken during the nomination fight concluded that Romney's religion was an issue with voters. To the question 'Do you think that most people would vote for a presidential candidate who is a Mormon, or would not?', 53 per cent answered in the negative. Unfortunately for Romney, the number was almost as high among Republican voters (51 per cent).<sup>52</sup> Although there are roughly three million Mormons living in the United States, being Mormon appears to be a barrier to those seeking national office.

Romney and his advisers seemed to agree. 'I'm not running for pastor-in-chief', Romney proclaimed in February 2007 on ABC's *This Week with George Stephanopoulos*.<sup>53</sup> More telling, perhaps, is that Romney's religious affiliation was not listed on his campaign website. Nor does he mention that he was a former bishop or that he did two and a half years of missionary work on behalf of his church. The closest he came was listing his degree from Brigham Young University, which does not necessarily mean that he is Mormon: Romney's Mormonism was also markedly absent from his announcement speech, which he gave in Dearborn, Michigan—the state of his birth, where his father, George W. Romney, was a three-term governor—in February 2007. 'I believe in God and I believe that every person in this great country, and every person on this grand planet, is a child of God,' Romney said. 'We are all sisters and brothers.'<sup>54</sup> He used a similar line that Sunday in his interview with Stephanopoulos: 'That fundamental belief that we are all brothers and sisters has an enormous impact, I think, on a lot of what we do. But the particular doctrines of a church I don't think are a major part in a political sense.'<sup>55</sup> Romney used overtly Christian language, without naming his particular variant of it.

The questions about his Mormonism eventually became so serious that he attempted to resolve the issue with a substantial speech in December 2007. Even though he dismissed the comparison to Kennedy's 1960 speech on his Catholicism, Romney invoked the former president: 'Almost 50 years ago another candidate from Massachusetts explained that he was an American running for president, not a Catholic running for president. Like him, I am an American running for president. I do not define my candidacy by my religion.

<sup>52</sup> *New York Times*/CBS News Poll, 7–11 March 2007, 32, <[http://graphics.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/national/20070313\\_pollresults.pdf](http://graphics.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/national/20070313_pollresults.pdf)>.

<sup>53</sup> 'Mitt Romney: The Complete Interview', transcript of interview with George Stephanopoulos, ABC News, 18 February 2007, <<http://abcnews.go.com/ThisWeek/Politics/Story?id=2885156&page=1>>.

<sup>54</sup> 'Romney Opens Bid for White House', BBC News, 13 February 2007, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/6358325.stm>>.

<sup>55</sup> 'Mitt Romney: The Complete Interview'.

A person should not be elected because of his faith nor should he be rejected because of his faith.<sup>56</sup> More important, perhaps, was his nod to the separation of church and state and the notion that Christians worship the same God—one who prefers liberal democracy: 'I will take care to separate the affairs of government from any religion, but I will not separate us from "the God who gave us liberty"'.

Echoing Alexis de Tocqueville, Romney credited the lack of an established religion and the tradition of religious tolerance for the strong religious sentiment among Americans: 'I've visited many of the magnificent cathedrals in Europe. They are so inspired . . . so grand . . . so empty. . . . And though you will find many people of strong faith there, the churches themselves seem to be withering away.'<sup>57</sup> On the surface, the speech was a reminder of how church and state can and should remain separate, and how religion should remain relevant in American social life. But the speech was also a cautionary tale for conservatives: If we are not careful, we could become as amoral or nihilistic as the Europeans.

Romney, however, like McCain, gave religious Republicans reasons to be suspicious. While clearly a man of faith, he was also a man who conveniently set his faith aside when he needed to. Romney's public stances on important moral positions, especially abortion, changed—or 'evolved and deepened', as he wrote in a *Boston Globe* editorial in July 2005.<sup>58</sup> 'I am pro-life,' he said. 'I believe that abortion is the wrong choice except in cases of incest, rape, and to save the life of the mother. I wish the people of America agreed, and that the laws of our nation could reflect that view.' In an interesting qualification, Romney was careful not to push his personal beliefs too far into the public square. 'But while the nation remains so divided over abortion, I believe that the states, through the democratic process, should determine their own abortion laws and not have them dictated by judicial mandate.' In other words, he would like to see *Roe v. Wade* overturned. This was far removed from his position during his failed 1994 bid to become senator in Massachusetts; then Romney openly supported *Roe*, stating in a debate, 'abortion should be safe and legal in this country.'<sup>59</sup> Similarly, during the 2002 governor's race, Romney met with the Log Cabin Republicans (a pro-gay

<sup>56</sup> Mitt Romney, 'Faith in America', speech at the George Bush Presidential Library, 6 December 2007, <[http://www.mittromney.com/Faith\\_In\\_America](http://www.mittromney.com/Faith_In_America)>. Several quotations from this speech in the remainder of this section will be obvious from the context, so the citation will not be repeated.

<sup>57</sup> Romney, 'Faith in America'. The ellipses are his pauses for dramatic effect.

<sup>58</sup> Mitt Romney, 'Why I Vetoed Contraception Bill', *Boston Globe*, 26 July 2005, A17.

<sup>59</sup> Dan Balz and Shailagh Murray, 'Mass. Governor's Rightward Shift Raises Questions', *Washington Post*, 21 December 2006, A1.

rights organization within the party) and later wrote them a letter which said, 'We must make equality for gays and lesbians a mainstream concern.'<sup>60</sup> However, in his presidential run, he no longer supported open homosexuals in the military and did not back a federal law prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation.

While polls indicated that Romney's Mormon identity was a problem especially for evangelical voters, the difficulty he had in the primaries was most likely exaggerated by his own rapid political transmutations. In the span of a few short years; he gave voters from all sides legitimate reasons to reject him. Romney was eventually able to speak the language of public reason and religious pluralism, but it was more to explain himself than to embrace others.

## 6. PUBLIC REASON IN THE LIGHT OF THE CASE STUDIES

To talk about religion and public reason can generate heated arguments. Those who feel strongly about the issue and who are advocates for either a secular or a religious public square see little but surreptitious motives on the other side, and they can find sufficient news stories of partisan excess by the other side to justify their suspicions. The polls of American citizens cited in this chapter, and the rhetoric of major-party candidates for president in our case studies, point toward an interpretation between these extremes: Americans want religion in their public square, but in a way that is tolerant of religious diversity. For instance, very few Americans would make a specific religious identity an absolute qualification that a candidate would have to have to get their vote.<sup>61</sup>

By the same token, the four candidates we have examined all indicated that 'faith' is important to them personally and all made attempts to win certain blocs of religious voters. Indeed, the irony of the changing nature of the political culture in the United States is that the Democrats nominated a man of overt faith, who laces his speeches with the civil-religious tropes of Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King and who would expand President Bush's faith-based initiatives, while the Republicans nominated a man who

<sup>60</sup> Adam Nagourney and David D. Kirkpatrick, 'Romney's Mixed Views on Gay Rights and Marriage Rile Conservatives', *New York Times*, 9 December 2006, A11.

<sup>61</sup> Fox News/Opinion Dynamics Poll, 15 November 2007, 11, <<http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,311839,00.html>>.

is quite private about his religious beliefs, has little feel for the language and style of evangelicals, and whose political priorities are not those of religious activists.

Our case studies have certainly shown that the 'public political forum' and the 'background civic culture' are blended. Rawls himself suggested the same as he continued to revise his concept of public reason. In both 'The Idea of Public Reason Revisited' and a late interview with *Commonweal*, he invoked Tocqueville's view that the purpose of the separation of church and state was just as much about the protection of religion as it was about protecting the state. Tocqueville 'travelled around this country and talked to a lot of Catholic priests, who were then very much in the minority. When he asked them why they thought religion was so free and flourishing in this country, they told him because of the separation of church and state.'<sup>62</sup> The case studies suggest that Rawls's Tocquevillian instincts were right, and that a positive appreciation of the religious aspects of the background culture should continue to feature in any theory of public reason.

Closely related to this point is the second feature of the debate over public reason: assumptions about the nature of political discussion. Here we side against the Rawlsian and Audian models of political dialogue in their quest for a set of principles that would ensure that everyone can join a common political conversation. Political discussion in a liberal democracy is pluralist, cacophonous, and fluid—it is so in practice and it should be so in principle. A focus on campaigning suggests that it is good to let a thousand flowers bloom when it comes to political rhetoric: an open dialogue assists voters in making fully informed decisions and it often generates new ideas and energies for political action.<sup>63</sup>

The third feature of the electoral process is the significance of a politician's personality, character, and vision. Voters want—and have a right to expect—integrity of candidates for office. The expected norms for political speech should not force candidates to pretend to be what they are not—which suggests that voters, political elites, religious leaders, and the media also have a role in ensuring the integrity of public discourse. Our case studies revealed that candidates' use of religious rhetoric is geared heavily toward making a demonstration of their character and vision and

<sup>62</sup> Rawls, *Collected Papers*, 621.

<sup>63</sup> Eric Gregory invokes the 'thousand flowers' phrase as well (p. 199) in a fascinating article about Rawls's undergraduate thesis on the topic of Protestant theology ('Before the Original Position: The Neo-Orthodox Theology of the Young John Rawls', *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 35/2 (2007), 179–206). Gregory summarizes several of the problems with the ideal of public reason, but also finds Rawls's project to be more theologically astute and morally grounded than some of his critics have allowed.



very little toward making policy arguments. During the primary campaigns, the standard points of controversy in the 'culture wars' got little attention from either party. Economic issues, the war in Iraq, and character qualities mattered more to voters—even in Republican primaries. This suggests that it simply is not necessary for a stringent version of public reason to be asserted as a prior principle, when candidates and voters are evidently able to communicate with more or less civility through the campaigning and voting process.

When it is interpreted in an overly stringent and negative fashion, the ideal of public reason can mislead us. A stringent standard of public reason suggests that the topic of abortion is too personal and too often governed by religious and metaphysical views to count as a legitimate topic for political debate—other than to establish the freedom to procure abortion. Both Obama and Clinton said, in the context of discussing matters of faith and religion, that abortion is a moral issue and one that concerns many citizens.<sup>64</sup> Both candidates, while maintaining their pro-choice positions, said that it would be important as president to work with abortion opponents on the common goal of reducing the incidence of abortion. By describing the public's views more accurately, Obama and Clinton expressed a normative approach to public reason that was more moderate: They recognized that though some citizens are opponents of abortion on religious, metaphysical, or other personal grounds, these reasons do not disbar their positions from consideration in the political debate. Oddly, it seems that some Republican candidates had a harder time getting their bearings straight: assuming that Republican primary voters wanted them to exhibit 'values' on abortion and gay marriage, McCain and Romney shifted from their past positions. The connection to character and values is that, on these two moral issues, the candidates suffered for seeming opportunistic.

To discuss religious and moral values presents candidates with more opportunities to misstep; for instance, to reveal a contradiction between their personal belief or practice and their politics. The role of religion presents risks, perhaps especially for Republicans, of alienating religious voters, who are highly motivated and can hold grudges at the voting booth—or stay away on election day. The role of religion presents risks for candidates, perhaps especially for Democrats, to look opportunistic when talking about their faith. But to ignore religious and moral values in political rhetoric is impossible, at least in the United States. So the question has been and remains: how to talk about religion helpfully in the political arena?

<sup>64</sup> Obama discussed abortion in his 'Call to Renewal' speech and in his chapter 'Faith' in *The Audacity of Hope*, while Clinton discussed it at the Sojourners forum.

## 7. CONCLUSION: 'A SENSE OF PROPORTION'

Although religious talk can present risks of alienation and opportunism, a good way to avoid those problems is the voting booth. Voters have tended to reject extremism, and so candidates are already motivated to practise the self-restraint that a principle of public reason would recommend. It seems clear that voters know insincerity when they hear it. In the long run, they are likely to find more fault with candidates who seem to be trying to tell people what they think people want to hear than what they really believe. This does not mean that the beliefs of rank-and-file voters always have a healthy effect on politics. The parochial religious views of a significant segment of the American populace no doubt created additional obstacles for candidates Romney and Obama, and it will still be some time before an atheist could have a prayer, as it were, of winning the presidency.

Yet, on balance, our case studies suggest that candidates' religious ideals, rationales, and motivations should be out in public view, if they think them relevant. It is plausible that these views, when expressed, provide relevant information about candidates' characters and their understanding of what is most important in public life. In addition, voters are going to make determinations about these matters whether the candidates talk about them or not. That being the case, candidates would do well to acknowledge and talk about their religious views in order to save themselves from being misunderstood.

Even with Democrats making an attempt to connect to religious voters, it is hard to claim that the 2008 presidential campaign was saturated with religious rhetoric. Candidates practise self-restraint for any number of reasons, including the fact that they are aware of the diversity of the electorate. The four candidates we studied did not violate the basic requirements of Rawlsian public reason in their use of religious language. If anything, Republican candidates found reason to be circumspect in their usage because much of the public had wearied of excessive religiosity. On the Democratic side, Obama argued for the expansion of religious language in public, and then made use of that space. So public reason was being used by candidates on the presidential campaign trail—but in a way that included a modest amount of religious rhetoric. This inclusive way of practising public reason has been a hallmark of American political culture. The way should be kept open for candidates and citizens to use religious language if they feel it is important to do so, assuming they also accept their civil duty to make their views intelligible to others in the public forum.

A helpful way to think about the principle of public reason is that it can be oriented negatively or positively: it can prescribe what people should not do, and it can prescribe what they should do. The negative prescription is that citizens restrain themselves from offering religious (and other culturally and personally specific) reasons for their political views. The positive one is that citizens should be willing to make their personal views intelligible to their fellow citizens in a spirit of humility and solidarity, so that the political common good is advanced. A principle of public reason works best when its positive aspect is accentuated. We believe that such a principle is necessary in a liberal democracy, although it can certainly be misunderstood as a rigid principle and a high bar for allowable rhetoric. If all parties to public debates were to approach their task with 'a sense of proportion', as Obama recommends, those debates would generate more light and less heat. Such an attitude would benefit Americans in their ongoing task of working out forms of cooperation—and, if necessary, compromise—between their politics and the religious cultures that motivate many citizens to care about the common good.