

God, Politics, and Politicians

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How are we to think about the religious commitments of political candidates? Are their actual beliefs off-limits in terms of public policy?

That is the conventional wisdom among many in the media and the political class. As these opinion-shapers see it, religion is a privatized affair with no obvious policy impact. In other words, we should not expect that a politician's religious commitments will actually mean anything when it comes to their policies and their conduct in office.

The presidential candidacy of John F. Kennedy raised all of these issues in 1960 and, according to the prevailing political wisdom, we are to see his approach in the campaign as the appropriate model. Kennedy knew that his Catholicism was an issue and the 'Catholic question' was a constant distraction for the campaign. In order to neutralize the issue, Kennedy gave an [address](#) to a group of Baptist pastors in Houston and pledged that his Catholicism would not drive his presidential decision-making. Kennedy's narrow win seemed to validate his approach in many eyes.

Similarly, former New York Governor Mario Cuomo presented a [major speech](#) at the University of Notre Dame in 1984, making essentially the same argument with regard to the issue of abortion. Cuomo, a Roman Catholic, claimed to be personally opposed to abortion but politically obligated to support a woman's "choice" to abort her unborn child — something his church teaches is nothing less than murder.

That approach is an insult to both religious conviction and intellectual honesty. One cannot honestly believe that abortion is murder and that an option for murder should be legally protected.

Michael Kinsley obviously agrees. In his [commentary](#) published in this week's edition of *TIME* magazine, Kinsley argues that candidates owe voters a more honest and coherent account of their faith than has yet been forthcoming. Kinsley is a well-known commentator, journalist, and political pundit. His article seems to be prompted by the candidacy of former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, a Mormon, but his point applies to all candidates.

In Kinsley's words:

Mitt Romney wants the J.F.K. deal with voters: If you don't hold my religion against me, I won't impose my religion on you. But that deal made little sense in 1960 and makes no sense today. Kennedy said, "I believe in a President whose religious views are his own private affair." But the Roman Catholic Church holds that abortion is the deliberate killing of a human being. Catholic liberal politicians since Mario Cuomo have said they personally accept the doctrine of their church but nevertheless believe in a woman's right to choose. This is silly. There is no right to choose murder. Either these politicians are lying to their church, or they are lying to us.

As Kinsley argues, presidential candidates commonly speak of the importance of their faith and beliefs. In his words, they "are required to wear religion on their sleeves." As Kinsley explains:

God is a personal adviser and inspiration to all of them. They all pray relentlessly. Or so they say. If that's not true, I want to know it. And if it is true, I want to know more about it. I want to know what God is telling them—just as I would want to know what Karl Rove was telling them if they claimed him for an adviser. If religion is central to their lives and moral systems, then it cannot be the candidates' "own private affair." To evaluate them, we need to know in some detail

the doctrines of their faith and the extent to which they accept these doctrines. "Worry about whether I'm going to reform health care, not whether I'm going to hell" is not sufficient.

At the very least, Christians should certainly understand that Christian beliefs are never, as Kinsley observes, "our own private affair." Christianity makes a claim upon every area and dimension of life — discipleship cannot be relegated to a privatized compartment.

Kinsley is a defender of liberal principles, and it becomes clear that the beliefs he fears are those that might lead to policies restricting personal behaviors. "Most important, we need to know what forms of conduct a candidate's religion forbids or requires and how the candidate interprets that injunction," he argues. "Is it a universal moral imperative or just a personal lifestyle choice? Every religion has its list of no-nos."

But Kinsley doesn't stop there. Consider this fascinating paragraph:

Some church doctrines give offense even though they don't constrain an outsider's behavior in any way. They can imply a more general worldview, and voters have a right to know if a presidential candidate shares that perspective. Until recently, just about all religions had a built-in patriarchal worldview—God the Father, male priests and so on—that many today find offensive. To what extent has the candidate's church moved with the times, and what has the candidate done to push his or her church in the right direction? I say the right direction, but many voters, of course, believe that this kind of modernization is the wrong direction. They also are entitled to know where the candidate stands and to vote on that basis.

With these words, Kinsley launches into dangerous territory. He is no longer talking about how religious conviction might influence public policy, he is talking about the beliefs that govern the church's internal life.

It is important that Christians look carefully at Michael Kinsley's argument. Some United States senators have begun grilling presidential nominees on matters internal to their churches. Are Orthodox Jews, Roman Catholics, and many conservative evangelicals now to be excluded from public office, just because these three groups limit the rabbinate/priesthood/pastorate to men?

Kinsley is right to argue that the privatized argument of Kennedy and Cuomo will not stand close scrutiny. He is also right to call for candidates to share how they struggle with these questions. He needs to struggle a bit more himself, and think carefully about the distinction between doctrines that relate directly to public policy and those that do not.

