

The pious primary is underway

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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Mark Silk [notes](#) an interesting moment at the Republican presidential debate Monday night in New Hampshire: Rick Santorum's take on religion in public life sounds an awful lot like the one then-Senator Obama [articulated in 2006](#) (free registration required). [Here](#)'s Santorum:

I'm some[one] who believes that you approach issues using faith and reason. And if your faith is pure and your reason is right, they'll end up in the same place.

I think the key to the success of this country, how we all live together, because we are a very diverse country--Madison called it the perfect remedy--which was to allow everybody, people of faith and no faith, to come in and make their claims in the public square, to be heard, have those arguments, and not to say because you're not a person of faith, you need to stay out, because you have strong faith convictions, your opinion is invalid. Just the opposite--we get along because we know that we--all of our ideas are allowed in and tolerated. That's what makes America work.

A good reminder that the standard media shorthand on Santorum--hardcore conservative-Christian type--is too simplistic. But Tim Pawlenty, who is understood to be challenging Mitt Romney for the role of "broadly and blandly appealing candidate," stepped up and ably delivered the crazy:

The protections between the separation of church and state were designed to protect people of faith from government, not government from people of faith. This is a country that in our founding documents says we're a nation that's founded under God, and the privileges and blessings that we have are from our creator.

They're not from our member of Congress. They're not from our county commissioner.

It's a tired old argument, though it's notable that Pawlenty uncritically employs the phrase "separation of church and state." In its classic form, the argument includes the point that this phrase--and, by extension, the interpretation of the establishment clause that it represents--doesn't appear in the Constitution. Instead, Pawlenty argues that "separation" somehow separates A from B but not B from A. Yet the fact that he speaks in short and grammatically clear sentences makes him sound like the reasonable adult in the room.

Campaign season has barely begun, and I'm already weary of it.

Elsewhere, Paul Waldman offers a [smart take](#) on the politics of religiosity in a presidential candidate:

Because politics is so much about identity and affinity, the candidates send signals to convince voters that they are part of a shared community. When candidates talk about feeling God's nudge in their decision-making, they are speaking to those who think the same way in their own lives. That comment about [Michelle] Bachmann -

"She comes from us, not to us," the "us" in question being core evangelicals - highlights the accompanying quandary. A candidate who excels at the politics of identity, making base voters believe she's "one of us," may be simultaneously telling general election voters that she's "one of them."

This is a problem for both Democrats and Republicans running for president, but it is particularly difficult for Republicans, since their party remains defiantly white and Christian in a country that grows increasingly diverse, both racially and religiously, with each passing year. It isn't that most Democrats don't also affiliate with Christian denominations (they do), but the Democratic coalition also includes almost all of America's Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and the non-religious.