In campaign, Bush moderates faith stance: Points to religious freedom

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Even as the Democratic presidential candidate takes care not to wear religion on his sleeve, so too has President Bush struck moderate notes in speaking before the wider public.

At least in town hall–style visits from Florida to Oregon in mid-August, the incumbent Republican—well known for his evangelical Christian views—tried to deflect questions that invited him to give his testimony of faith.

Typical of Bush's answers, reported the *Los Angeles Times*, was his response to a Beaverton, Oregon, woman who asked the president to take a moment "right now" to pray for Oregon, which is reputed to be one of the most unchurched states.

Responding only "I appreciate that," Bush went on—to the questioner's apparent surprise—to offer a defense of church-state separation: "I think the thing about our country that you must understand is that one of the most valuable aspects of America is that people can choose church or not church, and they're equally American. That is a vital part of our society."

Likewise, in Niceville, Florida, Bush evaded with a joke the comment of a 60-year-old man who said to him, "This is the very first time that I have felt that God was in the White House."

After thanking the man, Bush switched the subject to his brother, the Florida governor: "Let me ask you a question: Do you like Jeb? Jeb plants [this supporter] right here on the front row." Asked by another person in the audience if he was a Christian, Bush said yes, then added: "You have a right in this country to worship freely. . . . You are equally American if you're a Christian, Jew, Muslim or Hindu."

In an interview on CNN's *Larry King Live* August 12, Bush defended his positions on embryonic stem cell research and same-sex marriage, but he also touched upon the importance of a multifaith nation and church-state boundaries. King noted that

Democratic rival John Kerry, a Catholic, received applause at his party's convention when he said that he doesn't "wear my own faith on my sleeve."

Asking if his faith affects his conduct in office, Bush said in part, "I make decisions on what I think is best for the country, but my faith is important to me. A lot of times my faith comes up because I thank people for their prayers—and I mean people from all religions."

With pollsters saying that many voters have already made up their mind on the presidential race, the "undecided" segment, especially self-styled independents, is often seen as crucial.

According to researchers at City University of New York, if the Bush and Kerry campaigns want to woo that segment of potential voters, they should avoid openly religious appeals.

Ariela Keysar and Barry Kosmin, authors of the 2001 American Religious Identification Survey, said independent voters are "unlikely to be won over in large numbers by messages with strong religious elements" because they are the most secular voters. The survey data from 2001 show that 24 percent of independent voters consider themselves secular in some fashion, compared to 19 percent of Democrats and 11 percent of Republicans.

Their socioeconomic profile indicates that "independents are likely to be found in the middle ground on most economic and political issues, but not on faith issues," they reported in August. People with a "religious" outlook tend to be Republican across denominations, and those who are "somewhat religious" tend to be Democrats.

When Bush deflects leading public questions on his conservative religious beliefs, one religious-political analyst says, he is rightly remembering that many voters are turned off by religious matters.

Doug Wead, who was a campaign liaison to evangelicals for the first President Bush, told the *Los Angeles Times* that the younger Bush is not hurting himself by evading invitations to proclaim his faith boldly. "He's got their votes," said Wead. "That woman [in Beaverton] is not going to go out and vote for John Kerry because the president didn't pray with her."

Evangelicals, said Wead, already know that their beliefs are not popular everywhere and, like Bush, have learned to choose words carefully so as not to offend the views

of others.