

Democratic rivals at ease with faith talk: The forum on faith and politics

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The stereotypes seem etched in stone, as definitive as the Decalogue: Democratic politicians are hostile to faith; they believe that church and state should remain forever separate; they're uncomfortable in front of evangelicals.

The three leading Democratic presidential candidates used a prime-time televised forum on faith and politics June 4 to chisel away at those stereotypes and to give Americans a glimpse of their soulful side.

Hosted by Sojourners/Call to Renewal, a Washington-based network of centrist evangelical social-justice advocates, the forum provided an opportunity for senators Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York and Barack Obama of Illinois and former North Carolina senator John Edwards to answer questions on poverty, prayer and policy.

"It was pretty incredible to sit and watch that happen and to think about how far the Democratic Party has come," said Eric Sapp, a political consultant. Sapp has worked with Democratic candidates on faith outreach, though his firm, Common Good Strategies Inc., is sitting out the primary season.

The three Democrats contend with other criticisms: Clinton has sometimes been painted as overly ambitious and disingenuous, Obama as lacking policy heft, and Edwards as putting style over substance. But when invited to talk about their faith, the candidates appeared to welcome the chance to explain how faith motivates their lives, both personally and professionally.

Hillary Rodham Clinton

Fielding questions about her prayer life and marriage, Clinton displayed a vulnerable and affable side that may be new to many Americans.

The senator, a lifelong United Methodist, said she comes "from a tradition that is perhaps a little too suspicious of people who wear their faith on their sleeves," adding: "A lot of the talk about advertising about faith doesn't come naturally to me."

But when asked about difficulties in her marriage, Clinton said, "I'm not sure I would have gotten through it without my faith." After coming to the White House, she said, "if I had not been a praying person . . . I would have become one in a big hurry."

Asked what she prayed for, Clinton admitted that sometimes it's "trivial and self-serving" things, such as, "Oh Lord, why can't you help me lose weight?" At such times, the senator said she assumes there's a lot of "rolling of eyes going on" in heaven and chides herself with the thought, "I can certainly do better than that."

Barack Obama

Thanks to his two autobiographies and his "we worship an awesome God in the blue states" speech at the 2004 Democratic national convention, most Americans already have a sense that Obama is a religious man.

On June 4, Obama showed how his faith connects to public policy questions—from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to fighting domestic poverty.

“My attitude—and I think the attitude of every religious leader and scholar that I value and listen to—is that we have these individual responsibilities and these societal responsibilities. And those things aren’t mutually exclusive,” said Obama, a member of the United Church of Christ.

Referring to Martin Luther King’s vision of a “beloved community,” the senator argued that being a nation of faith means committing to early childhood education, matching at-risk parents with child-care experts and providing work for ex-offenders.

“There’s a biblical injunction that I see to make sure that those young men and women have an opportunity to right their lives,” Obama said.

John Edwards

Edwards had barely reached the stage for the forum before he was hit with tough questions on the creationism-evolution debate and on gay marriage.

Saying he believes in evolution and opposes gay marriage, the former senator pledged not to try to impose his belief system on the rest of the country, arguing: “It’s not the role of the federal government to tell . . . faith-based institutions, churches, synagogues what they should or should not recognize.”

Raised a Southern Baptist before joining the United Methodist Church, Edwards said his “belief in Christ plays an enormous role in the way I view the world.” And using language common among evangelicals, the former senator said: “We are all sinners. We all fall short, which is why we have to ask for forgiveness from the Lord.”

But it was a question about poverty in the U.S., which Edwards called “the great moral issue of our time,” that drew his most passionate response.

“This is not an issue that I just talk about when I come to you,” Edwards said to the audience of about 1,300 Christian activists and university students. “This is an issue that I talk about all over America in front of all kinds of audiences because it’s part of who I am. . . . As long as I am alive and breathing, I will be out there fighting with everything I have to help the poor in this country.” —*Daniel Burke, Religion News Service*