

Faith forums: A fairly civil conversation

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [May 20, 2008](#) issue

Something Pope Benedict XVI said about immigration while he was in the U.S. sent CNN commentator Lou Dobbs into a rant that went something like, “We don’t need popes or preachers telling us what to think and how to vote. . . . Religion is about saving souls, isn’t it? . . . We have something called separation of church and state in this country, after all.”

Ministers hear comments like this all the time. I was an ordained minister only a few months before a member left the church because I had expressed an opinion about a local issue. I was told I was violating the separation of church and state. Nothing I said about the difference between the constitutional prohibition against established religion and the social, economic and political implications of biblical faith made any difference to this unhappy parishioner.

Not for a moment do I think it is inappropriate for the pope or anyone else to address social and political issues from a faith perspective. The wall of separation between church and state, first articulated in a letter by Thomas Jefferson and based on the nonestablishment provision in the Bill of Rights, not only disallows the establishment of any religion but allows and invites every voice to be heard.

The nation is having a fairly civil conversation about religion this election season (apart from the exploitation of several remarks by Barack Obama’s pastor). When Hillary Clinton was asked in a forum on faith and politics about her favorite Bible character, she named Esther, and she explained in a way that revealed her familiarity with the Bible. Obama is a thoughtful Christian and church member. John McCain, not yet subjected to much scrutiny regarding his religion, seems to know his way around the Episcopal and Baptist traditions. The questions posed to Clinton and Obama at the faith forum at Messiah College were specific and tough. “Why does God allow human suffering?” a student asked Senator Clinton. Her answer was disarming: “I have no idea,” she said, “but I intend to ask him.” This is not an

ordination examination, I thought to myself—and yet it is good to have thoughtful dialogue about a topic so easily misunderstood.

Christians have long struggled over defining the proper relationship between their faith commitments and the political order. The struggle is ongoing, because Christians believe in the incarnation and believe that God loves this world and cares about how life is lived. Therefore issues of war, health care, immigration, torture and energy and the environment are not just political issues; they are moral and theological issues as well.

In his new book *The Christian World: A Global History*, Martin Marty describes the first Christians' fluctuating relationship with Rome: "For Christians to accept civil authority was one thing, but it was another when they rejected the gods and rites of Rome. Other sects . . . could accept civil authority as the final word in ordering of life, but Christians could never do so."