

Applying the Golden Rule to gay marriage

by [David Gibson](#) in the [June 13, 2012](#) issue

As pundits and politicians struggle to divine the political fallout from President Obama's sudden endorsement of same-sex marriage, one thing has become clear: the Golden Rule invoked by Obama to explain his change of heart is the closest thing Americans have to a common religious law—and that has important implications beyond the battle for gay rights.

In fact, one of the most striking aspects of Obama's revelation on May 9 that he and his wife, Michelle, support marriage rights for gays and lesbians is that he invoked their Christian faith to support his views. In past years, Obama had cited his religious beliefs to oppose gay marriage—as many believers do.

Obama told ABC News that he and the First Lady “are both practicing Christians and obviously this position may be considered to put us at odds with the views of others, but, you know, when we think about our faith, the thing at root that we think about is not only Christ sacrificing himself on our behalf, but it's also the Golden Rule, you know, treat others the way you would want to be treated.”

Obama has frequently mentioned the Golden Rule or a version of it when speaking about how his faith shapes his policies, and he can point to chapter and verse to back up his views. Jesus twice invoked the Golden Rule in the Gospels in a phrase that is often rendered, “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” And Jesus is cited three times boiling down all of God's law to what is known as the Great Commandment, a dual injunction to “love the Lord your God with all your heart” and to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

In those passages, Jesus is actually citing the Hebrew scriptures—specifically Leviticus 19:18, in which God tells Moses to “love your neighbor as yourself.” Also, scholars of religion say some version of the Golden Rule can be found in almost every religious tradition.

That universality is especially useful in modern-day America, as the religious landscape has become more diverse and as people of different faiths are increasingly living and working together and marrying each other and raising children.

“Given today’s religiously diverse context, this way of thinking about religion and spirituality provides a handy bridge across religious differences,” said Nancy Ammerman, a sociologist of religion at Boston University. “Consistently, roughly half say that it’s how you live your life every day and how you treat others,” said Ammerman, whose book on these and other findings, *Sacred Stories: Religion and Spirituality in Everyday Life*, will be published next year. “About 40 percent place the emphasis on more evangelical practices like reading the Bible and witnessing to others. And about 10 percent say that it’s about working for justice.”

That phenomenon was also a central finding in a sweeping study of U.S. religion, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, published in 2010. In that book, authors Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell elaborated the so-called “Aunt Susan Principle”—the Aunt Susan in all our lives is “the sort of person who epitomizes what it means to be a saint, but whose religious background is different from our own.” In everyday life, this means that believers can invoke the Golden Rule in order to respect others, like gays and lesbians, while maintaining their particular religious views, which may or may not endorse homosexual relationships.

While this tendency toward toleration may not translate immediately into legislative or judicial victories for gay rights—witness the ban on gay marriage that North Carolina voters approved in May—the shift to social acceptance is broad and swift and, as even many religious conservatives concede, probably inexorable.

On May 19, directors of the NAACP, the nation’s oldest African-American civil rights group, voted to endorse same-sex marriage, saying it opposed legislation that “seeks to codify discrimination or hatred into the law or to remove the constitutional rights of LGBT citizens.”

The Golden Rule template is also one that experts say will likely one day pave the way for greater acceptance of marginalized groups like Muslims, just as it did in past generations for Catholics and Jews. Mormons like Mitt Romney already seem to be benefiting, as their visibility grows and more Americans see them as living upstanding lives.

Whether Obama will benefit politically from his invocation of the Golden Rule remains a point of intense speculation. But the White House seemed to recognize the power of the Golden Rule. As the president's interview was being aired, the White House sent Democrats a list of talking points that featured this exhortation: "In the end, the value that the president cares most deeply about is how we treat other people." —RNS