

Debating religion and the presidency

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At last week's Republican Presidential Debate hosted by CNN in Jacksonville, Florida, a wonderful question was asked of the candidates: if elected, how would their religious beliefs affect their decisions as president.

I don't mean to Monday morning quarterback — actually, yes I do, because this question is the sort of thing I think about a lot (from the discipleship angle, not the presidential one). So, with the benefit of plenty of time to think, I thought I'd take a stab at my own response.

First, though, I'll note that of the candidates' answers, Newt Gingrich's was closest to my perspective. His brief assertion that religion isn't something that just happens on Sundays and, in that sense, is inextricable from daily life, was by far the most compelling point.

Even now, I still have no idea how Ron Paul's argument makes any sense: that religion affects his character, and the way he lives, but wouldn't affect his presidency because his oath of office would take precedence. Paul seemed to indicate he could set aside his faith at times, which I find confusing and problematic.

Santorum and Romney made safe claims about Judeo-Christian values and the Declaration of Independence, sticking to general faith fluff and an embellished religious history of America.

That's all fine. No candidate said anything particularly compelling, but no candidate had an "oops moment" either.

I'll never run for president. I don't analyze polling data or focus groups. My answer, I have no doubt, would not be popular with much of America. But, here it is:

Every day, before I check my email and my to-do lists, I pray. Prayer centers me, reminding me that each day is a gift from God. Prayer reminds me I didn't make this world. I didn't found our great nation. I don't live a perfect life. Every day, after that morning prayer, I'm called to respond to God's grace and love.

Faith, religion, and service are inextricable aspects of my life. They are at my core. I try to live my life not primarily for personal gain, but to serve God and others. So it turns out that faith is actually a large part of why I'm running. After all: why would I put my family, myself, my friends through the gauntlet of a campaign if it were not for a larger purpose beyond self? We don't need a president — or anyone in public office — thinking the world revolves around any one person. Public service, for many of us, is an act of discipleship.

Now, before anyone gets any ideas, I would not use public office to compel or advocate my particular faith tradition. My values come from my faith tradition, but they're also certainly influenced by my family, education, and community. In this most religiously diverse country on God's earth, we must seek to advocate for policy in ways that speaks to those of all faiths, and those of no faith. For me, my love of neighbor comes from Jesus' teachings, rooted in the Bible, and is sustained by a community of faith. For others, their love and service is influenced by the teachings of Muhammad, or in the way of Buddha. For still others (some dear friends of mine) who don't believe in God, life's goals come from influences beyond faith. But atheists and agnostics can and do still seek to contribute to society, to support their community, and to live justly.

So, I hope, I pray, that faith would affect every aspect of my time in office, that it would demand from me humility, honesty, courage, love, care for the earth, respect, that faith would drive me to seek liberty and justice for all. Faith then, wouldn't hinder me in office — it's not something I can just set aside — rather, faith would help me as I humbly sought to serve both God and country.

What do you think? What would you answer? What struck you about the candidates' responses?

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