

Agreeing to sling different mud

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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So a pro-Romney Super PAC planned to focus on Jeremiah Wright--you know, because those decontextualized clips of a black pastor sounding angry didn't get played on the news enough last time around--but [quickly changed its tune](#) based on Romney's unenthusiastic response. Then a pro-Obama Super PAC clarified that [it won't be going after Mormonism](#), and David Axelrod [agreed](#).

I'm certainly glad to be spared a barrage of prime-time crap about how black liberationists hate America (and even say "damn" about it!) on the one hand and about polygamy and special underwear on the other. But note this news story's assumptions: that a) a campaign is all about attacking each other with one blunt instrument of a subject or another and b) the high road includes taking religion off the table. Each of these is a real shame.

Going dirty in a presidential election is nothing new, but the rise of Super PACs means we're in for more mud than ever. It'll be an election fought in large part by attack ads created by cash-rich organizations with just-plausible distance from the candidates. So if we don't hear a lot of distortions and half-truths about Trinity UCC and the LDS church, we'll just hear that many more of them about other stuff. So much better!

And there's no good reason that religion should be off the table as a subject of discussion. The president had a conversion experience as part of a black church in the liberationist tradition; his challenger used to be an LDS bishop. There's a lot of useful conversation to be had there--provided it's factual, fair and respectful. Religion has clearly shaped both candidates in ways that are both profound and unprecedented in the presidency, and No Religious Tests doesn't mean voters shouldn't consider all this.

But our political/media culture makes it hard enough to fairly address the nuance of a religious issue when that's the *goal*. Super PACs have far lower aims, so whatever--I'll give one feeble cheer each time I see an ad calling Obama a socialist but nobly refraining from bringing up Jeremiah Wright.