

Democrats talk about faith

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Democratic presidential hopefuls waded into theological waters while speaking at a forum on LGBTQ equality on October 10 in Salt Lake City, contrasting their liberal approaches to faith with those of religious perspectives that oppose same-sex marriage and LGBTQ rights.

Nine candidates participated in the forum, which was organized by CNN and the LGBTQ rights advocacy group Human Rights Campaign. They fielded questions on a variety of topics, ranging from same-sex marriage to their thoughts on whether organizations and businesses should have the right to invoke religion as a reason to deny services or opportunities to LGBTQ people.

When Pete Buttigieg was asked to point to any verses in the Bible that support refusing services to LGBTQ people—a reference to so-called religious refusal laws that allow organizations and businesses to invoke religion as a reason to deny services—the openly gay mayor of South Bend, Indiana, argued he was raised with a different kind of Christian faith.

“Without telling others how to worship, the Christian tradition that I belong to instructs me to identify with the marginalized, and to recognize that the greatest thing that any of us have to offer is love,” said Buttigieg, who is Episcopalian. He went on to contend that the right to religious freedom “ends where religion is being used as an excuse to harm other people” and that “it makes God smaller” when faith is used to disparage another.

Sen. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts, who currently holds the top spot in the crowded field of Democratic hopefuls in some national polls, also contrasted her own Methodist faith with that of people she said harmed LGBTQ people. Asked whether there was ever a time she didn’t support same-sex marriage, the former Sunday school teacher sang a line from “Jesus Loves the Little Children,” a children’s hymn.

“To me, that is the heart of it, that was the basis of the faith that I grew up in,” she said. “It truly is about preciousness of each and every life, it is about the worth of every human being. I saw this as a matter of faith.” She added, the “hatefulness”

against LGBTQ people “always really shocked me—especially for people of faith.”

Sen. Cory Booker of New Jersey also cited his faith to explain what motivated him to fight for LGBTQ equality. “My faith, as well as my American values, will make me fight on every front to make sure that people are not discriminating against someone because of who they are,” he said.

Once controversial, the theology articulated by Buttigieg and others now tracks with public support for LGBTQ rights. According to a 2018 poll from the Public Religion Research Institute, majorities of most major US religious groups—with the exception of white evangelical Protestants and Mormons—oppose religiously based service refusals to gay and lesbian people, as do a plurality of Jehovah’s Witnesses and “other nonwhite Protestants.”

The same survey also reported that majorities of most major religious groups now support same-sex marriage, with plurality support among black Protestants and Hispanic Protestants. The outlier remains white evangelical Protestants, a majority of whom oppose it.

Beto O’Rourke of Texas took what was arguably the most controversial position of the night when he argued that churches and other faith-based institutions that oppose same-sex marriage should have their tax-exempt status revoked. “There can be no reward, no benefit, no tax break for any institution or organization in America that denies the full human rights and full civil rights of every single one of us,” he said.

The line sparked outrage from *Daily Beast* columnist and CNN political commentator Matt Lewis. “This isn’t going to help win the electoral college,” Lewis tweeted Friday morning. “If you wonder why so many Christians are willing to hold their nose and support someone as horrible as Donald Trump, this helps explain it.” —Religion News Service