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The Dems' Delicate Dance on Faith

By Amy Sullivan

It's hard to pinpoint the exact moment when the Democrats' bold new religion and politics experiment jumped the shark. But a strong contender would be the segment in Sunday night's Compassion Forum during which the question "WHEN HAVE YOU FELT THE HOLY SPIRIT?" flashed on the CNN chyron. Above it on the screen a clearly flustered Hillary Clinton appeared to be trying to figure out whether she'd mistakenly wandered into a small group Bible study. By the end of the evening, both Clinton and Barack Obama had endured questions about their favorite Bible stories, their views on evolution, and that millennia-old puzzler: Why does God let bad things happen to good people?

If the two Democrats hadn't tossed the occasional "When I'm President" into their answers, it would have been easy to forget that they're running to be commander-in-chief and not national theologian. As it was, they each at least had the good grace to look uncomfortable when the questioning veered away from policy and principles into piety. "I wouldn't presume to know" was the sensible answer both candidates used on multiple occasions when invited to speculate about the mind of God.

Their discomfort was all the more striking because, unlike many of their Democratic colleagues and predecessors, Clinton and Obama are [not afraid to talk about faith](#). Their campaigns have robust religious outreach operations that are far more sophisticated and extensive than anything Democrats have seen in general elections, much less primary seasons. Their ease and familiarity with religious language and communities surpasses that of most members of their party, not to mention the G.O.P. nominee John McCain. (McCain was invited to the nonpartisan Forum as well, but declined, citing scheduling conflicts.)

Obama and Clinton have been leading voices within their party in arguing that Democrats have erred in the recent past by failing to engage religious voters, particularly Catholics and white evangelicals (half of whom describe themselves as politically moderate or liberal). But after three decades in which religion was often used as a political wedge by the Right, the two candidates have evinced a wariness of repeating the same

mistakes when bringing religion into politics. Indeed, both gave their strongest answers of the night in response to the question of what they would say to those who are concerned about the mixing of faith and politics. ["The biggest danger for those of us of religious faith when we're in the public sphere is a certain self-righteousness," said Obama.](#) "What those of us of religious faith have to do when we're in the public square is to translate our language into a universal language that can appeal to everybody."

The statement was a clear rebuke to the religiosity of the Bush era. During a 2000 primary debate the then presidential candidate [named Jesus as his favorite philosopher](#) "because He changed my heart." Bush refused to elaborate on his controversial statement, saying simply, "If you don't understand, I can't explain it to you," and he was criticized for failing to translate his answer for non-Christians. Eight years later, the questions themselves at an event like the Compassion Forum exclude non-Christians from the political discussion. And they impose a troubling implicit religious test. It is, after all, hard to imagine how a secular candidate could have participated in an event that included questions about the Holy Spirit and favorite Bible stories.

That isn't to say that religion can't — or shouldn't — be a part of a political campaign. A remarkably consistent 85% of Americans, according to annual Pew surveys, say that religion is an "important" part of their lives. An ability to relate to that cornerstone of many voters' daily existences will continue to be important for political candidates, especially since voters make decisions based on their judgments of a candidate's character in addition to his or her policy positions. Religion is just one proxy for character — and an imperfect one at that — but it makes sense that a candidate who is personally religious would want to share that piece of his or her biography with the electorate.

The mixture of religion and political campaigning can be a potentially combustible one, especially for Democrats, who continue to face increased scrutiny when they speak about faith. The [controversy surrounding Obama's recent comments about "bitter" voters who "cling to" religion](#) — and whether they reflect a secular elitist mind-set (Clinton's take) or a real understanding of the comfort faith can provide (Obama's take) — is just the latest reminder of the topic's sensitivity.

There are, however, some fairly simple rules that can govern the discussion of [religion in politics](#). First, when a candidate raises his or her faith on the campaign trail, journalists and voters are obligated to ask two relevant questions: Would your religious beliefs have any bearing on the actions you would take in office? And, if so, how? Most other nitty-gritty questions are ultimately unrelated to a politician's public role, fascinating though it might be to learn his or her favorite church potluck hot-dish or interpretation of I Corinthians 14:33.


Second, Democrats have been at a disadvantage when it comes to religious voters, not because they couldn't recite the Nicene Creed or name all 12 Apostles, but because they often refused to engage with faith communities with which they had disagreements over issues like abortion or gay rights. In 1988, for example, Michael Dukakis' campaign turned down all requests for the candidate to appear at Catholic venues because of concerns that he would be asked questions about his pro-choice stance on abortion. Dukakis undoubtedly avoided some awkward conversations by skipping Catholic institutions on the campaign trail. But he also missed the chance to hear from

Catholic voters about all of their other concerns — from the death penalty to health care to the economy to issues of war and peace.

That's why the most useful aspect of the Compassion Forum was the inclusion of religious leaders from a variety of faith traditions and from across the ideological spectrum. Democratic candidates don't usually field questions from the head of the Southern Baptist Convention, but there was Dr. Frank Page asking about abstinence programs in Uganda. And others, such as evangelicals Samuel Rodriguez and Jim Wallis, questioned the candidates about the environment and poverty and whether "pro-life" and "pro-choice" labels are unproductive. It was left to one of the pastors in the audience to pose the most relevant query of the event, asking Clinton to discuss the first principles she relied on when making decisions with life-and-death consequences.

At the end of the evening, CNN moderator Campbell Brown announced that the network will host a second Compassion Forum during the general election, with McCain presumably joining the Democratic nominee to face more faith-based questioning. Next time, perhaps they should let the religious leaders ask the questions and leave the gimmicky theological queries at home.

Sullivan's new book, [The Party Faithful: How and Why Democrats Are Closing the God Gap](#) (Scribner), was published in February

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