

Election a remarkable event on the religion front
Written by J. Brent Walker

I know, I know. We're all tired of politics. After nearly 20 months of incessant electioneering, reported by ever-looping 24/7 news cycles, it's time to give it a rest – at least for a while.

Indulge me one retrospective on the election. (At least some political junkies out there will be happy to get some help dealing with withdrawal.) After all, this was an historic and terribly important election in many ways. The first African-American was elected to the presidency defeating a genuine war hero with 25 years of national political service; a female was the runner-up in one party and another vied for the vice presidency in the other. All of this came in the midst of both the worst economic crisis in nearly 80 years and two seemingly unending wars.

It was a remarkable election on the religion front, too. The CNN Compassion Forum led by Jon Meacham and Campbell Brown and Rick Warren's Saddleback Church Civil Forum provided a national audience a chance to listen to the presidential candidates talk about their faith and related issues for four hours. Although these efforts were far from perfect (I've critiqued them in previous columns) and with a few other exceptions – notably the false charges that Barack Obama is a Muslim and the anti-Christ – religion was handled and discussed in this campaign about as responsibly as we've been able to do it in this country.

Two events occurred during the campaign that I hope we can learn from and use as models for future elections.

The big news on Sunday, Oct. 19 was Gen. Colin Powell's endorsement of Sen. Obama for president on Meet the Press. In that interview with Tom Brokaw, Gen. Powell made what I thought was a point vastly more important than his endorsement. Seeking to knock down the patent lies that seemed never to die about Obama's religion, Gen. Powell said:

I'm also troubled by, not what Senator McCain says, but what members of the party say. "Well, you know Mr. Obama is a Muslim." Well, the correct answer is he is not a Muslim, he's a Christian. He's always been a Christian. But the really right answer is, what if he is? Is there something wrong with being a Muslim in this country? The answer's no, that's not America. Is there something wrong with some seven-year-old Muslim-American kid believing that he or she could be president? Yet, I have heard senior members of my own party drop the suggestion, "He's a Muslim and he might be associated with terrorists." This is not the way we should be doing it in America. (bold added)

Gen. Powell concluded with a poignant story of a mother in Arlington Cemetery caressing her 20-year-old son's grave. The top of the headstone did not bear a Christian cross but the crescent and star of Islam. Kareem Rashad Sultan Khan was Muslim from New Jersey who gave his life for this country, his country.

If the ban on religious tests for public office in Article VI of the Constitution means anything ò in letter and spirit ò it is that there should be no faith litmus test for our national leaders. We presently have two Muslims serving in the Congress: Rep. Keith Ellison from Minnesota and Rep. Andre Carson from Indiana. Hardly anyone thought we would see an African-American elected to the presidency in our lifetime. Who knows, one of these, or maybe Gen. Powell's imagined seven-year-old, may contend for higher officeò even the presidencyò in our children's lifetime. It would be just like America to do something like that.

The other important event was Sen. McCain's laudable refusal to use the Jeremiah Wright flap as a political weapon in the campaign. (Yes, surrogates surely did, but McCain, to his credit, declined to elevate it to the top of the ticket.) The place where candidates worship and whom they choose as spiritual mentors is not irrelevant. It is part of the mix that makes up a candidate's character. But we should indulge a strong presumption against making such things a campaign issue.

That is, we should bend over backward to permit candidates to exercise their religion freely and not skew their decisions by fear of having to pay a political price if they chose a pastor that is controversial or given to harsh rhetoric ò particularly when the candidate unequivocally repudiates the preacher's statements. I would hope candidates will listen to prophetic preaching every day they worship. They need to hear it as much as we do ò maybe more. But a widespread attitude that straps candidates with isolated, out of context, statements of their pastors and spiritual advisers will have the effect of encouraging candidates to abjure the prophetic pulpit in favor of a blander form of preaching. That would be a great loss for the candidate and for the public.

Yes, this was an historic election ò for more reasons than we had thought. And next time we'll do as well ò or even better ò in solving the perennial conundrum: how we uphold the institutional separation of church and state while affirming the relevance of a candidate's religion to politics, but without imposing a legal or practical religious test. I think we're making progress.

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