

Science and God in the Election

THIS IS THE FIRST ISSUE OF THE NEW YEAR, AND GUESS WHAT? IT'S AN ELECTION YEAR IN THE United States, and other nations are watching the developments with interest. So *Science's* News Focus section, beginning on p. 22, presents some of the major presidential candidates' views about science and science policy. We hope that these will give citizens of all countries a sense of how these aspirants would meet the essentially global challenges that rest on science and technology, including climate change, health policy, resource management, and energy conservation.

This election will be carried out amid new forces that have put the religious commitments of the candidates at the political center stage, a phenomenon now endemic to the United States but to few other non-Muslim nations. This contemporary dimension of presidential politics was brought into focus for me when a questioner in one of the "debates" brandished a copy of the Bible and asked the Republican candidates: "How you answer this question will tell us everything we need to know about you. Do you believe every word of this book?" It brought forth affirmative responses, with occasional limiting reservations about "metaphor" or "allegory," putting God right in the voting booth.

With respect to faith disclosures in politics, this is something new. This year, candidate Romney gave a speech to explain his Mormon faith, perhaps reassuring the evangelical Republican base by identifying Jesus Christ as "the son of God and the savior of mankind." Nearly 50 years ago, John Kennedy gave a speech in which he reassured the 1960 electorate about his Catholicism. He simply said that his religion would not affect his position as the U.S. president. Unlike Romney, he didn't give the voters an exegesis of his own faith; he clearly indicated that his private religious commitments would stay outside the Oval Office and were therefore not their business.

But these days, presidential candidates—even some Democrats—find it necessary to use religion to qualify their electability. The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution is clear on prohibiting the establishment of a national religion. Yet in the election, we have been told repeatedly that the United States is a "Christian nation." This assertion might pass as the "free exercise" of religious preference as a fundamental right, a clause that has repeatedly clashed with the establishment clause. But when a candidate tries to persuade voters that his faith constitutes a claim on their vote, it surely touches on the establishment clause.

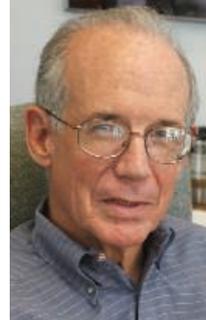
Given this new focus on religious disclosure, what does this U.S. election have to do with science? Everything. The candidates should be asked hard questions about science policy, including questions about how those positions reflect belief. What is your view about stem cell research, and does it relate to a view of the time at which human life begins? Have you examined the scientific evidence regarding the age of Earth? Can the process of organic evolution lead to the production of new species, and how? Are you able to look at data on past climates in search of inferences about the future of climate change?

Especially because we are in a new era of faith advertisement, we should demand that candidates provide thoughtful answers to such scientific questions. That religion has entered the political space should not produce a conflict between science and religion. Some of my scientist friends are religiously committed, others are actively disengaged, and both kinds are principled. Most of them are disinclined to join the religion versus science debate, which has become uncomfortably combustible.

But we share a right to press candidates about their views on the boundary. After all, determined efforts have been made to introduce scriptural versions of the age of Earth or of "intelligent design" in science classrooms. We need to know the candidates' qualifications for understanding and judging science, and for speaking intelligently about science and technology to the leaders of other nations in planning our collective global future. I don't need them to describe their faith; that's their business and not mine. But I do care about their scientific knowledge and how it will inform their leadership.

— Donald Kennedy

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