

SMELL THAT?

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In Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* (1590), when Barabas (the Jew of the title) and his servant Ithamore pass near a monastery and see two of its resident friars approaching, the following interchange occurs (IV. i. 20-21):

Ithamore. Look, look, master; here come two religious caterpillars.

Barabas. I smelt 'em ere they came.

These words come to my mind when I see most of our presidential candidates ostentatiously parading their piety out of a misguided belief that the populace at large must kowtow to the radical right wing of Christian evangelicals. The influence of these evangelical zealots is a bigger threat to the integrity of our political process than most of us seem to realize. It is a perniciously infectious pandemic for which we desperately need a curative vaccine.

One sees their influence everywhere.

In one televised *tableau vivant* (mis-labeled "debate") of Democratic Party candidates, the moderator asked each to declare what his or her favorite Biblical—by which he meant Judeo-Christian Biblical—verse was. Instead of rising up in concerted outrage at the inappropriateness of such a question, all the candidates slavishly complied, thereby giving the question unjustified legitimacy and credibility.

Equally offensive was the use, on one Republican Party candidate performance display, of a YouTube video question asking the candidates whether they believed every word of that same Bible. The three who answered (Giuliani, Romney, and Huckabee) gave an emphatic assent, allegorical hedges notwithstanding.

Gov. Mike Huckabee placed a television ad in Iowa emblazoned with the slogan "A Christian Leader."

Mitt Romney gave a hypocritical speech proclaiming the electoral irrelevancy of religion at the same time that he trumpeted its policy and personal relevance for him. This was the oratorical equivalent of the optical illusion of the rabbit and the duck.

Our Founders would be appalled at this. After all, most of the Founders themselves were only nominally Christians or outright irreligious. Indeed, when he ran for president, Jefferson was accused openly of being an atheistic infidel. Nevertheless, the Founders knew that religion, which had to be kept out of the public arena, had to be given a protected place in the private sphere for those who lived, and were consoled, by its teachings. Not only did they know all too well that private religious practice needed to be protected from political intrusion, but equally they realized that when religion becomes political, it is corrupted and prone to dangerous excess.

The U. S. Constitution is unambiguous in its mandating a separation of politics and religion. According to Article VI of the main text—putting first things first—"no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any office or public trust under the United States." This keeps politics free of religious influence and illegitimate religious litmus tests. Then, according to Article I of the Bill of Rights, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free expression thereof." This protects religion—all religion, any religion, even irreligion—from any legislative interference: it keeps religion free from politics.

The Constitution itself enshrines this very separation by studiously avoiding any mention of any God or any Bible. The Bible is not even mentioned in connection with the administration of oaths, for which its presence is not a Constitutional requirement.

In short, the Constitution is a remarkable testament to the attitude that the Founders wished to inculcate, namely a respect for all belief (theistic or atheistic) and an absolute freedom from the influence of religion.

What the Founders intended was stated most pointedly by their contemporary, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kant himself was a devout Christian, sometimes called the Philosopher of Protestantism. Yet, Kant realized that republican politics is religiously neutral. In one of his too little known political works, *Toward Eternal Peace* (1795), he said:

The republican constitution is the only one entirely fitting to the rights of man. But it is the most difficult to establish and even harder to preserve, so that many say that a republic would have to be a state of angels, because humans with their selfish inclinations are not capable of a constitution of such sublime form. But...it is only a question of a good organization of the state [so that] a human is forced to be a good citizen even if not a morally good human. The problem of establishing a state...can be solved even for a people [composed] of devils, if only they are intelligent.

In other words, a republican government is equally possible for morally good and morally wicked citizens, as long as they behave rationally.

The Founders knew this too, and they bequeathed that knowledge to us. Let us not betray their legacy. Let us make a New Year's resolution that we will not vote for any candidate who claims to find policy guidance in his or her personal religion.

To support this commitment, when it comes to televised performance displays of candidates, let us have Kathy Griffin as moderator.

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