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The Religious Issue in the Presidential Campaign

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For the first time since 1960, the "religious issue" has emerged in a presidential campaign. Governor Carter's frequent references to his religious commitment and his personal experience as a "born again" Christian have focused public attention on the faith and ethos of evangelical Christianity, and raised questions in the minds of some people about the commitment to religious pluralism, separation of church and state, and freedom of religious conscience of political candidates whose creed involves the call to evangelize.

The American Jewish Committee, which since its inception has combatted bigotry and prejudice rooted in stereotypes or caricatures of any racial, religious or ethnic group, believes that Jews, who have themselves frequently been the victims of religious bigotry, should be particularly sensitive to any tendencies in the current campaign that suggest that facile generalizations or group-labeling be substituted for a searching examination of where individual candidates stand on a variety of specific issues.

The "religious issue" in the current campaign may be addressed in two ways. by examining the range and diversity of evangelical Christianity in the United States, and by asking specific questions of all political candidates, whose answers will elucidate their position on issues of concern to Americans of various backgrounds and persuasions.

The American Jewish Committee, which pioneered in establishing ongoing dialogue with segments of the evangelical community, beginning in the 1960s, has enabled numbers of Jewish and evangelical Christian scholars, academicians and theologians to meet and know one another as persons, dispelling mythologies and stereotyping on both sides. Such experiences have punctured the image of either community as a monolith.

Historically, evangelical Christianity dominated not only religion, but civic and secular life for the first 100 years of our country. In that "evangelical empire," as Dr. Martin Marty called it, one had to be an evangelical Christian in order to be regarded as a patriotic American. Neither Catholics, Jews, nor dissenting Protestants were entitled to vote or hold public office.

Yet, the Baptist tradition of religious liberty and freedom of conscience is also deeply rooted in American history. In 1638, Roger Williams gathered nineteen men, refugees from the enforced establishment of evangelical orthodoxy in the Massachusetts Bay colony, to form a new colony in Rhode Island that would not only allow but enforce, liberty of conscience.

In his celebrated parable of the ship, Williams elaborated his commitment to "total freedom of conscience" paralleled by his call for complete obligation "to obey the common laws and orders" of the civil sphere.

"There goes many a ship to sea, with many hundred souls in one ship, whose weal and woe is common, and is a true picture of a common-wealth, or any human combination or society. It hath fallen out some times that both Papists and Protestants, Jews and Turks may be embarked into one ship.

Upon which supposal, I affirm that all the liberty of conscience that ever I pleaded for, turns upon these two hinges, that none of the Papists, Protestants, Jews or Turks be forced to come to the ship's prayer or worship nor compelled from their own particular prayers or worship, if they practice any "

A similar range and diversity exists within the evangelical community today, perhaps not so much on matters of faith, but on social and economic policy issues. From the Christian anti-Communism of the Rev. Billy James Hargis and the Rev. Carl McIntire, which has lent religious coloration to reactionary politics, through the mass evangelistic crusades of Dr. Billy Graham, to the emergence of a group of "new evangelicals" who have sought to make Christian faith the mainspring of needed social reforms and who have criticized the fundamentalist disregard for the problems of society as irresponsible individualism.

The diversity of opinion within our various religious communities notwithstanding, there are authentic differences between them and conflicting claims. The thrust by some evangelicals to win converts has sometimes led to abuses of church-state separation and coercive measures of proselytism. Jews are particularly sensitive to such developments and concerned about them. Moreover, Jews naturally resent any approach which reduces them -- or the State of Israel -- to theological abstractions, preliminary stages in someone else's drama of redemption.

Jews will and should query all candidates to determine their commitment to separation of church and state, and to the principle of religious pluralism, and their positions on a host of other issues of concern to the Jewish community. Voters will judge for themselves where the candidates stand on these issues, and if they mean what they say. These are questions of policy and integrity, not of religious affiliation.

Confronting anti-Catholic bigotry in the 1960 presidential campaign, AJC's then program director, David Danzig wrote:

"We are a nation in which a multiplicity of religious groups (none constituting a clear majority) struggles...each to convince the larger society that its own set of values, policies and solutions to problems best represent the truth and interests of the country and the common good...there are those who consider the presidency as the symbolic arena in which the struggle will be joined and settled ...But the major reality to face is that the struggle among religious groups to shape America to their own points of view is irrelevant to the religious affiliation of the president."

These words are as true today as they were in 1960, and apply as equally to an evangelical Protestant as they did to the Roman Catholic presidential candidate in that election. Religious pluralism as a functioning reality of American life, does not depend on the religion of the president; it depends on the vitality of America's religious communities.

The issues of difference among religious groups are real. Those relating to public policy should be openly discussed and confronted. The surfacing of religion as an issue in this campaign may well provide the opportunity to enhance and deepen the existing evangelical-Jewish dialogue, further dispelling misconceptions in both communities, and advancing mutual understanding.