

Expert offers tips to manage mix of religion and politics

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By Marv Knox

Editor

ABILENE, Texas—Religion and politics inevitably will mix—especially in the U.S. presidential campaign—but that does not mean Americans should sanction a free-for-all, church-state expert Melissa Rogers insisted.

Rogers, director of the [Center for Religion & Public Affairs](#) at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, N.C., delivered the annual T.B. Maston Christian Ethics Lectures at Hardin-Simmons University's [Logsdon Seminary](#) in Abilene.

Melissa Rogers

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“There’s a growing interest in religion’s role in politics that could result in an ‘anything goes’ approach,” she observed. “But it doesn’t have to be that way. There are some constructive ways of managing these issues.”

The U.S. Constitution guarantees the right to mix politics and religion—to a degree, reported Rogers, former executive director of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life and former general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee on Religious Liberty, both based in Washington.

“Our Constitution certainly says that religious groups and people have the right to participate in the debate of political issues,” she said, adding, “Private citizens clearly have a constitutional right to comment on issues of public concern in religious terms.”

And while Article VI of the Constitution forbids any government-imposed religious test for public office, “voters certainly are free to cast their ballots for any reason, including voting for or against someone because of his or her religion or lack thereof,” she noted. Still, the spirit of this constitutional provision should influence voters’ decisions, she argued.

Religion and politics will mix

More broadly, Rogers offered six suggestions for “managing the mix of religion and politics.” They are:

- “Accept the fact that religion and politics will mix,” she said. “They always have; they always will.”

Long before Mormon Mitt Romney and former Baptist pastor Mike Huckabee ran for president and candidate Barack Obama’s pastor made headlines, Americans were bringing their values to bear on political/religious discussions, she noted.

“There is nothing unconstitutional, un-American or otherwise wrong with the mere fact that some will draw on religion as a source of guidance when making decisions about public matters or that some will include religious references in their discussion of such matters,” she said.

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Risks involved

- “Although the religious and political spheres overlap, they are different, and there are risks when religion and politics mix,” Rogers warned.

“This is one indication of the risks when religion and politics mix: We begin to think that those who disagree with us are enemies of God, and we are at the right hand of God. Other risks include the potential for damage to our pluralistic democracy and to the integrity of religion, including the use of religion as a means to a political end.”

- While religious people have rights to participate in politics, they are not better rights than others’ rights, she admonished.

She quoted Huckabee, who said on the campaign trail, “... I don’t feel like a person has to share my faith to share my love of this country.”

“America should be a place that welcomes all people of good will to bring their values to the political process and to participate fully and equally in that process,” she urged. “After all, religious people who are political conservatives are not the only Americans who have values and vote them. All God’s children got values, including nonreligious people, and all of us vote them.”

Candidates' obligation

- Candidates have an obligation to answer some questions that “touch on religion,” she insisted.

To illustrate, she showed a video clip of John McCain talking about whether the United States is a “Christian nation” and quoted Barack Obama

discussing his beliefs about teaching evolution in public schools.

Emphasizing candidates should be willing to answer questions “about how their personal beliefs, including personal religious beliefs, might affect their governance,” she also referenced some statements by Obama about race, religion and patriotism, and played a clip of Huckabee answering a question about whether his religious perspective on marriage would impact his political decisions.

- “There’s good religious outreach and bad religious outreach by candidates,” Rogers said.

“Here I am talking not about what is politically effective, but about what is right,” she explained. Assuming they are respecting the tax rules that nonprofits must follow, she said, “It is good for candidates to reach out to religious as well as nonreligious communities and listen to religious as well as nonreligious groups.

“But it is not good for candidates to try to tell people of faith what their faith means to them, how they should vote, or to otherwise try to command, control and co-opt religion.”

The good and the bad

- Religious communities engage in both “good and bad forms of religious engagement” of politics, she reported.

The late U.S. Rep. Barbara Jordan offered “wise advice to those who speak of religion in the public square,” Rogers said, quoting Jordan: ““You would do well to pursue your cause with vigor, while remembering that you are a servant of God, not a spokesperson for God.””

Similarly, churches and other religious groups should resist politicians’ attempts to usurp the autonomy and freedom of religion, she added,

warning against giving politicians access to church members' contact information, church money and volunteers.

“Our faith is not an instrument of electoral politics, and we should never do anything that suggests it is,” she admonished. “Partisan politics should have no place in the pulpit. ... Let’s say it again this election: God is not a Republican or a Democrat. An awesome God does not affiliate with any political party.”

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