

# EDITORIAL: What role has faith in public policy?

December 5, 2009

The tension between Christian compassion and the duties of citizenship—particularly the responsibilities of public officials—has been in the news lately. Maurice Clemmons was free to walk into a Lakewood, Wash., coffee shop and murder four police officers because former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, who was a Baptist pastor before he became a politician, let him out of prison about a decade ago.

Counting Clemmons, 1,033 Arkansas prisoners were pardoned or had their sentences reduced by Huckabee during his 10 1/2 years in office. An [Associated Baptist Press article](#) reports Huckabee apparently had a soft spot for prisoners who told them they had become Christians and had turned their lives around, as well as inmates whose pastors vouched they had experienced life-changing spiritual commitments. In fact, Huckabee granted twice as many clemencies as did his three immediate predecessors combined.

Editor Marv Knox

So, the fifth victim of Clemmons' shooting spree may have been Huckabee's presidential aspirations. Clemmons' rampage eclipsed the carnage of Willie Horton, who committed robbery and rape while out of prison on a furlough program supported by 1992 presidential candidate Michael Dukakis. The "soft on crime" label stuck on Dukakis and contributed to his defeat.

Ironically, the Clemmons clemency leaves Huckabee in the same boat with another famous Baptist politician, Jimmy Carter. Huckabee is a conservative Republican; Carter is a moderate-to-liberal Democrat. Carter's critics, particularly those with some theological understanding, accused

him of being too naive, even too kind and decent, to lead the free world. They claimed his grace-shaped worldview did not serve him well on a planet filled with dictators and despots. And now Huckabee's critics from both parties are questioning whether his sense of Christian compassion makes him too quick to offer second chances to felons.

The Carter-Huckabee comparison raises the question whether religious faith, or certain religious viewpoints, should prevent adherents from holding specific offices. The [U.S. Constitution guarantees](#) "no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States." But practically, could religious belief—however noble its aspirations—disqualify someone from public office? For example, should a person whose convictions oppose capital punishment run for governor of a state like Texas? The governor is required to uphold the laws of the state, and Texas is the foremost practitioner of the death penalty.

Extremists stake out opposite ends of the spectrum, with some saying religious perspectives have no place in public policy and others claiming religious views should trump all others. But most citizens come down in the middle. We realize faith is integral to people's lives and cannot be banished. We also recognize no religious tenet or organization has the right to dominate others. The tension of the extremes holds a tightrope we must walk as we balance competing perspectives.

Yet balance them we must.

If we realize faith is a vital component of full humanity, then we should be neither surprised nor disturbed when political leaders hold strong religious views—even when they differ from our own. In fact, we should welcome and foster clear dialogue about the role religious understanding plays in the decision-making processes of our leaders and would-be leaders. This will be a key issue in the next presidential election, whether Huckabee runs or not. (And 2012 is closer than you think.)

Baptists—whose 400-year heritage champions the autonomy of every soul and religious liberty—should be excellent facilitators of dialogue about the place of faith and the role of belief in public policy.

*Marv Knox is editor of the Baptist Standard. Visit his [FaithWorks Blog](#).*