

## Shedding light, not bringing heat

Contributed by J. Brent Walker, BJC Executive Director

Less than six months out from the 2012 fall elections, religion continues to be a part of the campaigns. I predict it only will accelerate.

Four years ago I offered this conundrum as a challenge: "How do we uphold the institutional separation of church and state, while affirming the relevance of candidates' religion to politics, without imposing a religious test for public office?" And I might add, how do we do it with civility, integrity and with an eye to encouraging shedding of light rather than turning up the heat in the public square? These continue to be nettlesome questions.

For me, two overarching principles are always in play here: First, although the U.S. Constitution's ban on religious tests for public office addresses only formal, legal qualifications and constrains only government, the electorate should make every effort to embrace the spirit, as well as the letter, of the no-test clause. This means that discussing the candidate's religion should be permissible but never mandatory. Nonbelievers and persons of faith who are uncomfortable discussing their religion in public should not be prejudiced in the political arena. The most outwardly religious candidate is not necessarily the best qualified leader of our secular government and religiously plural country.

Second, when religion is discussed or taken into account, it is essential to ask about how the candidate's religious views will impact public policy positions and leadership competence. It's important always to ask the question: "What difference will it make?" It is not only unhelpful but terribly invasive to launch a theological inquiry isolated from policy questions and issues that matter in governing.

Both of these tenets, it seems to me, continue to be violated. Gov. Mitt Romney's membership in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints raises the religious test issue front and center. A recent poll reflected about 20 percent of registered Republicans say they would not vote for a Mormon under any circumstances. About one in three evangelicals claim they will not pull the lever for a Mormon. This kind of religious bigotry was apparent when, calling Mormonism a "cult," the Rev. Robert Jeffress, pastor of First Baptist Dallas, brazenly dismissed Gov. Romney's candidacy simply because he was a Mormon without drawing any connection between his religious beliefs and his fitness for office. In fact, this attitude is so widespread that even the secular left has joined with the religious right. Talk show host Bill Maher called Mormonism a "cult" in May. ("Cult" is one of the most inflammatory words in our religious lexicon. It does nothing but heap opprobrium on somebody else's beliefs and practice and even suggests that it's not even a "religion" worthy of constitutional protection or acceptance. Let's get rid of the word!)

Of course, President Barack Obama is not immune from a de facto religious test. And to make matters worse, it's often a lie. Nearly one in five Americans say they believe that the president is really a Muslim. Of course, he is not. He is a Christian and a member of the United Church of Christ. And, as Gen. Colin Powell said four years ago, "What if he is [a Muslim]? Is there something wrong with being Muslim in this country? The answer's no, that's not America."

The second principle is also being flouted. The president's association with the Rev. Jeremiah Wright was sought to be brought up again by a Republican strategist, Fred Davis, who wrote an extensive memo supporting an ad

campaign to discredit the president with guilt-by-association tactics. Laudably, Gov. Romney put the quietus on that effort.

Sure, where candidates choose to worship and whom they select as spiritual mentors is not completely irrelevant. It is part of the mix that makes up a candidate's character. But we should indulge a strong presumption against making such things a campaign issue. This is particularly the case where the candidate, such as President Obama, has repudiated much of the inflammatory rhetoric that Wright preached over the years.

Indeed, we should bend over backwards to permit candidates to worship freely without having to pay a political price if they happen to choose a pastor that is controversial or given to immodest rhetoric. And it's good to encourage candidates to hear prophetic preaching when they worship. Strapping candidates with isolated, out-of-context statements of their pastors and spiritual advisers will have the effect of encouraging candidates to avoid the prophetic pulpit and favor less-trenchant forums of preaching.

We are fortunate to live in a country that welcomes religion into the public square and on the campaign stump. Let's not abuse it. Get to know the candidates by listening to their story, including their religious pilgrimage; but, don't make it a litmus test one way or another. And, treat religion with respect and civility — always demanding the truth and respecting our religious diversity. Our religion and our politics will be the better for it.