

I am disturbed and fascinated by the election campaign for the President of the United States.

On the positive side, there is much to cheer regarding the candidacy of Hillary Clinton and of the possibility of an African-American, Barack Obama, becoming the President of the United States.

But what is disturbing is the inordinate amount of attention being paid to the religious faiths of these leaders. In the meetings and interviews, some held in evangelical churches, candidates have responded to detailed questions on their faith, and how this will be played out in their leadership and policies.

My understanding of the United States' Constitution, ratified in 1791, is that the founding fathers tried to ensure the separation of state and religion, even though they were Christians. The First Amendment states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or the press," and again "the government may not engage in the promotion or endorsement of any particular belief system."

In 1802, Thomas Jefferson explained that in order to protect individual's right of conscience there would be a "wall of separation" between church and state. This was to ensure the neutrality of the state in matters of faith.

In 1829, Senator Richardson of Kentucky said, "It is not the legitimate province of the legislature to determine what religion is true, or what is false, because legislature cannot determine the laws of God."

These opinions of the leaders show their intent was to ensure the protection of the individual's religion, while at the same time ensuring that the State did not advocate for any religion.

So it puzzles me that not one of the American presidential candidates has been brave enough to say that his/her religious beliefs are personal and not a matter for public discourse. Should this lead us to conclude that the high attention on the candidates' religious beliefs means that the president and vice presidents' religions will influence the United States policies and actions?

It is understandable that the person's faith is part of that person's outlook, but as a political leader it should not become part of public policies and actions

Surely it should not matter that Sarah Palin believes in “creationism” which states that the world is less than 10,000 years old, because of the calculations made based on the Bible. Nor should it matter that she is against women’s choice regarding abortion. But these become critical issues if her personal beliefs are translated into public policies, so that other women lose their choice, and creationism is taught as an alternative to evolution.

In Canada, most of the time, we try to differentiate between our leaders’ personal beliefs and public policies. I was impressed by Prime Minister Jean Chretien’s comment that though he was a Catholic, his personal beliefs would not influence his governmental actions. He said he was the Prime Minister of all Canadians, and so he could not impose the Catholic Church’s beliefs on all Canadians.

This emphasis on personal faith being part of the public discourse is worrying to me as a Muslim. As a member of a religious minority, I am strongly committed to the foundations of a civil society which recognizes State neutrality and protects me in the practice of my faith.

Muslims are constantly harangued that many of us don’t separate matters of faith and state. This is viewed as undemocratic and dangerous beliefs of a “regressive” religion, which is Islam.

It is true that in some Muslim majority countries, the seductive call that “Islam is the solution” has become a political tool. It is used by those who oppose the totalitarian regimes of their countries. These regimes do not encourage attempts to create a truly civil society based on democracy, so Islamists want states built on Islam with their version of “Sharia” as a better alternative. However this is not working either.

Recently, there was a gathering of Muslim scholars in Qatar organized by the Doha Arab Democracy Foundation. At this conference, some scholars urged Islamists to abandon their idea of establishing a religious state and to engage in a “radical intellectual revision.”

The scholars, Radwan al Sayed of Lebanon, and Salah al Din al Jurashi of Tunisia, recommended that the pursuit should be of a civil state. They asked the Islamic movements to denounce violence in the name of God and to abandon the theme of “Islam is the solution”.

The worrying issue for me is that there is too much similarity between the United States election discussion and the Islamists who both want “Religion” in the public, political arena.

There was a recent incident in Quebec which demonstrates my point. A Muslim woman candidate in our federal elections was interviewed on radio. The interviewer spent little time discussing issues, and instead focused on her as a Muslim and made derogatory

remarks about Islam. She tried to explain that her faith is a personal matter and she was more interested in discussing issues, but the interviewer would not let it go.

Sadly, this demonstrates the racism and anti Muslim attitudes too commonly held. She wanted to separate her personal beliefs in the public arena but he would not accept that. The use of religion as a political weapon by a Muslim or by this interviewer is unacceptable.

I am not alone amongst believing Muslims who want a state based on civil and human rights, and not on the teachings of a specific religion. The American elections emphasis on the candidates' religious beliefs and practices is as disturbing the use of Islam as a political tool. The use of religion in politics raises concerns whether it is in the States, or Canada or Iran or Saudi Arabia.