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# 'God' or 'Allah'?

What can political rhetoric tell us about religion in America today?

*by Daniel C. Dennett*

**W**hat can we do to change the tradition of politicians either brandishing their devoutness or defensively paying lip service to religion? It disfigures our public discussions, and I think that few people are fooled by it any more.

Perhaps we could ask politicians who insist on using the word “God” in their rhetoric to alternate between “God” and “Allah” (rather like ‘he or she’ in non-sexist language) so as not to offend Muslims among us. (After all, are not “God” and “Allah” names for the same Being? Isn’t it offensive to insist on using just one of these names to the exclusion of the other?)

That might squelch the habit — but I for one would be amused to hear some of our more sanctimonious politicians trying not to choke as they thanked Allah for all the blessings He has bestowed on the United States, or calling on Allah to guide us in all our endeavors.

Drawing MORE attention to the specific language used by the candidates might dissuade them from using the rhetoric at all. Just threatening to make a big deal about any appeals to sectarian interests in the choice of language might work wonders. Some of us should start expressing in public the offense we

take when candidates pander to the devout in their self-presentation. There is nothing that politicians take more to heart than learning that they are turning off a sizable bloc of voters.

What I want to hear from a candidate is a solemn and credible vow that he or she will put the good of the relevant constituency (city, state, nation) ahead of the good of that person's religious affiliation, if any, when executing the duties of office. John F. Kennedy did just that, in effect, and without it, he would never have been elected.

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