**Complete Oral Presentation**

**Interreligious Political Strategies**

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My thanks to Blandine, to Marie, and to everyone involved in the planning process to bring me here.

I am pleased to have been invited to join with this inter-academic, international, intercultural and inter-perspectives panel in a discussion on interreligious political strategies in the United States. It is a subject that I am very much interested in and which I have covered in my dissertation on how Mormons and Mormonism, a minority religious group, gained legitimacy to participate in the sociopolitical discussions of the country. I will illustrate my remarks focusing on the so-called “culture wars”. I have seen on more than one occasion how divisive such wars can be. Many of those who have a stake in it would like to draw others into their respective sides or to state their position if they do have one. Of course, as a person I do have an opinion, which certainly does not matter here, and rarely does, in fact. As a scholar, I have no judgment to formulate on the validity of the parties. How can it be otherwise when one view the issues that lead to the “culture wars” in religious, moral terms while the other views them in secular, legal ones? Yet, because I see religious groups like ordinary social groups, i.e., social clubs, unions, political parties, especially political parties, whose goal is to try to set society in a direction which corresponds to their worldviews, my interest lies specifically in finding answers as to why religious groups cooperate, gage the efficiency and limits of their cooperation.

**The religious factor in broader political perspective**

I think the theme of “interreligious political strategies” is ideally placed at the end in the tow-day conference. We have heard a lot about the place of religion in presidential elections. Those who spoke before me made very few statements with which I would want to dissociate myself. Of the many statements I fully agree with is Professor Michelot’s concluding remark yesterday that religion is well and alive, that it has lost much less power than other political mediators like political parties or trade unions, that is there to stay, probably in a more structuring way if not as visible as before.

Another reason – among the many mentioned yesterday – which may lead to conclude that religion is not a central theme in this presidential cycle is because in the previous one, especially in the primaries, most of the candidates were Evangelical Protestants who felt the need to show their religiosity or use surrogates to do so because it was a way to tackle Romney’s Mormon faith. There was then much more for the media to focus on. But we should not confuse the way the religious factor *presents itself* to us or is presented to us through the lens of the media with its absence or even to consider that it is inconsequential. You don’t have this time the same violent confrontation that played out in the media but of course, everyone knows the religious significance of Clinton’s choice of Catholic Tim Kaine as running mate and of Trump’s Evangelical Mike Pence. Those veeps have the legitimacy to sit around and talk to religious voters in ways that neither Clinton nor Trump can. Their statements and encounters with religious leaders and voters are not reported in the media – which has so much to do with media magnet Donald Trump – but they are for sure actively campaigning because they know that taping into the religious vote means taping also into an ethnic or minority vote.

Still, the question of interreligious political strategies, which has not been addressed so far, provides an opportunity to consider the “religious factor” in broader perspective, in local contexts where religion is much more “structuring” and present in every election cycle. In fact, I submit that we miss a good part of the political strength of religions if we focus on its expression solely during presidential elections. We run the risk of jumping too quickly into conclusions; for although they are significant markers, presidential elections are only one stop, in long term strategies. Donald Trump has threatened to overlook constitutional procedures to carry out certain policies if elected but we know of course that presidential power can sometimes be very limited if a president does not have Congress on his side. This means that presidential politics is not the only place we need to look at to assess the strength of the religious vote. We also need to look at local politics because that’s where it can be the most efficient. A presidential candidate may choose to ignore certain States during his campaign because they represent virtually nothing in the delegate balance. That, a congressional candidate cannot do. While it is not the case for Representatives of the House, we know that no matter the demographics of the States, they all send two Senators to Washington. We had an illustration of how the religious factor could be influential recently in the struggle between President Obama – who was pushing for the Senate to confirm Judge Merrick Garland to fill the vacancy left by Scalia in the Supreme Court – and Senator Mitch McConnell. As you know, McConnell hails from Kentucky, which weighs only 8 electoral colleges. But this devout Southern Baptist happens to be Senate majority leader. He feels responsible first to his constituents, that is, the religious people who sent him to Washington. And through him and similar Senators and Representatives, religions can influence presidential politics: his refusal to even consider opening the hearing process that could lead to Judge Garland’s confirmation is enough to offset Obama’s agenda.

It is also true that Obama is not in the best political situation to change anything: he is a “lame-duck president” and doesn’t even have a majority in Congress. This is a clear indication that after presidential elections, we need to pay attention to who gets elected to Congress and what party has a majority there.

And there are many other types of local politics where interreligious strategies operate. And as will be seen later, rather than starting from presidents down, religious groups can also start from the local up to the president. I will focus here on two national examples: the first one has to do with efforts masterminded by Phyllis Schlaffly which culminated in the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) project; the second example will be gay marriage, the most recent and protracted “culture war”.

**Interreligious cooperation and the ERA project**

The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) was a project which proposed to amend the US Constitution adding the clause “Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of Sex.” It was proposed at every session of Congress beginning in 1923 but it was only in 1972, in the context of the civil rights movement, that it was approved and sent out for ratification by at least ¾ of the States pursuant to Article 5 of the Constitution.

The project was on a safe path to passage until Phyllis Schlaffly of the *Eagle Forum/Stop ERA* decided to coalesce religions around the idea that the ERA was bad news for society. In the “Mormon Culture” region for instance, which include Utah, Idaho, Arizona, Nevada, etc., favorability began to shrink in November 1974 just after she had visited the leaders of the Mormon Church and convinced them that it was bad news for society. From then on, the Mormon Church – which was neutral and had instructed its members to “vote their conscience” – moved swiftly to prevent ratification in Utah – where 63% favorability before November 1974 became 72% “no” when the local Assembly voted in February 1975 –, Arizona, Nevada, and it contributed to have the “yes” of the Assembly rescinded by a referendum. The Mormons joined in efforts which led to the same results in Virginia, Florida, Missouri, Illinois and North Carolina. The ratification deadline was extended to 1982 but of course, you would have known it if the project had materialized into a real amendment…

**Interreligious cooperation and gay marriage**

Gay marriage is a protracted “culture war” because it is a conflict that goes back at least to the 1960, overshadowed by the ERA but which began to pick up and replace ERA in the 1970s. As you know, several US States became battlegrounds over this issue in the aftermath of the *Defense of Marriage Act* (DOMA), cosponsored by Methodist Bob Barr (R-GA) and Catholic Don Nickles (R-OK) and signed into law in 1992 by Democratic President Bill Clinton.[[1]](#footnote-1) California stood out among the battleground States because of its long liberal history, and also because of clashes over homosexuality and gay rights in the 1970’s. The examples that readily come to mind are the election of Harvey Milk (1977) and the *Briggs Initiative* – also called *Proposition 6* (1978) – whose goal was to ban gays from education in California. That initiative can be cited as an example of “culture-wars” that failed in the ballot because it did not get enough traction among religious groups. I was chanced to interview in Salt Lake City the man who was Briggs chief of staff at the time of the initiative. This man, who is a Mormon, told me that he had made the trip from California to Utah to enlist the Mormon Church, as Schlaffly had done, in the fight. To his surprise, he was turned down because the leaders of the Church then thought that putting people out of work was not the best way to defend moral values. A sign that “values” advocates did not feel very comfortable with the initiative is the fact that they wholeheartedly embraced Ronald Reagan and carried him to the presidency in spite of his lack of support for the initiative when he was governor of California.

Clashes between homosexuals and religious people came to the fore again in the 1999-2000 election cycle over a referendum of popular initiative[[2]](#footnote-2) which proposed to amend the Golden State’s constitution with the phrase “Only marriage between a man and woman is valid or recognized in California.” The initiative, known as *California* *Defense of Marriage Act* or *Proposition 22*, was introduced by a coalition of more than twenty religious groups among them the Sikhs, the Mormons, the Catholics and the Southern Baptists. It did not require much effort on their part for the proposition to pass the ballot on March 7, 2000, with a whopping 61% of the vote. The LGBT advocates lost in the ballot but the State’s Supreme Court granted their request in May 2008, striking the Proposition 22 amendment on the ground that it was not consistent with principles of equal protection.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The leading conservative forces of the Defense Marriage coalition did not wait for the decision of the Court to mount a counter-attack. Anticipating the 2008 elections, a new Protect Marriage coalition, set up without the Mormons, introduced another initiative which became known as *Proposition 8*. Pre-election polls leading to May – the month the State’s Supreme Court decision on *Prop 22* was handed – showed that the LGBT advocates, who were better organized this time, would win in the ballot. As politicians do when they want to bring new impetus to their campaigns, in June 2008, the California Conference of Catholic Bishops asked Archbishop George Niederauer of San Francisco to call the Mormon Church to the rescue. Niederauer was much-appreciated and had good interfaith relations with the Mormon Church during his 11-year stay in Utah as Bishop of the Salt Lake City diocese. The Mormon Church welcomed his invitation because it provided an opportunity to further strengthen relations with Catholics and Evangelical Protestants, in particular. It intervened in a manner that drastically changed the outcome of the election: its membership in California barely amounted to 2% of the population (the same nationally) but it was reported that in some cases Mormons represented up to 90% of the volunteers who went door-to-door to get people out to vote, and their financial contribution exceeds 40% of the total expenses of the “Yes” side of the referendum. The results of the November 2008 elections showed that California could be both a progressive and a conservative State: more than 61% of its population voted for Barack Obama (who opposed gay marriage then) while more than 52% voted for *Prop 8*.

The rest of the story is public knowledge: *Prop 8* and all similar laws in the country were appealed and what LGBT advocates had lost in ballots and legislative chambers were again won in the courts (*United States v. Windsor*, 2013; *Hollingsworth v. Perry*, 2013; *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2014). Conservatives point to such discrepancies as examples that the courts need to be reined in because they do not follow the voice of the majority of the people. This, the religious right agrees on. But Donald Trump, supposedly the candidate who could guarantee some balance in their favor in the federal Supreme Court, is a point of fracture. Top Evangelical leaders are more divided about him than they were about Mitt Romney’s Mormonism; he repulses Catholics more than Newt Gingrich had in the previous primaries; and, reacting desperately to the current trend, Evan McMullin, a Mormon, gave up his position as House Republican Policy director to run for president, hoping if anything to further undermine Trump by capturing some of his coreligionists’ vote. Put differently, Republicans are in disarray and in disconnect with their religious base. Ultimately, this means that unlike most Republican candidates, Donald Trump has not been able to and does not show that he can tap into the vast resources of the religious right. A vote for him can only be “a default vote” for lack of other options.

**Some principles that guide interreligious political strategies**

The idea of “a default vote” also lands me naturally into the moment when I need to make some remarks on why religions develop common political strategies. Allow me to begin with two quotes, one relates to religious history, and the other one, although not directly related to religion will speak to those familiar with Euro-American history.

Quote 1: “One of the images […] which has struck me forcibly recently is the cover illustration of a new history of the Knights of Malta: one of the military orders set up specially to defend medieval Christendom against Islam. The picture is the reproduction of a miniature showing Prince Zizim, brother of the Ottoman Sultan, being feasted by the Knights in their then headquarters on the island of Rhodes. They had granted him asylum against his brother; so here were the brethren of organizations sworn to fight the infidel, who had chosen to *ally with one infidel against another* to further their long-term aims” (Robert A. K. Runcie, Retired Archbishop of Canterbury, “Religion and Diplomacy”, 1995: 10, italics mine).

I admit that this quote rather tells about religions wars than interreligious political strategies. The “principle” I am interested in stands nonetheless.

Quote 2: “The day that France takes possession of N[ew] Orleans […] seals the union of two nations [France and Spain] who in conjunction can maintain exclusive possession of the ocean. From that moment we must marry ourselves to the British fleet and nation. […] This is not a state of things we seek or desire. It is one which this measure, if adopted by France, forces on us…” (Pdt. Th. Jefferson to Robert Livingston, 1802).

One needs to keep in mind that Jefferson was considering this *mariage de raison* with the British less than thirty years after the war of independence.

The principle I want to highlight with these quotes is that interreligious political strategies are an old war and political strategy which Evangelical activist Francis Schaeffer revived in 1980 by rehabilitating the term “co-belligerence”. It refers to a situation which brings Evangelical Protestants together with groups which they have vigorously opposed, and continue to oppose on matters of doctrine – into a political coalition to fight for issues that matter to all of them. In a sense, they are Thomas Jefferson who wanted to marry the United States with the country that it had fought for independence; they are the Knights of Malta, strange bedfellows to use Shakespearian phrase quoted by the panel chair and which happens to be in a title in which three Canadian scholars discuss Mormons and the Moral Majority.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The two culture wars I have referred to above, ERA and gay marriage, points us to a number of principles that find justification in the Runcie and Jefferson quotes:

1 – Interreligious political strategies are motivated by expediency, the need to react at the right time and with the proper means to ensure victory. I’ve quoted the example of the Knights of Malta and of Jefferson but I could have referred to rival candidates vying for election and the conclusion would have been the same: old-time rivals (Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders) negotiate temporary alliances in order to have better chances at defeating a more threatening opponent (Donald Trump, for instance). And on the other side you can take the examples of Paul Ryan, Ted Cruz, etc., who have eventually toned down or openly endorsed Trump.

2 – The effectiveness of interreligious political strategies depends less on the size of co-belligerents than on their ability to effectively mobilize their bases for grassroots organization and on their financial strength money to reach out to more people. Mormons were a minority in California but their involvement brought the extra resources the coalition needed to insure victory. And this is why I think we ought to look beyond numbers and even presidential elections if we want to come up with a full answer of what the religious vote is. One person can have more impact on the outcome of elections through his financial contributions than whatever number of people you can come up with unless they go to the polls and cast a ballot. Political strength therefore is not only a matter of large numbers: as was shown yesterday, the Hispanics are a huge potential for whoever can tap into it but it is more of a “sleeping giant” if it does not mobilize.

3 – Interreligious political strategies work because although they may bring greater appreciation of an opponent they do not entail renunciation of what each cobelligerent stands for. Feasting Prince Zizim does not mean that the Knights of Malta had converted to the Muslim faith; nor did Jefferson have in mind to renounce the independence of his country in considering an alliance with the British. In other words, the coalitions the religious groups create are not political entities in which their uniqueness is dissolved and where they are silenced. Plurality is their essence.

4 – This point goes right along the previous: interreligious political strategies are temporary alliances. They may continue on an implicit basis but cobelligerents are free to pursue their own individual aims. We have seen this in the way the Evangelicals, especially Southern Baptists, opposed Mitt Romney’s Mormonism in his two bids for the presidency. On the other hand, we have recently seen a surprise move on the part of the Mormon Church which supported Senate Bill or SB 296, a law which protects LGBT people against discrimination in employment, housing, medical care, etc. in Utah.

**Conclusion**

In lieu of a conclusion, I’d like to insist on the permanence of the religious factor in elections in general. It may become dormant and even almost invisible at the national level but religions more active than one can imagine at the local level. They are among “State’s rights” advocates; they are in city councils and other local decision-making bodies trying to shape society from the bottom-up. Their ability to join forces at any time and intervene in national politics must not be underestimated.

1. Public Law 104-199, 104 Congress. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. California is one of the ten States where the people can initiate a referendum. Depending on the nature of the initiative, it takes 5% of signatures of voters at the previous gubernatorial election to introduce an initiative to amend the State’s Statutes or 8% to amend its Constitution. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See *In re Marriages Cases* (S147999), May 15 2008, p. 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Brinkerhoff, Merlin B. et al. “Mormonism and the Moral Majority Make Strange Bedfellows?: An Exploratory Critique”, *Review of Religious Research* 3 (1987) : 236–251. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)