

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM -- THEN, NOW AND ROMNEY

Richard Reeves, December 7, 2007

MANCHESTER, N.H. -- I had trouble choosing a lead for this column on Mitt Romney's nice speech about religious freedom last Thursday morning. I am for religious freedom and for freedom from religion. I am not for Romney, though, God knows -- oops! -- he certainly looks like a president should.

I considered four first paragraphs:

Lead 1: More than 175 years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville, an intellectual Roman Catholic, traveling in the new United States to write a book he came to call "Democracy in America," wrote this in his notebook:

"It's incredible to see the infinite number of subdivisions into which the sects of America have split. ... Each new sect separates a little further while nearing pure Deism. ... The reformed religion is a sort of compromise."

Lead 2: More than 20 years ago, I received a package in the mail from a man named Arthur Glauberman, in Newton, N.J., a place my father often went to fish for trout he never caught. He said his father, Isadore Glauberman, who died in 1978, had found a Bible in the attic and thought it might be mine. The inscription on the first page read: "Presented to Richard Reeves by the Primary Department of The Church School of Old Bergen Dutch Reformed Church, September 22, 1946." It was mine and still is, well-thumbed and read, one of my most important possessions.

Lead 3: Sometime in the early or mid-1970s, I settled into my seat on a United Airlines flight, and the man next to me, wearing a small gold cross in his lapel, turned to me and said: "Have you found Jesus?" I reached for the overhead button, then told the stewardess I wanted to change my seat.

Lead 4: In 1979, I had a conversation about religion in the White House with former President Nixon, who was raised a Quaker and rather cynically began a tradition of White House prayer breakfasts, and he said something interesting: "When religion started talking about the masses rather than what it could do for the individual, then religion went ..." He thrust both his thumbs down and made a noise something like "Phffft!"

I debated using one of those because I think it would be offensive and too provocative to begin by saying that I consider many of the tenets of Mormonism to be very odd stuff. I can handle its rejection of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, in favor of a God who is Himself a physical being.

But I will never get over my first visit to the museum of the Mormon Tabernacle in Salt Lake City. A great mural there depicts the origins of the phrase "Latter-Day Saints," the idea that when Christ was resurrected he did not go to the side of his Father, but instead stopped off in North America to preach to and convert Jews who were dressed as Indians. OK, believe what you will -- I agreed with Nixon that religion should be personal -- but all the feathers did me in.

Obviously, Romney did not want to try to defend such beliefs, though he did say he believed the doctrines of his faith. His Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints has a singular kind of problem. It was founded in 1830, while Tocqueville was in America, and that means it has modern records; it was all written down at the time. We remember historically that a guy named Joseph Smith was talking to angels and found golden plates from God -- which no one else ever saw -- that ordered the creation of a new religion. And we know that the greatest of Mormon leaders, Brigham Young, the Moses who led his people to the promised land of Utah, had 56 children and 51 wives and was indicted for murder in a massacre of innocent farmers heading west on the Oregon Trail.

You can read all about these things in accounts by participants and witnesses. Jews, Christians and Muslims are better protected because their religions were founded before writing was common, and their histories are essentially verbal.

As for us, we live in interesting times. I, for one, am thrilled by the diversity of the candidates in both parties. But I am appalled by the rise of public religiosity that I began looking into after my airplane encounter with a fellow "born again." It is people like him, and their evangelical fundamentalism, who have been determined to turn American democracy into a struggle between religions, values and cultures. Not only have they succeeded, but they have been a driving force in turning American foreign policy into a cultural-religious war with Islam, a horrific, deadly confrontation that will do neither side any good.

There was a reason our Founding Fathers, who had seen Europe tear itself apart in religious wars, were so determined to separate church and state. They were right then, and they are right now. The candidates would do well to reaffirm that separation.