

December 7, 2013

## **The Bible as Bludgeon**

By FRANK BRUNI

YOU can make a successful run for political office in this country without an especially thick résumé, any exceptional talent for expressing yourself, a noteworthy education or, for that matter, a basic grasp of science.

But you better have religion. You better be ready to profess your faith in and fealty to God — the Judeo-Christian one, of course. And you better be convincing. A dust-up last week in the 2014 race for a United States Senate seat from Arkansas provided a sad reminder of this, showing once again that our ballyhooed separation of church and state is less canyon than itty-bitty crack.

The Democratic incumbent, Mark Pryor, released a television commercial. Yes, I know, it's awfully early for this sort of thing, given that the election is 11 months off. But Pryor's in trouble. His approval rating recently dipped below 40 percent. His state right now is much redder than it is blue. Republican strategists see his defeat as key to retaking the Senate majority.

And his Republican opponent, an up-and-coming congressman named Tom Cotton, is no slouch. Good-looking. Smart. Delayed a promising legal career to serve in the Army in Afghanistan and Iraq. Makes the hearts of his conservative compatriots quiver and their wallets open like steamed clams. A profile of him in the National Journal last week called him "too good to be true," noting his "perfect pedigree" and observing that his "timing couldn't be better." Arkansas, it said, is "a hellscape for Democrats."

So Pryor is taking a heavenly tack. His new commercial focuses not on health care, the sequester, immigration or anything like that. It extols the Bible. "This is my compass, my North Star," he says in the 30-second spot. "It gives me comfort and guidance to do what's best for Arkansas."

In response, the communications director for the National Republican Senatorial Committee, Brad Dayspring, pounced. But his complaint was not that Pryor was injecting gratuitous God talk into a campaign with less nebulous matters to discuss. Dayspring questioned whether Pryor was truly devout enough, emailing reporters a comment that Pryor made last year, when he said — cogently and correctly — that the Bible "is really not a rule book for political issues" and that "everybody can see it differently."

What should have been a back-and-forth about the proper place of religious testimonials in the electoral process was instead, astonishingly, a contretemps over whether Pryor had flip-flopped on Scripture as a legislative how-to manual. The implication was that Scripture is totally suitable as such.

And while it's tempting to attribute this silliness to a Southern politician's need to appeal to the Christian fundamentalists prevalent in that region, the Arkansas episode is indicative of how thoroughly Americans from coast to coast let religion permeate public life.

As full of insight and beauty as the Bible is, it's not a universally and unconditionally embraced document, and it's certainly not a secular one. Yet it's under the hand of almost every American president who takes the oath of office.

It's in classrooms, some of which teach creationism. The Texas Board of Education has been withholding approval of a widely used biology textbook because it presents evolution as more than just a theory. Thus, in the nation's second most populous state, whose governor essentially kicked off his 2012 presidential campaign with a stadium rally for tens of thousands of evangelicals, religion is trumping scholarship, at least for now.

"So help me God." "Under God." "In God We Trust." Perhaps we're meant to register these ubiquitous phrases as unspecific inspirations, vague recognitions of an undefined higher power, general appeals to generous living. But they're rooted in a given religious tradition and are arguably the gateways to the Arkansas ridiculousness and to the overwrought accusations of a "war on Christmas" that herald the holiday season as surely as Frosty the Snowman and Black Friday do.

Three of four Americans are at least nominally Christian. But that leaves one in four who aren't. One in five Americans don't claim any binding religious preference or affiliation, and their ranks have grown significantly over the last two decades. Out-and-out atheists remain a sliver of the population, but a restive sliver at that. On some Sundays in some cities over recent months, they've gathered by the hundreds for church-style celebrations without psalms, making the point that good will and community don't depend on divinity.

The centrality of religion in this country's birth and story can't be denied. And shouldn't be. And having the Bible at inaugurations honors tradition more than it offends pluralism. But using the Bible as a litmus test for character betrays the principles of religious liberty and personal freedom, along with the embrace of diversity, that are equally crucial to America's identity and strength. It also defies the wisdom of experience. How many self-anointed saints have been shown not to practice what they preach? How many of the ostentatiously faithful have fallen? Theirs is an easy pose, and sometimes an empty one.

The intrusion of religion into campaigns gets ugly. During both of Barack Obama's presidential bids and over the years in between, his enemies tarred him with what they clearly saw as the most damning accusation of all: He's not Christian! The same kind of charge was infamously hurled at Kay Hagan, a North Carolina Democrat, on the road to her election to the Senate in 2008. Her opponent, Elizabeth Dole, ran a

commercial that showed Hagan's face while a voice — not Hagan's, though viewers could easily have thought it was — said, "There is no God."

So did Hagan denounce this as a wrongful commingling of piety and politics? No, she labeled it defamatory, saying in a commercial of her own that it was an example of "bearing false witness against fellow Christians."

"I taught Sunday school," she stressed in her ad, trotting out her religious bona fides, as if they were necessary and integral. "My faith guides my life."

For his own part, Pryor said the same thing last year when he also made his comments about the Bible as a questionable policy playbook. He wasn't distancing himself from Christianity, merely from the literalism of a text that was written long ago and includes some passages and prescriptions that no one heeds exactly. He was putting a particular creed in its proper place in government.

To applaud that isn't an affront to the faithful. It's actually more respectful of religion than not, because letting the government and its servants go too far in celebrating one religion over others creates the possibility of looking up someday to find that the religion being promoted isn't your own.

-