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Elyse Nelson Winger on Religion and the Presidential Race

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WGLT Sound Ideas Interview with Elyse Nelson Winger, February 3, 2016

Judith Valente: At times senator Ted Cruz seems to be running for not Commander in Chief, but Chief Pastor. Here is addressing a group in Iowa days before the Caucuses

Ted Cruz (quote): The third and final thing, I want to ask each of you to do is pray. When you wake up in the morning, when you shave, when you're having lunch, when you're lying down in bed simply take one minute and say, 'Father God, please continue this spirit of revival, awaken the body of Christ, so that we may pull back from this abyss'.

Valente: And then there is President Donald Trump who epitomizes a "greed is good mentality", advocated by several millionaires. Trump is attending church again, and even quoting St. Paul. Though, he stumbled badly by referring to the New Testament book known as *Second Corinthians* as "Two Corinthians". And, it isn't just conservative candidates who have gotten religion. Hillary Clinton told the New York Times her favorite book is The Bible. She is increasingly talking about her Methodist upbringing. And then of course there is Senator Bernie Sanders, a self-prescribed, non-practicing Jew. Yet, He is leading in the Democratic polls in New Hampshire. So, what accounts for this mysterious blend of American politics and religion? Reverend Elyse Nelson Winger, the Chaplain at Illinois Wesleyan University, says people of faith sometimes vote in confounding ways

Elyse Nelson Winger: Religion and politics... (laughs)... it's an age-old issue and opportunity and problem. I think this overt way of speaking about faith as a politician running for elective office, reflects a serious misunderstanding of the role of the politician. You know, I think it's totally acceptable for candidates to share their world views, their religious beliefs, or their non-religious ones, and to have informed and inspired conversations about why they're committed to public service. But, if he or she is going to express those religious beliefs it comes with responsibility to see common ground with Americans with all different kinds of backgrounds and beliefs. The truth is, when Cruz invites people to pray, I think he is misusing his public role as a senator and as a candidate for elected office. Indeed, it can even be coercive to use one's public voice and to call on people to behave in a particular religious way.

Valente: Survey after survey, poll after poll, shows that Americans think it's important for their Presidential candidates to have some sort of religious underpinning. Speaking as a pastor, does the public really need to know a candidate's religion?

Nelson Winger: What people need to know: what's this candidates' vision and policies and plans are for defending and supporting the Constitution, and supporting the American people and this country. Now, if one's religious beliefs are a part of the framework that inspires and informs their work, there are places where it is appropriate to share that.

Valente: What would be appropriate? Sometimes, as we heard in that clip, Ted Cruz sounds as if he's addressing a Sunday worship service?

Nelson Winger: Again, I think that if one is going to talk about his or her religious perspectives and beliefs in the public square as a candidate, it comes with a responsibility to connect those beliefs with common shared values with Americans no matter their background.

Valente: Now, a majority of Americans do they say they would not vote for an atheist, and yet an increasing number of Americans are turning away from organized religion... 20% check off 'none' when asked about their religious affiliation. How do you reconcile both of these trends?

Nelson Winger: Right, these surveys are challenging to understand, but I do think there's a difference between those who do choose to disaffiliate or are not affiliated with religious institutions and a belief in God. And so, there are those who have a belief in God who don't affiliate with religion. But I also think that in America civic religion... civil religion... is so embedded in our politics and in the Presidency. I mean—

Valente: What do you mean by that? Civil religion?

Nelson Winger: Um, I can't imagine any presidential speech that I've heard not ending with, 'God bless you, and God bless the United States of America'. Umm, our children say the Pledge of Allegiance at school every day, and say "One Nation, Under God" even though that addition, during the Cold War. The President is expected to preside like... somewhat like, a religious leader in times of national celebration and national tragedy. I mean Barack Obama preached an amazing Sermon in Charleston, at the funeral of the pastor that was murdered. My best take on this is that it is hard for us to imagine a President not being in that role. But ultimately, it is a failure of imagination because there are ways in which a president can be a leader who speaks from her deepest values without using explicitly religious language, and I think it is a conversation we need to have a society.

Valente: Let's talk a little bit about senator Bernie Sanders. Now (laughs), here's another paradox or irony: he's made no secret of the fact that he is a non-practicing Jew. So, what does the popularity of this obviously nonreligious candidate suggest?

Nelson Winger: Well I think it tells us something about the demographics of the Democratic party. Umm, unlike the Republican that has by and large since the Civil Rights Movement and Jerry Falwell's moral majority aligned itself with the Christian conservative right. The Democratic party is more racially and religiously and demographically diverse. Candidates generally lift up the shared values of these diverse constituents. It doesn't mean that religion isn't a part of the picture or that Democrats do not talk about religion, but it doesn't pay the same primary role.

Valente: Do you think it suggest that America, which has elected only one Catholic one non-Protestant President, is ready for a Jewish President?

Nelson Winger: I would hope so, but we are clearly a very divided country on these matters.

Valente: How is electing someone who wants to inject their personal religious beliefs into public policy different from what has transpired in some of the Middle Eastern countries? Like Iran, say which follows Shari law or Islamic law, Saudi Arabia which follows Islamic law as their civil law.

Nelson Winger: I think those who talk about a Christian America, who use the rhetoric of God's law, talk about America as a city on a hill, actually have a lot in common with Theocracy more than representative Democracy. And I think we should just pay close attention to ways in which explicit religious doctrine is evoked, especially when it comes to law in this country. And then, make connections and wonder how much different is that than from countries that want to see Muslim religious law, for example, as the central legal code for their countries.

Valente: Do you have any parting words for advice for people of faith who will be casting their primary votes in Illinois in a few weeks?

Nelson Winger: You know, the world's major religious traditions all share an invitation to their adherence to make a better world, to be in the world, to advocate for the poor, to care for the Earth, to work for peace, and we have an opportunity as people of faith to participate in that work in civic life. And so, I invite people of faith to, like me, look at what candidates stand for, and how they share their kinds of values to make a better and more equal society for all people, but to understand that we do that as citizens in a multi-faith and multicultural democracy. And that is a privilege, but we're not there to make new Christians, or Muslims, or Hindus, or Jews, we are there to share in this work as citizens.

Valente: Reverend Elyse Nelson Winger is the Chaplain at Illinois Wesleyan University and ordained in the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Thank you so much for chatting with us.

Nelson Winger: Thanks. Great to be here.

Valente: I am Judy Valente.