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The Spirituality of Congress

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We may enjoy some level of separation of church and state in this country, but there hardly exists anywhere a separation of faith from public office. There is spiritual vitality in virtually every branch of government; from President Bush's Methodism all the way to the disciplined Catholicism of Justices Alito, Scalia, Kennedy, Thomas and Roberts, faith and government are linked arm in arm.

This is nowhere more evident than with the recently-convened 110th Congress. According to a story distributed by Newhouse News Service, this Congress will be one of the most religiously diverse bodies we have ever had.

For instance, for the first time in our history, Congress will include among its ranks a Muslim. Keith Ellison, a newly-elected representative from Minnesota, converted from Catholicism to Islam when he was 19 years old. Throughout his campaign, his religion, as some readers will recall, was a source of contention that culminated when he announced that he would take his oath of office on the Qur'an rather than the Bible.

The new Congress will feature two Buddhists: Hank Johnson from Georgia and Mazie Hirono from Hawaii. And for the first time in our history, Jews will outnumber Episcopalians -- not that either of them can boast overwhelming numbers. Overall among the Jews there are 30 representatives and 13 senators. Compare this to the number of Episcopalians, who have 27 House seats and 10 senators. And with Mitt Romney, Governor of Massachusetts, considering a run for the presidency, it is also interesting to note that 10 representatives and five senators share his Mormon faith. In fact, Harry Reid of Nevada, the new Democratic majority leader in the Senate, is a Mormon.

Roman Catholic is the largest religious group represented in the new Congress. Catholics will have

129 representatives and 25 senators. The next largest group is Baptists, with 59 representatives and seven senators. Coming in third are Methodists, with 48 representatives and 13 senators.

It is also revealing to note who is not represented in the new Congress. No one from the Church of God is in the House, though the Senate includes a member of that group. There are also no Congregationalists in the House, but there is one senator from that group as well. The inverse is true for Quakers -- one in the House, but none in the Senate.

Meanwhile, there are six House members who describe themselves as unaffiliated. Of course, given the evangelistic proclivities of Baptists and Methodists, this could change in the course of their terms.

The big question is: What does all this mean? Well, for one thing, our new religiously-diverse Congress seems to be "awash in a sea of faith," to borrow an expression from the title of Yale historian Jon Butler's award-winning history of early American religion. True now as then, Christianity may dominate the religious landscape, but it is far from alone in representing faith journeys in America.

Our religiously-diverse Congress also serves to remind us of the power of religious freedom. This freedom is established in the First Amendment of our Constitution. Because Congress must never show partiality to any one faith, nor hinder anyone's free exercise of faith, spirituality has blossomed in the rich soil of American freedom.

Of course, it may be a cause of concern to some that such diverse forms of spirituality have taken root in our culture, for many of these expressions of faith do not follow traditional lines of Christian belief. But as we find with the 110th Congress, from freedom emerges diversity. You can never have one without the other.