

Religion, politics getting too cozy, Carter warns

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SALT LAKE CITY (RNS) For a man who evangelized foreign leaders and taught Sunday school while U.S. president, Jimmy Carter has some strong words for what he sees as an "excessive melding of religion and politics."

And it began, he said, with the denomination he called home for more than seven decades: the Southern Baptist Convention.

"It's now metastasized to other religions, where an actual affiliation between the denomination and the more conservative elements of the Republican Party is almost official," Carter said during a stop here to promote his new book, "White House Diary."

"There are pastors openly calling for members to vote a certain way," the 86-year-old ex-president said. "That's a serious breakdown in the principle of separation of church and state."

Carter and his wife, Rosalynn, left the Southern Baptists in 2000 after the denomination's long shift toward conservative politics and new doctrinal statements that are, in Carter's view, more creed-based and anti-woman. But the couple remain Baptists and worship at Maranatha Baptist Church when they are home in Plains, Ga.

Though Carter criticizes conservative Christians' influence on politics, he argues religions and religious people have a right -- and a duty -- to speak up on moral issues.

"It's completely legitimate for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or Baptists or Methodists or Catholics or anyone else to express the views of their particular faith, even when it's an opinion about prospective legislation," he said. "The Mormons have a perfect right to express their views against gay marriage."

The U.S. Constitution simply says states cannot establish religion, he said. It does not silence religious voices.

"White House Diary" condenses 5,000 pages of journals Carter kept during his presidency, and offers glimpses of Jimmy Carter, the Baptist.

Even as he records downing a couple of "good strong drinks" with Tip O'Neill (drinking is a no-no for many Southern Baptists) or describes Sen. Henry "Scoop" Jackson of Washington as acting like "an ass," Carter's faith shines through.

When the Pennsylvania congressional delegation was pressuring him for a particular U.S. attorney appointment, Carter wrote, "I told them in a nice way to go to hell."

Because he was open about his beliefs, Carter said during the interview, heads of state often quizzed him. "I was never hesitant," he said, "to discuss faith in Christ."