The Tories will be watching how Republican's religion-in-politics tactic plays

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The race for the Republican Party's Presidential nomination in the USA is turning into a religious farce. As Mitt Romney, Rick Santorum and Newt Gingrich slug it out to become top dog, each tries to out-religion the other.

Romney is a Mormon, something that Santorum has suggested is not really Christian. Santorum is a Catholic and says that the only Catholic president there has ever been in theUSA, John. F. Kennedy, "makes him throw up" for advocating separation of church and state.

And, in what appears to be a first in presidential politics, Newt Gingrich – also a Catholic - suggested on Sunday that the federal government should develop ethical guidelines for in vitro fertilization. Standing outside a Baptist church inFlorida, he said: "I believe life begins at conception. I would favour a commission to look seriously at the ethics of how we manage fertility clinics." He said regulations were necessary, because the clinics are "creating life".

Mr Gingrich is not only pro-religious, he is anti-secular. He told a church congregation nearAtlantathat Americans have faced a "50-year assault" by those trying to alienate people of faith. "The forces of the secular left believe passionately and deeply, and with frankly a religious fervour, in their world view and they will regard what I am saying as a horrifying assault on what they think is the truth," Gingrich said. "Because their version of the truth is to have a totally neutral government that has no meaning." However, he didn't agree with Santorum about the Kennedy speech, which he said was "remarkable".

All three candidates think that Obama is either an atheist or a Muslim. Anyway, not a "real" Christian.

The rhetoric has been ratcheting up, with Santorum now suggesting that the constitutional separation of church and state is undesirable. "What kind of country do we live in that says only people of non-faith can come into the public square and make their case?" Mr. Santorum said on the ABC News program This Week. "That makes me throw up," he said, adding later, "I don't believe in anAmericawhere the separation of church and state is absolute."

That caused quite a stir and in another interview, Mr. Santorum defended his criticism of Kennedy's famous speech in which JFK said: "I am not the Catholic candidate for President. I am the Democratic Party's candidate for President who happens also to be a Catholic. I do not speak for my church on public matters--and the church does not speak for me."

Mr Santorum says: "The idea that the church can have no influence or no involvement in the operation of the state is absolutely antithetical to the objectives and vision of our country."

Mr Santorum's speech sounded very much like the one Baroness Warsi made at the Vatican a couple of weeks ago, which further fuels the idea that the Tories in Britain are experimenting with the American model of appealing to the religious right.

The Richard Dawkins Foundation poll showed that three quarters of people in this country think religion should stay out of politics, and the same thing is seen in the latest Pew Research poll in theUSA. Although only 53% of respondents thought the churches should keep out of politics, this represents a sharp rise on previous polls.

It may be that Mr Santorum's courting of the religious conservatives and the extravagance of his language will eventually be counterproductive. His idiotic rhetoric might be turning more people off than it is turning on.

No doubt Tory strategists are watching Mr Santorum's progress closely. If his tactic of overstating religion pays off, we can expect to see a similar ratcheting up of the Pickles/Warsi "Britain is a Christian country" message here.

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