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Mitt Romney & The Evangelical Vote

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

Mark Silk blogged yesterday on Mitt Romney's latest strategy for dealing with the evangelical vote in the GOP primaries. Silk, whose new blog at Beliefnet and his long-time blog, *Spiritual Politics*, are both must-reads, is one of those rare breeds, an academic who writes in lucid and lively prose. He also is one of the nation's leading analysts of the relationship of religion and politics in American life.

Recently, one of Romney's strategists stated that this time, the campaign is not going to tailor its message to secure the evangelical vote. Silk correctly notes that this approach is preferable to Romney's unsuccessful effort to try and obscure the differences between his Mormon faith and mainstream evangelical religion in 2008. But, he wonders why Romney does not merely be straight-forward about his religious faith and seek to generate a common moral consensus as the basis of an effort to generate support from the evangelical community.

It is beyond doubt that, theoretically, one can separate moral and political views from the religious and dogmatic beliefs from which they are drawn. It is a cardinal principle of Catholic social teaching that the natural law is accessible to all people, and that the natural law, enlightened by faith, is the basis for the Church's teachings on morality, including social justice issues. Regular readers will know that I have my problems with the natural law tradition: The dualism that sustains it cannot easily be reconciled with *Gaudium et Spes* 22 which suggests a more intrinsic relationship between grace and nature than Aquinas would allow. (N.B. Once you get into the grace and nature debate, you quickly get above my theological pay grade!) But, the key question is a simpler one, namely, can Romney reach beyond the evangelical suspicions of his Mormonism to craft a moral vision those evangelicals find compatible?

In 1979, the Rev. Jerry Falwell formed the Moral Majority as an explicitly political organization that would bring together people of diverse religious creeds to support a common moral vision. The group

succeeded in many tasks. It registered literally millions of new conservative voters, helping break the evangelical psychology that had previously kept conservative evangelical voters away from politics. It put critical social issues such as abortion and pornography on the front burner of the nation's political discourse. Most significantly, it changed the way millions of Christians saw themselves and the way their secular compatriots viewed Christianity as well. Whatever you thought of Falwell, his significance is undeniable. Yet, after 10 years, Falwell shut down the Moral Majority and shifted his focus to Liberty University and his pastorate at Thomas Road Baptist Church. The Moral Majority did not fail, but its work was supplanted by issue-specific groups and, while Roman Catholics were always the largest contingent within the membership rolls of Moral Majority, the idea of an alliance built on a common moral vision had limits both politically and ecclesiastically.

Mr. Romney is an intelligent man and a wealthy man. He is well advised to hire some consultants who understand the history and dynamics of the conservative evangelical community. Dismissing their importance to securing the GOP nomination is madness: One of Falwell's signature triumphs was to bring a host of centrist Republicans to the right on his issues, and you ignore his constituency at your peril. It is a different, and much more complicated task, to deal with anti-Mormon bigotry. He cannot take the stance that JFK took: Seeing religion as "private" is exactly what evangelicals believe got America into trouble in the first place. And, the skepticism evangelicals (and others) have towards Mormonism is deep: They do not subscribe to the Nicene Creed and, just so, they are not Christians in the sense that that most basic designation has been used for 17 centuries. That is a big hurdle. But, the current occupant of the White House is a black man whose middle name is "Hussein." One thing we can all agree on: With God, all things are possible and in America, you will likely live to see some of them.

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