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Q & A: Mark Silk on the Tea Party

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 21, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

This week, Q & A examines the effect the Tea Party will have on the GOP's prospects in the upcoming midterm elections. Today, we hear from Mark Silk, who writes the blog Spiritual Politics [1]and is a contributor at BeliefNet [2]. Silk is a professor at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut.

The question: Will the Tea Party be a blessing or a curse for the GOP in the upcoming midterm elections?

Mark Silk: I predict that come November the Tea Party will be a blessing for the Republican Party -- unless the Democrats can manage to hang Tea Party extremism around GOP necks. As a constituency, the Tea Party represents little more than the social conservative base of the GOP, re-energized. What distinguishes it from the religious right of yore is that the leadership -- and especially the money boys at Tea Party Express -- has fixed the messaging firmly on low taxes and small government. But it?s never been a movement of libertarians.

Real libertarians are so thin on the ground in America that they can?t run for office as themselves. Rand Paul may once have been one of them, but what secured him the GOP senatorial nomination in Kentucky was taking the pro-life pledge. That brought James Dobson on board and the rest is history. If there?s a pro-choice, pro-gay marriage Tea Party candidate out there, I haven?t heard of her.

But you?d be wrong to think the Tea Party consists of social conservatives masquerading in conservative economic clothing. From the outset, the religious right had low taxes and small government on its to-do list. Ask Bob Riley of Alabama. In 2003, when that conservative Republican governor invoked Christian values to shift Alabama?s hopelessly regressive tax burden from poor people towards wealthy corporate interests, the Christian Coalition of Alabama came out in vigorous opposition?and Riley?s referendum was slaughtered at the polls. It has been no stretch at all for Christian conservatives like Bob McDonnell of Virginia, Sharron Angle of Nevada, Michelle Bachmann of Minnesota, and now, Christine O?Donnell of Delaware (to say nothing of the Mama-Grizzly-in-chief) to wrap themselves in the Tea Party agenda.

If that agenda seems to have the Democrats in Congress spooked, it?s because they have given Americans little reason to believe in the legislation they?ve worked so hard to pass. And because a populist economic movement in hard times?even one as wacky as the Tea Party?is difficult for them to disrespect. But if they don?t start disrespecting it, and quickly, it?s curtains in November.

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[1] http://www.spiritual-politics.org/
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