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Three Cheers for Romney

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

Piers Morgan is a sorry interviewer in every regard but he was especially dense last night when he began questioning GOP presidential candidate Mitt Romney about his faith and its relationship to his governance. He kept asking Romney if he thought being gay was a sin and Romney kept replying that he was running for political office, not religious office, and he would leave the category of "sin" to the religious experts.

Morgan continued to press and Romney availed himself of a line from John F. Kennedy's speech to the Houston Ministerial Association in 1960: I do not speak for my church, and my church does not speak for me. Morgan tried again to see if "personally" Romney thought being gay was a sin, and Romney refused to budge. He would not answer.

Three cheers for Mitt Romney. "Sin" is not a legal category in this country and he is running to be the nation's chief executive, not its principal theologian. The reasons a person belongs to a church are complicated and varied and, although no one likes to admit it, everyone is, in some sense, a cafeteria Mormon or a cafeteria Methodist. Orthodoxy is not a requirement for political office and, indeed, such concerns are specifically prohibited by the Constitution. Paul Revere warned the British about religious tests for office, didn't he?

I have been critical of the formulation John Kennedy used in Houston, that his religion was "private" and should matter only to him. I understand why he said that in the context of his campaign. And, I also understand that his speech was not a theological dissertation. I understand, too, that he is not responsible for the fact that others have taken his words further than he did at Houston, and the word "private" was about to attain a significance in the legal world in *Griswold v. Connecticut*, and then be conflated with Kennedy's use of that word, in ways Kennedy himself never intended. Still, the idea of religion as

?private? is a decidedly un-Catholic way of seeing the world and I wish JFK had used the word ?personal.?

In his exchange with Morgan, the host asked about the relationship of morality to governance. Romney used an example that is instructive: Murder is against the law, and in most moral codes it is considered a sin, but not all sins are the subject of civil law. Romney, who just had a highly successful fundraising event in Las Vegas, could have used that city as people?s exhibit #1. Las Vegas is a city built upon two things: sin and federal water projects. The culture learned a lesson from Prohibition: sometimes, taking legal action against sin is counter-productive. But, the lesson of Prohibition is not that we should tear up the criminal code either. When deciding whether or not to combat a moral evil with the blunt, and coercive, instrument of civil law, we must first ask: will it work?

This point is vital, because those who are always prattling on about certain issues, like abortion and gay marriage, being ?non-negotiable? while others permit a wide range of Catholic opinion because they are subject to ?prudential judgment? are engaged in a shell game that tried to jump over this necessary question: will it work? On the issue of abortion, it is true that the Supreme Court could overturn *Roe v. Wade*, but there is no going back to 1973. Most states would, I suspect, put *Roe* or some version of it onto their statute books. A few, actually a very few, might criminalize abortion but, even then, no woman would be more than a bus ride away from a clinic and after a few botched illegal abortions, I doubt if any state in the Union would keep abortion illegal.

The ?non-negotiable? position has a political aim, not a moral one. It does not seek to end the scourge of abortion, it seeks to align the Catholic Church with the Republican Party. If Professor Robbie George and his American Principles Project and other such groups were truly serious about ending abortion, they would be calling out Cong. Ryan for his budget which cuts large sums of money from programs that help women facing crisis pregnancies make the decision to keep their child. They would support a more aggressive adoption policy, and throw some money that way, instead of cutting such programs. They would certainly not be opposed to the Affordable Care Act (aka Obamacare) which creates disincentives for insurance companies to offer abortion coverage and for customers to procure it. Of course, none of this comes up if you are only interested in providing religious cover for your political friends.

Gov. Romney should not be expected to delve into the intricate religious, philosophical and constitutional arguments his comments invite. He is welcome to, of course, but sophistication in such matters is not a requirement for office. From his comments last night on CNN you get a sense of where the man?s compass would lead him, and there was nothing alarming in his words. If Romney could find a way to show some of the spark and the backbone he displayed when confronting Piers Morgan on this issue on other issues, he might have a real chance at securing the nomination and defeating President Obama. It was Romney?s best performance to date.

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