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GOP Orthodoxy & Idolatry

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Distinctly Catholic

In yesterday's *New Republic*, Ed Kilgore gave a brief overview of the ways that social conservatives, especially white evangelicals, have joined forces with secular conservatives to support their no-tax agenda. Kilgore's article is fine so far as it goes and for a fuller explanation of the ways the Christian Right came to baptize laissez-faire economics, you are going to have to buy my biography of Jerry Falwell!

Kilgore notes that commitment to the Christian Right's agenda on issues like abortion have become GOP orthodoxy but most of his article notes the way Christian evangelicals have come to embrace laissez-faire capitalism on specifically religious grounds. He quotes from a recent letter sent out by televangelist James Robison, who played a large role in shaping the Religious Right back in the late 1970s. Robison wrote, "Depending on the federal government as our source is idolatry. We must control it, or it will control us. Stop the madness! Hitler believed that Germany needed a government over the people, not of the people. God deliver us from this kind of insanity.?"

There is idolatry at work, and it is dangerous, but it is the idolatry of the market that is conspicuous in Washington today.

The problem is that Christian conservatives did not just bring their issues into the GOP. They brought their style. They brought the logic and the language of orthodoxy and applied to issues like government spending on social programs and the tax code. In earlier times, Democrats might want to raise the minimum wage by one dollar and Republicans might not want to raise it at all. In negotiations, they might agree on a fifty cent increase and call it a day. Interests are made to be compromised and our government system was designed, as any reader of the *Federalist Papers* knows, to adjudicate such interests.

But, once you cast an economic position in terms of orthodoxy and invest it with a sense of divine origin

or participation in a divine plan, such compromise becomes not only more difficult, it becomes impossible. Last year, during the midterm elections, Republicans energized their base by pledging to come to Washington and brook no compromise. Liberals sat home. Moderate swing voters, concerned mostly about the economy and the lack of jobs, swung to the GOP. So, Republicans came to Washington and they have brooked no compromise. The economy, fragile to begin with, is now beset with the worst cancer it knows, uncertainty, as no budget deals appears forthcoming.

It is almost painful to watch John Boehner, a man who seems thoroughly decent and, as a veteran of the House, someone who has participated in plenty of compromises over the years. President Obama has promised everything except a date with Michelle in his efforts to secure a budget deal. But, the intransigents in the House GOP caucus insist that the only way to trim the deficit is to cut government spending. They further insist that the Pentagon sustain none of those cuts. So, the only cuts on the table are in social programs and other government services such as environmental protection, aid to schools, and the like.

The centerpiece of the GOP orthodoxy is opposition to tax increases. Back in 2000, when America actually was paying down its debt and the budget was running a surplus, Republicans insisted on tax cuts. Now that the economy is struggling to recover from the recession ? a recession in which, presumably by their calculations, lower tax rates played no part ? and the government faces deficits, they insist that it is a horrible time to raise taxes. House Majority Leader Eric Cantor walked out of budget negotiations over the issue of raising taxes to close the budget deficit, even though the proposed increases would not take effect this year, or next year, undercutting the idea that the increases would stall the recovery.

I am no fan of that variety of liberalism that thinks government programs are the solution to all problems. But, it is also abundantly apparent that that style of liberalism no longer exists. Further, as mentioned yesterday, I would be delighted to see experiments that would let the states design certain social programs more efficiently, provided that certain standards were applied to avoid a race to the bottom among the states. But, that, too, is not on the table. Instead, one side in the negotiations is ready to accept cuts in programs they value and the other side insists that they would risk their immortal souls by compromising on their no tax pledge. The idolatry that threatens the nation today is not, as Pastor Robison suggests, an idolatry of government but an idolatry of the market.

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