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The economy should not be politicians' golden calf

Bill Tammeus | Oct. 3, 2012 A small c catholic

Both major political parties in the United States have it wrong. It's not all about the economy, stupid. And it never should have been.

And yet what is Mitt Romney's focus? He said it plainly in his acceptance speech [1] at the GOP national convention last month: "What America needs is jobs. Lots of jobs."

(And it was no coincidence that the same night Romney said that, one of the people he beat for the nomination, Jon Huntsman, was on "The Colbert Report" saying that "it's all about job creation.")

And what is Barack Obama's focus? The economy. And it has been from his very first State of the Union message [2] in 2009, when he said:

"For many Americans, the state of our economy is a concern that rises above all others. And rightly so."

Above all others? That's what he said.

I don't wish to downplay the importance of the economy. A weak one causes all kinds of personal pain and havoc.

But for people of faith, the economy should not be a concern "that rises above all others." Yes, Americans need jobs, but governance is not "all about job creation."

Rather, governance is -- or should be -- about justice; about defending the country against potential enemies; about helping to ensure that our civic systems function fairly for all; about educating our populace; about preventing the abuse of public land, air, water and other assets; about creating and enforcing laws that give everyone equal and fair treatment and that don't put unnecessary roadblocks in the way of opportunity. And on and on.

Instead, we have elected leaders who imagine that their primary job is making sure we have a robust economy -- and, worse, an economy that turns out to be based on consumption of endless material goods that advertisers claim will make us happier.

I'm not sure how people of faith let government's view of its purpose get so skewed. I became most acutely aware of the problem when presidential candidate Ronald Reagan told voters they simply needed to ask whether they are better off today than they were four years ago.

That question shifted the focus from a view of the common good to a personal focus on individual wealth. Perhaps Reagan intended a broader-than-economic meaning to his question, but in any event, it came to mean that we should look not at our communal responsibilities but, rather, at our personal financial status.

So the way to win the White House was to do what Bill Clinton did -- remember every day that "it's the

economy, stupid."

Against this laser-like focus on matters of money, there have been a few voices from faith communities reminding us there are other concerns that demand our attention, even while acknowledging that often those concerns are entwined with the state of the economy.

But those voices have been weak and unpersuasive to many. And the support they should have had from followers of the great religions has been at best, tepid, and at worst, nonexistent. In some cases, people of faith have even abandoned their obligation to love the unlovable, care for the needy and welcome the stranger. Instead, they have ripped holes in the safety net, forced the needy to fend for themselves and built walls to keep out the stranger.

Do I want a strong American economy? Of course. And do I want our government to do its part to make sure it functions fairly? Absolutely.

But I'm tired of our presidents and the people who want to hold that office acting as if in one of the most religious nations on earth, our primary task should be to worship the economy.

The economy has become a golden calf of an idol, one we have created ourselves in our spiritual wilderness. It's time for people of faith to refuse to pay it so much homage at the expense of more eternal values.

[Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder and former award-winning Faith columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, writes the daily "Faith Matters" blog [3] for *The Star*'s website and a monthly column for *The Presbyterian Outlook*. His latest book, co-authored with Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn, is *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust [4]*. Email him at wtammeus@kc.rr.com.]

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