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Why I Can't Vote for Romney

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 1, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

I do not doubt that Mitt Romney is a good and decent man. The stories of his personal generosity are many and moving. A friend who had dealings with Romney when he was Governor of Massachusetts always found him receptive and responsive.

A recent article by Tom Rosshirt [1]acknowledged the many sides of Mitt Romney and made the case that they were all real, the compassionate neighbor and bishop of his church, as well as the man who derided the 47% of his fellow Americans who do not pay federal income taxes, and the businessman willing to cut harsh terms for workers while making sure he and his investors grabbed their share of the pie. The question is not which face of Romney is real, or more real. The question is how Romney would respond to the very unique role of inhabiting the White House.

The many faces of Romney have led many people fault him for being a weathervane. Certainly, he has trimmed his sails for political purposes to an extraordinary degree. But, faulting a politician for taking the temperature of public opinion is like faulting a swimmer for spending so much time in the pool. Franklin Delano Roosevelt had a bit of the weathervane in him too. In 1932, after his election, he asked Frances Perkins to become the Secretary of Labor. She set some requirements, one of which was the President?s support for Social Security. He told her he could not support it unless she spent some time generating public support for the measure. Two years later, the support having been generated, he signed the law. Similarly, FDR refused Churchill?s pleas to enter the war for more than two years, in part because America was not ready but also because there was insufficient public support for going to war.

But, Mr. Romney, if elected, would not only be the President of the United States. He would become the leader of the Republican Party. And, he would not be the leader of your father?s Republican Party but of today?s Tea Party-fueled Republican Party. And Romney has not demonstrated in the least his willingness to stand up to them. It has become a maxim of contemporary politics that you never lose your base, but what to do when the base is rabidly ideological and committed to a kind of political fundamentalism that makes governance impossible? This would be the problem facing a Romney administration, and unless he were willing to stand up to his base, four years would be enough to wreak great harm upon the American people.

Certainly, during the GOP primaries, Romney calibrated his pitch to win over the Tea Party adherents. When Texas Governor Rick Perry expressed an ounce of human sympathy for the children of undocumented workers, brought here by no choice of their own, Mr. Romney took him to the woodshed. It was ugly. Mr. Romney signed Grover Norquist?s pledge to never raise taxes, but the only oath a prospective president should be willing to take is the oath of office. Really, for all those who are genuinely concerned about the nation?s fiscal health, and I believe many of my conservative friends are genuinely concerned about the debt and deficit, how can anyone justify the no taxes pledge? This is not the party of Bob Dole or George H.W. Bush or even of Ronald Reagan, all of whom signed on to increased taxes when necessary.

During the autumn debates, Mr. Romney calibrated again. His performance in the first debate was impressive to be sure, but it was also somewhat bizarre. Gone was the ?severe conservative,? and out popped Mr. Happy

Time. But it was during the second debate that I was truly appalled. The discussion turned to the HHS mandate, which is an issue about which I care deeply. Mr. Romney said that of course he had no intention of letting employers decide whether or not their female employees could get insurance coverage for their contraception. Really? Back in the spring, he had expressed his unqualified support for the Blunt Amendment. Ah, but that was then. Does anyone really know what Mr. Romney thinks about the principles at stake here? I will grant that if elected, Mr. Romney would likely be more responsive to a call from Cardinal Dolan than President Obama, but Republican Catholics are fooling themselves if they think Mr. Romney would take any political risks on their behalf. Is it not stunning that a Republican candidate is running an ad that basically champions his views on abortion for their moderation?

My principal reason for declining to vote for Mr. Romney, however, is that both his record and his rhetoric show a confidence in the applicability of his undoubted business skills to the task of political leadership. This is not a one-off debate moment. This is the essence of his campaign, the raison d?etre of his candidacy. The financialization of the economy and the growing inequality of wealth in America may have been Romney?s tickets to success, but those same two phenomena are, to my mind, the chief threats to the nation?s political health. His brand of venture/vulture capitalism is repugnant to me. If Republicans are right to be concerned about growing federal power, and I think as Catholics steeped in our social teaching we should be concerned about the growth of impersonal state power, they are utterly blind to the threat posed to the common good by the growth of impersonal economic power. That is Mr. Romney?s world. The economy is not, for him, a means by which workers find dignity and a living wage. The economy is a poker table where he and his wealthy friends play for high stakes with other people?s lives.

This experience which he trumpets has combined with the Tea Party?s orthodoxy to produce a commitment to lower taxes as the needed elixir for the nation. This orthodoxy seems to be steeped in superstition to me. His confidence in market solutions not only seems terribly misplaced post 2008 economic meltdown, it borders on the idolatrous. Romney?s opposition to government regulations would only allow the strong to further punish the weak. His comments about the 47% revealed a view of the world that was so lacking in sympathy, so out of touch with the economic reality of millions of Americans, so unalert to the exploding income inequality in America, they could only have been uttered by someone who was born on third base and thought he hit a triple.

All of these suspicions about Mr. Romney?s basic professional, political and ideological leanings were confirmed when he made the one ?presidential? decision a candidate makes before the election, his choice of a running mate. Congressman Paul Ryan is a hell of a nice guy. I believe he is completely sincere in his belief that his ?opportunity society? approach to social problems would help the poor. But, he still seems to have his head buried in ?Atlas Shrugged? and seems more than a little clueless about the lives of the poor and the reality of the choices they face.

Let?s look at Ryan?s recent speech on poverty. He gets high marks for even raising the issue, to be sure, but was there any substance? Mr. Ryan said ?In the war on poverty, poverty is winning.? Is that true? It is true that in the years following the Great Society programs of the 1960s, poverty among African-Americans was cut in half. Does that not count as a victory? It is also true that spending on anti-poverty programs has gone up in recent years, but not because of some nefarious, socialistic agenda by President Obama. Whenever there is a recession, and millions of people lose their jobs, spending on programs like food stamps and Medicaid go up. We can debate until the cows come home about the sources of the 2008 recession, but obviously, it cannot be laid at the feet of Mr. Obama.

It is true, as Mr. Ryan said, that a ?one size fits all? model for anti-poverty efforts is wrong-headed, though certain caveats need to be registered. Given the huge disparities that exist between different states, there is a case to be made for certain basic levels of support, mandated by the federal government. Turning a major program like Medicaid over to the Alabama legislature might not be such a good idea. It is also the case that Mr.

Ryan has supported drastically changing Medicare, a ?one size fits all? program that works really well: If you have worked all your life, and paid your taxes, you should not have to worry about going bankrupt because of health care expenses. But, Mr. Ryan thinks seniors should think the way he and his friends at the CATO Institute think, they should welcome the chance to get a voucher instead of a guarantee, and go shopping for the best policy, hoping that the voucher will cover the costs, and of course worried, understandably, that if they are in the unlucky group of people who are already ill, the insurance companies won?t take them. But, such considerations Ryan sets aside, all in the name of achieving the ?opportunity society.? You know, I have a few years to go before I am eligible for Medicare, but already, when it comes to health care, I am not looking for opportunity, I am looking for the day when I don?t have to worry about it.

These are just a few examples of where Ryan?s libertarianism clouds his judgment. In his speech on poverty he spoke ? and spoke well ? about the importance of civil society. This shows he may have come a long way from his earlier, more Randian days, when he insisted that every political choice be seen as a binary choice between individualism and collectivism, as if the Democrats were killing Kulaks. ?Collectivist?? Who uses that word? I hope Mr. Ryan will continue to walk into the waters of Catholic social teaching and that he will change and reform his policy proposals accordingly. But, we need more evidence of his conversion and I think, being a bit stiff-necked on these issues, that Ryan should, in the manner of Henry II at Becket?s tomb, do some public penance at the grave of Msgr. John A. Ryan before I completely set aside my suspicions.

Mr. Romney, the weathervane, with Mr. Ryan, the ideological warrior, at his side. This scares me. I think repealing the Affordable Care Act would be a tragedy of historic proportions. I think further tax cuts for the super-rich would be a scandal. I worry that, in an effort to appear moderate, a Romney-Ryan administration would stay far, far away from their commitment to the cause of the unborn, but make sure their radical economic agenda gets pushed through Congress. I worry that Medicaid and Medicare, two pillars of the common good in our otherwise hyper-individualistic culture, would not survive the changes Romney and Ryan propose. I worry that these two men, neither of whom have demonstrated much interest in foreign affairs, would listen too easily to the neo-con advisors who surround them, and not just the neo-cons who are at least principled, but the military-firsters, those who think the first course of action, provided there is a strategic or economic interest at stake, is to send in the Marines, but who also saw no value in coming to the aid of Bosnia and Kosovo as some neo-cons rightly supported. In short, I do not think that Mr. Romney?s resume, nor anything we have learned about his worldview, gives justification for voting him into such high office. And, more importantly, that same resume and his rhetoric and his party, suggest that he would govern in such a way that the rich would get much, much richer, the poor would have an even harder time of it, the middle class would continue to tread water at best, and and ideas about the common good would be set aside. That is not an America I can vote for. I would like to have Mr. Romney for a neighbor. And, I would like to have some long discussions with Mr. Ryan. But, I would not, and will not, vote to put them into office.

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