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Wassup at EWTN?

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 25, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Wednesday night, I tuned in to watch ?EWTN News Nightly? with Colleen Carroll Campbell. She was interviewing two congressmen, Rep. Henry Cuellar, Democrat from Texas and Rep. Tim Huelskamp, Republican from Kansas. At a certain point, the conversation turned to the problem-ridden rollout of the health care exchanges under Obamacare. Campbell noted that ?it could be months before the problems are solved,? and then asked Huelskamp if he thought ?a delay or repeal? was now likely given all the problems.

Campbell has become an expert on bumpy rollouts. Early in the summer, to much fanfare, EWTN announced it was launching a new nightly news program and that Campbell would be hosting the show. They promised the show would begin in late August. It is now almost November, and ?EWTN News Nightly? is not yet nightly, but weekly, and there is not much in the way of news you would not get from any mainstream outlet.

To her credit, Campbell asked tough questions of both her interlocutors. She asked Cuellar about the consequence on the domestic unemployment rate if a guest worker program is begun. Then, Campbell noted the bishops have strongly supported immigration reform and asked Huelskamp, who opposes a pathway to citizenship, ?how do you square that with your Catholic faith?? The congressman replied that the issue was a matter of, you guessed it, ?prudential judgment,? which to conservative Catholics means a ?get-out-of-jail-free? card. I was not surprised that Campbell did not follow up on the point. But, I was surprised to hear the Congressman say, ?I also want to say, what I hear from the bishops that I visit with, it?s not a unanimous opinion there should be citizenship.? [Check out the video below at 7:52.] Campbell did not follow up on that, but did ask Huelskamp about the consequences of a permanent underclass is there is no pathway to citizenship. He ducked it.

I will only note about this exchange that Huelskamp is from Kansas, so it does not take a lot of imagination to figure out which bishops do not share the nearly unanimous view of the U.S. bench that there must be a pathway to citizenship in any reform law.

On the subject of the Affordable Care Act, Cong. Heulskamp also confused the individual mandate with the HHS contraception mandate, without a peep out of Campbell.

Despite my suspicions, I would give Campbell a solid C, maybe even a gentlelady?s B. The anchor?s table looks like one of those modish altars they construct for papal Masses. The segment from Rome reported on new Ambassador Ken Hackett presenting his credentials, and there was no editorializing about the difficulty of representing the Obama administration, but it was unclear why an American audience needed to know about the establishment of Vatican cricket club. Campbell is articulate and, based on this episode, at least trying not to appear overwhelmingly partisan.

Unfortunately, fellow EWTN star Raymond Arroyo can?t seem to scratch his way toward anything approaching balance or fairness. The previous week, he began his show with an interview with Cong. Steve Scalise of Louisiana. Certainly Arroyo had no way of knowing that a couple of days later, the Washington Post?s fact checker [1]would give Scalise three Pinocchio?s for his lies about the Affordable Care Act, but those lies were obvious enough and needed no independent fact-checking. When Rep. Scalise spouted the lies to Arroyo, they went unchallenged. When Arroyo pressed Scalise on immigration, the congressman ducked, unlike another frequent Arroyo guest, Sen. David Vitter who is quite open about his dissent from Church teaching on the subject.

But, Arroyo?s show got really strange with his next guest, Janice Connell, who wrote a book entitled ?The Spiritual Journey of George Washington.? Arroyo promised that Connell would help ?separate legend from reality? regarding the Father of Our Country, and perhaps he thought she would, but I confess I became suspicious when she explained that Washington was ?Jesuit-educated? by a French Jesuit who was ?run out of France? because of the French Revolution. Later in the show, Connell said that the first Bishop in the U.S., John Carroll, had also been ?run out of France? because of the Revolution. Of course, the French Revolution began in 1789, by which time, presumably, Gen. Washington had completed his studies and Carroll was back in what would become the United States by 1774, a full fifteen years before the Bastille was stormed.

Connell asserted, among other things, that Washington was ?the most humble man on earth,? which certainly clashes with the historical record that shows him to be a man of some vanity, exceedingly conscious of his station and reputation. She claimed that the American Revolution was something of a miracle and of the Battle of Yorktown said, ?we should not have won that battle either.? Why? We had Lord Cornwallis? tired troops surrounded on all sides by superior forces. The French Navy blocked the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay, preventing Cornwallis from escaping by sea. Where was the miracle? The strangest part of Connell?s presentation had to do with the claim that Washington had a sacramental death, that as he was dying, there was no Anglican priest at hand, so he was visited by a Catholic priest because, Connell, claimed, ?sacramental ministry was administered by both Anglicans and Catholic priests,? going on to say that at that time, Anglican orders were valid. This is gibberish, both as a matter of theology and a matter of history. The latitudinarian reality of American religiosity in late colonial and early Republican America is true enough, but it was most certainly not extended to Catholics. And Anglican orders became invalid after the Edwardian ordinal was adopted in the sixteenth century. I will pass by without comment Connell?s suggestion that George Washington was visited at Valley Forge by the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Arroyo knew all this was nonsense. Why was this crackpot on the show? There is a strange desire within conservative circles to baptize the American founding, and I can understand and even sympathize with that section of the historiography of the Founding that highlights the significance of religion in the culture of the day. But, it was an entirely Protestant affair and the ideas and attitudes that formed the ideological justification for the Revolution were drawn from that strain of British political thought that was distinguished precisely by its severe anti-Catholicism. Has Arroyo never heard of Algernon Sidney? Bishop Hoadly?

I know that EWTN?s programming helps many Catholics, especially those who are homebound, connect with their faith. But, those who donate to this enterprise need to ask themselves just how kooky it needs to get before it becomes even more of a sideshow than it already is. Maybe Campbell will bring some semblance of balance to the network. Maybe Arroyo will see the error of his ways. Maybe. But, I am not holding my breath.

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