NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

The Catholic candidate in Political Neverland

Phyllis Zagano | Dec. 7, 2011 Just Catholic

Well, it had to come out sometime. The current front-runner in the Republican presidential primary race, Newt Gingrich, is a Catholic. He used to be a Lutheran. Then he was a Southern Baptist. He converted to share his third wife's Catholicism in 2009.

Seatbelts, everyone. It's going to be a bumpy ride.

Why? Well, Gingrich has been talking about moral issues lately. You know, abortion, embryonic stem cell research. And moral values in general.

Did I write that correctly? Did I say his third wife?

Oh, well, the story has been around for a while. Gingrich married his former high school geometry teacher in 1962. He was 19. She was 26. They had two children. Their marriage lasted about 18 years, crashing on the rocks during his affair with Marianne Ginter, whom he married directly after the divorce. That second marriage lasted until Gingrich began an affair with Callista Bisek, a House committee staffer a generation his junior, whom he married following his second divorce.

Gingrich's first affair, leading to his second marriage, continued while he was Speaker of the House and leading the investigation of President Bill Clinton. You know, the Lewinsky thing. Gingrich's third marriage, coming from his second affair, took place in 2000.

This may be getting confusing, but it's Washington.

It doesn't mean he's not a nice person.

Besides, Herman Cain might endorse him.

Sometimes you just have to wonder. Political life is becoming a fantastical Neverland.

Now, I often like what Gingrich says about moral values, and marital stability is not the only measure of a man's mettle. Still, there are issues.

What does society expect of its leaders?

Even if the electorate overlooks Gingrich's marital history, Democrat Rep. Nancy Pelosi has a slingshot loaded with mud. In the long run, will anyone believe Gingrich's moral stances?

Or does the electorate make moral judgments anymore?

The *New York Times* recently reported on Gingrich's appearance at a family values forum in Iowa, where he spoke about the link between happiness and religious piety. Ever the history professor, Gingrich said, "The

pursuit of happiness in the 18th century Enlightenment meant wisdom and virtue ... the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 to organize Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Indiana and Wisconsin says religion, morality and knowledge being important, we need schools."

But, Gingrich said, "the Pelosi House cut off the first three words and said 'knowledge being important.'" His clear implication: Democrats dismiss religion and morality.

I think we have to admit knowledge often trumps moral values these days.

The founders of the American experiment were convinced religious values should influence public policy. U.S. federal and state laws reflected the common moral teachings of the ecumenical and interreligious hodgepodge of America.

That is going away, eroded by a belief that morality always says "no" while knowledge always says "yes." So, if "yes" is good and "no" is bad, then a constant stream of "yeses" is what the country needs.

But does permissiveness always spell progress? Is it always best to do something just because we can?

Many years ago, the Jewish philosopher Edith Wyschogrod told me scientists were experimentally fertilizing hamster eggs with human sperm. We were both horrified. The gross-out factor notwithstanding, the experiment lurches forward to join Pelosi's apparent view of education. Knowledge -- or the pursuit of knowledge -- unhampered by morality or religious values is the stuff of novels and of science fiction.

There are things we do not need to know. There are things we do not need to do.

Does this circle back to the Republican morality show? I think so. I was appalled to learn during a televised debate that some Republican candidates would approve torture by military forces to obtain information. I am still wondering about the real or accused infidelities of some candidates and their very potent curiosities.

But the deeper issue, and the pressing problem for they who argue for moral values in political life and public policy, is the country has apparently gone beyond religion and moral teachings. ("Outgrown" would be the secularist term.) We are like children worshipping at a shrine of knowledge in a Neverland where grown-ups' moral values do not interfere.

To be sure, members of the anti-religion crowd will go after any candidate who claims any values coinciding with those of any religion. They truly live in a place where dreams are born, and the rest of the country is heading toward their Neverland.

If we all fly to the second star to the right and straight on till morning, and sprinkle a little fairy dust, eventually no candidate's ethical or moral lapses will mean anything at all.

[Phyllis Zagano is senior research associate-in-residence at Hofstra University and author of several books in Catholic studies. Her most recent books are *Women & Catholicism*, published by Palgrave-Macmillan in June, and *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future* (with Gary Macy and William T. Ditewig), newly released by Paulist Press.]

Editor's note: We can send you an email alert every time Phyllis Zagano's column, "Just Catholic," is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow directions: **Email alert sign-up** [1]. If you already receive email alerts from us, click on the "update my profile" button to add "Phyllis Zagano" to your list.

Source URL (retrieved on *12/12/2013 - 02:24*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/just-catholic/catholic-candidate-political-neverland

Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup