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Republican Candidates Add Artificial Religious Sweeteners

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I'm against multi-tasking, but I justified the Republican debates as exceptions. Just watching them straight on, without distractions, was too unnerving for me. So I caught glimpses, glanced at a book, canvassed for emails and waited for raised voices.

During what seemed like the 90th scrum, a couple of verbal missiles caught my attention. One was Mitt Romney's absolute certainty, as a rebuke to same sex marriage, that wedlock had been the sole province of one man and one woman for 3,000 years and offered as a sort of proof that it had been a "sacrament" for lo those many years.

Even for those in the most hierarchical, traditional churches that espouse marriage as a sacrament that's a stretch. Marriage in pre-Christian times wasn't understood in those terms (a least a thousand of Romney's declared span). And for the length of the Middle Ages most couples didn't have Cana conferences and church weddings. They partnered up and became one under a kind of common law.

That's not to dispute the sacramental doctrine itself for those who hold it. It has its own integrity and justification. But from the Reformation on, Protestants dropped marriage from the sacraments, though it was honored and blessed by the church and the Creator was beseeched to do the same.

Romney's objective, of course, was to promote his judgment against gay marriage by describing conjugal union in the purest, eternal, unchangeable terms regardless of religious or church history. Evoke divine, ahistorical authority and hope voters will identify you with it. Challenge the same-sex advocates to match that.

The other flashpoint was Gingrich's unqualified charge that the Obama team was out to harm organized religion. That arose out of the Administration's proposal that religious institutions that discriminate against gays and lesbians wouldn't be eligible for federal funding.

There are valid arguments on both sides of this one. Catholic officials argue persuasively that the church shouldn't have to hire people who starkly oppose its values. The Obama defense is that the first obligation of government is to grant all citizens equal protection and access.

The Supreme Court, meanwhile, has ruled that the government cannot intervene on behalf of an employee of a religious institution who has been fired for falling short of the institution's religious standards as a part of the job requirements.

Though the wider debate is a valid one, Gingrich's angry assault on the White House as undermining religion in general struck a disingenuous note. It is an irresponsible, distorted device with which to paint the opposition as a vile enemy of faith.

The dual attempts to win sympathetic support from those who are most susceptible to suspicions that their beliefs and their houses of worship are threatened by "big government" will likely crop up at various times in the campaign. The "adversary" will be referred to only inferentially. The charges will be delivered as immutable truths but will lack substance.

The struggle for religious integrity is on.

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