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Romney's Problem

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 27, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

Fareed Zakaria has a good op-ed [1] up in the Washington Post thing morning as he tries to explain why Romney's campaign has not caught on. He notes the current GOP orthodoxy against raising taxes ever and against any common sense solution to immigration has twisted Romney in knots. He can't explain in detail how he will address either problem because fixing either problem will require the kind of deal that violates the orthodoxy. All that is undoubtedly true.

But, the problem is deeper I think. Even Romney's promise, unspecific or not, to restore growth to the economy rings somewhat hollow. The middle class and especially the working poor witnessed the growth of the Reagan years and the Clinton years, but they did not share it. Wages have been stagnant for a long, long time. All the while, the cost of buying home or purchasing a week's worth of groceries has gone up. Health care premiums have gone up. Pensions with guaranteed benefits have been set aside in favor of 401k's that go up and down with the market and not a single middle class individual, who happens to retire when the market is down, is going to receive the kind of bailout the big banks did when their own recklessness brought the market crashing down around all our heads. We all want growth, but Romney's idea that unleashing the rich via tax cuts in the hope that prosperity will trickle down to the rest of us, that simply does not ring true anymore.

Mind you, I do not think many of us have much hope that President Obama's plans, also a little vague, to grow the economy "from the middle out" are necessarily more likely to work or help. But, Obama's plans at least have this benefit: They confront the idea that the rich get to play by a different set of rules in which, like Bain Capital, they can't lose.

Romney's and the Republicans' problem is deeper still. One of the things I realized in writing my biography of the Rev. Jerry Falwell [2]is that the minister from Lynchburg largely created the modern Republican Party. Yes, he organized, educated, galvanized and registered millions of white evangelical Christians who are now the most important segment of the GOP base and who care deeply about social issues about which many other Americans are ambivalent. But, he did something else: He brought the language and the logic of orthodoxy into the political arena in a fundamentalist key. Grover Norquist is as much Falwell's heir in his requirement that GOP candidates sign a no tax pledge as is Tony Perkins at the Family Research Council. Falwell brought a fundamentalist cast of mind into politics and it is there still, at the heart of the GOP.

It is astounding to me that polls continue to indicate that large pluralities of the Republican electorate, and in some instances majorities, still believe things that are demonstrably false. There are millions of Americans who still believe President Obama was not born in the United States. There are millions of Americans who do not believe Obama is a Christian. There are millions of Americans who think climate change is a hoax. The list goes on, each item as absurd to the rest of us as the claims of creationists. Yet, it is one of the hallmarks of fundamentalism that in the face of evidence to the contrary, one doubles down. Certainty is more values than anything and, if need be, one withdraws from the ambient culture to maintain that certainty. Alas, for Mr. Romney, who I doubt has a fundamentalist bone in his body, that fundamentalist mindset shows no signs of withdrawing from the ambient culture of the GOP primary campaign season, during which he had to twist

himself into something he so obviously is not, a "severe" conservative.

I have a related but different worry here as well. This denial of evidence on the right is giving rise to an uncritical embrace of scientific evidence as if it were ontology on the left. Scientism, science as ideology, is becoming accepted uncritically and sloppily on the left. We saw this last year when President Obama declined to take the advice of scientific experts who suggested that emergency birth control should be made available over the counter at drug stores to any girl age 11 and up. (I wrote about the decision here [3].) The President has two teenage daughters, so he grasped immediately, and in a common sense kind of way, why these scientific experts were as crazy as those who argue God planted fossils to trick us. Obama was widely criticized by certain sectors of the ideological left. When science is given undue authority in the realm of ethics and public policy, it too can go terribly wrong. The history of eugenics is there for all to see.

William Jennings Bryan, the champion of evangelicalism who litigated the Scopes trial, famously said, "It is better to trust the Rock of Ages, than to know the ages of rocks." I think the Catholic perspective here is to insist that one can both trust the Rock of Ages and know the ages of rocks. But, our current political and cultural climate prefers its choices as either/or, not both/and, and that disposition can be found on both sides of the ideological divide.

Voters in the center of the electorate are, by definition really, not very ideological. If you really, really care about gun rights, chances are you are a Republican. If you really, really care about the environment, chances are you are a Democrat. Voters in the center are either ambivalent

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