

THE ALTERNATIVE

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Dear Reader.

As has become a custom the December issue of this Newsletter every four years is a reflection on the presidential election, especially on the role of religion. Much of what is in The Alternative for December 2008 could simply be repeated but some subtle shifts did occur. The emphasis in this Newsletter is on the moral dimension in the relation between religion and politics.

It has long been true that religion is a topic that seldom gets directly addressed in the public life of the United States. That hesitation to make public display of one's religion or ask a question about a candidate's religion is not all bad. As the United States has become more religiously diverse, journalists find themselves not competent to carry on a discussion of Aquinas's theology, Muslim law or Max Weber's Protestant ethic. Better to leave religion alone rather than make a mess out of a discussion on the topic. The last great highlighting of a presidential nominee's religion was in 1960 when John Kennedy was believed by many people to be (like Al Smith before him) unfit to be president because he was a Catholic. Since Kennedy's survival of that challenge, religion has largely disappeared unless a candidate insists on bringing it up.

Many aspects of a person's religion are irrelevant for his or her performance in political office. What underwear Mitt Romney wears as a Mormon is no one's business but his own. Still, religious beliefs may have important moral implications. For some people, in fact, morality and religion cannot be separated. Some religious people think that a person who professes to have no religion cannot be a morally good person. Most people seem to agree that being religious does not automatically make one morally good and that having no religious affiliation does not make one morally bad.

While religion is a topic that may better be addressed only indirectly, the same does not hold for the moral aspects of a candidate's policies. The contention, especially in international relations, that politics is exclusively a matter of power and self-interest, is unpersuasive to most people. Morality is not a separate realm which substitutes for politics or is to be added to politics; rather how power is used and for whose interests is the moral question that cannot be avoided.

There are three essays that follow. Each of them is concerned with moral dimensions of the Obama presidency. The first essay is by Gabriel Moran on whether tolerance is helped or hurt by religion. The second essay is by a Muslim journalist, Abdulrahman El-Sayed who expresses disappointment at the failure of the Obama administration to address some obvious moral problems of the country. The third essay is by Thomas Groome, a professor of theology and religious education at Boston College, and a national co-chairman of Catholics for Obama. In his essay written before the election, he places the moral issue of abortion in its proper context.

MORALITY AND RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

By Gabriel Moran

In the 1950s, a study by Gordon Allport found that people who strongly identified with religion were either much more tolerant or much less tolerant than the general population. The issue was how the religion was assimilated into their lives. For people who held on to religion as an ideology, the religious belief was likely to interfere with their ability to see the diversity in the world and to be willing to hear the voices of people who disagree with them. For people whose religion was more integral to their makeup, religious belief opened their minds widely, even to realms that are subtly censored by secular opponents of religion. Modern secular tolerance is based on the premise that underneath our differences we are all the same, implying that people who have religious beliefs should be respected *despite* their beliefs. The premise of religious tolerance is based on the premise that religious beliefs are important to people and therefore people, together with their religious beliefs, should be respected.

One surprising aspect of the recent presidential election was the absence of concern with religion. If one looks back at the last decade or more a pattern might be discerned whereby a politician's religion has become less and less important. We have come a long way since the 1930s when President Franklin Roosevelt said to two of his top aides, a Catholic and a Jew: "You know this is a Protestant country; Catholics and Jews are here only by sufferance." He was not kidding.

The United States can no longer be identified as a Protestant country even though tens of millions of people around the world would say it is a Christian country, a fact they believe is evident in that it calls its wars crusades. Since the term America was derived from Christian belief and the United States identifies itself with that name, people who call their nation America continue to import Christian ideas into their patriotism. Mitt Romney's campaign motto was "believe in America" which was amusing because it is almost the only thing that all "the Americans" already believe in. In his acceptance speech at the Republican convention, Romney used the term America 53 times. He did not say anything about the United States.

The four men who ran for the offices of president and vice-president all came from backgrounds in which religion was a key formative element. You would think that reporters would have had many questions about the candidates' respective religions but they apparently think that religion is no longer a topic to be brought up in polite (or impolite) company. The fact that the vice-presidential debate was between two Roman Catholics must have had Paul Blanshard spinning in his grave. The fact that Catholics are a majority on the United States Supreme Court is surely a matter of concern but the implications of that fact are almost never discussed.

Of the four candidates, Paul Ryan seems to have been the one most deeply affected by his Catholic upbringing. Joe Biden seems a little more casual about his Catholicism although I think he is strongly influenced by it. Barack Obama's religious belief and practice is

seldom brought up except by the weird people who somehow know he is a Muslim. One thing obvious is that Obama learned how to be a black preacher.

The candidate whose religion would be a big issue, one would have thought, was Mitt Romney. I wrote in these pages four years ago that if Romney ran in 2012 he would have to have his “JFK moment in Houston.” That is, like John Kennedy soothing an audience of Protestant clergy about how his Catholicism influenced (or didn’t influence) him, Romney would have to give a major address in which he would go into detail about his Mormon beliefs and practice. I thought it would be a more difficult speech because, despite the fact that there are 15 Mormons in Congress, including the Senate majority leader, Mormonism is still a mystery to most of the U.S. electorate. And it seems clear that Romney takes his Mormonism far more seriously than Kennedy took his Catholicism. I was wrong. The issue of Romney’s religion was never seriously addressed.

I thought when they were ultimately faced with pulling the lever for a Mormon, evangelical Protestants would not be able to do it. Wrong again. Polls showed that 78% of evangelicals voted for Romney. The people who say that they have no religion also did not have a problem with Mormonism although 70% said they voted for Obama. In 2012, as in the last three presidential elections, one of the most crucial groups was Roman Catholics. Once again the Catholic vote of 50-48 for Obama was a decisive difference. The margin was a little less than in 2008 but the U.S. Catholic Bishops were if anything more anti-Obama in 2012 than they were in 2008. The bishops dropped all pretense of neutrality in their denunciation of the health care act and their claim that the Obama administration was waging a war on religious liberty.

One of the most interesting aspects of the Catholic vote was the emergence of nuns as a potent political force. Who could have guessed that a small group of women, average age over seventy and without a penny in their pockets, would be a force to be reckoned with in the election. What seems to have happened is that when Catholics were forced to choose between what the U.S. bishops were saying and what the “nuns on the bus” represented, they decided that the nuns were the better guide to Catholic teaching.

In the usual framework of political and economic discussions, nuns were a difficult group to fight against. What was their real motivation? Were they out for power? Maybe they were looking for financial gain? Or a looser sexual morality? The only recourse for their opponents was to say that nuns are nice but are innocent of how the real world works. The trouble with that argument was that what the nuns were saying about the real world of poverty and injustice was backed by facts and thoughtful arguments. I imagine that among all the speeches at the Democratic convention that attacked Republicans, the one that stung Paul Ryan the most was by Sister Simone Campbell. Et tu Simone!

The U.S. bishops continued their self-destructive path and even accelerated the process. Four years ago I wrote that if the bishops were so insistent on condemning abortion because it is opposed to Catholic doctrine, why were they not being consistent and condemning contraception. I was being ironic. There had been a truce about 40 years ago not to bring up the embarrassing papal encyclical condemning “artificial birth control” in

a world where the control of births is one of the most important and unavoidable challenges facing the human race. The great majority of those Catholics who did not leave the church decided that they were in a better position than the pope to understand the control of births. Most of them were not “cafeteria Catholics,” picking doctrines that pleased them, but loyal Catholics whose consciences told them that on this point they were more in touch with Catholic tradition than the pope, bishops and clergy.

To the astonishment of many of us, the U.S. bishops decided to reopen the war on contraception that they had lost overwhelmingly, even among Catholics. One might grant that the Obama administration could have handled the provision about contraceptives better, but the claim that it was part of an attack on “religious liberty” persuaded few people. And the underlying problem is that if the bishops wished to oppose abortion the most obvious and proven route is education in the use and availability of contraceptives. The bishops are actually on the right side of the abortion issue insofar as abortion is a violent form of birth control. The rhetoric of “abortion rights” that has become standard rhetoric on the Democratic side alienates about a third of the country and does not acknowledge that there is anything wrong with the fact that thirty percent of pregnancies end in abortion. There is a moral argument to be made on the issue of abortion but the U.S. bishops have undermined any credibility they might have had by opposing the very policies that would drastically reduce abortions.

The New York *Times* reported after the election that “Bishop James Soto of Sacramento, who serves on the bishops’ domestic policy committee, said that the bishops spoke on many issues, including immigration and poverty, but got news media attention only when they talked about abortion, same-sex marriage and religious liberty.” I think one can grant some truth to his complaint; the casual surveyor of the news might think Catholic bishops are only concerned with abortion, contraception and their version of religious liberty. But even for people who follow the news and the Catholic Church closely, the impression that is conveyed by the bishops is that the number one issue is abortion and anything else is a distant second.

The bishops were not issuing strongly worded position papers in support of immigration reform or the scandal of what Paul Ryan’s budget would do to the poor. The nuns managed to get a hearing and some space in the press when they criticized Ryan’s budget for cutting services to the poor. Of course, the nuns had got a big boost from the Vatican document that complained that they were spending too much time on issues of poverty and social justice. The Vatican statement was further evidence for my theory that the world is run by double agents. Stephen Colbert must have imitators in the Vatican.

Of the four candidates, Paul Ryan was the most interesting case of relating his religion to particular political policies. He claimed that his political convictions were inspired by his Catholicism. Certainly, he invoked Catholic Church teaching on being “pro-life.” He managed to avoid being caught as were several other losing candidates when they had to admit what consistently follows from the belief that a fertilized egg is a human being, a metaphysical and legal person. Those other candidates had to admit either that exceptions have to be made, which is to accept murder, or that no exceptions can be made which

draws ridicule and condemnation on all sides. Interviewers let Ryan escape this dilemma. He described his conversion to “pro-life” as occurring when he saw his future child in the womb looking like a little bean. The emotional impact of that experience was obviously powerful. It was not, however, an answer to public policy in the United States.

Up to a few years ago, Paul Ryan had said that the chief influence on his view of the world was the system of Ayn Rand. During 2012 he dismissed those statements as part of a youthful enthusiasm. But as recently as a 2009 video he praised Rand for “the morality of individualism as what matters most.” In 2012 he rejected her as a militant atheist, something apparently not obvious to him earlier. But a repudiation of Ayn Rand’s philosophy did not seem to affect Ryan’s philosophy of governance. There was nothing he said throughout the campaign which suggested that he had changed from seeing the world as individuals who should be responsible for themselves. In 2011 he described a social safety net as a “hammock” that fosters “dependency.” His philosophy still seems to be that of the Austrian economists of the 1950s (Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich Hayek) who neatly complement the rugged individualism of Ayn Rand’s novels.

At a recent dinner of our N.Y.U. department, someone asked whether any of the men in the department had read Ayn Rand and the Austrian economists when they were young. Practically all of us admitted that we had been enthusiastic followers for a short period. I should note about the composition of the faculty that it is strongly Jewish, overwhelmingly liberal, and populated by experts in history and social sciences. For little boys who were smart in school and attracted by big ideas, the certainty afforded by a rationalist and individualistic view of the world was almost irresistible. I had the world figured out by age 15; why could not everyone else see the obvious advantage of individuals acting independently and with a minimum of government interference. I could not understand in 1952 why anyone would vote against Robert Taft.

I find Paul Ryan – who is a figure of the future and not just the past – to be a tragic case of holding on to a worldview that fits his ideology but ultimately is hopelessly out of connection with today’s reality and its political and economic needs. I think I agree with many of the things he believes in. He does not seem to be cynically saying things that he does not genuinely believe. In his acceptance speech at the Republican convention he said a string of things that were obviously untrue. He is smart enough to know that was so but he had somehow to fit the numbers to his beliefs. Romney may be a good man, too; but it is hard to know who he is or what he stands for. The Republican campaign mostly hid Ryan out of a fear that if he went beyond the blizzard of numbers he could say something embarrassingly truthful.

Ryan may be an example of someone who absorbed the Catholic Church teaching that he was given as a child and has held on to it. That teaching was not all wrong; most of it may be right. Whether it was Ayn Rand and the Austrian economists that mixed in with that Catholicism or some other set of life experiences, Ryan defends a world of numbers that is logically consistent but within a closed world of philosophical assumptions. His convictions could prove disastrous for the country in the future. On the other hand, he is a young man whose best nature may yet take over his life.

PROGRESSIVE DISSONANCE

By Abdulrahman El-Sayed

Our Nobel Peace Prize-winning president has expanded an aimless “war on terror” (although under a new name) to Pakistan and Yemen. Millions in those countries are haunted by the constant buzz of drones overhead threatening to strike them or their loved ones, which has perpetuated a climate of American hate, distrust and destruction.

At home our economy continues to stagnate; its victims are so many of my peers who had also invested in “hope and change” four years ago, who cannot find meaningful work. Our civil liberties have been as commuted – the realities of living in a country where the president can freely order the murder of Americans on foreign soil. As a Muslim ethnic minority, I feel no more dignified, no more accepted, as cops throughout the country have usurped my right to walk the streets freely without fearing unjustified interference. Inequality has accelerated, and the divide between the haves and have-nots in our country has never been starker.

Although Obama wielded once again in his victory speech his twin sabers of “hope” and “change,” they had dulled over these past four years – wayward movement on so many of our country’s most crucial issues, weak leadership and a stalling national discourse have deemed them wanting.

Don’t get me wrong: I voted for Obama in 2012 as I had four years ago. I even wrote in support of his re-election. As a young, urban progressive, I had no other option. But I have to say now what I have held in throughout the campaign, and what I think all of us have to admit: Obama was not the *right* choice – he just wasn’t the *wrong* one. And that’s a difficult pill to swallow.

Why? Because it exposes so much of the dissonance that we’ve been forced to ignore by the imperfect choice we’ve had to make over the past several months. A Romney presidency would have been an utter disaster for all of the reasons that made Obama’s last four years a failure. But averting disaster doesn’t make victory out of failure.

And then there’s the problem that we really like the *idea* of Obama. After all, he’s a third culture kid – the child of a Kenyan immigrant and raised in Hawaii. His story is so representative of the America we hope to leave our children: a post-racial, post-establishment utopia where any kid, no matter how crazy his name or background, can be elected president.

We then excuse our dissonance and our want to like Obama by kidding ourselves that he has made good on at least some of his promises. But has he? Take healthcare, his prized accomplishment, for example: it’s a watered-down reform that kowtows to the interests of healthcare lobbies before it provides meaningful, secure access to healthcare for our society’s most desperate. We also like to excuse his political blunders as the result of having had to pander to the right given the scepter of a reelection bid – an excuse that’s

patently flawed given his famous argument that he'd rather have been a "really good one-term president than a mediocre two-term president."

So let's be clear, for progressives who care about peace, prosperity, civil liberties, and the future of our country, Obama's reelection was no victory. It was the rock we chose over the hard place. And that should mean something for the way we approach our political future. Can Obama come through on the promises of four years ago? Maybe – but not if we continue to brush his poor choices under the table because he's better than the alternative, or because they were "hard choices," or because we like the guy. This leader has perpetuated war, violated our civil liberties, deported more people from our shores than any other president before him, and the list of his failures goes on. I wish I could celebrate like it was 2008. But the reality says otherwise, and it's time we came to terms with that if we want any hope for change.

MAKING THE CATHOLIC CASE FOR OBAMA

By Thomas Groome

Both friends and strangers have challenged why a Catholic theologian like me would publicly support the re-election of President Barack Obama. The implication always is that my Catholic faith should dictate otherwise.

Of course, I cite Catholic social doctrine (note the weighty term) and the mandate of my faith to care for "the least" among us (Matthew 25:34). Social programs for the common good and especially for the most vulnerable are central to Catholic social teaching. By contrast, Ayn Rand's proposal of a "virtue of selfishness," besides being an oxymoron, is the antithesis of Catholic faith. If implemented as social policy -- a la the Romney/Ryan budget -- the neediest among us will suffer by far the most. Some 64 percent of its alleged "savings" come from cutting programs that aid poor families and individuals.

The comeback is invariably around abortion, whereupon I explain that my opposition to abortion is precisely the tipping point that prompts my unqualified support of President Obama. As a loyal Catholic, I accept the teaching of my Church that "every human life, from the moment of conception until death, is sacred" and that abortion is "gravely contrary to the moral law" (Catechism of the Catholic Church No. 2319, 2271). Though the U.S. Catholic Bishops caution, "As Catholics we are not single issue voters" (Faithful Citizenship, November 2007), yet with some 1.3 million annually in the U.S., abortion presents our country with a grave moral crisis.

The dilemma for citizens like me is that the great majority of our fellow Americans favor some possibility of abortion and do not want to criminalize it again. As Thomas Aquinas taught wisely, laws must reflect "the consensus of the governed" and there is no agreement in this country to ban all abortions. Even Gov. Mitt Romney is now making "exceptions." When faced with a strategic dilemma in applying a general moral principle, the same Aquinas argued that Christians should choose whatever appears to be the lesser evil and the greater good.

In this light, the most feasible moral choice is to reduce the number of abortions. So,

Catholics like me and citizens of like mind should support the candidate who has the best abortion reducing policies.

There is ample evidence that good social programs can dramatically reduce the number of abortions -- and that the lack of them increase it. The Dutch and the Germans have an abortion rate approximately one-third of the U.S. because they have universal health care, including prenatal and postnatal care, and programs to encourage adoption.

All the statistics show a deep correlation between abortion and economic need. More than three out of four women give economic reasons for choosing abortion, and the abortion rate is 300 percent higher among people below the poverty level than those above it.

A fine instance of good social services reducing abortion is the Massachusetts health-care plan that Gov. Romney signed into law before his flip-flop on health care. It has lowered the number significantly, with a 21 percent decrease among teenagers.

If Gov. Romney makes good on his commitment to rescind the Affordable Health Care Act, coupled with the Romney/Ryan budget proposal that slashes services to poor people, then under a Romney administration, the rate of abortions in the U.S. will skyrocket. If elected, Gov. Romney would join a line of Republican presidents who campaigned as pro-life but whose social policies increased the number of abortions. The cuts in social services during the Ronald Reagan administration caused the abortion rate to rise dramatically.

President Bill Clinton, by contrast, having campaigned on a pro-choice position, improved social services and the abortion rate declined nearly 30 percent under his administration -- a decline that then stagnated under President George W. Bush. By way of being truly pro-life, it would seem that presidential Republican candidates are no more than "wolves in sheep's clothing."

Meanwhile, President Obama has made good on the commitment that he personally had inserted into the 2008 Democratic platform (reiterated in 2012), namely to "strongly support a woman's decision to have a child by ensuring access to and availability of programs for pre- and postnatal health care, parenting skills, income support and caring adoption programs." The current Republican Platform, and certainly candidate Romney, has no such abortion-reducing commitment. President Obama has signed into law the Pregnancy Assistance Fund -- a \$250 million program that helps local organizations support vulnerable pregnant women who wish to have their babies.

He has extended and tripled the Adoption Tax Credit and proposes making it permanent. He supports the Child Tax Credit, which the Romney/Ryan budget would cut. Going forward, his overall social policies and affordable health care will insure that the U.S. rate of abortions will decline significantly. No one could reasonably assert that my Catholic faith requires me to vote for one or another candidate in this election. However, my Catholic conscience prompts me to support President Obama as a practical strategy to reduce abortion in America.