The GOP's race to represent God

by Lionel_Van_Deerlin

A strange year, this. As Christmas casts its warm glow across much of the land, a stubborn political freeze settles over Iowa. While GOP presidential candidates continue what passes for campaign debate, they seem agreed only that their fate rests with that 40 percent of Hawkeye Republicans who claim the label "Christian conservative."

Mitt Romney, possibly feeling beleaguered after spending $6 million on Iowa TV, delivered a nationally televised address aimed at proving he is indeed a Christian while clinging to Mormon beliefs. He even has said that Gideon Bibles provide his travel reading. But some who are working those precincts for the Jan. 3 caucuses seem to have their own ideas of what constitutes a Christian.

Meanwhile, the more centrist and temperate 60 percent of Iowa Republicans must feel a mite wary upon learning that one of Romney's ecclesiastic accusers - Mike Huckabee of Arkansas - has taken a polling lead in their state. Huckabee, remember, was one of just three GOP hopefuls who denied belief in evolution. He accepts without scientific challenge that our Earth - Grand Canyon and all - is no more than 6,000 to 8,000 years old, its creation pretty much as described in the first chapter of Genesis.

With equal certitude, Huckabee asks a college audience to believe that his recent surge in Iowa opinion polls was "the work of God."

The image thus conveyed - of celestial tabulators poring over party registration lists in Dubuque - seems innocuous enough. But last week Huckabee's unquestioning faith was shown to have inspired an unfortunate policy decision when he was governor of Arkansas. A virtual replay of 1988's "Willie Horton" episode - to wit:

An imprisoned rapist, one Wayne DuMond, persuaded then-Gov. Huckabee that his born-again religious conversion while an inmate made him a safe bet to rejoin society. Freed at the governor's urging, DuMond shortly became a born-again rapist-killer, and he died in jail.

Other contenders have not escaped religious scrutiny. Several Catholic prelates outside Iowa recommend denying sacraments to their church's only entry in the GOP field, Rudy Giuliani - because he's pro-choice on abortion. Rivals otherwise seem to differ only on how many of the Seven Deadly Sins they can pin on Rudy.

Arizona Sen. John McCain may feel reasonably safe from persecution. His Episcopal faith was once facetiously described as the "Republican Party at Prayer," though that has been of scant help to McCain in the standings.

So much religious talk in a campaign for president seems strangely outdated. It's almost as if these fellows were vying for a spot in the Holy Trinity, not to lead a nation supposedly free of sectarian tests. It's a reminder of arguments over how many angels could dance on the head of a pin.

I may seriously misjudge the mood of those conservative Christian voters. But I think they are people who play close attention to what's happening around them. Surely some are troubled by a succession of events likely to stir those easily jolted juices of the Republican right, though ignored by campaigners.

Like "dirty books," as they're commonly called. A decade after it banned salacious magazines, the Pentagon has re-approved Penthouse along with Playboy for sale at PX stands and Navy stores.

Remember the Don Imus brouhaha earlier this year? The foul-mouthed broadcast host, who hailed the near-champion Rutgers women's basketball team as "nappy-headed hos," is back on the air, And try as she might, TV's celebrated interviewer, Barbara Walters, could not coax Imus to sound contrite.

Meanwhile, has no one been keeping an eye on the courts? Citing overcrowded prisons, federal judges say they plan to release up to 20,000 inmates sentenced on drug offenses. Setting a passel of potheads scot-free, that's what.

Richard Roberts, president of Oklahoma's Oral Roberts University and son of its televangelist founder, found a strange way of dealing with mounting debt. He went on a personal shopping spree that included a single day's $37,000 tab at a Tulsa department store. Roberts says God, no less, advised him not to contest his dismissal, quoting the Almighty's very words: "You live in a litigious society."

And what to do about San Francisco? Mayor Gavin Newsom admitted to an amorous affair with an office staffer, the wife of his campaign manager. City-county supervisors thereafter passed a resolution proclaiming office romances to be unavoidable and therefore OK.

Under the baroque dome of San Francisco's City Hall, from now on, foreplay is fair play.

Folks aren't like that in Iowa, no siree.

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