Beyond religion

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

Republican presidential hopeful Mitt Romney and his family recently tried to conjure up some Kennedyesque imagery with a game of touch football. But since then, Romney has made one fumble after another, and his poll numbers have fallen. And so, with the clock running out before the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary, the candidate decided to throw, ah, a Hail Mary.

Romney decided to talk openly about his Mormon religion in an attempt to assuage concerns by some - especially evangelical Christians who figure prominently into the Republican primary - that a Mormon is unfit to be president.

In short, what Romney must contend with is an ugly prejudice that might cause some Americans to shy away from a candidate because of his religion. That's outrageous. What could be more un-American? Romney was right to tackle that subject head-on. We applaud him for doing so.

But let's be honest. As a presidential candidate, Romney's problems go beyond his religion. He has a knack for saying the wrong thing. He can't seem to shake the criticism that he flip-flops on tough issues by trying to be all things to all people.

For instance, Romney did himself no favors when he ruled out appointing a Muslim-American to his Cabinet if elected president. Mind you, Romney wasn't talking about a particular Muslim-American who may not be suited to the position but Muslim-Americans in general. That sort of blanket dismissal is steeped in the same sort of prejudice that Romney is trying to counter. And the candidate somehow missed the hypocrisy?

Speaking of hypocrisy, Romney - a Harvard MBA who remade himself as Wyatt Earp on the illegal immigration issue - suffered another embarrassment when he announced he had terminated his contract with the landscaping company that tends his Belmont, Mass., home because it employs illegal immigrants.

That the company hired illegal immigrants isn't news. The Boston Globe reported a year ago that the company employed illegal immigrants from Guatemala. What was shocking is that Romney waited until now to fire the company. He should have done so last year when he first became aware, along with the rest of us, that his home was maintained by the same folks who, he claims on the campaign trail, shouldn't be in the country. Instead, he made a mess of this issue and opened himself up to even more criticism and accusations of flip-flopping.

Could it be that Romney doesn't care as much about ending illegal immigration as he pretends? Is he just giving lip service to the issue to placate conservative voters?

If so, what does Romney care about? And what does he stand for? Voters deserve to know the answers to these questions.

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