

Searching for love in all the Right's places

by *Bill Berkowitz*

While Giuliani and McCain register 'morally repugnant' on the religious right's traditional-values meter, Romney has a bigger problem: many conservative Christian evangelical leaders don't believe his religion measures up

For more than two decades social and economic conservatives have artfully put aside their differences and forged a powerful coalition -- under the umbrella of the Republican Party -- that has won five of the last seven presidential elections and, until this past November, controlled Congress for more than a decade. Ken Connor, the Chairman of the Center for a Just Society, described it in a recent column titled "Base to GOP: Hasta la Vista, Baby!" as "One of the most successful coalitions in modern political history."

The "Reagan Coalition," as Connor termed it, "brought the Republicans great success, including occupancy of the White House and twelve years of control over the House of Representatives."

According to Connor, a trial lawyer who represented former Florida Governor Jeb Bush in the Terri Schiavo case and who formerly headed up the powerful Washington, DC-based Family Research Council, "the most influential among the economic conservatives" are what he calls the "blue bloods"; they "are fiscally conservative, but often socially liberal." Connor's "blue bloods" are interested in "money and power and see politics as a means of increasing both." Contributing to political campaigns is seen as a "cost of doing business" and they expect to receive a "return on investment," which usually "comes in the form of tax breaks, financial subsidies, or limited accountability for their misconduct."

Social conservatives on the other hand, are motivated by how they view "the direction in which the country is moving." They tend to be "both socially and theologically conservative." They are "disturbed by what they regard as the unraveling of the social fabric and the breakdown of the social order." According to Connor, social conservatives are involved in politics to "bring about a 'course correction' for the country." Without great financial resources, they make up the soldiers in the field "invest[ing] sweat and shoe leather."

"They are the sign-planting, precinct-walking, phone-banking 'worker bees' of the party. They are best known as the Republican 'base,' but are derisively referred to as 'blue collars' by many of the Republican elites who tolerate their social agenda with sniffing disdain."

These days, writes Connor, the coalition is "fraying" and "and is on the verge of unraveling."

While Connor places the blame for the "unraveling" on the current debate over immigration, there has been ample reporting about how conservative evangelical Christians are also highly dissatisfied with the current slate of candidates running for the GOP's presidential nomination -- particularly the top tier of former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani, Arizona Senator John McCain, and former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney.

This well-publicized disenchantment hasn't stopped candidates from courting the religious right. Rudy Giuliani's recent jaunt to the Rev. Pat Robertson's Regent University campus was an example of how both declared and undeclared candidates are searching for love in all the Religious Right's places.

McCain made up with Falwell

Last year, when Senator John McCain -- whose campaign is perilously listing -- made his highly-publicized pilgrimage to the campus of the late Rev. Jerry Falwell's Liberty University, the visit served dual purposes: McCain was attempting to simultaneously heal the rift that had developed between he and Falwell during the 2000 GOP primary campaign when McCain called Falwell (and Robertson) "agents of intolerance", and check out the possibility of getting the one-time master of the Moral Majority to endorse him. For Falwell, the visit provided an opportunity to flex some political muscle that had grown flabby and inject himself into the 2008 election cycle. All that became moot when Falwell passed away in May.

Gingrich's Dobsonian confessional

Earlier this year, when Newt Gingrich decided to come clean about his serial marital infidelities, he chose to do it on Dr. James Dobson's radio program. The radio confessional by Gingrich -- ostensibly heard by millions across the country -- who many observers feel is waiting for the right time to step into the GOP race, was warmly received by Dobson, the founder of Focus on the Family. Dobson, who has emphatically ruled out supporting either McCain or Giuliani, and had a minor rhetorical dust-up around less than complementary remarks he made about Fred Thompson's religious commitment, appeared impressed with the former Speaker's willingness to publicly confront his demons.

Giuliani reaches for Robertson

Of all the meet-ups, however, the Giuliani/Robertson get together was perhaps the most extraordinary. In his speech, Giuliani trucked out the 'elect a Democrat and you'll be guaranteed another terrorist attack on U.S. soil' rhetoric, and despite the fact that Giuliani didn't mention the a-word (abortion) -- he's pro-choice, one of the g-words (gays) -- he's pro gay rights, the other g-word (guns) -- he's pro-gun control, press reports pointed out that he was warmly received.

Robertson appeared downright giddy in his introductory comments: "This is supposed to be a nonpolitical thing," Robertson said. "But we would be remiss to forget the fact that he seems to be running for President."

"And in point of fact," added Robertson, "he may one day become not New York's mayor, but America's leader. So it's a great pleasure to welcome a dear friend and a great leader."

The Romney factor -- 'A vote for Satan'

While Giuliani and McCain are viewed with enormous suspicion and distaste by many on the Christian right,

Romney has a much larger problem, one that has little to do with his serial flip-flopping on social issues. It is Romney's Mormonism that clearly makes many conservative Christian evangelicals uneasy. Interestingly, when his father, George Romney, ran in the GOP presidential primaries in 1968, his religion wasn't an issue. "Because of the dynamics of the modern presidential campaign and the rise of the Christian right in the Republican Party," writes Ben Weyl in the Iowa Independent, "Romney's faith could now pose a problem in ways his father never faced."

Some conservative Christian evangelical leaders are questioning whether Mormons are authentic Christians: "Are Mormons 'Christians' as defined by traditional Christian orthodoxy?", Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr., president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, the flagship school of the Southern Baptist Convention, recently asked in a post published at beliefnet's Blogalogue.

"The answer to that question is easy and straightforward, and it is 'no,'" writes Mohler. The Southern Baptist Convention, with its more than 16 million members, has dominated the political, theological and social landscape among Baptists, and is closely associated with the GOP.

Mohler writes:

We are not talking here about the post-modern conception of Christianity that minimizes truth. We are not talking about Christianity as a mood or as a sociological movement. We are not talking about liberal Christianity that minimizes doctrine nor about sectarian Christianity which defines the faith in terms of eccentric doctrines. We are talking about historic, traditional, Christian orthodoxy."

"Once that is made clear, the answer is inevitable. Furthermore, the answer is made easy, not only by the structure of Christian orthodoxy (a structure Mormonism denies) but by the central argument of Mormonism itself -- that the true faith was restored through Joseph Smith in the nineteenth century in America and that the entire structure of Christian orthodoxy as affirmed by the post-apostolic church is corrupt and false."

In early May, Florida Televangelist Bill Keller warned readers of his Daily Devotionals that a vote for Mormon Mitt Romney is "a vote for Satan," JewsOnFirst! recently reported. Keller called Mormonism a cult and its founder Joseph Smith a "murdering polygamist pedophile." He said "Romney getting elected president will ultimately lead millions of souls to the eternal flames of hell!!!"

Keller added that "Having Romney as President is no different than having a Muslim or Scientologist as President."

In late June on his Liveprayer television program, Keller, whose audience reportedly numbers in the millions,

"slammed 'top' religious right leaders for supporting Romney," JewsOnFirst! reported:

"If you vote for Mitt Romney, you are voting for satan! This message today is not about Mitt Romney. Romney is an unashamed and proud member of the Mormon cult founded by a murdering polygamist pedophile named Joseph Smith nearly 200 years ago. The teachings of the Mormon cult are doctrinally and theologically in complete opposition to the Absolute Truth of God's Word. There is no common ground."

"...I have watched in horror over the past weeks as one evangelical Christian leader after another has either endorsed, supported, or just as bad, refused to denounce Romney's run for the White House and those Christian leaders who support him. Last weekend Pat Robertson, founder of CBN and Regents University, had Romney deliver the keynote address to the graduates of Regents. Regents is one of the great Christian colleges in this nation and Robertson allowed this cult member to deliver the commencement address. Is he out of his mind? Do you think there would ever be a true Gospel preacher giving the commencement address at Brigham Young?"

While some on the Christian right are bitterly opposed to Romney, members of the Mormon Church -- overwhelmingly politically conservative -- are embracing his candidacy. "Romney's faith does come with a political upside," the Iowa Independent pointed out. "Many Mormons are backing -- and giving generously -- to his campaign." Larry Sabato, a political analyst and director of the Center for Politics at the University of Virginia, told the newspaper that "If you look at Romney's impressive fund raising, you'll find an enormous amount of Mormon backers. He's in contention in this race in good part because of that money that's been raised."

Conservative evangelical leaders will also be considering the bonafides of Fred Thompson, the former Republican Senator from Tennessee cum actor, who appears close to tossing his hat into the ring.

And there's always Gingrich lurking in the wings.

"Despite obvious differences" between economic and social conservatives, "Ronald Reagan forged a coalition ... by reaching out to both," Ken Connor wrote. The coalition stitched together "an agenda that appealed to both groups," which included "lower taxes, less government, and freer markets coupled with a commitment to the sanctity of life and the primacy of the family..."

"But that was then and this is now," Connor noted.

Conservative direct mail king, Richard Viguerie, the chairman of American Target Advertising and the author of the book "Conservatives Betrayed: How George W. Bush and Other Big Government Republicans

Hijacked the Conservative Cause," has also expressed his disappointment with all 10 of the current GOP candidates.

What will it take for a GOP candidate to win support from conservative Christian evangelical leaders? Will these leaders ultimately support a candidate -- Giuliani -- who many disagree with on fundamental so-called traditional values issues because they believe he can win, or will they back a candidate -- former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee and Kansas Senator Sam Brownback -- men closer to their core beliefs but not seen as electable?

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