

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Is It Possible to Be a Moral Conservative in 2012?

In a recent article in *Time* magazine, David Von Drehle posits that there is a conservative identity crisis in America today. The term “conservative” is a popular term in America. Indeed, Von Drehle shows that according to polls, conservatism is the most “popular philosophy in the US: 2 in every 5 Americans say they embrace it, according to Gallup. That’s twice the number who say they are liberal. Yet the image of a party’s ‘base’ suggests a solid foundation, and the Republican race has revealed some deep cracks in the conservative movement—dividing anti-abortion social conservatives and live-and-let-live libertarians, separating the isolationist heirs of Robert Taft from the nation-building heirs of George W. Bush’s ‘freedom agenda,’ culling the pragmatists at the Chamber of Commerce from the ideologues of talk radio and distinguishing country-club insiders from Tea Party outsiders.”

Is a conservative someone who advocates strong free market capitalism with a significantly reduced regulatory role for the US government? Or is a conservative someone who sees a reduction of the entitlement culture and the elevation of personal responsibility as a realistic set of goals? Or is a conservative someone who advocates a powerful military and an aggressive defense of American interests worldwide? Or is a conservative someone who is morally and ethically conservative—someone who views cultural issues through the grid of personal faith? Is a conservative someone who follows Ronald Reagan or Rush Limbaugh? There is no simple answer to these questions. For that reason, I agree with Von Drehle that the conservative movement is in the midst of an identity crisis.

To that end, permit me to examine the unexpected surge of Rick Santorum. He has seemingly come out of nowhere and is probably the only remaining serious challenge to Mitt Romney for the Republican presidential nomination. He is a former senator from Pennsylvania, who lost his 2008 reelection bid for the US Senate. He is a devout Roman Catholic, who does not hide his faith. Is Santorum a conservative? Economically and in terms of foreign policy, he is a mainline conservative in his pronouncements. But that is not what distinguishes him. It is his moral conservatism that defines Rick Santorum. On many issues that are moral/ethical in nature, Santorum states quite clearly his position, explains it in detail and then defends his position in the form of a moral argument. Consider these examples:

1. On the issue of marriage, he exclaims boldly that marriage is between a man and a woman and that the current dysfunction of marriage in the West is due to the ethical confusion and the absence of clear ethical guidelines.

2. He is one of the strongest defenders of human life in the race. He adamantly opposes abortion and even argues for the prosecution of abortion doctors. He also maintains with great clarity that the widespread use of prenatal testing will produce even more abortions.
3. As a strong Roman Catholic, he believes that contraception in almost all forms is ethically wrong and ends up being harmful to women. He has argued that the birth control revolution, which began in the 1960s, has been terribly detrimental to the larger culture. He sees nothing good about birth control.
4. Astoundingly, on the environmental issue, he has questioned the sincerity of President Obama's Christian faith. He calls it "phony theology," not "biblical theology." Obama's worldview is deficient on the environmental issue, he suggests, because it does not recognize nor does it accept the centrality of human beings created in God's image.
5. Albert Mohler, the theologian, refers to a speech that Santorum gave in 2008 at Ave Maria University in Florida. During his address, Santorum argued that the current generation of students is engaged in "a spiritual war. . . [in which] the Father of Lies has his sights on what you would think the Father of Lies would have his sights on: a good, decent, powerful, influential country—the United States of America."
6. Quite unbelievably, Santorum said that when he first read the text of candidate John F. Kennedy's address to the Houston Baptist pastors in the 1960 presidential campaign, "I almost threw up." He strongly contends that JFK "threw his faith under the bus in that speech." Santorum does not intend to throw any elements of his faith "under the bus!!"

In reading over these statements, one could conclude that Rick Santorum is a conservative evangelical. His position on most of the moral/ethical issues above resonate with evangelicals, for he uses the language and the biblical logic of American evangelicalism. As has happened over the last two decades especially, evangelicals find that theologically conservative Roman Catholics are often on the same page when it comes to many cultural issues.

The reaction of the cultural elite, especially the media, to Rick Santorum is predictable. Mohler writes that "The moral convictions Santorum articulates are deeply rooted in the Christian inheritance of Western civilization, but the denial of that inheritance has been a central aim of moral progressives for years. Even many who style themselves as moral conservatives live like moral liberals, with the rules intended to regulate the lives of others, rather than their own." *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd has called Santorum "Mullah Rick," deeming him a religious fanatic who is raising issues "settled a long time ago." She argues that he "wants to take the country backward." She has even characterized the Republican Party as the "Ghastly Outdated Party." Former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani says of Santorum that he is "making the party look like it isn't a modern party. . . It doesn't understand the world that we live in." Further, anyone who has listened to MSNBC or even the commentators who have aired their opinions on Fox News or on the major networks characterize Santorum as behind the times and out of touch.

What then does all this mean for America? American culture has so accommodated itself to postmodern autonomy and the sovereignty of the self, that it is impossible to have a debate on sexual ethics, abortion, the connection between contraception and sexual promiscuity and the role of religion in the public square. The ethical issues that Santorum raises and the positions that he holds are rooted deep in the Judeo-Christian ethical framework. The ethical libertinism that Dowd and Giuliani advocate is perhaps the real source of the problem. Is it possible that the dysfunction and the disastrous self-destructive behavior that seem so rampant in our culture are due to the ethical framework and lifestyle they advocate? Is it possible that postmodern autonomy now so deeply ingrained in Western civilization is the real source of the problem? But those kinds of debates focusing on those kinds of questions are now impossible. To even raise the questions Santorum is raising is to be vilified as a Christian ayatollah desiring to reinstitute some kind of Inquisition. Santorum may not always follow the Apostle Paul's dictum to "speak the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15), but he is raising profoundly important questions. It is actually quite sad that American culture has slid into such a level of decadence that it can no longer tolerate someone who challenges the ethical cesspool in which we all now live.

See David Von Drehle in *Time* (13 February 2012), pp. 28-30 and Albert Mohler, www.albertmohler.com (27 February 2012).