

HUFFPOST RELIGION

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America's new, distracted obsession with social issues

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I am an Orthodox rabbi. That means I'm from the more traditional wing of the Jewish community and am probably more conservative than most folks from my hometown of New York City. Hence, the current presidential campaign season holds particular interest since it keeps on offering a passionate frenzy of debate on matters religious.

However, I haven't yet seen any candidate or commentator ask the obvious question: Why are Americans suddenly more obsessed than ever with social issues while the global economy implodes? While Greece burned and Europe continues to reel, while jobs and home ownership in the U.S. stagnate, we here stateside are worried about seemingly more pressing matters like contraception, same sex marriage, abortion and the college experience. Let's not even touch Satan, Mormonism, gun control and whatever other urgent topic is on the public table.

A peculiar form of American isolationism has gripped our country. The rest of the world is fending off potentially disastrous immediate economic contagion, while we expend much of our national energy on social issues pretty much decided years ago. We must be a very wealthy population to have the luxury of such a philosophic national conversation.

Not.

Job creation still tops the list of issues of concern to most Americans, but it is a topic somehow sidestepped every minute by vociferous debate on morals. This kind of heated, religiously tinged rhetoric hearkening back to a mythologized America is at the heart of the tumultuous Republican primary season and part and parcel of the public discussion about President Obama's policies, whether on healthcare or birth control. What is it about the America of the moment that distracts us from substantive reflection on globalization instead of the unceasingly repetitive debate on family values?

Charles Murray's timely new book "Coming Apart" gives us a clue. It's about the decline in values of the white middle class. Murray posits that America has become exactly what it was supposed to be a refuge from: a class-based society in which one inherits social and economic position.

But the argument doesn't end there. It suggests an even more strident classism has hit us. Murray demonstrates that if you are white collar, chances are you'll mingle solely within your social class and strengthen your own upper class status. If you were unlucky enough to be born blue collar, you'll get poorer and sink into the chronic underclass. In the end, the middle has dropped out.

It was once that middle which grounded America in a civic sensibility that observer of early America Alexis De Tocqueville claimed lent itself to the most active grassroots volunteerism and sense of local community in the world. It is no coincidence that, just as America retreats into a complacent acceptance of its growing gap between rich and poor and an even deeper retreat from facing up to the restructuring of the international economy compelled by globalization, volunteerism has drastically decreased. Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam's now-classic 2000 best seller "Bowling Alone" chronicles this social decline.

So what's the relationship between a class-based society with a disappearing middle class and our current obsession with social issues? Simple: escapism. It is much easier to worry about contraception than about how to restart manufacturing in this country. It is much easier to worry about gay marriage than to figure out how to truly hold AIG, Goldman Sachs, J.P. Morgan and similar institutions accountable in an economic system in which these organizations' chieftains, surviving on government handouts no different than public assistance except in dollar amount and lack of transparency, steer economic policy at the expense of the rest of us because they sit on the board of the New York Fed or otherwise hold major political influence.

Working through the problems Murray diagnoses is tedious. It means thinking long term about the nuts and bolts of American democracy and its practical policy implications. That is drudgery, however necessary. Getting fired up about Satan, no pun intended, is much more fun and, in the short term, politically satisfying. A temporary culture war is an entertaining diversion from a recession that seems unyielding no matter what figures come out of Washington, and more importantly, from a kind of national depression about the earnest hopefulness of the American project.

Our jadedness about the future of the American dream compels us to look elsewhere for political satisfaction. And so we have a president suddenly making contraception an issue and a field of Republican candidates taking their cue and staking out truly wild positions and even kookier rhetoric.

Yes, I am convinced that religion taken in its broadest sense can be a meaningful reference point when considering policy options. One only need invoke Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to recognize the prophetic power of faith in the public square. I believe that a religious discourse emphasizing the divinity of human striving and the sacredness of local community can support America on a path to recovering faith in its future.

However, I also recognize that we live in a pluralist society governed by the rule of law. It is admirable to argue for overturning what one may consider unjust precedent in the Supreme Court. It is admirable to peacefully protest laws that clearly violate the human spirit. But courts and protests are processes separate from a more immediate imperative that in fact has gone unrecognized amidst the absurdist rhetoric of the current campaign. One can't get to serious discussion of social issues, theological or otherwise, without having secured a more basic premise: the preservation of a shared sense of fellowship, indeed citizenship, among brothers and sisters in a republic. And that does not mean quick and easy tearing of the social fabric wisely woven by prescient thinkers such as Jefferson and Madison; rather, it means reflecting together on the commonweal. After all, we are One nation under G-d. The rest is commentary.