

At the Crossroads of Religion and Politics: Republicans, Proceed With Caution

☒ In his new book, *Believer*, political guru David Axelrod tells us that when his pal Barack Obama was running for president in 2008 he lied, for political reasons, about his position on gay marriage, telling voters he was against it when he really was for it.

According to Axelrod, “Gay marriage was a particularly nagging issue. For as long as we had been working together, Obama had felt a tug between his personal views and the politics of gay marriage,” Axelrod writes. “Opposition to gay marriage was particularly strong in the black church, and as he ran for higher office, he grudgingly accepted the counsel of more pragmatic folks like me, and modified his position to support civil unions rather than marriage, which he would term a ‘sacred union.’”

This, even though years earlier, while running for his first term in the Illinois State Senate, Mr. Obama signed a questionnaire saying he “favored legalizing same-sex marriages, and would fight efforts to prohibit such marriages.”

So let’s see if we have this right: Barack Obama is now for gay marriage... but was against it when he first ran for president ... even though he was for it before he was against it.

Sure.

After hearing what Axelrod had to say about all this, Mr. Obama told a reporter that his old friend got it wrong; that he really was against it and then changed his mind. Except you

know Axelrod got it right.

Why would he make something like that up which makes his friend-the-president look like a run-of-the mill-politician who would say whatever he had to say to get elected?

When religion is involved politicians will twist themselves into pretzels making sure they don't offend the faithful – especially the faithful who vote in large. Offend them and you bring their wrath down upon your head. In political terms that means they just might sit home on Election Day.

But, as they say in the world of sports, no harm no foul. The president's acolytes in the news media yawn over revelations like Axelrod's. The president may be a cynic, but he's their cynic.

Republicans pander to the faithful, too, of course. But they look worse when they do it – at least when science is involved.

Take Scott Walker. He was in London recently trying to drum up trade for his home state of Wisconsin when an interviewer asked if he believed in the science of evolution.

The simple answer, of course, should have been: "But of course. Don't you? Instead, Governor Walker ran for cover.

"For me, I'm going to punt on that one," he said. "That's a question a politician shouldn't be involved in one way or another."

Why? Because if a Republican politician sins, and says he accepts evolution as science, those who don't will punish him.

Later, Walker issued a statement to POLITICO, saying: "Both science and my faith dictate my belief that we are created by God. I believe faith and science are compatible, and go hand in hand."

Sometimes that's true. We can have faith in God and also believe in science. We can believe it all started with a big bang and also believe that God put the particles there that exploded to become the universe. But faith and science often are at odds. Faith, very often, is what we believe despite what science tells us. Science tells us when you're dead you're dead. Faith tells Jesus died and came back to life. Science tells us that we slowly evolved over millions and millions of years. Faith tells us God created us – in his image no less – right from the jump.

I don't know what Scott Walker really thinks about evolution, but I'm pretty sure he knows what a lot of evangelical Christians think about evolution. They don't accept it. They believe there was an Adam and an Eve and a Garden of Eden and that God created man and woman in the form we appear today.

If Walker is asked the same question about evolution later in the campaign, and if he "punts" again – or gives his hand in hand answer – it's a safe bet the press will hammer him.

Other GOP contenders, fearful of making a "wrong" move, might have also "punted" if asked how they felt about evolution. And they may also "punt" – as one already has – if asked how old our planet is, because some conservative Christians incredibly believe it's only 6,000 years old – not the real number, which is 4.5 billion.

In 2012, when GQ magazine asked Marco Rubio, "How old do you think the Earth is," he responded: "I'm not a scientist, man. I can tell you what recorded history says, I can tell you what the Bible says, but I think that's a dispute amongst theologians and I think it has nothing to do with the gross domestic product or economic growth of the United States. I think the age of the universe has zero to do with how our economy is going to grow. I'm not a scientist. I don't think I'm qualified to answer a question like that. At the end of the day, I think there are multiple theories out there on how

the universe was created and I think this is a country where people should have the opportunity to teach them all. I think parents should be able to teach their kids what their faith says, what science says. Whether the Earth was created in 7 days, or 7 actual eras, I'm not sure we'll ever be able to answer that. It's one of the great mysteries."

That response prompted one liberal commentator to write: "The GOP doesn't just want to roll back the New Deal; it wants to roll back the Enlightenment." (OK, it was Paul Krugman of the New York Times who said that; the same Paul Krugman who has never met a conservative he doesn't think is a jerk. But on this, I'm afraid he's got a point.)

As I say, a progressive like Barack Obama panders too – to the faithful in his tent who vote. But he gets away with it. Republicans won't.