

BUTTIGIEG'S RELIGION AGENDA

South Bend mayor Pete Buttigieg chose Palm Sunday to announce his presidential bid. It is no accident: It accurately reflects his religion agenda.

"A devoted Episcopalian who fluidly quotes Scripture and married his husband, Chasten, in a church service last year, Mr. Buttigieg is making the argument that marriage is a moral issue." That's the way the *New York Times* described him on April 11.

It is not clear what a devoted Episcopalian looks like. Although the official position of the Episcopal church today has abandoned two thousand years of biblical teaching on the subject of marriage—it accepts marriage between two men and two women—there are many Episcopalians in the United States, including bishops, who consider themselves devout precisely because they have not rejected what the Bible says.

Why is the *Times* crediting Buttigieg for "making the argument that marriage is a moral issue"? No argument needs to be made—it is axiomatic. The paper makes it sound as if it only became a moral issue recently.

What the *Times* is getting at is Buttigieg's bid to cast marriage as a moral issue—even for homosexual unions—so he can seize the issue from evangelical Christians, traditional Catholics, and others. Good luck with that.

The fact is that the Democratic Party has aligned itself with the secularist agenda for the last half century. That agenda is hostile to religious liberty, even if some, such as Barack Obama, have been known for their God-talk skills. The reason Democrats put up with Obama's religion-friendly words is that they knew he would not make good on them. Deeds are what counts, and on that score, Obama never disappointed his base.

Buttigieg is cut from the same cloth. He will not allow his God-talk to be controlling, because if it did, he would alienate those who like him but have a phobia (or worse) about religion. They need not worry—he is a loyal soldier in the secularist war on religion.

Buttigieg knows that Democrats are leery of talking about freedom these days. They prefer to talk about equality, social justice, climate change, and the like. This explains why he recently told George Stephanopoulos, “when we talk about freedom, I think Democrats need to be much more comfortable getting into that vocabulary. Conservatives care a lot about one kind of freedom and it’s freedom from. Freedom from regulation, freedom from government,” etc.

In the run-up to his presidential announcement, Buttigieg spent a lot of time trashing Vice President Mike Pence. Casting Pence as the bad guy is part of his religion agenda.

By attacking Pence he hopes to steal the mantle of religion. This won’t be easy. After all, Pence supports religious liberty legislation, and Buttigieg does not. So who does the South Bend mayor think he can pick off? Surely not regular church-goers—they support the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA).

Buttigieg attacks Pence for signing an Indiana law in 2015, when he was governor, that was based on the federal RFRA. That law, which was supported by Democrats and Republicans alike, and signed by President Bill Clinton in 1993, stated that the government could not substantially burden religious exercise without compelling justification; even then it had to be done in the least restrictive way.

Buttigieg could have decided to simply say that he favors gay rights over religious liberty, but that would have deprived him of seizing the high moral ground. So he elected to set Pence up as his straw man so he could appear to be the real

moral agent.

"If me being gay was a choice," Buttigieg recently said, "it was a choice that was made far, far above my pay grade. And that's the thing I wish the Mike Pences of the world would understand. That if you got a problem with who I am, your problem is not with me—your quarrel, sir, is with my creator."

That was a clever, if totally dishonest, ploy. Pence never once criticized Buttigieg for being gay, and if he did, the whole world would have known about it. The difference between the two men is over policy, not one's persona.

When Buttigieg "came out" in 2015, that is, letting everyone know he is a homosexual, his governor, Mike Pence, said, "I hold Mayor Buttigieg in the highest personal regard. I see him as a dedicated public servant and a patriot." Those are not the words of a gay basher, and it is malicious of Buttigieg to characterize him as such.

When Buttigieg and Pence first met, the mayor spoke highly of his governor. In 2011, he said that despite Pence being known as a "conservative warrior," he found him to be "affable, even gentle." The evidence shows that it is Buttigieg, not Pence, who changed.

"If I saw a restaurant owner refuse to serve a gay couple, I wouldn't eat there anymore." We would expect that Buttigieg would say something like that, and not someone like Pence. Yet those are Pence's exact words, as spoken in 2015.

We know from survey research that most people see a profound difference between denying a gay couple the right to buy a cake in a bakery, and forcing a practicing Christian baker to personalize a gay wedding cake. The former is a matter of discrimination against the gay couple's equal rights; the latter is a matter of discrimination against the baker's religious rights.

Buttigieg disagrees. Fine. Then let him make his case against religious liberty without setting himself up as a religious moralizer. And let him do so without demonizing those with whom he disagrees. That would be the Christian thing to do.