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Oman: Glenn Beck is bad news for religious conservatism

NATHAN B. OMAN | Posted: Thursday, December 30, 2010 12:00 am

W. Cleon Skousen's book "The Five Thousand Year Leap" has been reissued, and after an endorsement from Glenn Beck, it was even briefly the No. 1 best-seller at Amazon.com. This is bad news for religious conservatism.

Skousen's book is a slipshod mixture of tendentious history, bad theology and paranoid politics in the John Birch Society mold. It ought to be treated as a curiosity of the pre-Reagan right, a fantasy world where communist agents such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Dwight D. Eisenhower worked to undermine America.

There was a tiny core of truth to these paranoid fears. Russian intelligence was active in the U.S. during the 1930s and 1940s, and Alger Hiss — despite his legion of establishment defenders — was a Soviet agent. Eisenhower and King were not. Conservatism triumphed in 1980 in large part because William F. Buckley and others "excommunicated" Skousen and his ilk from the movement. Doing so made conservatism safe for moderate voters.

The revival of Skousen-esque thinking via Glenn Beck's teary-eyed presentations on the dangers of creeping socialism and the tea party's darker prognostications on President Barack Obama's secret totalitarian agenda present problems for serious religious conservatives.

First, despite partisan triumphalism in the wake of electoral victory, voters at the center of the political spectrum hold the balance of power in American politics. In the recent congressional elections these voters broke in favor of the Republicans, but they did so in spite of Beck's Skousen revivalism, not because of it.

Second, and more important, Beck's neo-Skousenism is a distraction and a dead end. His ready use of religious imagery appeals to many religious conservatives, but ultimately it is political and spiritual junk food: tasty to some but without substance and poisonous in large quantities.

Our society faces real challenges, challenges where religious voices have much to offer. One of the great accomplishments of religious conservatives has been to call attention to the poverty of a "naked public square" that excludes religious voices from political debate. But those voices must offer something of substance. Paranoid fantasies and pious bromides about the wisdom of the Founding Fathers won't cut it.

For example, the nonpartisan National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia recently released an alarming report on the state of matrimony in America. Marriage seemed to be healthy

among high-income and highly educated Americans, but the same cannot be said of those lower down the income and educational ladder.

Forget debates over gay marriage; the traditional kind seems to be in free fall among those vulnerable citizens who could benefit the most from it. This is surely an issue where the republic would benefit from serious religious voices, as opposed to paranoid fantasy presented as saccharine political spirituality.

Over the long term, the revival of the worst strands of Cold War conservatism on the religious right is bad for America and bad for religious conservatives. If vigorously pursued, it will render conservative religious voices irrelevant to serious political discussions. Sadly, the irrelevance will be deserved.