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Can I Take Your Faith, Sir?

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Participants included Gary L. Bauer, a former Reagan administration official who also served as president of the Family Research Council; Paul Begala, a Clinton administration official; and sociologists of religion including Robert Bellah, Andrew Greeley, and Alan Wolfe.

The centerpiece of the event was an exchange between former New York governor Mario M. Cuomo and Congressman Mark Souder of Illinois. Cuomo, a Roman Catholic long identified as a liberal Democrat, and Souder, an evangelical Christian and a conservative Republican, offered an honest and energetic exchange of arguments on the symposium's central question: How should religious convictions impact public policy?

Mario Cuomo has addressed these issues before, most famously in an address delivered at the University of Notre Dame while he was still New York's governor. In that address, Cuomo argued that, as a Roman Catholic, he was obligated to a set of personal commitments concerning church teachings, but he insisted that he was not obligated to bring those teachings to his administration and public life. In other words, Cuomo insisted that he must oppose abortion as a practicing Roman Catholic, but he simultaneously insisted that he was not obligated to oppose abortion as New York governor.

In his Brookings Institution address, Cuomo insisted that religious convictions could indeed be brought into public debates and could determine the outcome of public policy, but only when those convictions are a matter of universal agreement. As he told his audience, a politician would have the right "to argue that his or her religious belief would serve well as an article of universal public morality," but the belief could not be "narrowly sectarian." Instead, it must instead fulfill "a universal human desire for order or peace or justice or kindness or love or all of those things–values most of us agree are desirable, even apart from their specific religious priority."

Thus, Cuomo pointed to the existence of a natural law "derived from human nature and human reason without the benefit of revelation or a willing suspension of disbelief." Describing this law, Cuomo argued that it "would occur to us if we were only 500,000 people on an island without books, without education, without rabbis or priests or history, and we had to figure out who and what we were." Extending his argument, the former governor suggested that two basic principles derived from natural law should be understood by all. The first is the unique human ability to communicate with each other, and the second is "that we should use our abilities to make the place as useful and as good as we can make it."

As respondent John Green was later to make clear, Cuomo was espousing a form of universalism. What Mario Cuomo rejects is the use of particular religious convictions drawn from particular religions.

Cuomo reduces the moral framework he draws from the natural law to this: "We need to love one another, to come

together to create a good society, and to use that mutuality discreetly in order to gain the benefits of community without sacrificing individual freedom and responsibility."

Offering an example from his personal experience, Cuomo pointed to his well known opposition to the death penalty. In this case, he argued that his position is based on public rationality rather than religious conviction, or even questions of morality. "My reasons are perfectly appropriate in this pluralist society. The question is, What is good for us, what is fair, what is reasonable? What works, what does not work?"

Using the death penalty as his example, Cuomo actually set a trap for his own intellectual inconsistency. Claiming to base his rejection of the death penalty on a universal framework drawn from the natural law, Cuomo fails to acknowledge that this framework offers no true consensus about what is good, what is fair, what is reasonable, what works, or what does not work. In order to provide answers to those questions, Cuomo must go beyond the natural law into his own personal convictions, secular or otherwise.

Congressman Mark Souder was quick to reject Cuomo's dualism of public and private spheres. Acknowledging disagreement among Christians over some critical questions of public policy, Souder pointed to an underlying consensus about the moral accountability. "Conservative faiths, even sects within these faiths, differ on how involved the City of God should be with the City of Man. But this much is true: conservative Christians as individuals do not separate their lives into a private sphere and a public sphere."

Demonstrating both courage and intellectual clarity, the congressman pointed at the inconsistencies required by current standards of political correctness. As he told the audience, he is never criticized for bringing Christian arguments to bear as he works to preserve the national parks. "I find that I am allowed to use these Christian values in speaking out for national parks and in speaking out against spouse abuse, but not when I speak out against homosexual marriage, pornography, abortion, gambling, or evolution across species. Then, it seems, I am supposed to check my religious beliefs at the public door. In other words, some moral views seem to be okay in the public arena, but other moral views, no matter how deeply held, are not okay."

In pointing to this inconsistency, Souder has performed a genuine public service. Furthermore, he now forces the secular opposition to be more honest about the real ground of its opposition. Secularists are not concerned about religious convictions that serve their own purposes or function in matters of common agreement. What they really oppose are Christian arguments that would restrict sexual behavior and would impinge upon the "lifestyle" issues at the heart of postmodern culture.

As an evangelical Christian, Souder rejects the theory of evolution. This rejection becomes a matter of vital importance when set alongside the reality that the secularist worldview assumes an evolving standard of morality. Souder's central concern, however, was that liberals reduce the debate over evolution to a simple matter of "science" versus "religion." Souder rejected this overly simplistic and unfair generalization. These debates, he insisted, "are about differing scientific viewpoints, anchored in differing views of how the world came to be." Continuing, he asserted: "It is not a science versus religion debate, and it is unfair to describe it that way. It's unfair to claim that other people's views are based on religion and therefore do not belong in the arena of public debate."

Actually, Souder could have taken his argument to the next step, arguing that the debate over evolution is really a matter of religion versus religion. For many on the left, evolution functions as a religious conviction, a central matter of faith essential to their worldview. It is not merely a secular principle of rational discourse, nor merely an explanatory theory of the universe and its origins–it is the very foundation of the worldview that establishes morality, meaning, and order in the cosmos.

In order to explain his position, Souder went back to the distinction between universalist and particularist faiths. "What is evident from this dialogue, whether respondents are considered conservatives or liberals in the political world, and regardless of religious background, is that they were overwhelmingly universalist. They believe the debate in the public arena should be consensus-driven because consensus can be achieved. Furthermore, almost all did not understand that they were actually advocating a religious view representing, at most, half of America. Universalists often intimidate, mock, and at the very least, condescend to particularists. Universalists assume and assert that education, science and reason back their positions."

Furthermore, the secular elite is so distant from the Christian convictions of mainstream America that they assume all references to personal piety are extreme, if not dangerous. Souder explained at the Brookings Institution symposium that "faith is relying upon God's spirit for direction." Nevertheless, "If I were to say, 'I was reading the Bible this morning and prayed to Jesus about my concerns and He revealed to me through the Holy Spirit how to proceed'–my lands, you're likely to worry that I have a poisonous snake in the crowd here that I'm about to pass around." Quickly getting to the point, Souder added, "No wonder a gulf is appearing between an increasingly religious minority and an establishment opinion in this nation. And, just for the record, we [Christian conservatives] do read books."

What question should the Christian politician ask himself as he contemplates public policy? Souder suggested this question: "To the best of my limited ability to understand, what do I believe Jesus would have me, as a humble sinner, do?" Souder was right to insist that the universalist/particularist divide constitutes a major ground of opposition and conflict. Nevertheless, it is the personal versus public divide that constitutes the real fault line in this debate. So far as Mario Cuomo is concerned, Christian conviction is a matter of personal conviction, but not public policy. Mark Souder insists that he cannot be a Christian in one arena, and not in the other.

Mark Souder wins the debate on this one–hands down. While believing Christians may disagree even with each other about specifics of public policy issues, we must never accept a division between the personal and the public that silences Christian conviction in the public square. The "One Electorate Under God?" project will soon be released in book form. The Brookings Institution symposium is a good place to start a discussion over these contentious but unavoidable issues, but it is no place to stop. The outcome of this debate reaches to the very heart of what it means to be an American, and it will determine the future shape of the American experiment.
