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Where Are They Leading Us?

'Compassion Forum' Mostly Showed Faith in Liberalism

By Robert Knight

CNN used the April 13 "Compassion Forum," a discussion of faith-related questions with Democratic presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, to frame "compassion" as a function of government rather than the responsibility of individual Americans.

Co-hosts Campbell Brown of CNN and Jon Meacham, editor of *Newsweek*, were joined by mostly liberal activists who formed what Brown described as a "distinguished bipartisan audience" at Messiah College in Grantham, Pennsylvania.

Except for Frank Page of the Southern Baptist Convention, however, the questioners from the audience all had liberal affiliations, or are distinguished by having publicly embraced a liberal stance on an issue. For example, Rich Cizik of the National Association of Evangelicals had made global warming his personal crusade.

The forum's lineup revealed how liberal news media and liberal activists work together to conflate "compassion" with collective (read: government) programs. "Compassion," to CNN, seems to be what happens when people of faith help engineer more, not less, dependence on government. Many of the 31 questions constituted a laundry list of liberal wishes for more government activism on poverty, health care, education, global warming and foreign aid.

Prompted by Meacham, Brown and the questioners, both candidates repeatedly cited faith as a motivating force for doing good and for informing

them as to the role of government, which appeared to be open-ended. When asked whether religion played too important a role in public life, neither candidate discussed the original intent of the First Amendment, which was to protect religion from government intrusion. To his credit, Obama defended the right of religious people to participate and to cite religious reasons for policy choices. Clinton did so as well, emphasizing that religious people “must be inclusive and respectful,” especially because the “spiritual journey” is “so personal.”

Compassion Forum by the Numbers

31	Questions (16 to Obama, 15 to Clinton)
14	Questions of a political nature (7 to each candidate)
11	Questions of a theological nature (6 to Clinton; 5 to Obama)
6	Questions of a moral nature (2 to Clinton; 4 to Obama)
35	Minutes into the discussion before the Bible was mentioned
2	Questions referring to the Bible
1	Direct reference to Christ
0	Mentions of the name Jesus
0	References by the candidates to specific Bible verses
0	References by the candidates to the Founding Fathers and the original intent of the Constitution

No one asked questions about the tax burden faced by American families, the importance of marriage, the social costs of family breakdown or how government policy could encourage personal

responsibility and reduce dependence on government. The candidates were never pressed to explain their actual policy proposals or voting records, but instead were allowed to give vague, faith-sprinkled answers that went unchallenged.

For example, Rev. Samuel Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, asked Obama the following question about abortion:

Senator Obama, the vast majority of Americans believe that abortion is a decision to be made by a woman, her family and her doctors. However, the vast majority of Americans similarly believe that abortion is the taking of a human life. The terms pro-choice and pro-life, do they encapsulate that reality in our 21st Century setting and can we find common ground?

Obama replied that, “I absolutely think we can find common ground” that “there is a moral dimension to abortion” and that it is “a wrenching choice for anybody to think about.”

Meacham asked both candidates whether they thought life began at conception. But after neither ventured a guess, Meacham failed to follow up.

Clinton's Questioners

Dr. Joel C. Hunter is the senior pastor of Northland Church, an evangelical megachurch in Longwood, Florida. Dr. Hunter briefly served as president of the Christian Coalition but stepped down when the Coalition's board rejected his effort to broaden its agenda to include issues of poverty and environmentalism.

Rabbi Steve Gutow is the Executive Director of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, an organization dedicated to protecting Jews globally, the security of the state of Israel, and furthering interfaith, interracial and inter-ethnic relations. Recently, the JCPA called for President Bush to boycott the Opening Ceremonies of the Beijing Olympics.

Rev. William Shaw is president of the National Baptist Convention, the "nation's oldest and largest African-American religious convention." In June 2007 the Convention issued a joint statement with other national black Baptist denominations that called for the end of U.S. military involvement in Iraq and also for the resignation of former Attorney General Alberto Gonzales.

Eboo Patel is a Muslim and the founder and executive director of Interfaith Youth Core, which "build[s] relationships on the values that we share, such as hospitality and caring for the Earth," and emphasizes similarities of various religions rather than differences. After participating in CNN's Compassion Forum, Patel said about Sen. Obama: "Finally, an American politician who understands something about my religion, and wants to relate to me in a way that doesn't necessarily include missiles."

Lisa Sharon Harper is the executive director of Faith and Justice, an interfaith organization that strives to "follow Christ, unite the church, and end poverty in New York through spiritual formation, education and direct advocacy." CNN failed to note that Harper is also a featured writer on the FaithfulDemocrats blog.

Neither candidate was asked about his or her record on abortion-related issues, which are among the most liberal in the U.S. Senate, including opposition to the partial-birth abortion ban. As a state legislator, Obama even voted against the Illinois state version of the federal Born-Alive Infants Protection Act, which protects babies who survive abortions.

Also conspicuously absent during the 90-minute session was the name Jesus, which was not mentioned by either participant or by any questioner, although Mrs. Clinton did cite "Christ" once. The terms "Christianity" and "Christian" were used freely.

Some of the questions were theological, such as Clinton being asked to name her favorite "Bible story" (Esther) and Obama being asked, "Did God really create the world in six days?" (a "day" to God can mean many things) and "Do you believe that God intervenes in history?" (no idea; we can only do what we think is right). A few queries centered on moral questions such as euthanasia.

Both candidates declared themselves Christians, but neither distinguished Christianity from any other

religion. In fact, they both asserted moral universality.

CLINTON: ...A core value of Christianity but also a core value of all great religions is that I am my brother's keeper, my sister's keeper.

OBAMA: ... We are not just a Christian nation. We are a Jewish nation; we are a Buddhist nation; we are a Muslim nation; Hindu nation; and we are a nation of atheists and nonbelievers.

In other words, America has no particular religion that informs its commitment to individual rights and the freedoms of speech, association, religion and assembly, which are based on Christianity's understanding of man as created in the image of God but having a fallen nature.

Neither candidate nor any of the questioners cited America's Founding Fathers at any point, nor drew on specific verses from the Bible.

Character and personal responsibility also got short shrift during the debate. Both candidates asserted that faith made people stronger, but they repeatedly emphasized collective rather than individual solutions to social problems. The most direct reference to character was both candidates' response to criticism surrounding Obama's remark about people clinging to "guns or religion" in hard times. (See appendix.)

Obama's Questioners

Rev. Samuel Rodriguez is president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, an organization that supports traditional family policies and which also lobbied Congress in 2007 to embrace the comprehensive immigration bill that opponents labeled "amnesty."

Dr. Frank Page is president of the Southern Baptist Convention. The SBC believes life begins at conception, sex is reserved for marriage and homosexuality is a sin.

Richard Cizik is the Vice President for Governmental Affairs for the National Association of Evangelicals. Cizik sparked a controversy among evangelical leaders in 2007 when he publicly opposed the NAE's refusal to address environmentalism.

Jim Wallis is CEO of Sojourners, a liberal Christian social justice organization. On April 16, *Christianity Today* posted an interview with Wallis in which he proclaimed "poverty and global inequality are the fundamental issues of our time." Wallis' opposition to the war in Iraq is also well known.

David Gushee is President of Evangelicals for Human Rights, which is dedicated to eliminating the use of torture. Gushee has also spoken out in support of evangelical involvement in environmentalism and against the war in Iraq.

Summary

The Compassion Forum could have elicited answers that would have revealed how faith shaped the candidates' character and policy positions. But the lack of balance and follow-up questions instead served up at best, a fuzzy, feel good moment for both candidates.

It seemed at times as if CNN had scripted the evening to support Democratic Party Chairman Howard Dean's announced strategy, after the party's losses in 2004, to incorporate religion into the party's message.

Robert Knight is the director of the Culture and Media Institute, a division of the Media Research Center.

Appendix

Excerpts from the Compassion Forum

Both candidates were asked first about Obama's controversial remark at an April 6 San Francisco donor event. Speaking of jobless blue collar Pennsylvania workers, Obama had said:

"It's not surprising then they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations."

Jon Meacham asked Clinton: "Senator, you have written of how faith sustained you in bitter times. Many of us have been sustained by our faith in bitter times. What exactly is wrong with what Senator Obama had to say?"

After Clinton reiterated her publicized criticism that the remark seemed "elitist," and said Obama could speak for himself, she finished with a promise to "speak for myself on what my faith journey is."

Campbell Brown then asked one of the only follow-up questions, and the only one that had a tone of challenging the candidate's previous answer:

BROWN: But, Senator, you've been out there on the stump attacking him pretty aggressively over this. And his response has been -- and he said it pretty bluntly tonight -- shame on you. You know that he is a man of faith. This is what he's saying. And to suggest that he is demeaning religion is you playing politics.

Clinton reiterated her "elitist" charge, adding that Obama was "frankly, patronizing."

Here's Obama's answer to why he used the phrasing he did.

OBAMA: Well, first of all, you know, Scripture talks about clinging to what's good. And so it's very important -- my words may have been clumsy, which happens surprisingly often on a presidential campaign...

(LAUGHTER)

... but this is something that I've talked about before, I've talked about

in my own life, which is that religion is a bulwark, a foundation when other things aren't going well. That's true in my own life, through trials and tribulations.

And so what I was referring to was in no way demeaning a faith that I, myself, embrace. What I was saying is that when economic hardship hits in these communities, what people have is they've got family, they've got their faith, they've got the traditions that have been passed on to them from generation to generation. Those aren't bad things...unfortunately, what people have become bitter about ... is any confidence that the government is listening to them.

Neither Meacham nor Brown asked Obama why he included guns and ethnic and racial animosity in the same list.

It was pretty much softball after that to both candidates. Some of the theological and moral questions were refreshingly direct (“Does life begin at conception? And if not, when?”—both candidates denied knowing when). But there weren’t follow-ups when a candidate ducked a question by talking in generalities, which often occurred.

Here are some other excerpted exchanges that give the flavor of the forum:

BROWN: Do you have a favorite Bible story?

CLINTON: Oh, I have so many of them. You know, I was fortunate as a child growing up to be read Bible stories, to go to Sunday school, to go to Bible school. And Bill and I read, you know, Bible stories to Chelsea. And, you know, I have talked about Bible stories and parables a lot in my life with friends.

BROWN: Senator, if one of your daughters asked you -- and maybe they already have – “Daddy, did God really create the world in six days?” What would you say?

OBAMA: You know, I’m trying to remember if we had this conversation.

(LAUGHTER)

OBAMA: You know, what I’ve said to them is that I believe that God created the universe and that the six days in the Bible may not be six days as we understand it. It may not be 24-hour days. And that’s what

I believe. I know there's always a debate between those who read the Bible literally and those who don't. And, you know, that, I think, is a legitimate debate within the Christian community of which I am a part. You know, my belief is, is that the story that the Bible tells about God creating this magnificent Earth on which we live, that that is -- that is essentially true. That is fundamentally true.....

But let me just make one last point on this. I do believe in evolution. I don't think that is incompatible with Christian faith. Just as I don't think science generally is incompatible with Christian faith.....

PASTOR JOEL HUNTER of Lakewood, Florida-based Northland Church: What are the first principles you fall back on to make such decisions? Are there certain activities or references or people with whom you consult in order to do what is morally right?

CLINTON:my prayer, my contemplation, my study. I think you have to immerse yourself in advice, information, criticism from others....

REV. RICHARD CIZIK, Vice President, National Association of Evangelicals: How do you relate your faith, your personal convictions to science generally and science policy, and let's take an issue like climate and flesh that out, or take stem cells, something like that. Just give us a little more indication of how you think.

OBAMA: Well, first of all...

CIZIK: Is that fair enough?

OBAMA: It is fair enough. And you guys have done some terrific work on this. So I want to congratulate you on that.

(APPLAUSE)

OBAMA: And should it be part of God's plan to have me in the White House, I look forward to our collaboration.

OBAMA: ...we've got to make some uncomfortable choices. And where I think potentially religious faith and the science of global warming converge is precisely because it's going to be hard to deal with....We

are going to put in place a cap-and-trade system that controls the amount of greenhouse gases that are going into the atmosphere.

REV. JIM WALLIS, President of Sojourners, a Christian social justice organization: ...one in six of our children are poor in the richest nation in the world. So in the faith community, we are wanting a new commitment around a measurable goal, something like cutting poverty in half in 10 years. Would you commit -- would you at this historic compassion forum, commit to such a goal tonight and if elected, tell us how you'd mobilize the nation, mobilize us to achieve that goal?

OBAMA: ...I absolutely will make that commitment. ... we're going to have to mobilize our society, not just to cut poverty, but to prevent more people from slipping into poverty....shore up the mortgage market...change our tax code...invest in our infrastructure to create jobs...invest in clean energy...cap and trade [carbon credit] system...a plan in place that provides health care to every single American ... investing in early childhood education, working with at-risk parents...drastically improving our educational system K through 12, by paying our teachers more and demanding more of them...after school programs and summer school programs...partnering with faith communities....

Dr. DAVID GUSHEE, President of Evangelicals for Human Rights: Is there justification for policies on the part of our nation that permit physical and mental cruelty toward those who are in our custody?

OBAMA: No torture, period.... And the reason this is important is not only because torture does not end up yielding good information ...It is very hard for us when kids, you know, 19, 20, 21, 22 are in Iraq having to make difficult decisions, life or death decisions every day, and are being asked essentially to restrain themselves and operate within the law. And then to find out that our own government is not abiding by these same laws that we are asking them to defend? That is not acceptable. And so my position is going to be absolutely clear.

BROWN: ... there are a lot of Americans who believe the conversation going on here tonight is not necessarily appropriate.

They believe that religion has far too much influence in public life. What do you say to that?

OBAMA: ... What I believe is that all of us come to the public square with our own values and our ideals and our ethics, what we believe. And people of religious faith have the same right to come to that public square with values and ideals that are rooted in their faith.

And they have the right to describe them in religious terms, which has been part of our history. As I said in some of my writings, imagine Dr. King, you know, going up before, in front of the Lincoln Memorial and having to scrub all his religious references, or Abraham Lincoln in the Second Inaugural not being able to refer to God.

...what those of us of religious faith have to do when we're in the public square is to translate our language into a universal language that can appeal to everybody...We are a Jewish nation; we are a Buddhist nation; we are a Muslim nation; Hindu nation; and we are a nation of atheists and nonbelievers.

FRANK PAGE, President of the Southern Baptist Convention: ...we also are involved in a ministry called True Love Waits, which has been credited by the government of Uganda from lowering the AIDS infection rate there dramatically from 30 percent to 6 percent. But we also teach a part of that, that faith has a role in the issue of HIV/AIDS. Do you concur with that and would you elaborate on that, please.

BROWN: Can I just clarify, True Love Waits is an abstinence program.

OBAMA: [after complimenting Southern Baptists and even President Bush for anti-AIDS efforts in Africa] ...My view is, is that we should use whatever the best approaches are, the scientifically sound approaches are, to reduce this devastating disease all across the world.

And part of that, I think, should be a strong education component and I think abstinence education is important. I also think that contraception is important; I also think that treatment is important; I also think that we have to do more to make antiviral drugs available to people who are in extreme poverty.

So I don't want to pluck out one facet of it. Now, that doesn't mean that non-for-profit groups can't focus on one thing while the government focuses on other things. I think we want to have a comprehensive approach.