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Backtrack to Saddleback — Secularists Not Pleased

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Suffice it to say that I was not very hopeful about the Saddleback Civil Forum on the Presidency held at the California megachurch last Saturday night. In the first place, I am not really comfortable with the idea of hosting such a politically charged event in a church. No matter how the event is planned and projected, once the event starts it can turn into something far more politically volatile than planned. That is a truth I have learned by hard experience.



Secondly, the advance publicity about the event touted it as a platform for a kind of “third way” movement that would avoid the serious worldview issues and would instead limit the conversation to vague generalities. A good many media reports suggested that Sen. Barack Obama and Sen. John McCain would be asked only “soft” questions that would demonstrate common ground and agreement between the candidates. That would be an exercise in wasted time and a squandered opportunity.

Thirdly, I was concerned that Pastor Rick Warren, the moderator of the event, would be reduced by the format to the role of a therapist or spiritual guru. Like all of us, Rick Warren likes to be liked, and being liked by two of the most famous political figures in the world is quite an achievement. Yet, if Rick Warren was to fulfill his role in moderating and leading these conversations, he would have to risk being liked a bit less. Maybe even a lot less.

With the press pushing the event as a “new face” for American evangelicals, I was not overly hopeful. Given the hype, I was positively *un*hopeful. But . . . the event turned to be quite worthwhile after all. I still have deep reservations about identifying the event so closely with a church, but the conversations really *did* get to urgently important and controversial issues, and Pastor Rick Warren handled the conversations with aplomb, demonstrating both civility and candor.

Pastor Warren’s questions ranged from the deeply personal to the overtly controversial. He often asked questions that made it difficult for the candidates to avoid giving direct and revealing answers. He let the candidates speak for themselves.

He asked about their greatest moral failure. Obama spoke of drug and alcohol use as a young person. McCain referred directly to the failure of his first marriage. When asked about the reality of evil, the two candidates revealed very different approaches. When asked about abortion and same-sex marriage, a great chasm appeared between the candidates. Obama declared his complete support for the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion on demand. When asked, “at what point does a baby get human rights?” Obama said that the question “is above my pay grade.” That is a particularly evasive answer, because the President of the United States must frame policies that are predicated on some assumption of when a human being, born or unborn, deserves the full protection of the law.

On same-sex marriage, Sen. Obama attempted to define marriage as the union of a man and a woman, but he made clear that he would actively oppose any constitutional amendment designed to protect that definition, and he gave full support to civil unions. He suggested that the matter should be left to the states, but he has opposed Proposition 8 on the California ballot — a citizen-initiated referendum that would define marriage as a heterosexual union.

Sen. McCain offered more succinct answers. When asked the question about when a baby gets human rights, McCain said, “at conception.” He pledged to be a pro-life president and he opposed the legalization of same-sex marriage. The

worldview differences between the two men were made clear, but the conversations were calm, respectful, and unhurried.

In other words, something of genuine significance happened at the Saddleback Civil Forum. Millions watched the event on CNN and the event set the stage for many lively conversations to follow.

But, not everyone is pleased. Writing in the editorial pages of USA Today, columnist DeWayne Wickham complained that the event was too overtly Christian. “What we need in the White House is a devout believer in this nation’s democratic principles, not the vicar of Saddleback,” he asserted.

The “vicar of Saddleback?” Neither of these candidates is running for that office. That comment reveals more about DeWayne Wickham’s commitment to a secularist vision of politics than about the Saddleback event.

He wrote:

As his interviews made clear . . . Warren’s doublespeak cloaked an effort to get the candidates to take a stand on many of those non-negotiable issues, which he apparently still considers matters of religious faith — and qualification for public office. His questions about their “worldview” on Christianity, abortion and the definition of marriage reflected not so much a civil forum as a push for a theocratic presidency, one that would be deeply influenced by Warren’s evangelism.

Sound the alarm — “a theocratic presidency?” That hyperventilation is remarkable. Anyone who talks about Obama or McCain in terms of a “theocratic presidency” has been reading too much science fiction in the secularist apocalypse genre. Furthermore, Rick Warren is no theocrat.

Wickham continued:

Just as worrisome for me was his call for McCain and Obama to confess their “greatest moral failure.” That’s a pretty far-reaching inquiry that would be better answered in a pastor’s study than on national TV — unless, of course, the purpose is political persuasion, not personal salvation. Even so, Obama said it was his drug and alcohol use during his youth. McCain said it was the failure of his first marriage.

Wickham’s real issue here is probably not the question itself at all. It’s hard to imagine his umbrage if Lesley Stahl or Bill Moyers asked that question of the candidates. No, the real issue here is the setting. But, then again, Wickham went on to argue that it is a good thing that many famous presidents of the past did not have to answer that question.

Finally, Wickham argued:

The president’s job is not to rid the world of the Bible’s Beelzebub but rather the worldly devils that afflict us. It is to properly handle the difficult issues of war and peace, to manage the domestic affairs of this great melting pot, and to ensure this country’s longstanding guarantee of religious freedom — and protect its commitment to a secular government. CNN did these causes a great disservice by giving a leader of just one of this nation’s religious faiths a platform to influence the outcome of the coming presidential election.

There is much in that paragraph to unpack, but the central issue here is Wickham’s definition of a “secular government.” The Saddleback Civil Forum revealed once again that government must necessarily deal with many decidedly “unsecular” questions. These two candidates were not forced into this conversation, they embraced it. Once there, they had to answer the questions.

Neither candidate is seeking to be the new vicar of Saddleback. Instead, both are running for the highest political office in the land. As both candidates were reminded Saturday night, that means there are certain questions you just can’t duck.

We discussed the Saddleback Civil Forum on Monday’s edition of *The Albert Mohler Program* [listen [here](#)]. A CNN transcript of the Saddleback event is available [here](#).

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