

AlbertMohler.com

Secularism with a Smile

Friday, June 30, 2006

Senator Barack Obama [D-IL] is one of America's most articulate political leaders. The freshman senator is already openly discussed as a presidential prospect, and his personal story is a reflection of the American dream.

So, when Sen. Obama addressed the "Call to Renewal" conference sponsored by a group of left-ward religious types, he was expected to address, in some way, the relationship between religious conviction and public life.

Some of what he had to say looked genuinely promising. For example, he told his audience that "secularists are wrong when they ask believers to leave their religion at the door before entering into the public square."

That statement is potentially important, and it would have been followed by some sustained argument for how believers would be encouraged not "to leave their religion at the door before entering into the public square."

Instead, Sen. Obama went in a very different direction, effectively contradicting that previous statement:

Democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific, values. It requires that their proposals be subject to argument, and amenable to reason. I may be opposed to abortion for religious reasons, to take one example, but if I seek to pass a law banning the practice, I cannot simply point to the teachings of my church or evoke God's will. I have to explain why abortion violates some principle that is accessible to people of all faiths, including those with no faith at all.

So, after encouraging believers to bring their convictions into the public square, Sen. Obama now tells them to keep such convictions to themselves, at least when it comes to any matter of public policy.

When the senator demands that any policy proposal be couched in an argument from secular principle — "some principle that is accessible to people of all faiths, including those of no faith at all" — he is institutionalizing secularism. This is the same kind of argument heard from academics like Robert Audi and the late John Rawls.

But this is also demanding the impossible. Sen. Obama seems to believe in the myth of a universal reason and rationality that will be compelling to all persons of all faiths, including those of no faith at all. Such principles do not exist in any specific form usable for the making of public policy on, for example, matters of life and death like abortion and human embryo research.

This is secularism with a smile — offered in the form of an invitation for believers to show up, but then only to be allowed to make arguments that are not based in their deepest beliefs.

The senator also made a very interesting and perceptive observation: "Now this is going to be difficult for some who believe in the inerrancy of the Bible, as many evangelicals do. But in a pluralistic society, we have no choice."

That is a truly remarkable statement. He recognizes that those who believe in the authority and inerrancy of the Bible must, of necessity, make some arguments on the basis of that revelation. Nevertheless, this is just not to be allowed in our "pluralistic society."

See coverage in *The Washington Post*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *ABC News*, *Associated Baptist Press*. Full text of his speech available [here](#).

Content Copyright © 2002-2010, R. Albert Mohler, Jr.