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Personal & Political; Hypocrisy or Not?

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 15, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

At the Washington Post [1], Jacques Berlinblau, a professor at Georgetown, criticized Martha Raddatz for the question she asked the VP candidates about abortion. specifically asking them to speak about the issue in person terms. He writes: "The problem is that such an appeal, inadvertently and subtly, bolstered a core conviction of the Religious Right. Namely, that personal religious convictions should--nay, must--serve as a politician?s guide to policy formation." Huh?

Normally, if someone believes one thing but refuses to act upon it, we consider that evidence of hypocrisy. Of course, there are contexts in which a sharp division between personal beliefs and public conclusions is acceptable. No one complains when Justice Antonin Scalia says that it is his job as a judge to determine what the Constitution allows, nothing more and nothing less. So, on the issue of abortion, Scalia says the Constitution is silent on the issue and, therefore, should be left to the political branches. Of course, the Constitution mentions citizens, people, person, all of which bears on the issue of abortion, but you can see Scalia's point.

But, for a public official - and here I am thinking of you Mr. Biden - you may stipulate, as you did during the debate, that you are personally opposed to abortion but do not want to force your views on others, although that is exactly what laws do, force others to comply with a given view. Certainly, the civil rights movement forced a whole lot of racists to do what they did not want to do. But, say Mr. Biden simply does not see how to craft legislation that would actually achieve the result of limiting abortion. Perhaps he thinks, and there is some warrant for so thinking, that if abortion were criminalized, it would simply result in more back alley abortions. Fair enough. But, nothing - nothing in the Constitution, nothing in Catholic moral teachings - nothing prevents him from raising his voice to convince those who do not share his stated view that abortion is wrong that they are wrong. He may have once believed that some theory of representative democracy placed a check on his vote. If he were ever president, such a theory might place a check on his veto. But, nothing in all the world keeps him from raising his voice.

As for Professor Berlinblau, where did he get the idea that Raddatz's appeal "bolstered a core conviction of the Religious Right"? The idea that the "personal is political" has its origins in the late 1960s and was employed by feminists, not the Religious Right. The good professor needs to do some research, and the Post's editors need to be more careful about publishing nonsense.

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