

Post for *The Immanent Frame*

On “The Compassion Forum”

http://www.ssrc.org/blogs/immanent_frame/2008/04/18/trust-me/

- Penny Edgell, Professor, Sociology Department, University of Minnesota
 - 4/18/2008
 - WORD COUNT: 1172
-

On Sunday evening at Messiah College, the two contenders for the Democratic presidential nomination agreed to talk in a “deeply personal” way about “issues of faith and compassion and how a president’s faith can affect us all.”

Such an event evidences a decided shift in public discourse and political culture; until recently, it would have been thought to be in exceedingly poor taste, if not a dangerous diluting and blurring of the (imaginary, preferred) sharp dark black line separating church and state.

John Kerry got caught in that shift, and appeared cold and awkward because he was not comfortable deploying his religious identity as a political calling card. At the time, his discomfort still generated a certain public sympathy. I suspect it now would not. (It is worth noting here that just as the *status quo ante* felt quite alienating to many religious Americans, the *status quo* is quite alienating to some religious Americans and to many who are not religious or who are critical of mainstream religious institutions.)

When I watched the Compassion forum, and then read the transcript, I had just prepared a lecture on the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu for my undergraduate theory class. Bourdieu thought of social life as a complicated status game, and with positions in the social hierarchy constantly being “occupied and defended” by actors who draw on their economic and cultural resources (“capital”) to solidify their position. I found myself asking the question that Bourdieu might have asked—what claims were made, what statuses defended and defined, what capital was expended on Sunday night?

The first claim that I noticed was the conflation of religion with morality. Toward the beginning of her remarks, Clinton spoke of religion as that which both “centers one in a storm” and is a “guide . . . in day-to-day living.” She also used the terms “good men” and “men of faith” interchangeably in talking about presidential candidates in ’00 and ’04. She was not alone; Obama’s comments were similarly laced with references to religion and morality as interchangeable in both private and public life, and both were unapologetic in their defense of making private religious faith a subject of public political discourse.

And this is good, right? In a diverse democratic society, people should bring their values, their identities, and their moralities into the public square. As a sociologist, it is hard not to see that as a healthy counter to the rationalization and marketization of public discourse, as one small step closer to a public sphere that is the locus of normative evaluation and critical, emancipatory speech.

Moreover, the rhetoric in the Forum expressed religiously-based moral concerns in universal terms, not narrow, particularistic ones. A wide range of historic faith traditions were represented, and the talk was about compassion, care for the earth, responsibility to future generations, protecting human life. That's inclusive, isn't it?

Or is it? What if conflating religion with morality implies that the irreligious are not good people, or good citizens? What if calling something The Compassion Forum when it's really The Religion Forum makes it hard to fully imagine moral claims not rooted in religion or non-religious motivations for compassion? If religious faith becomes a proxy for commitment to the public good and a guarantor of personal trustworthiness for presidential candidates, then the atheist, the agnostic, and the religiously indifferent are cast as something of a problem, are they not?

I noticed other claims being made Sunday night. To imply that religion is about compassion and that compassion is the appropriate moral value for political leaders to have is to have endorsed a particular religious culture rooted in individualism and personalism -- one very like contemporary evangelical Protestant culture. To be sure, there were other faith leaders present at the Compassion Forum, including Jewish and Muslim leaders. But they *all* articulated their questions within a framework that had already been circumscribed by a rhetoric of compassion (as in, "compassionate conservatism" -- remember?).

Think for just a moment about the kinds of religiously-inspired moral claims that were *not* made during the Forum. There was no Martin Luther King-like call for "justice to roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream." (The fact that Obama has explicitly and repeatedly repudiated the "righteous judgment" rhetoric of Pastor Wright tells us a great deal about the kinds of religious moral claims that are acceptable in this new "values" era of political discourse -- and the kinds that are not.) Think about the fact that while Clinton referred to the Methodist Book of Discipline she did not articulate the social justice theology that informs its stance on issues ranging from sexuality to citizenship to environmental ethics -- a theology that has less to do with compassion than with a call to change corrupt and oppressive social structures.

Finally, the Compassion Forum can be understood as one long claim made in defense of patriarchy, a personally-based system of distributing power, resources, and rewards, defended and offered as a counter-claim to the formal rationality of the bureaucratic state -- the formal rationality which for much of the 20th century provided the impetus for extending welfare benefits to the poor, expanding the political rights of women and Americans of color, protecting the rights of those favoring unpopular personal beliefs & expressions of sexuality, and constraining the exploitations of *laissez faire* capitalism. Compassion is a personal response to pain, suffering, and injustice that is individually rooted, emotionally resonant, and ameliorative in orientation.

In short, using "compassion" to signal a particular stance toward political leadership and social welfare is not a neutral thing. In such usage, "compassion" is the velvet glove shielding the hand that seeks to dismantle the welfare state and affirmative action. It says, in effect, "trust me, and

we won't need so many rules and regulations.” (The powerful always want you to trust them to be “good people” and not tie their hands with pesky regulations. The powerless always want formal rules that protect them regardless of the whims and vagaries of whomever happens to hold power.) Compassion, personalism – these are not the antitheses of patriarchy in the late modern world, they are its essence.

The irony of this critique is that I agree very much with the organizers of the Compassion Forum about one thing -- a vital public sphere must be a site for values-based discourse, for moral claims, one we enter as fully human selves, bringing our identities with us. The problem with the Compassion Forum was *not* that it sought to put religion, morality, and compassion on the political agenda in a contentious election season. The problem was that it did this in a way that actually obscured the particular identities and statuses that informed its claims by cloaking them in faux-universal language. As a social scientist, I feel compelled to point to the particularities informing those claims, and to note that there are other legitimate sources of value-based claims besides religion.

Let's have a forum where we talk about that for awhile. Maybe it will be liberating.