

ISSUE BRIEF

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The Budget and Religion: Principles for Informing Policy

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House Budget Committee chairman Paul Ryan (R-WI) is being criticized by the secular and religious left for comments he made about the role his Catholic faith played in crafting his budget. The most outrageous criticism is that it played any role at all.

The reactions to Ryan's comments should call to mind three important things: (1) religious values should be welcomed in the public square, (2) not all religious values are based on divine revelation, and (3) translating moral principles into policy requires both prudence and technical expertise.

The Offending Remarks and the Reaction. Ryan explained that a "person's faith is central to how they conduct themselves in public and in private." "To me," he said, "the principle of subsidiarity, which is

really federalism, meaning government closest to the people governs best, having a civil society ... where we, through our civic organizations, through our churches, through our charities, through all of our different groups where we interact with people as a community, that's how we advance the common good."¹

Critics pushed back. Sarah Posner argued in *Salon* that political theology debates "in a pluralistic democracy ... have no place in determining the federal budget."²

She went on to channel the religious left: "Surely it's understandable that liberal Catholics are angry that Ryan is misrepresenting their faith to justify his punishing and heartless assault on his fellow Americans." She quoted Catholic ethicist Daniel Maguire: "Right-wingers like Paul Ryan grab that one word, 'subsidiarity,' and claim it supports their manic hatred of government. It doesn't."

The trend continued when faculty at Georgetown penned an open letter to Ryan: "In short, your budget appears to reflect the values of your favorite philosopher, Ayn Rand, rather than the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Her call to selfishness and her antagonism toward religion are antithetical to the Gospel values of compassion and love."³

The Civil Public Square. It is antithetical to the American tradition and to sound political reasoning to argue that in a pluralistic society religious values should be excluded from policy debates. This position leads to what Richard John Neuhaus famously termed the "Naked Public Square."⁴ But as Neuhaus insisted, the alternative to the Naked Public Square is not the Sacred Public Square but the *Civil* Public Square—a place where all views touching on the political common good, from whatever foundational perspective, are welcome.

This is not to say that every view is equally good or true. But it is to say that society should not preemptively rule out classes of arguments merely because they have religious roots.

Those who insist that public deliberation occur only along a shared secular conception of justice are pursuing an illusion. There is no one shared conception of morality, and insofar as there are commonalities, many spring forth from religious roots. Contrary to what some believe, it is precisely because America is a pluralistic society that all views should be welcome.

Americans have always practiced this, especially in the greatest social justice movements: Whether it be the

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abolitionists, the women's suffrage movement, or the civil rights movement, religious voices and rationales played indispensable roles. There is no reason to exclude them now.

Religious Values and Divine Revelation. Underlying many objections to religion in the public square is an implicit assumption that everything about religion is a matter of faith and thus is not open to public deliberation. But religious communities frequently transmit traditions of rationality that require no faith commitments to appreciate. For instance, the Catholic faith includes the doctrine of the Trinity, which is based on the Catholic Church's account of divine revelation. However, there are other Catholic teachings that are accessible to reason and do not require revelation. The church's condemnation of sexual assault is one example.

Another example is the principle of subsidiarity. Pope John Paul II explains this principle in his encyclical *Centesimus Annus*:

A community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it in case of need and help to coordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good. ...

The social nature of man is not completely fulfilled in the

State, but is realized in various intermediary groups, beginning with the family and including economic, social, political and cultural groups which stem from human nature itself and have their own autonomy.

"Human nature itself," the pope insisted, provides the grounding for this principle.

Translating Moral Principles into Policy. How citizens talk about translating moral principles into policy is particularly important, for the work of policymaking requires both sound principles and prudently applied technical expertise. In the course of public debate over such matters, it is therefore important to establish whether a disagreement is at the level of principle or at the level of application. There will and should be vigorous debate about how best to apply moral principles. And good politicians do not claim to have a monopoly on the application of social thought.

Some moral principles translate rather directly into public policy: Rape is wrong, and thus it is criminalized. But other principles require more prudential and technical judgments to be made, about which reasonable people of good will can and do disagree.

Ryan's proposed budget makes prudential and technical decisions when it comes to translating his moral principles into public policy. There are certainly other, perhaps even better, instantiations. But

to characterize Ryan's budget as a "punishing and heartless assault on Americans" and to claim that he "hates government" is to engage in some of the worst forms of demagoguery, and it is especially pernicious when religion is involved.

If theologians disagree with Ryan's policies, they might hesitate before asserting that he rejects religious principle and instead seek to understand the prudential considerations that motivated his judgments. Much of the dispute lies not over how best to understand the principle of subsidiarity but on whether current federal entitlement spending is sustainable and whether the programs they fund are effective. It is disagreement about *this* issue that separates Ryan from his religious critics.

Moral Values at Play. Ryan's explanation of the religious reasons that motivate his work on the budget is welcome in public discourse. These principles add important content to these debates. Discussion of the budget specifics requires political prudence and technical expertise to determine their likely economic, social, and cultural effects—such as how they will affect the poor. Critics should discern and articulate whether disagreement is at the level of principle or application of those principles.

Yet when it comes to why people should help the poor in the first place, and what the role of government is in helping them, it is hard to see how moral values drawn from religious traditions are not at play. Advocating

1. David Brody, "Only on Brody File: Paul Ryan Says His Catholic Faith Helped Shape Budget Plan," The Brody File, April 10, 2012, <http://blogs.cbn.com/thebrodyfile/archive/2012/04/10/only-on-brody-file-paul-ryan-says-his-catholic-faith.aspx> (accessed May 8, 2012).
2. Sarah Posner, "Paul Ryan's Biblical Bilge," Salon.com, April 12, 2012, http://www.salon.com/2012/04/12/paul_ryans_biblical_bilge/singleton/ (accessed May 8, 2012).
3. Steve Schneck "Ryan, Weigel, and Subsidiarity: Politicizing the Social Magisterium," Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, <http://www.catholicsinalliance.org/thecommongoodforum.html> (accessed May 8, 2012).
4. Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (New York: Eerdmans, 1988).

the Naked Public Square is not the solution.

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