

The Moderate Voice

Bernie Sanders' Views On Secularism & The Drug War Present An Important Alternative To Hillary Clinton's Conservative Views

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The prospect of Hillary Clinton becoming the Democratic nominee represents a nightmare to those on the left who desire to see action on the concentration of wealth among the ultra-wealthy, those who prefer peace over perpetual war, those who support civil liberties, and those who are liberal on social/cultural issues. If Bernie Sanders had his way, he would only be speaking about the first issue during this campaign. He is learning that he cannot be a single-issue candidate and must broaden his appeal (as I discussed after his performance in the first Democratic debate). Bernie Sanders has frequently championed economic issues, has often spoken out on Clinton's pro-war stance, and has now become a more reluctant culture warrior and hero to secularists in this campaign.

Sanders appeared much more comfortable in this position when appearing on Jimmy Kimmel Live last week. To the shock of conservatives, and delight of secularists, Sanders downplayed the role of religion. Kimmel asked, "You say you're culturally Jewish — you don't feel religious. Do you believe in God, and do you think that's important to the people of the United States?" Sanders answered:

I am who I am and what I believe in and what my spirituality is about is that we're all in this together. That I think it is not a good thing to believe that as human beings we can turn our backs on the suffering of other people. This is not Judaism — this is what Pope Francis is talking about — that we cannot worship just billionaires and the making of more and more money. Life is more than that.

While discussing social/cultural issues, Sanders also said he is "not unfavorably disposed to moving towards the legalization of marijuana" when asked by Kimmel. He came out strongly against the drug war in pointing out, "We have more people in jail today than any other country on Earth." He also said, "We have large numbers of lives that have been destroyed because of this war on drugs and because people were caught smoking marijuana and so forth. I think we have to end the war on drugs."

This is quite a contrast to the views of Hillary Clinton, who has been as much a war-monger on the drug war as on foreign policy.

Sanders' views on religion are in tune with the times in an age when those unaffiliated with organized religion is the fastest growing group. This comes as a welcome alternative in the Democratic race for secularists to the views of Hillary Clinton, used the phrase "God-given potential" three times during the last Democratic debate, and who answered this question from The New York Times Sunday Book Review:

If you had to name one book that made you who you are today, what would it be?

At the risk of appearing predictable, the Bible was and remains the biggest influence on my thinking. I was raised reading it, memorizing passages from it and being guided by it. I still find it a source of wisdom, comfort and encouragement.

This led Gawker to write, "However you feel about Hillary Clinton, it is difficult to deny that she is one of the most cold and calculating political figures in all the land." The Daily Banter also called this "a political calculation" and at the time I thought the same. However, a deeper look into Clinton's religious views suggests an even scarier interpretation than crass political calculation—this might actually be what she believes. As I previously discussed in April, Clinton's cultural conservatism and promotion of conservative causes has often been seen in her membership in The Fellowship while in the Senate. From Mother Jones in 2007:

Through all of her years in Washington, Clinton has been an active participant in conservative Bible study and prayer circles that are part of a secretive Capitol Hill group known as the Fellowship. Her collaborations with right-wingers such as Senator Sam Brownback (R-Kan.) and former Senator Rick Santorum (R-Pa.) grow in part from that connection...

That's how it works: The Fellowship isn't out to turn liberals into conservatives; rather, it convinces politicians they can transcend left and right with an ecumenical faith that rises above politics. Only the faith is always evangelical, and the politics always move rightward... These days, Clinton has graduated from the political wives' group into what may be Coe's most elite cell, the weekly Senate Prayer Breakfast. Though weighted Republican, the breakfast—regularly attended by about 40 members—is a bipartisan opportunity for politicians to burnish their reputations, giving Clinton the chance to profess her faith with men such as Brownback as well as the twin terrors of Oklahoma, James Inhofe and Tom Coburn, and, until recently, former Senator George Allen (R-Va.). Democrats in the group include Arkansas Senator Mark Pryor, who told us that the separation of church and state has gone too far; Joe Lieberman (I-Conn.) is also a regular.

Unlikely partnerships have become a Clinton trademark. Some are symbolic, such as her support for a ban on flag burning with Senator Bob Bennett (R-Utah) and funding for research on the dangers of video games with Brownback and Santorum. But Clinton has also joined the gop on

legislation that redefines social justice issues in terms of conservative morality, such as an anti-human-trafficking law that withheld funding from groups working on the sex trade if they didn't condemn prostitution in the proper terms. With Santorum, Clinton co-sponsored the Workplace Religious Freedom Act; she didn't back off even after Republican senators such as Pennsylvania's Arlen Specter pulled their names from the bill citing concerns that the measure would protect those refusing to perform key aspects of their jobs—say, pharmacists who won't fill birth control prescriptions, or police officers who won't guard abortion clinics.

Clinton has championed federal funding of faith-based social services, which she embraced years before George W. Bush did; Marci Hamilton, author of *God vs. the Gavel*, says that the Clintons' approach to faith-based initiatives “set the stage for Bush.” Clinton has also long supported the Defense of Marriage Act, a measure that has become a purity test for any candidate wishing to avoid war with the Christian right...

The libertarian Cato Institute recently observed that Clinton is “adding the paternalistic agenda of the religious right to her old-fashioned liberal paternalism.” Clinton suggests as much herself in her 1996 book, *It Takes a Village*, where she writes approvingly of religious groups' access to schools, lessons in Scripture, and “virtue” making a return to the classroom.

As noted in the above excerpt, Clinton's affiliation with the religious right was seen in her support for the Workplace Religious Freedom Act, a bill introduced by Rick Santorum and opposed by the American Civil Liberties Union for promoting discrimination and reducing access to health care, along with her promotion of restrictions on video games and her introduction of a bill making flag burning a felony. Her opposition to needle exchange programs was a significant difference between Clinton and Obama in the 2008 race. Her social conservatism is also seen in her weak record on gay rights and on abortion rights, such as supporting parental notification laws and stigmatizing women who have abortions with the manner in which she calls for abortion to be “safe, legal and rare” as opposed to uncompromisingly defending the rights of women to control their own bodies.

Bernie Sanders is raising important economic issues in his campaign against Hillary Clinton and her Wall Street ties, but there are many other differences between them which are important in this race.