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The vice-presidential 'Catholic' question

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NCR Today

My Irish Catholic ancestors on my mother's side would have had a great time watching last night's vice-presidential debate. For the first time in American history, two Catholics -- Irish Catholics, no less -- sparred verbally in the quest for the second-highest office in the land.

But when moderator Martha Raddatz of ABC News asked them how their faith influenced them, their answers laid out the stark differences in contemporary Catholicism. Paul Ryan talked about his faith almost exclusively in relation to abortion, and Joe Biden immediately mentioned the social justice agenda of the church -- care for the poor and vulnerable. When he mentioned abortion, he said he accepted official church teaching on the subject, but he would not impose that teaching on people who disagree with it.

Although Biden's position is not new, the respect he showed to people of other faith traditions as he answered the question surely won him a lot of points with voters. Here is a Catholic who -- in the tradition of John F. Kennedy -- really does understand what "religious freedom" means: not imposing one religious position on what is now the most religiously diverse nation on the face of the earth.

The two candidates also sparred over "religious freedom," with Ryan defending the Catholic bishops' position that such freedom is abridged because Catholic institutions would be forced to pay for contraception coverage under Obamacare and Biden pointing out that the issue has essentially been resolved through compromise.

After the debate, Lawrence O'Donnell of MSNBC said he felt the question about the candidates' faith was inappropriate. I disagree. It is always useful to know from candidates of any faith (or no faith) how that position would influence their stances on public policy. O'Donnell and others might believe that a public official's personal faith should not be a factor in public policy making, but it sometimes is, and voters

have a right to know how -- if at all -- it influences a candidate.

Both men are intelligent and informed, though Ryan is, shall we say, factually challenged on issues like Medicare. Still, Ryan is no Sarah Palin. This was a lively debate with a real exchange of starkly different ideas as to where to take the country.

However, I give the win to Biden, hands down. He made stronger points, not only on respect for our religious diversity of views on abortion, but on the power of the stimulus (loved his citing Ryan's letters asking for stimulus money for his district), Medicare and Afghanistan. My Irish Catholic grandmother is smiling from the great beyond.

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