



My Debate With the “Son of Man” Over ObamaCare

On Friday, July 5, for about 90 minutes, I debated with “the Son of Man” — the leader of the New Nation of Islam — on his Detroit radio and television broadcasts. The issue was the Affordable Health Care Act, i.e., ObamaCare.

Never before having heard of “the Son of Man,” and knowing only that he considers himself the successor of Elijah Muhammad — the deceased Nation of Islam head responsible for both inspiring and, eventually, murdering Malcolm X — and that he calls himself “the Son of Man,” I was reluctant to accept his invitation. Yet given the graciousness with which he extended it, his assurances that I would be treated with respect and courtesy, and, last but not least, his willingness to give a prospective opponent as much air time as needed to express an alternative point of view, I found it hard to refuse.



The experience was an interesting one. To my host’s credit, he proved himself to be a man of his word. Not only did he give me as much time as I needed, he gave me more than enough time. In fact, he actually wanted for me to stay on for the full two-and-a-half hours with him. And not once did he try to shout over me. On the one occasion when one of his congregants jumped on the line to express his displeasure with my position — it happened so quickly, I didn’t hear a word that this malcontent mumbled — “the Son of Man” wasted not a second in smacking him down. He excoriated his disciple for “disrespecting” his guest and cautioned him in no uncertain terms against attempting a move like that again.

All of this aside, it became painfully clear that my thoughtful host wasn’t so thoughtful on this issue of ObamaCare. It isn’t that he was necessarily any less thoughtful — or any more thoughtless — than anyone else who favors this monstrosity. He was, to put it charitably, confused. And he was confused for the same reasons that all proponents of ObamaCare are confused. Gently, but firmly, I drew the attention of “the Son of Man” to the error of his ways.

First, I remarked, the plethora of cost-benefit analyses of ObamaCare that both its friends and foes supply are, in the final resort, of no relevance. Utilitarian considerations of the kind that these studies invoke are not germane to the ultimate question: Does it amplify or diminish liberty?

Even if ObamaCare promises to solve every material challenge that we face, even if it will drastically reduce healthcare costs for all, it should be resoundingly rejected if it violates our liberty. But to determine whether this is the case, we need to be as clear as possible as to what liberty — our liberty — is.



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The liberty that Americans have traditionally prized is not some abstraction. It is a concrete manner of living to which earlier generations of Americans had become habituated. This way of life is both cause and effect of the decentralization of authority and power of which our institutional arrangements have historically consisted.

Thus, ObamaCare is indeed a violation of liberty, for it requires and assigns an allocation of authority and power to the federal government that is unprecedented in both size and scope.

This, I believe, is the decisive point against ObamaCare. Yet “the Son of Man” essentially ignored it and, instead, insisted upon citing all of the good — all of the substantive satisfactions — that Obamacare will allegedly yield. So, I changed tactics by availing myself of a particularly powerful — actually, an unanswerable — argument from analogy: If the federal government is justified in demanding of all citizens that they purchase medical insurance for their own good and that of their fellows, I said, then the federal government would be no less justified in demanding of all citizens that they purchase memberships to fitness clubs for the very same reasons.

My interlocutor replied that this would be “unreasonable.” This, though, is no response at all.

What is “reasonable” or not,” I informed him, is for the most part a function of habit. The federal government under which we live today America’s Founders would have found wildly “unreasonable.” There isn’t a single state in the Union that would have remotely conceived of ratifying a written constitution that envisioned a national government like that under which we currently labor.

When “the Son of Man” noted that only those people “at the bottom” who don’t already have health insurance will be burdened by ObamaCare’s “individual mandate,” I tried to hammer home the point that even if this was true — and it is not — it would still be utterly immaterial. Many of us belong to gyms and regularly exercise. That is, we would not be burdened by the government’s efforts to mandate that every citizen — or any citizen — purchase a gym membership. Still, there is scarcely a soul who wouldn’t be outraged over any such attempt.

And the outrage over such a law would stem, not from any consideration regarding who would or would not be most put out by it, but from the fact that it would be a blunt affront to liberty.

ObamaCare sparks — or should spark — outrage for the same reason.

Third, “the Son of Man” asserted that ObamaCare is necessary if we are to care properly for our fellow men and women. To put it another way, those of us who oppose ObamaCare are negligent of those in need.

My answer to this line was straightforward.

The peoples of the Earth, I replied, have never encountered such compassion and charity as they witness on display in the Christian world. Yet these moral excellences, as well as all such excellences, are distinguished on account of the fact that they are freely chosen. There is no virtue that redounds to the credit of the citizen whose government conscripts his resources into the service of others. Moreover, more good is done — more people actually helped — when individuals are at liberty to give to those whose circumstances they know best.

Fourth, “the Son of Man” made an appeal to the requirements of patriotism. The patriot, he argued, is devoted to his government.

I wasted no time in correcting him on this: The patriot is devoted, most definitely not to the federal government, I declared, but to his country. Certainly he wishes to preserve the integrity of his



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government; there is no question regarding his loyalty to it. But it is to the preservation of the historical identity of his country that he devotes his energies first and foremost.

Finally, discourse partner for the evening not infrequently appropriated the imagery of a benevolent parent when referencing the federal government. He confusedly oscillated between this image and that of an umpire.

I brought to his attention the stone cold fact that these two images were radically incompatible. I further informed him that the idea of government-as-parent is just as incompatible with the idea of citizen as self-governing agent. If the government is like a parent, then the citizen is like a child. But the Founders envisaged a government that was more like an umpire, a government that is the custodian of rules that all citizens were obligated to observe, but rules that simply stated how they were to conduct themselves — not what they were to do.

I left this radio show being that much more convinced that ObamaCare is an unmitigated disaster for liberty.



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