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## The Great Cultural Divide

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In recent years, Roger Williams University has experienced a great deal of debate regarding some of the most controversial political and cultural issues that are confronting contemporary American society. Many of the speakers representing the various viewpoints on these issues have been criticized as espousing either a left- or right-wing agenda, or as being too inflammatory to propel genuine civil discourse. RWU and the Commission on Civil Discourse have attempted to remedy this situation by bringing a wide variety of diverse speakers to campus, including the president of the Campaign for Working Families, Gary Bauer. Bauer, a conservative Republican, (and past Presidential candidate) spoke about the two primary wars in which, in his view, America is currently engaged: the War against "Islamofascism," and the "Culture War" broadly, but especially regarding the more specific issue of homosexual marriages. The main topic of his lecture focused on the traditions of American culture, particularly its Judeo-Christian ethic and heritage, and how these two conflicts or "wars" threaten to subvert it. Overall, the speech was refreshing in the sense that his critics in the audience, and they were numerous, were analyzing the validity of his arguments, and not dismissing him as an extremist with hostility towards Muslims, women, or homosexuals.

Bauer believed that the most obvious war facing America is the War on Terrorism that commenced on September 11, 2001. According to Bauer, the chief motivation for our opponents in this conflict is their ideology. Bauer, a fundamentalist Christian, proclaimed that the particular faction of Islam, which he called "Islamofascism," is counterintuitive to the American values of liberty, free enterprise, and transcendental rights for all people, especially women. Bauer was also quite dismissive of claims that the United States' foreign policy and the history of colonialism were more significant factors for the current state of affairs, believing that such statements unfairly hold the United States responsible for the actions of the terrorists. His comments regarding the specific brand of Islam that he finds abhorrent to the values of a civilized society were arguably the most controversial aspect of his lecture. In fact, a young Muslim student from Afghanistan critiqued his analysis, saying that his interpretation of her faith was inaccurate, and that the terrorists of September 11 were not true representatives of her religion. Gary Bauer addressed her criticism by clarifying that he did not personally hold negative views of Islam, and that he concurred with the Afghan student that the Islamic faith is indeed peaceful and benevolent. He insisted, however, that although the terrorists' perception of Islam is erroneous, their ideology is their guiding principle for their hatred of America, and not American foreign policy.

Bauer's discussion of the Culture War was also of significant importance to his worldview, especially with regard to some of the most critical and controversial issues in the minds of college students and the general populace alike, issues such as abortion, the right to die, and homosexual marriage. He was vocal about his opposition to legalized abortion, and displayed his disgust with the Terri Schiavo case in Florida in which she was permitted "to starve to death." Bauer's main focus, however, was his opposition to institutionalized homosexual marriage and his support of a constitutional amendment to ban it. He stated that the issue is, in fact, far less controversial than many would believe, and that vast segments of the American population are opposed to homosexual marriages. Bauer further declared that homosexual practices have absolutely no root in American culture, which was largely founded upon Christian values, and that if such marriage rights were bestowed upon homosexual couples there would be no valid argument against polygamous relationships. Another point that Bauer addressed was how often he has been discredited because he is a pious Christian. Opponents believe that infusing his religious beliefs with political decision-making would corrupt the "separation of church and state" upon which this country was supposedly founded. Bauer dismissed this notion by pointing out that the country's Founders were also deeply religious men who consistently mentioned God in their public life, including the Declaration of Independence authored by Thomas Jefferson.

Two major criticisms from the audience revolved around the specific issue of homosexual marriage. One student cited Federalist Papers No. 10 and No. 51 authored by James Madison in which he discussed the concept of "tyranny of the majority." Under this social theory the will of the majority may not be a just

outcome because there could be oppressive circumstances for the minority group, which is analogous to the homosexual marriage issue. Bauer responded by comparing homosexuality to polygamy.

Most students and faculty, in my view, left his speech discussing some of the most controversial issues in a civil and respectful manner. Gary Bauer was unlikely to persuade anyone in the audience, but he was hopefully able to break some of the stereotypes that some university students and faculty may have about social conservatives.