

Paulina Napierała

## Barack Obama, Religion, and the Separation of Church and State

The religious views of presidential candidates have always been an important topic in American presidential campaigns. Their views concerning the separation of church and state have also become another significant issue, especially after John F. Kennedy's campaign. With the creation of the Religious Right movement, religious issues have now been placed at the center of attention.

The religious views of Barack Obama and his attitude toward the separation of church and state were at the center of attention both during the 2008 presidential campaign and during his first term in office. During the second part of his presidency, he introduced a number of political decisions on religion-related issues that played an important role and were widely debated during the 2012 campaign. He also made a number of comments about his personal faith as well as about secularism, the separation of church and state, and the role of religion in the public sphere. In this essay I would like to analyze his attitude toward religion and the idea of the separation of church and state, as well as the shifts in his approach toward religion-related political issues and the political debate surrounding them.

### Barack Obama's religious background

Barack Obama's religious background is more diverse than that of most American politicians. His mother grew up in an environment that, as Obama put it, was not particularly religious. He often stressed, however, that although his mother "grew up with a certain skepticism about organized re-

ligion” ... she was one of the most spiritual people that he had ever known.<sup>1</sup> His father was a Kenyan immigrant who was raised in the Muslim faith but “was said to be a non-believer throughout his life” (Pew Forum, Religion and Politics 2012). His step-father came from a Muslim background of an eclectic kind. When Obama’s mother remarried, they moved to Indonesia, where Barack attended a Catholic private school and later a secular, Muslim-majority school. Later he lived with his maternal grandparents in Hawaii, where the family briefly attended services at a Unitarian Universalist church. In general, Obama was raised in a relatively secular household where however he learned a lot about various religions due to his mother’s interests in anthropology.

After graduating from Columbia University, Obama, who was a religious skeptic at that time, went to work for a faith-based community organizing group in Chicago. According to his later statements, that was when he first attended Chicago’s Trinity United Church of Christ and was inspired to believe in Christianity by a sermon entitled “The Audacity to Hope” delivered by the Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright (Pew Forum, Religion and Politics 2012). In 2008 he explained that he was attracted to Trinity and Wright’s sermons because they “spoke directly to the social gospel, the need to act and not just to sit in the pews.” Obama eventually was baptized at the Trinity United Church of Christ, which is a predominantly African-American church located in Chicago. It is the largest church affiliated with the United Church of Christ, a Christian denomination with roots in Congregationalism. The church has been active in the sphere of racial issues, especially during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>2</sup> It has also been involved in social programs on behalf of the disadvantaged, both nationally and internationally.

## Obama’s attitude toward religion as a political issue during the 2008 campaign

Although Barack Obama has often repeated that the Christian faith has played an important role in his life, his non-conventional religious background has been a source of controversy, and his religious views were widely debated during the 2008 presidential campaign and later on. His religion has been

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<sup>1</sup> This discussion of Barack Obama’s religious background is mostly based on information presented in the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life’ Project, “Religion and Politics 2012”.

<sup>2</sup> The church sought to re-contextualize Christianity through black liberation theology in order to counter the influence of radical black Muslim leaders, who taught that it was impossible to be both Black and Christian. Rev. Wright was later accused of spreading white racism (Kantor 2007).

treated with suspicion, with some of his opponents calling him a Muslim, others an atheist.<sup>3</sup> Both of these descriptions were supposed to disqualify him as a candidate for office. According to the Gallup Poll, atheists and Muslims are least accepted as presidential candidates.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, Obama's religious history and his church membership became a topic to be examined. In the end, his membership in Rev. Wright's church turned out to be problematic when a review of Rev. Wright's sermons, offered for sale by the church, revealed his controversial comments concerning the USA. ABC News reporters coined them as "repeated denunciations of the U.S. based on what he [J. Wright] described as his reading of the Gospels and the treatment of black Americans" (Ross 2008).

Reporters eagerly quoted controversial fragments of Rev. Wright's sermons, especially the "God damn America" phrase which Rev. Wright used in one of his sermons:

The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law and then wants us to sing 'God Bless America.' No, no, no, God damn America, that's in the Bible for killing innocent people ... God damn America for treating our citizens as less than human. God damn America for as long as she acts like she is God and she is supreme (quoted in: Ross 2008).

Reporters also commented on the 2001 sermon, in which they argued, Rev. Wright claimed that the United States had brought on al Qaeda's attacks of September 11, 2001 because of its own terrorism (Ross 2008). In 2001, Rev. Wright said:

We bombed Hiroshima, we bombed Nagasaki, and we nuked far more than the thousands in New York and the Pentagon, and we never batted an eye ... we have supported state terrorism against the Palestinians and black South Africans, and now we are indignant because the stuff we have done overseas is now brought right back to our own front yards. America's chickens are coming home to roost ... (quoted in: Ross 2008).

At first, Senator Obama commented on these revelations, explaining that he had not been at the church on the day of Rev. Wright's 9/11 sermon. He also underlined that "[t]he violence of 9/11 was inexcusable and without jus-

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<sup>3</sup> Not only was his background considered as proof of his atheism, but also joining the Trinity Church. As a conservative blogger puts it: "Hell, the 'church' he joined is best known for black liberation theology. That's not a religion. It's a **political** party" (Reed 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Regardless of the fact that, for example, Thomas Jefferson was considered an atheist and yet he is cherished as one of the greatest American. The support for an atheist as a presidential candidate is 54%. It has risen from 49% since 1999, but it is lower than support for a Muslim (Jones 2012).

tification,” and that “[i]t sounds like he [Rev. Wright] was trying to be provocative” (Ross 2008). However, when video clips of some of Wright’s controversial sermons were aired Obama began to distance himself from the pastor in speeches, ultimately denouncing Wright’s comments and resigning from Trinity (Pew Forum, Religion and Politics 2012). Since then he has attended various churches but has not become a formal member of any of them.

These controversies have contributed to the suspicious atmosphere surrounding Obama’s religious views. Due to these controversies as well as to the fact that as a senator he was known for quite liberal views on such issues as gay rights and abortion, the comments concerning religion and its public role which he has made throughout his political career have been thoroughly examined. One of the most important sources of information concerning his views on the role of faith in the public sphere and the idea of separation of church and state was his address at a 2006 Call to Renewal conference sponsored by *Sojourners*, a ‘progressive’ evangelical’ magazine. It was often referred to, quoted, and variously interpreted during the presidential campaign of 2008.

In this speech he stressed that the topic of the connection between religion and politics had often caused bitter arguments in the US. He criticized the Religious Right for dividing the nation and convincing Americans that all Democrats are hostile to religion just because they talk about the separation of church and state. What is really important is that he expressed his appreciation of the Religious Left’s calls for political affirmation of the biblical message concerning poverty. He also tried to explain the reasons for the emergence of the ‘God gap’.

He started the speech with an anecdote about his political opponent in the 2004 U.S. Senate General Election, Alan Keyes, who often implied that progressives are both immoral and godless, and who tried to convince voters that “Jesus Christ would not vote for Obama”. According to the anecdote, Obama replied that they lived in a pluralistic society, where one cannot impose his own religious views on another. However, he felt that his answer did not adequately address the role of his faith in guiding his values and beliefs. This short anecdote led Obama to the conclusion that progressives had long had a problem with expressing their personal faith in public due to strictly understood respect for the constitutional separation of church and state. According to him, it was one of the reasons of the emergence of the ‘God gap’ which “... [c]onservative leaders have been all too happy to exploit” (Obama 2006a). According to him, conservatives have used progressives’ cautious attitude in order to discredit their faith and respect for religious values. He concluded that: “... it’s time that we join a serious debate about how to reconcile faith with our modern, pluralistic democracy ...” (Obama 2006a)

Obama also expressed his conviction that if the progressives abandon the field of religious discourse, “others will fill the vacuum, those with the most insular views of faith, or those who cynically use religion to justify partisan ends.”

In other words, if we don’t reach out to evangelical Christians and other religious Americans and tell them what we stand for, then the Jerry Falwells and Pat Robertsons and Alan Keyeses will continue to hold sway (Obama 2006a).

Barack Obama stressed, however, that not every progressive has to use religious rhetoric because “religious people do not have a monopoly on morality”. He implied that religious and non-religious arguments on morality should be treated equally, and that religion should not be used instrumentally. At the same time, he criticized secularists for, what he considered as keeping religion away from the public sphere, and enumerated great Americans motivated particularly by their religious beliefs:

But what I am suggesting is this – secularists are wrong when they ask believers to leave their religion at the door before entering into the public sphere. Frederick Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, Williams Jennings Bryant, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King – indeed, the majority of great reformers in American history – were not only motivated by faith, but repeatedly used religious language to argue for their cause. So to say that men and women should not inject their “personal morality” into public policy debates is a practical absurdity. Our law is by definition a codification of morality, much of it grounded in the Judeo-Christian tradition ... (Obama 2006a).

However, he reminded listeners that:

... given the increasing diversity of America’s population, the dangers of sectarianism have never been greater. Whatever we once were, we are no longer just a Christian nation; we are also a Jewish nation, a Muslim nation, a Buddhist nation, a Hindu nation, and a nation of nonbelievers.”

“And even if we did have only Christians in our midst, if we expelled every non-Christian from the United States of America, **whose Christianity would we teach in the schools?** Would we go with James Dobson’s, or Al Sharpton’s? Which passages of Scripture should guide our public policy? Should we go with Leviticus, which suggests slavery is ok and that eating shellfish is abomination? ... (Obama 2006a)

The answer that followed was a crucial summary of what Obama’s considered proper relations between religion and politics in democratic societies:

... **Democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific values.** It requires that their proposals be subject to argument, and amenable to reason. I may be opposed to abortion for religious reasons, but if I seek to pass a law banning the practice, I cannot simply point

to the teachings of my church or evoke God's will. I have to explain why abortion violates some principle that is accessible to people of all faiths, including those with no faith at all (Obama 2006a).

He also stressed the importance of compromise:

Now this is going to be difficult for some who believe in the inerrancy of the Bible, as many evangelicals do. But in a pluralistic democracy, we have no choice. Politics depends on our ability to persuade each other of common aims based on a common reality. It involves the compromise, the art of what's possible (Obama 2006a).

Soon after this speech, in his article *Barack Obama: My Spiritual Journey* published in *Time* magazine on October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2006, Obama repeated most of the arguments quoted above. In this text, which was partly a response to some voters' objections to his stance on abortion, he carefully explained his views concerning this issue. He started by referring to the question he was frequently asked: how could he support "murdering babies" as a Christian? Reporting his answer, he wrote:

... I explained my belief that few women made the decision to terminate a pregnancy casually; that any pregnant woman felt the full force of the moral issues involved and wrestled with her conscience when making that decision; that I feared a ban on abortion would force women to seek unsafe abortions, as they had once done in this country. I suggested that perhaps we could agree on ways to reduce the number of women who felt the need to have abortions in the first place (Obama 2006b).

Also in this context he stressed that the religious right was wrong when it did not allow for compromise in such issues. According to the text, it was much more important for him to mobilize Christians around such issues as poverty, Third World debt relief or confronting AIDS (just like pastors Rick Warren, Jim Wallis and Tony Campolo) than around the private issue of abortion.

When these comments started to be analyzed during the 2008 campaign, they caused various reactions in political circles. On the one hand, they infuriated the Religious Right, while on the other hand, they caused mixed feelings on the left side of political arena. Generally, however, they were considered as an attempt to deal with Democrats' long-standing problem with losing religious constituencies.

James Dobson, a founder of the conservative Focus on the Family and a prominent figure in the Religious Right, took particular offense when he was juxtaposed with the Reverend Al Sharpton. Dobson used his radio program on June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2008, to respond, criticizing Obama for acting "as though he's some kind of biblical authority." Dobson's associate Tom Minnery went

further, accusing Obama of “dragging biblical interpretation through the gutter” (Schmalzbauer 2008). Both of them objected to Obama’s claim that “democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific, values,” calling this a “fruitcake interpretation of the constitution” (Schmalzbauer 2008). The leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention supported Dobson in his arguments claiming that Dobson was right, while “Obama distorts the Bible and presents a confused theology” (Hall 2008).

However, not all evangelicals agreed with Dobson. Obama’s speech was hailed by some evangelical circles as a model of religious political engagement. Evangelical top magazine *Christianity Today* already in 2006, just after Obama’s speech acknowledged that “Democratic Senator Barack Obama gets it mostly right”, although it did not agree with Obama on all issues (*Christianity Today* 2006). There were also ‘progressive evangelicals’, especially those gathered around *Sojourners* magazine, who were absolutely enthusiastic about the speech in which Obama praised the Religious Left. Therefore, Jim Wallis, who is considered the leader of the Religious (or Evangelical) Left and who stresses that many policies considered “liberal” or “left wing” are in accordance with Scripture, was satisfied and hopeful.

Although some commentators suggested that the reason for Barack Obama’s attempts to court young evangelicals was purely political, Jim Wallis hoped that the Democrats had finally understood and believed in what he suggested in his 2005 book *God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It* – that the Democratic Party should articulate a moral foundation for progressive public policy (Gilgoff 2007: 256). Wallis’s book alleged that the Christian Right distorted the Bible by fixating on issues such as abortion and homosexuality while disregarding causes that, according to Wallis, were more important to Jesus, such as promoting peace and helping the poor. Wallis has long criticized Democrats for allowing the secular left to gain a stronghold on their party, and for ceding the entire dialogue about religion’s role in public life to the Christian Right (Gilgoff 2007: 255). Although the Democrats have wrestled for some time to close the ‘God gap’ (Sullivan 2007), Wallis saw Obama as the first Democrat who might have been able to do so.

There were also liberal academics and publicists who found Obama’s speech very promising. One of them was Amy Sullivan, national editor of *Time*, who wrote a book in 2008 titled *The Party Faithful: How and Why the Democrats are Closing the God Gap*. Already in 2004 when she heard Obama at the Democratic Convention, she started to view him as the Democrat who could close the ‘God gap’. As she wrote, Senator Obama’s address to the convention “displayed a gift for seamlessly weaving religious references into his language, a skill that rivaled both Clinton’s and Bush’s” (Hudson 2008). Af-

ter his Call to Renewal address in 2006, she said, “It was, for the first time in modern memory, an affirmative statement from a Democrat about ‘how to reconcile faith with our modern, pluralistic democracy,’ as Obama put it” (Hudson 2008). When he announced his entry into the presidential race in February 2007, she was one of those who stressed that he represented the party’s best choice to close the ‘God gap’. E.J. Dionne Jr., a journalist, political commentator, respected university professor and liberal Catholic with communitarian leanings, also found Obama’s declarations concerning religion and its public role very plausible. Already in 2006, in his article published in *The Washington Post*, he wrote: “Obama’s talk will inevitably be read as a road map for Democrats struggling to speak authentically to people of faith” (Dionne 2006).

At the same time, researchers also believed that Obama had done back to promoting a ‘properly understood’ civil religion as opposed to what some of them, including Professor Philip Gorski, call ‘religious nationalism’ (Gorski 2012). The fact that civil religion, a phenomenon described by Robert Bellah, has acquired certain evangelical features throughout American history, has been suggested by academics such as Jose Casanova, Justin Watson, and Robert Wuthnow. There were many researchers who just like Gorski underlined that different kinds of civil religion emerged with time. For example, Robert Wuthnow divided civil religion into a conservative and a liberal type. Robert Jewett and John Lawrence called one type of civil religion a ‘prophetic realism’ and the other ‘zealous nationalism’ (Burdziej 2009: 39). Gorski argues that the conservative kind of civil religion, which he calls religious nationalism, has long been promoted by the Religious Right (Gorski 2012). However, as he stresses, ‘properly understood’ civil religion, based on two central (‘Bellahian’) threads: a prophetic tradition and civic republicanism could be a mediating force between religious nationalism and radical secularism. Gorski and some of his colleagues hoped Obama would represent this mediating approach.<sup>5</sup>

Apart from these hopeful voices, there were also those on the left that did not welcome all of Obama’s comments concerning religion and politics enthusiastically. Among them there were some secularists. They strongly appreciated Obama’s acknowledgement of equal status of ‘non-believers’ as citizens, which they considered as a very important remark. However, they pointed out some of Obama’s comments which they considered misleading. For example, *Chicago Tribune* columnist Eric Zorn criticized Obama for the statement: “Secularists are wrong when they ask believers to leave their religion at the door before entering into the public sphere.” He blogged, “Speaking as a secularist ... what we ask of believers – all we ask – is that they not

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<sup>5</sup> More about civil religion and Obama in Schulman 2009.

enter the public sphere using ‘because God says so’ as a reason to advance or attack any political position” (Zorn quoted in: *Christianity Today* 2006). Austin Cline, who coordinates a website on agnosticism and atheism in the USA, also criticized this part of Obama’s speech. On his website he wrote:

No one has ever said that believers should ‘leave their religion at the door before entering the public sphere.’ Believers are free to express their religious beliefs and practice their religion in public all they want – and in fact they do. Neither has anyone said that “personal morality” shouldn’t be brought into personal policy debates ... (Cline)

He suggested that Barack Obama was echoing the arguments of the Christian nationalists “who propagate the lie that telling believers that their religious doctrines shouldn’t be part of public policy is somehow the same as saying that their religion shouldn’t be expressed in public or that morality shouldn’t be part of policy debates” (Cline). He expressed anxiety that by repeating such misconceptions Obama was giving them more legitimacy and credibility than they already have. He also noticed that when Obama said that “Democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific, values...” in fact he expressed “exactly the sentiments which secularists and church/state separationists keep recommending” (Cline). Additionally, Cline was not enthusiastic about the appreciation that Obama expressed concerning the Religious Left. He saw Obama’s claims that injecting religion into politics is acceptable as long as it is used to ‘tackle moral problems’ but not ‘divide the nation’ as inconsistent with the previous statements. For Cline it was unacceptable that Obama criticized the Religious Right’s for its tendency to claim that abortion and gay-marriage are religious issues, calling it a wrong an exploitative practice, but at the same time he approved of making e.g. global warming a religious issue. For him, both of these claims are wrong because both movements use religion as an instrument in politics, “suggesting that religion used the way they want is good; religion used differently is not” (Cline). He concluded that this might suggest that Obama does not fully respect the separation of church and state.

In fact, it seems that Obama was trying to balance the two positions: on one hand, trying to prove that Democrats are not hostile to religion and that their policies also have moral and religious motifs, while on the other convincing the traditional democratic electorate, including separationists, that he stands for what they stand for – the separation of church and state. During the campaign he used many religious references when he spoke, visited evangelical gatherings<sup>6</sup> and held closed-door meetings with evangelical leaders such as Franklin Graham and T.D. Jakes (Wald, Calhoun-Brown 2011: 153). He also

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<sup>6</sup> More in: Kennedy 2008; Wilson 2008; Weisman 2008.

launched a grassroots organization called the Joshua Generation aimed at evangelical and Catholic youth, and worked with a political action committee – the Matthew 25 Network – a group dedicated to expanding the scope of religious issues to incorporate social justice concerns. At the same time he often stressed his respect for the separation of church and state. For example, in February of 2008, he criticized Bush’s implementation of a faith-based initiatives policy, and assured voters that his version of this policy would operate without “blurring the line that our founders wisely drew between church and state” (Boston 2013).

However, he was very cautious when presenting his opinions concerning issues that involved the church and state separation controversy. The faith-based initiatives policy is one of the best examples of his compromise-oriented attitude during the 2008 campaign. The policy, which can be defined as “efforts by the federal government to broaden funding and support for the charitable efforts of religious organization” (Michelman 2002: 475), was very controversial both constitutionally and politically. Numerous researchers and politicians have suggested that Bush’s policy was an attempt to undermine church and state separation due to lack of adequate safeguards to protect religious freedom of the recipients and employees of the federally funded faith-based organizations’. Barack Obama declared that he would not support Bush’s policy of allowing faith-based groups that receive federal funding to consider a potential employee’s religion when making hiring decisions but stressed that generally he was in favor of the idea of faith-based and neighborhood partnership in providing social help (Pew Forum: *Hiring...* 2009)

He was also cautious on gay issues. He did not express his support for same-sex marriage during the entire 2008 campaign, although earlier he had voted against the Federal Marriage Amendment which would have defined marriage as between one man and woman. Instead of supporting gay-marriage, he declared his support for civil unions as an option for same-sex couples. On the other hand, he invoked the importance of winning equality, dignity, and respect for gays and lesbians by allowing them to serve openly in the military and repealing the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) (Wald, Calhoun-Brown 2011: 341).

Even when he spoke about his pro-choice position on abortion, and stressed that for him protection of women’s health was the most important, he usually added that he was open to searching for a way to agree with conservatives on “ways to reduce the number of women who felt the need to have abortions in the first place” (Obama 2006b). However, he was quite straightforward about his attitude toward stem-cell research, which he strongly supported. He even called on conservatives to stop playing politics on this criti-