

## **Conservatives and the Faith of Barack Obama<sup>1</sup>**

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Numerous polls indicate that many Americans are very concerned about the religious convictions of their presidents. For example, 72 percent of respondents to an August 2008 Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life survey agreed that “it is important that a president have strong religious beliefs.”<sup>2</sup> Many citizens derive comfort from knowing that presidents believe that God directs history and seek His guidance in making decisions. Much more than the faith of most presidents, Barack Obama’s has been both widely misunderstood and very controversial. To this date, only one religious biography of Obama has been published, while several studies have assessed the role of religion in the 2008 election.<sup>3</sup> Although both secular and Christian magazines have featured articles about the president’s religious background and he has talked about his faith in his two autobiographies and numerous speeches, many Americans are still confused about his faith. Recent polls reveal that 20 percent of Americans incorrectly think that he is a Muslim. Others consider Obama to be an advocate of black liberation theology because of his long membership in Jeremiah Wright’s church in Chicago. Few Americans have an accurate understanding of his faith.

Moreover, unlike Al Gore in 2000 and John Kerry in 2004, Obama made a concerted effort to win the votes of religiously-committed Americans in the 2008 election. During the campaign he explicitly discussed his faith journey and repeatedly labeled himself “a devout

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank my CVV fellow Dorothy Williams for her invaluable research assistance for this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Obama Religious Biography, <http://pewforum.org/religion08/candidates/barack-obama/>.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Mansfield, *The Faith of Barack Obama* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2008); see also Marvin A. McMickle, ed., *The Audacity of Faith: Christian Leaders Reflect on the Election of Barack Obama* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 2009), and David Remnick, *The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 170-1, 174-5, 406-7, 421, 440-2, 449, 458, 468, 469, 543; Corwin E. Smidt et al., *The Disappearing God Gap? Religion in the 2008 Presidential Election* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Evan Thomas, *“A Long Time Coming”: The Inspiring, Combative 2008 Campaign and the Historic Election of Barack Obama* (New York: Public Affairs, 2009); Gaston Espinoza, ed., *“Righteousness and Justice”: Religion, Barack Obama, and the 2008 Election* (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming).

Christian.” He hired staff to reach out to religious groups, especially Catholics and evangelical Protestants. Obama also discussed the positive role religion could play in public life and emphasized that his religious convictions affected his approach to politics, understanding of political issues, and policies.<sup>4</sup> This essay will analyze the nature of Obama’s faith, his use of religious rhetoric in his campaign and as president, the connection between his faith and several of his policies, and the reaction of religious conservatives to these matters.

### **Obama’s Religious Background**

Barack Obama is the first American president who was not raised by Christian parents. During his formative years he was instead primarily exposed to atheism, folk Islam, and secular humanism. Obama never knew his father Barack Obama, Sr., whom he labeled “a confirmed atheist”; Obama’s father returned to his native Kenya when the future president was two. As a youth, Obama’s mother, Ann Dunham, attended the East Shore Unitarian Church in Bellevue, Washington, and she derived inspiration from Unitarians’ social activism. As a high school student, however, she declared herself to be an atheist. As an adult, she sometimes took her son to Christmas and Easter services, and she lived for a while in a Buddhist monastery while working in India. Obama described his mother as an agnostic who believed that no one religion had a corner on the truth.<sup>5</sup> She was a very spiritual person with an “enormous capacity for wonder,” who lived by the Golden Rule and was skeptical about “religion as an institution.”<sup>6</sup> His mother was, he wrote, “a lonely witness for secular humanism, a soldier for New Deal, Peace

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<sup>4</sup> See Terry Eastland, “The Sermon on the Mall: God and Man in the Obama White House,” Feb 2, 2009, <http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/016/059cqhmm.asp?nopager=1>.

<sup>5</sup> Lisa Miller, “Finding His Faith,” <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2008/07/11/finding-his-faith.print.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Barack Obama, “A Politics of Conscience,” June 23, 2007, <http://www.ucc.org/news/significant-speeches/a-politics-of-conscience.html>.

Corps, position-paper liberalism.”<sup>7</sup> She was “instinctively guided by the Golden Rule,” Obama asserted, and constantly emphasized honesty, hard work, kindness and fair play.<sup>8</sup>

Inheriting his mother’s skepticism, Obama grew up religiously rootless. He was exposed to both Islam and Catholicism after Dunham remarried and took him to Indonesia. Obama occasionally accompanied his step-father Lolo Soetoro to a mosque to worship, and Obama attended a Catholic elementary school for first and second grade. Soetoro’s form of Islam made “room for the remnants of more ancient animist and Hindu faiths,” Obama explained.<sup>9</sup> Listed as a Muslim when he was transferred to a public school for third grade, Obama studied the doctrines of Islam during the two hours of required religious instruction each week.<sup>10</sup>

Obama moved to Hawaii with his mother and sister in 1971. During his years at the highly regarded Punahou School in Honolulu, Occidental University in Los Angeles, and Columbia University in New York, Obama struggled to find his identity and determine his personal philosophy. While attending Columbia, Obama “did a lot of spiritual exploration.” He fasted, went days without speaking to anyone, and read the works of Christian theologian St. Augustine, nineteenth-century atheistic philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, and Roman Catholic novelist Graham Greene. He sometimes attended African-American congregations, most often Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, attracted, Lisa Miller argues, by “the exuberant worship, the family atmosphere and the prophetic preaching.”<sup>11</sup>

Hungering “for some sort of meaning” in life, Obama took a job in 1985 as a community organizer for a group of congregations in Chicago. “Inspired by the civil rights movement,” he

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<sup>7</sup> Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father* (New York: Three Rivers, 1995), 50.

<sup>8</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at National Prayer Breakfast,” Feb. 3, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/02/03/remarks-president-national-prayer-breakfast>. See also Edward Lee Pitts, “A President’s Prayers: President Obama Shares Aspects of His Private Spiritual Life at the National Prayer Breakfast,” <http://www.worldmag.com/webextra/17599>.

<sup>9</sup> Obama, *Dreams*, 37.

<sup>10</sup> Mansfield, *Barack Obama*, 14-15.

<sup>11</sup> Miller, “Finding His Faith.”

wanted to help “rebuild some of Chicago’s poorest neighborhoods.” The religious leaders with whom Obama worked were influenced by the ideas of Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, Martin Luther King Jr., and African-American and Roman Catholic liberation theologians, and they emphasized human sinfulness, Christian community, and Christ’s call to help “the least of these.”<sup>12</sup> Although Obama professed to know the Scriptures and to share the values of the other members of this ministry, he gradually realized that “something was missing” in his life. He concluded that he needed “an anchor” for his beliefs, “a commitment to a particular community of faith.”<sup>13</sup>

This prompted Obama to attend Trinity United Church of Christ on the South Side of Chicago one Sunday in 1988, where he heard pastor Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr., whom he had talked with earlier as part of his community organization work, deliver a sermon titled “The Audacity to Hope.” That sermon challenged Obama to acknowledge Christ as his savior and place his trust in Him and convinced the future president that his “sins could be redeemed.” Obama soon came “to see faith as more than just a comfort to the weary or a hedge against death, but rather as an active, palpable agent in the world and in my own life.” Additionally, “These newfound understandings—that religious commitment did not require me to suspend critical thinking, disengage from the battle for economic and social justice, or otherwise retreat from the world that I knew and loved” eventually led him to be baptized at Trinity Church to affirm his faith publicly. Obama describes becoming a Christian “as a choice, and not an epiphany.” While kneeling beneath the cross at Trinity, he declared, “I felt I heard God’s spirit beckoning me. I

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<sup>12</sup> Miller, “Finding His Faith.”

<sup>13</sup> Obama, “Politics of Conscience.”

submitted myself to His will, and dedicated myself to discovering His truth and carrying out His works.”<sup>14</sup>

Obama and his wife Michelle, whom he married in 1992, attended Trinity Church fairly regularly until Obama ran for the Senate in 2004, had their children dedicated there, and supported the church financially. This black congregation of almost 10,000 members sponsored several dozen ministries and educational institutions around the world. Its members included numerous wealthy businesspeople, physicians, politicians, and college professors. Taking over as pastor in 1972, Jeremiah Wright built the church from 87 members to the largest American congregation in the United Church of Christ denomination. Deeply influenced by James Cone, America’s leading proponent of black liberation theology, Wright supported abortion rights and gay rights. More controversially, he exhorted the federal government to compensate blacks for their ancestors’ enslavement.<sup>15</sup>

Obama was attracted to Trinity by Wright’s sermons, the “upwardly mobile and politically active blacks” who attended, its “affirmation and celebration of his African heritage,” its theological support for his political liberalism, its focus on social activism, and the sense of belonging it provided.<sup>16</sup> Obama insisted that he found Wright’s black liberation theology, which “interpreted the Bible as a story of the struggles of black people and emphasized social justice,” very appealing. He “imagined the stories of ordinary black people merging with the stories of David and Goliath, Moses and Pharaoh, [and] the Christians in the lion’s den.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Obama, *Dreams*, 280-55; Obama, “Politics of Conscience” (all quotations).

<sup>15</sup> Mansfield, *Barack Obama*, 32-45.

<sup>16</sup> Barack Obama, “On My Faith and My Church,” Mar. 14, 2008, [http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2008/03/on\\_my\\_faith\\_and\\_my\\_church.html](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2008/03/on_my_faith_and_my_church.html); Mansfield, *Barack Obama*, 60-62.

<sup>17</sup> Obama, *Dreams*, 294.

## Faith and Politics

During their 2004 campaign for a U.S. Senate seat in Illinois, Republican Alan Keyes sharply criticized Obama for stressing his faith only “when it’s convenient to get votes.” When faith must be followed, explained, and serve as a basis for policies, Keyes protested, Obama pled the “separation of church and state,” a concept that was neither Constitutional nor scriptural.<sup>18</sup> “Christ would not vote for Barack Obama,” Keyes asserted, because his behavior was so contrary to that of Christ’s.<sup>19</sup> Obama easily defeated Keyes, a conservative Catholic, for the seat, but the heated campaign led him to further recognize the importance of faith in politics. He later admitted that his typical responses to Keyes’ charges—that “we live in a pluralistic society” and “I can’t impose my own religious views” on others had been inadequate.<sup>20</sup>

During this senatorial campaign, Obama burst onto the national scene by giving a memorable keynote address at the Democratic National Convention in Boston in July. Implying that the Democrats also had a vibrant spiritual faith, Obama proclaimed, “We worship an awesome God in the Blue States.”<sup>21</sup> Although the Democratic president nominee, Catholic John Kerry, largely avoided discussing his religious convictions, Obama’s speech foreshadowed the approach that he and many other Democrats would soon adopt. After Kerry’s defeat, Democrats made a concerted effort to narrow the “God gap” by recruiting candidates with a strong religious commitment to run for Congress in 2006 and speaking more openly about the importance of faith and religious values in politics.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> John Chase and Liam Ford, “Senate Debate Gets Personal,” *Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 22, 2004.

<sup>19</sup> Liam Ford and David Mendell, “Jesus Wouldn’t Vote for Obama, Keyes Says,” *Chicago Tribune*, Sept. 8, 2004.

<sup>20</sup> “Barack Obama Speaks Out on Faith and Politics: ‘Call to Renewal’ Keynote Address,” June 28, 2006, [http://www.sojournal.net/index.cfm?NewsID=5454&action=news.display\\_article&mode=C](http://www.sojournal.net/index.cfm?NewsID=5454&action=news.display_article&mode=C).

<sup>21</sup> “Transcript: Illinois Senate Candidate Barack Obama,” <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A19751-2004Jul27.html>.

<sup>22</sup> See James L. Guth, “Religion in the 2008 Election,” in *The American Elections of 2008*, eds. Janet M. Box-Steffensmeier and Steven E. Schier, 117-36 (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009); Laura Olson and John C. Green, “The Religion Gap,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 39 (2006): 455-59.

At the June 2006 Sojourners/Call to Renewal conference Obama explained how he viewed the relationship between faith and public policy. Faith, Obama declared, must not be used as “a tool of attack” in order “to belittle or divide.” He chided Democrats, however, for avoiding talking about religious values out of fear of offending people or belief that religion had no role to play in the public arena. Ignoring “the power of faith” in the lives of Americans was “a mistake.” Democrats must discuss “how to reconcile faith with our modern, pluralistic democracy.” Obama proclaimed, “Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, William Jennings Bryan, 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.” The contention that people “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 argued, “Secularists are wrong when they ask believers to leave their religion at the door before entering into the public square.” He insisted, however, “Democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific, values.” Their proposals must “be subject to argument, and amenable to reason.” For example, individuals may oppose abortion for religious reasons, but those who sought to ban the practice could not simply cite the teachings of their “church or evoke God’s will.” They must “explain why abortion violates some principle that is accessible to people of all faiths” and “those with no faith at all.”<sup>23</sup> E. J. Dionne, Jr. labeled Obama’s address “the most important pronouncement by a Democrat on faith and politics since John F. Kennedy’s Houston speech in 1960, declaring his independence from the Vatican.” He praised the Illinois Senator for speaking honestly about his faith, underscoring that “the great faith traditions”

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<sup>23</sup> Obama, “‘Call to Renewal’ Keynote Address.”

expressed “a powerful demand for social justice,” and insisting “that social improvement also requires individual transformation.”<sup>24</sup>

Obama later explained that he wanted to convince Americans to “stop using religion as a divisive force in the body politic” and instead to realize that “our deepest moral commitments can be harnessed” to improve society. Obama urged liberals and conservatives to recognize their mutual concern about inner city poverty and stop arguing over whether personal responsibility or government programs could alleviate it. Moreover, liberals and conservatives should devise coalitions to properly raise children, reduce AIDS, and improve the environment.<sup>25</sup>

### **The Election of 2008**

In his Call to Renewal speech Obama encouraged Democrats to “reach out to people of faith,” and during the 2008 presidential campaign he spoke the language of faith and courted the votes of religiously committed Americans including evangelicals. Obama met with numerous evangelical leaders including Franklin Graham, megachurch pastors T. D. Jakes and Max Lucado, David Neff, the editor-in-chief of *Christianity Today*, and Richard Cizik, a vice president of the National Association of Evangelicals. In weekly messages to the NAE, Obama promised to confront problems the Bush administration had ignored such as health care and climate change. His stances on the issues led prominent Bush supporter Kirbyjon Caldwell, pastor of America’s largest United Methodist church located in Houston, to declare his support for Obama. John McCain’s lack of emphasis on conservative social issues prompted many evangelicals to carefully consider Obama despite his support of abortion and gay rights. To

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<sup>24</sup> E. J. Dionne, Jr., “Obama’s Eloquent Faith,” [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/29/AR2006062901778\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/29/AR2006062901778_pf.html). See also David Espo, “Obama: Democrats Must Court Evangelicals,” AP, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/28/AR2006062800281\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/28/AR2006062800281_pf.html).

<sup>25</sup> “Obama Works to Win Evangelicals Back for Democrats,” July 14, 2006, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5556961>.



appeal to evangelicals, Tony Campolo, a well-known Baptist speaker, author, and social activist, was named to the Democratic Party's platform committee, which adopted a plank stating that the party "strongly supports a woman's decision to have a child by ensuring access to and availability of programs for pre- and post-natal health care, parenting skills, income support, and caring adoption programs."<sup>26</sup>

Joshua DuBois, a 26-year-old black Pentecostal associate pastor in Boston, spearheaded efforts to persuade religiously devout Americans to vote for Obama. He organized about 200 town hall meetings, which provided a forum for evangelicals, mainline Protestants, Catholics, and Jews to discuss the relationship of faith and politics. He also enlisted many Obama supporters to hold house parties for relatives, friends, and coworkers to dialogue about religion and public policy. Meanwhile, Mara Vanderslice founded the Matthew 25 Network on the Web, which urged Americans to vote for Obama because, like Jesus, he "cares for the least of these." She emphasized that Obama cared about the environment, would bring American troops home from Iraq, and would provide tax relief for ordinary Americans. This network sponsored many political ads on Christian radio stations in hotly contested states.<sup>27</sup>

Obama participated in several faith and values forums (most notably one with other candidates for the Democratic nomination at Messiah College and another with McCain hosted by Rick Warren at Saddleback Church in California), spoke to numerous religious groups and gatherings, described his faith journey, frequently quoted Scriptural verses and concepts, and attacked the agenda and perspective of the Religious Right as unbiblical. He accentuated the key role that people of faith had played in battles over prison reform, temperance, public education,

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<sup>26</sup> "Barack Obama Speaks Out"; John W. Kennedy, "Preach and Reach: Despite His Liberal Record, Barack Obama Is Making a Lot of Evangelicals Think Twice," Oct. 6, 2008, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/october/18.26.html> .

<sup>27</sup> Kennedy, "Preach and Reach."

women's rights, and especially abolition. Obama repudiated the argument that separation of church and state meant that "faith should have no role in public life." He also accused the leaders of the Religious Right of trying to divide Americans by their claims that Democrats disrespected evangelical values and churches, and that religious Americans only cared about abortion, gay marriage, school prayer, and intelligent design. Moreover, Obama protested, the quest of religious conservatives to provide tax cuts for the rich contradicted biblical teaching.<sup>28</sup>

In a July 2008 address to the African Methodist Episcopal convention, Obama described his faith journey and promised to make "faith-based" social service "a moral center of my administration." The Democrat explained that while working as a community organizer in Chicago in the 1980s, "I learned that my sins could be redeemed and if I placed my trust in Jesus, that he could set me on a path to eternal life." Obama argued, "Our faith" must be active, "rooted in that most fundamental of all truths: that I am my brother's keeper." Obama promised that if he became president, he would apply his faith to remedying America's problems of "war and poverty, joblessness and homelessness, violent streets and crumbling schools," which were "moral problems, rooted in both societal indifference and individual callousness." The government, he insisted, must support faith-based initiatives to help feed the hungry, rehabilitate prisoners and drug addicts, and provide jobs.<sup>29</sup>

Obama sought to provide a biblical basis for his policies on poverty, health care, immigration, and other issues. He argued that their faith required Christians not simply to worship God and pray, but to actively work to help others. They should do this through local congregations, parachurch ministries, community organizations, and other private agencies, but the government also had a key role to play in addressing such moral problems as racism,

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<sup>28</sup> Obama, "Politics of Conscience."

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Jonathan Weisman, "Obama Addresses His Faith: Senator Describes Spiritual Journey," July 6, 2008, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/07/05/AR2008070501854.html>.

unemployment, illegal immigration, and war. Christians must “heed the biblical call to care for ‘the least of these’”—America’s 37 million poor—by expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit and increasing the minimum wage. The government, he contended, also had a moral obligation to help the 45 million Americans who did not have health insurance.<sup>30</sup>

Arguing that “God is . . . challenging us to change . . . the world around us,” Obama exhorted evangelicals, progressives, and Catholics to be good stewards of creation, fight poverty and injustice, and promote “a consistent ethic of life.” The Democrat argued that to create a better world, Americans must “do justice and show mercy” and “treat others with dignity and respect.” He urged citizens, whether they were Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, Hindus, Jews, or non-believers, to adopt “a politics of conscience.” When people of faith brought their convictions in the public arena and spoke in “universal terms” that everyone could understand, they did “God’s work here on Earth.”<sup>31</sup>

Some religious conservatives, especially socially liberal evangelicals, applauded Obama’s policies. Donald Miller, author of *Blue Like Jazz*, argued that Democrats, with their concern for helping the marginalized, oppressed and poor, would create “better social conditions” so that fewer women felt compelled to have an abortion. Others hoped that Obama would heal some of the wounds Bush had caused by his arrogant, bullying foreign policy and help people in other nations see Christianity more positively.<sup>32</sup>

Although many religious conservatives appreciated some of Obama’s political positions, most deplored other stances he took, especially on abortion and gay rights. David O’Steen, the

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<sup>30</sup> Obama, “Politics of Conscience.” See also “The Candidates on Faith,” Aug. 7, 2008, <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1830148-2,00.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Obama, “Politics of Conscience.”

<sup>32</sup> Mark Tooley, “Post-Modern Prophet: Meet Donald Miller, the Evangelical Left’s Poster-Boy,” May 29, 2009, <http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/016/557jmfc.asp?nopager=1>; see also Sarah Pulliam, “Donald Miller to Give DNC Benediction,” Aug. 22, 2008, [http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctliveblog/archives/2008/08/donald\\_miller\\_t.html](http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctliveblog/archives/2008/08/donald_miller_t.html).

executive director of the National Right to Life Committee, argued that Obama was even more pro-choice than Hillary Clinton. As a member of the Illinois Legislature, Obama had voted three times to defeat bills designed to help newborn survivors of abortion remain alive; as a U.S. Senator he had voted against a bill that required parents to be notified if their minor child had an abortion in another state; and he promised as president to again legalize “partial-birth” abortion and allow tax funds to be used to pay for abortions. In addition, pro-life advocates complained that the Democratic plank on abortion did not contain a “conscience clause” that allowed health care workers to abstain from providing services they deemed unethical or a clear statement on the importance of reducing abortions. Some evangelicals criticized Obama for opposing California’s November 2008 ballot referendum to ban gay marriage. Although Obama favored civil unions rather than marriage for gay couples, he argued that “such referendums to amend federal and state constitutions could be used in the future to undermine other legal protections.” Tom Minnery, a senior vice president of Focus on the Family, protested that Obama gave “lip service to the institution of marriage,” but he refused to do anything to “ensure that traditional marriage survives.”<sup>33</sup>

The inflammatory statements of Jeremiah Wright during the campaign hurt Obama’s efforts to win the votes of religious conservatives and forced him to sever his relationship with Trinity Church. After video clips of some of Wright’s most provocative sermons were posted online and shown repeatedly on some cable channels in March 2008, Obama deplored Wright’s statements as “divisive” and “racially charged,” but he refused to disown his pastor. Obama insisted that Trinity was “a very conventional black church in a lot of ways.” He argued that nine out of ten of Wright’s sermons were not controversial.<sup>34</sup> Wright’s continued diatribe against the

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<sup>33</sup> Kennedy, “Preach and Reach.”

<sup>34</sup> Thomas, “Long Time Coming,” 213.

United States government, however, including claims that it had planted AIDS in black communities and brought on the 9/11 attacks by its terrorist assaults on other nations, prompted the Illinois Senator to repudiate Wright's assertions and resign his membership at Trinity Church in late May.<sup>35</sup>

Even though the Wright controversy called public attention to Obama's church membership and the Democrat repeatedly referred to his Christian faith, a June 2008 Pew survey reported that only 57 percent of Americans correctly identified Obama as a Christian, while 12 percent believed he was a Muslim. Meanwhile, some detractors repeatedly claimed on Christian radio and websites that the Illinois Senator was a Muslim. Obama's campaign worked vigorously to combat this misperception, and featured the headline, "Obama Has Never Been a Muslim, And Is a Committed Christian," on its website.<sup>36</sup> Obama's most vocal and caustic evangelical critic was Focus on the Family's James Dobson. He accused Obama of "deliberately distorting the traditional understanding of the Bible to fit . . . his own confused theology." Dobson lambasted Obama's abortion stance as "a fruitcake interpretation of the Constitution." The Democratic nominee was "so extreme" that he threatened "traditional family, life, and pro-moral values." Added Internet evangelist Bill Keller, "Pastors and churches who support Barack Hussein Obama are a stench in the nostrils of God!"<sup>37</sup>

Despite such criticisms, Obama's efforts to reach out to religious communities including evangelicals paid dividends. Several other factors helped Obama—his stances on dealing with illegal immigration, fighting poverty, and protecting the environment, the belief of many

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<sup>35</sup> "Text of Obama's Church Remarks," May 31, 2008, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0508/10731.html>; Michael Powell, "Following Months of Criticism, Obama Quits His Church," <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/01/us/politics/01obama.html?scp=5&sq=obama+church&st=nyt>.

<sup>36</sup> "Obama Religious Biography."

<sup>37</sup> All quotations from Kennedy, "Preach and Reach." See also Collin Hansen, "Reading the Bible with Obama: The Presidential Candidate Crosses Swords with Dr. Dobson over Hermeneutics," June 30, 2008, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/juneweb-only/127-11.0.html>.

evangelicals that Bush had ignored or betrayed them and that McCain did not enthusiastically support their agenda, and the state of the economy. Obama had equal or higher levels of support among almost every religious group than John Kerry did in 2004. He received the votes of 43 percent of weekly churchgoers, while Kerry won only 39 percent of this group. Obama won the 54.3 percent of mainline Protestants compared with Kerry's 43 percent, many of whom applauded the way his faith helped shape his policy priorities.<sup>38</sup>

Obama's effort to win religiously committed voters was also aided by the decline and division of the Religious Right—Christian social conservatives who had strongly influenced American politics for almost three decades—and McCain's reluctance to discuss his personal faith or the religious basis for his policies. Jerry Falwell and D. James Kennedy had recently died. Ted Haggard, the president of the National Association of Evangelicals, had resigned from his church in disgrace after a homosexual encounter became public. Other leading evangelicals, such as Houston megachurch pastor Joel Osteen, refused to take sides in the election, and Rick Warren and Bill Hybels displayed sympathy for some of the agenda of the Religious Left that Obama supported.<sup>39</sup>

### **The Nature of Obama's Faith**

As noted, Obama has frequently asserted that he is a Christian. Examining his views of God, Jesus, humanity, faith, salvation, prayer, church attendance, and the afterlife confirm this contention, although evangelicals disagree with his views of scriptural authority, the nature of faith, and salvation. Obama explained that his mother "didn't raise me in the church" and "I'm a Christian by choice." He embraced Christianity later in life "because the precepts of Jesus Christ

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<sup>38</sup> 2004 American National Election Studies and the 2008 Henry Institute National Survey on Religion and Public Life as cited by Laura R. Olson, Adam L. Warber, and Kevin R. den Dulk, "Mainline Protestants and the 2008 Election," in *Righteousness and Justice*, ed. Espinoza, 79, 86, 88.

<sup>39</sup> Mansfield, *Barack Obama*, xviii.

spoke to me in terms of the kind of life that I would want to lead.” “My public service,” he added, “is part of that effort to express my Christian faith.”<sup>40</sup>

Obama described God as “awesome and loving.”<sup>41</sup> He often thanked God for blessing and guiding America. For example, Obama’s call for a National Day of Prayer in 2011 declared, “Let us ask God for the sustenance and guidance for all of us to meet the great challenges we face as a nation.”

Obama has frequently testified to his faith in Jesus Christ as his savior and Lord. In a 2008 interview in *Christianity Today*, he declared, “I am a devout Christian. I believe in the redemptive death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.” He emphasized, “Accepting Jesus Christ in my life has been a powerful guide for my conduct and my values and my ideals.” At the 2011 National Prayer Breakfast, Obama explained that while working in Chicago “I came to know Jesus Christ for myself and embrace Him as my lord and savior.”<sup>42</sup> He maintained that his faith in the “redemptive death and resurrection of Jesus Christ” gave him “a path to be cleansed of sin and have eternal life.”<sup>43</sup> At a breakfast he hosted for pastors and parachurch leaders two days after Easter in 2010, the president urged guests to “continue the Easter celebration of our risen Savior.” Obama celebrated the discovery that forever changed the world—the empty tomb and Christ’s resurrection. He also expressed gratitude for Christ’s “sacrifice . . . for the sins of humanity.” Christians, he proclaimed, “believe that . . . faith in Jesus Christ” leads to our

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<sup>40</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President in a Backyard Discussion in Albuquerque, New Mexico,” Sept. 28, 2010, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/09/28/remarks-president-a-backyard-discussion-albuquerque-new-mexico>. See also “Obama Discusses His Christian Faith, Chides Republicans in Backyard Chat,” <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2010/09/28/AR2010092803203.html?hpid=topnews>.

<sup>41</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at National Prayer Breakfast,” Feb. 4, 2010, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-national-prayer-breakfast>.

<sup>42</sup> Sarah Pulliam and Ted Olson, “Q&A: Barack Obama,” Jan. 23, 2008, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/januaryweb-only/104-32.0.html>; Obama, “National Prayer Breakfast,” Feb. 3, 2011.

<sup>43</sup> Cathleen Falsani, “I Have Deep Faith,” *Chicago Sun Times*, April 5, 2004.

redemption and brings “eternal hope.” He exhorted all Christians to commit themselves to act justly, love mercy, “and walk humbly with the Lord.”<sup>44</sup>

Obama also affirmed the historic Christian position on human sinfulness. He attributed people’s inability to work together in part to their selfishness, stubbornness, acquisitiveness, and insecurities. All the world’s “cruelties large and small” are “rooted in original sin.” Obama lamented that people often sought to gain advantage over others, clung to “outworn prejudice,” feared “those who are unfamiliar,” and viewed life “through the lens of immediate self-interest and crass materialism.”<sup>45</sup> He argued that people are fallible and yield “to the temptations of pride, and power, and sometimes evil.”<sup>46</sup> Speaking in Tucson at a memorial service for the six people killed in a January 2011 shooting, Obama declared, “The Scripture tells us that there is evil in the world, and that terrible things happen for reasons that defy human understanding.”<sup>47</sup>

While frequently affirming that he is a Christian, Obama repeatedly emphasized that his faith “admits doubts, and uncertainty, and mystery.” Echoing the argument of theistic existentialist Soren Kierkegaard, Obama asserted that “it’s not faith if you are absolutely certain.” People must take a “leap” to accept Christianity. Some biblical passages, Obama stated, “make perfect sense,” but others are baffling.<sup>48</sup> Reflecting on his faith journey, the Democrat declared, “I leave open the possibility that I’m entirely wrong.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at Easter Prayer Breakfast,” Apr. 6, 2010, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-easter-prayer-breakfast>. See also Steven Thomma, “As Muslim Claim Lingers, Obama Talks Up His Faith in Jesus,” <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2010/09/28/101294/obama-talks-up-his-faith-in-jesus.html>.

<sup>45</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President in Commencement Address at the University of Notre Dame,” May 17, 2009, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-notre-dame-commencement>.

<sup>46</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at the Acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize,” Dec. 10, 2009, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-acceptance-nobel-peace-prize>.

<sup>47</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at a Memorial Service for the Victims of the Shooting in Tucson, Arizona,” Jan. 11, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/01/12/remarks-president-barack-obama-memorial-service-victims-shooting-tucson>.

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in John K. Wilson, *Barack Obama: This Improbable Quest* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2008), 138.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Miller, “Finding His Faith.”



Obama often heralded the benefits of prayer. He argued that “prayer has played an important role in the American story.” For example, Martin Luther King, Jr. derived a “sense of comfort and resolve” from prayer, “which his wife credited as a turning point in the civil rights movement.” Obama urged Americans to “ask God for the sustenance and guidance . . . to meet the great challenges we face as a Nation.”<sup>50</sup> He continued, “For those of us who draw on faith as a guiding force in our lives, prayer has many purposes. For many, it is a source of support when times are hard. President Lincoln . . . said, ‘I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go.’ And . . . more than once I’ve been filled with the same conviction.” Prayer helped people find meaning and to develop the vision and “strength to see the world that we want to build.”<sup>51</sup> Obama urged people to pray not only in times of trouble but also in times of “joy and peace and prosperity” to “guard against pride and . . . complacency.” Prayer, he argued, can keep people “calm in a storm,” help them overcome obstacles, and produce humility.<sup>52</sup>

Obama told attendees of the 2010 National Prayer Breakfast that “I’m praying a lot these days.” He explained that he prayed for patience, humility, wisdom, and the ability to help the struggling and that he would “walk closer with God and make that walk my first and most important task.”<sup>53</sup> At the next year’s breakfast, he asked God to “give me the strength to meet the challenges of my office.” Obama expected God to answer his prayers only if he worked, sacrificed, and served others.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Barack Obama, “Presidential Proclamation--National Day of Prayer,” April 29, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/04/29/presidential-proclamation-national-day-prayer>.

<sup>51</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at the Esperanza National Hispanic Prayer Breakfast,” June 19, 2009, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-esperanza-national-hispanic-prayer-breakfast>.

<sup>52</sup> Obama, “Prayer Breakfast,” Feb. 4, 2010.

<sup>53</sup> Obama, “Prayer Breakfast,” Feb. 4, 2010.

<sup>54</sup> Obama, “Prayer Breakfast,” Feb. 3, 2011.

Obama reported in February 2011 that the past two years had deepened his faith. “The presidency,” he added, “has a funny way of making a person feel the need to pray.”<sup>55</sup> He frequently asked Americans to pray for him, his family, and the United States.<sup>56</sup> Obama rejoiced that many others were praying with him and for him, including evangelical pastors Joel Hunter and T. D. Jakes, who periodically prayed with him in the Oval Office. He also thanked his children’s godmother for organizing prayer circles for him throughout the nation.<sup>57</sup>

Affirming his belief in God’s providential direction of human affairs, Obama explained that “failures and disappointments” had reminded him “that God’s plans for us may not always match our own short-sighted desires.” He sought to follow Christ’s exhortation: “Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well.”<sup>58</sup>

After Obama’s election and during the early months of his presidency, many speculated about where the president and his family would attend church, and numerous Washington congregations issued invitations. Obama said he might attend “a number of different churches,” but he has attended church services in Washington infrequently. Obama enjoyed the “powerful” sermons preached by Southern Baptist Carey Cash, the Navy chaplain who led the Sunday worship services at the Evergreen Chapel at Camp David, and the president decided that he would worship there and would not join a congregation in Washington. Like Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman, he expressed his aversion to being on display when he worshipped (He especially disliked people snapping pictures of him with their cell phones.).<sup>59</sup> In addition to the services at Camp David, Obama claimed that he received spiritual strength from reading the

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<sup>55</sup> Obama, “Prayer Breakfast,” Feb. 3, 2011.

<sup>56</sup> E.g. Barack Obama, “Remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast,” Feb. 5, 2009, <http://www.presidentialrhetoric.com/speeches/02.05.09.b.html>.

<sup>57</sup> Obama, “Prayer Breakfast,” Feb. 3, 2011.

<sup>58</sup> Obama, “Prayer Breakfast,” Feb. 3, 2011.

<sup>59</sup> Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “Has Obama Chosen a Church?” June 29, 2009, [http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctpolitics/2009/06/obama\\_chooses\\_a.html](http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctpolitics/2009/06/obama_chooses_a.html).

scriptural meditations Joshua DuBois sent him every day.<sup>60</sup> Both Protestants and Catholics complained that Obama's failure to worship regularly at a church in Washington did not set a "good model for others."<sup>61</sup>

Obama argued that there are numerous paths to salvation and heaven. He asserted that people are sinful and flawed and "achieve salvation through the grace of God" by recognizing that Christ atoned for their sins.<sup>62</sup> He could "have everlasting life" because Jesus Christ died for his sins.<sup>63</sup> Obama insisted, however, that he did not believe that God "would consign four-fifth of the world to hell."<sup>64</sup> He added, "Jews and Muslims who live moral lives are just as much 'children of God' as he is."<sup>65</sup>

In a 2004 interview, Obama declared that he did not presume to know what happened to people after they died. If he lived his life as well he could, he expected to be rewarded either in this world or the next. In *The Audacity of Hope* (2006) Obama also confessed that he "wasn't sure what happens when we die" or "where the soul resides" after death.<sup>66</sup> During the 2008 campaign, however, he proclaimed that because his mother was "a kind and generous person," she is in heaven.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, at a ceremony commemorating the death of six Americans in Tucson in January 2011, Obama referred to one victim, nine-year-old Christina Taylor Green, as

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<sup>60</sup> Obama, "Prayer Breakfast," Feb. 3, 2011.

<sup>61</sup> E.g. Teep Schlacter, "On Obama's Crackberry Jesus," April 8, 2010, <http://www.catholicvoteaction.org/americanpapist/index.php?p=6718>.

<sup>62</sup> Anne E. Kornblut and William Branigin, "Obama Discusses His Christian Faith, Chides Republicans in Backyard Chat," Sept. 28, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-yn/content/article/2010/09/28/AR2010092803203.html>.

<sup>63</sup> "Obama Contends Belief in Jesus Christ Not Necessary for Salvation," Mar. 27, 2008, <http://www.onenewsnow.com/Election2008/Default.aspx?id=73553>.

<sup>64</sup> Steve Waldman, "Obama's Fascinating Interview with Cathleen Falsani," Nov. 11, 2008, [http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctpolitics/2008/11/obamas\\_fascinat.html](http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctpolitics/2008/11/obamas_fascinat.html).

<sup>65</sup> "Obama Contends Belief in Jesus Christ Not Necessary for Salvation."

<sup>66</sup> Waldman, "Obama's Fascinating Interview"; Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope* (New York: Three Rivers, 2006), 226.

<sup>67</sup> "Obama Contends Belief in Jesus Christ Not Necessary for Salvation."

being in heaven and asked God to “keep those we’ve lost in restful and eternal peace” and to “love and watch over the survivors.”<sup>68</sup>

Despite Obama’s substantial use of Christian rhetoric during his campaign and his numerous professions that he is a Christian, Americans have continued to express great confusion and misunderstanding of his faith. Franklin Graham accused Obama of believing that he is a Christian because he attends church. Graham countered that to be a Christian, individuals must trust Christ as their Lord and Savior and follow Him faithfully. Peter Wehner, a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, protested that “Obama has never claimed that the definition of Christianity is church attendance.”<sup>69</sup> Syndicated columnist Cal Thomas argued that no one who espoused universalism and works-based salvation, and denied the “uniqueness of Christ as the sole mediator” between God and people as Obama did could be a Christian.<sup>70</sup> Southern Baptist ethicist Richard Land called the claim that Obama was a Muslim “nuts” and labeled Obama “a very typical 21st-century mainline Protestant.”<sup>71</sup> Kirbyjon Caldwell contended that Obama’s statements showed that “he is authentically Christian” and denounced attacks on Obama’s faith as stupid and insulting.<sup>72</sup>

A *Newsweek* poll conducted in August 2010 found that 24 percent of Americans thought that Obama is a Muslim, 42 percent believed he is a Christian, and 24 percent did not know what religion he espouses. Moreover, according to this poll, 31 percent of Americans thought it was definitely or probably true that the president “sympathizes with the goals of Islamic

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<sup>68</sup> Obama, “Remarks . . . [at the] Shooting in Tucson, Arizona.”

<sup>69</sup> Tobin Grant, “White House Rebukes Franklin Graham for ‘Preposterous Charges,’” April 26, 2011, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/aprilweb-only/whitehousefranklingraham.html>.

<sup>70</sup> Cal Thomas, “Why Do Christians Doubt Barack Obama’s Faith?” <http://www.squidoo.com/snobama>.

<sup>71</sup> Grant, “White House Rebukes.”

<sup>72</sup> Daniel Burke, “Obama Bares His Christian Soul,” *Christian Century*, May 4, 2010, 14.

fundamentalists who want to impose Islamic law around the world.”<sup>73</sup> These polling results prompted several responses from Obama supporters. His press secretary issued a statement declaring that “the president’s top priority . . . isn’t making sure that Americans know what a devout Christian he is, it’s making sure that we’re getting the economy on track.” Another White House spokesperson characterized Obama as a man of “strong Christian faith,” even though “he doesn’t wear it on his sleeve.” More than 70 Christian leaders, including Sammy Rodriguez of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, Bishop T. D. Jakes, World Vision president Rich Stearns, and Orlando megachurch pastor Joel Hunter, issued an open letter asserting that the president “has been unwavering in confessing Christ as Lord and has spoken often about the importance of his Christian faith.”<sup>74</sup>

Several factors help explain this persistent widespread perception that Obama is a Muslim. In a CNN interview, Franklin Graham declared that “the president’s problem is that he was born a Muslim” and was given an Islamic name by his father.<sup>75</sup> Obama’s visit to Egypt in June 2009, his quotations of the Qur’an, and his sharing of his personal experiences with Islam also contributed to this misperception.<sup>76</sup> Others argued that Obama’s failure to attend church or to speak publicly about his faith had caused this misunderstanding.<sup>77</sup> Some blamed the conservative media because pundits on the right, including Ann Coulter, David Limbaugh, and

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<sup>73</sup> Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “Poll: 24% Think Obama is a Muslim,” Aug. 31, 2010, [http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctpolitics/2010/08/newsweek\\_poll\\_2.html](http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctpolitics/2010/08/newsweek_poll_2.html). Polls in April and June 2008 found that 13 percent of Americans believed that Obama is a Muslim. In a Pew survey taken that same month, 34% of American adults said Obama is a Christian and 43% claimed they did not know what Obama’s religion is. See Kathryn Lopez, “Barack Obama’s Religious-Identity Vacuum,” Aug. 19, 2010, <http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/244168/barack-obamas-religious-identity-vacuum-kathryn-jean-lopez>. In a *Time* magazine poll, 24 percent of respondents said Obama was a Muslim and 47 percent said he was a Christian. Alex Altman, “TIME Poll: Majority Oppose Mosque, Many Distrust Muslims,” Aug. 19, 2010, <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2011799,00.html>.

<sup>74</sup> “Obama’s Religion: A Hard Question for Americans,” *Christian Century*, Sept. 21, 2010, 15.

<sup>75</sup> Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “Franklin Graham: Obama Born a Muslim, a Christian Now,” Aug. 20, 2010, [http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctpolitics/2010/08/franklin\\_graham\\_1.html](http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctpolitics/2010/08/franklin_graham_1.html).

<sup>76</sup> CT Editorial Staff, “Obama Speech Draws Strong Reactions,” June 5, 2009, [http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctpolitics/2009/06/strong\\_reaction.html](http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctpolitics/2009/06/strong_reaction.html).

<sup>77</sup> “Obama’s Religion: A Hard Question for Americans,” 15.

Chuck Norris, vociferously questioned Obama's claim to be a Christian. Writing in *Time*, Amy Sullivan emphasized that 60 percent of respondents in the 2010 Pew poll "who identified Obama's faith as Islam . . . said they learned the 'fact' from the media." Others hypothesized that some respondents told pollsters that Obama is a Muslim to express their disapproval of him.<sup>78</sup>

Critics also complained that various remarks the president has made have accorded too much prominence and credibility to Islam, which has also produced confusion about his own faith. In his Cairo address in June 2009, Obama referred to "the Holy Koran" and the Middle East as the region "where Islam was first revealed." Ken Blackwell, a former U.S. ambassador to the UN Human Rights Commission, argued that calling the scriptures of any other religion holy or revealed is a denial of Christianity. Although Obama was trying to improve diplomatic relations with Muslim nations, by making theological statements about Islam that no Christians could accept, he sent a very confusing message about his own religious beliefs. Such statements were widely circulated on the internet, Blackwell argued, and undermined Obama's profession to be a Christian.<sup>79</sup> Obama's support of the right of Muslims to build a mosque at Ground Zero may also have contributed to confusion about his religious commitments. Obama insisted that "Muslims have the same right to practice their religion as anyone else in this country. That includes the right to build a place of worship and a community center on private property in lower Manhattan." Responding to extensive criticism of his statement, Obama explained that he was not commenting "on the wisdom of making the decision to put a mosque there," but only on the right people had to do so "that dates back to our founding."<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> John McCormack, "Pew: 18 Percent of Americans Think Obama's A Muslim: So What?" Aug 19, 2010, <http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/obama-not-muslim>.

<sup>79</sup> Ken Blackwell, "The President's Confusing Messages on Religion," <http://online.worldmag.com/2010/02/05/the-presidents-confusing-messages-on-religion/>.

<sup>80</sup> "Obama Fumbles Mosque Question," *National Review*, Aug. 16, 2010, <http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/243756/obama-fumbles-mosque-question-editors>.

While agreeing that Muslims should have the freedom to worship how and where they please in America, many objected to constructing a mosque at this location. David Pryce-Jones complained in the *National Review* that erecting a “mosque in this site of mass murder committed by Muslims is not about freedom of worship, it is a statement of supremacy and conquest.” He pointed out that non-Muslims were not permitted to establish places of worship in Saudi Arabia or even to enter Medina and Mecca. Other opponents of the project complained that the proposal to place a mosque at this site, led by a group that included an imam who refused to condemn Hamas, was “unseemly and ill-considered.” Such critics argued that the president should have counseled the leaders of the mosque project to move it to a different location and urged the Saudis not to fund this project.<sup>81</sup>

While many Americans misconstrued Obama to be a Muslim, others continued to hammer away at his long association with Trinity UCC in Chicago. Joe Carter, the web editor of *First Things*, protested that for more than twenty years Obama belonged to this “apostate, racist church that makes no distinction between faith and politics.” Trinity espoused a form of “black liberation theology” that subordinated Christianity “to a twisted, racist political ideology” by making political liberation the “central theme of the biblical message.” Even if Obama knew nothing about Jeremiah Wright’s “inflammatory rhetoric” and slept through Trinity’s proclamation of liberation theology, he supported a church that preached a “despicable,” “divisive” theology the entire time he attended there.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> David Pryce-Jones, “Barack Obama, Apologist-in-Chief,” Aug. 14, 2010, <http://www.nationalreview.com/david-pryce-jones/243738/barack-obama-apologist-chief>.

<sup>82</sup> Joe Carter, “Pledging Allegiance to Irreligion,” Aug 31, 2011, <http://www.firstthings.com/onthesquare/2011/08/pledging-allegiance-to-irreligion/joe-carter>.

## Obama and Public Policy

Thus far, Obama has been a much more effective campaigner than administrator. Although his tenure has been plagued by the continuation of the global economic recession, Arab Spring, and renewed insurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan, Obama has not used his considerable rhetorical skills to unite or inspire Americans or achieve significant legislative successes. In many ways he has seemed aloof and indecisive. Moreover, in many instances he has not effectively connected his faith with his policies.

Obama has occasionally discussed how his faith influences his work. At the 2010 National Prayer Breakfast, he sought to explain “the ways my faith informs who I am—as a President, and as a person.”<sup>83</sup> He applauded the work of theologically conservative pastors who were leading efforts “to fix our broken immigration system,” evangelical leaders who were “rallying their congregations to protect our planet,” and theological progressives who were emphasizing “responsible fatherhood and healthy marriage” as essential to eliminating poverty. Until God made everything as “it should be,” Obama argued, Christians must work to extend His justice, mercy, and compassion to “the most vulnerable.” When his efforts to improve the economy, reduce foreclosures, or strengthen the health care system seemed “so profoundly inadequate,” Obama declared, the “biblical injunction to serve the least of these” kept him going. Through the Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships his administration was working with religious non-profits to feed hungry children, give fathers the support they needed to nurture their children, and “improve the lives of people around the world.” Americans’ spiritual values and compassion must be expressed not just in their families, workplaces, and houses of worship, Obama asserted, but also in their government.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Obama, “Prayer Breakfast,” Feb. 4, 2010.

<sup>84</sup> Obama, “Prayer Breakfast,” Feb. 3, 2011.



Despite these claims, many of Obama's policies, especially those on abortion, stem cell research, and faith-based community initiatives, as well as his judicial nominees, deeply troubled many religious conservatives. Joseph Loconte protested that Obama's plan to provide federal funding for abortion and embryonic stem-cell research contradicted "the moral convictions of millions of ordinary Americans." Conservatives also denounced Obama's repeal of federal rules that prohibited giving federal money to international organizations that promoted or provided abortions. Both conservatives and liberals were disappointed by Obama's proposal to fund research on stem cell lines created from surplus embryos at fertility clinics but not on lines created in laboratories to study specific diseases. Conservatives argued that federal funds should be used only to do research on adult stem cells, while liberals protested that Obama's policy inhibited potentially promising research. His revised faith-based initiative, conservatives complained, prevented charities from considering religious convictions in hiring employees. Obama also proposed giving failing public schools hundreds of millions of dollars, Loconte objected, but he opposed providing vouchers to poor families to help their children "escape these mismanaged monstrosities and attend private religious schools."<sup>85</sup>

In *The Audacity of Hope* Obama admitted that his support for abortion rights might not square with biblical teaching: "Jesus' call to love one another might demand a different conclusion"; in the future, "I may be seen as someone who was on the wrong side of history."<sup>86</sup> Nevertheless, as president Obama continued to strongly support the pro-choice position. As noted, he reversed a U. S. policy that prohibited tax dollars from being used to fund abortion providers overseas. Many Catholics and evangelicals complained that Obama's health care plan

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<sup>85</sup> Joseph Loconte, "Obama's Prayer Warriors: Can Religious Leaders Faithfully Serve the President and God at the Same Time?" Mar 18, 2009, <http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/016/290farmg.asp?nopager=1>.

<sup>86</sup> Obama, *Audacity*, 223.

would directly empower federally-funded insurance plans to pay for all elective abortions and repeal all previously existing prohibitions.<sup>87</sup>

Obama's support for legalized abortion caused considerable controversy when the University of Notre Dame invited him to give the commencement address in May 2009. Notre Dame philosophy professor Ralph McInerny and other Catholics protested that because Obama's position contradicted traditional Catholic teaching, he was unfit to speak at one of the nation's premier Catholic universities. Arguing that Obama's policies showed that he did not "hold human life as sacred," John M. D'Arcy, the Catholic bishop of the diocese that includes Notre Dame, like McInerny, declined to attend commencement. About 350,000 people signed an online petition posted by the Cardinal Newman Society urging Notre Dame to rescind its invitation to Obama. Labeling Obama's actions the "most anti-life" "of any American president," the petition protested his expansion of "federal funding for abortions" and "research on stem cells from human embryos," practices that clashed with traditional Catholic values. In addition, bishops from more than 50 of the 195 American dioceses publicly declared their disapproval of Notre Dame's awarding Obama an honorary degree. Notre Dame's president John Jenkins defended the university's decision to invite Obama, declaring that it "should not be taken as condoning or endorsing his positions on specific issues . . . including abortion and embryonic stem cell research."<sup>88</sup>

In March 2011 the Obama administration rescinded facets of a 2008 executive order by George W. Bush that strengthened the ability of physicians and nurses to refuse to perform

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<sup>87</sup> Joseph Loconte, "What Would Jesus Insure? The Religious Left Rallies for Obamacare," Sept. 4, 2009, <http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/016/904buqdz.asp?nopager=1>.

<sup>88</sup> Jamie Dean, "Caps and Frowns," <http://www.worldmag.com/webextra/15205>; Dan Gilgoff, "Outrage Over Obama's Appearance at Notre Dame: Who Are the Political Victims?" <http://www.usnews.com/news/blogs/god-and-country/2009/03/23/outrage-over-obamas-appearance-at-notre-dame-who-are-the-political-victims>; all quotations from Dean's article except the ones pertaining the CNS petition. See also Joseph Bottum, "And the War Came," *First Things*, June/July 2009, 63-68.

procedures they deem morally objectionable, especially those dealing with contraception and abortion. Although these changes did not completely wipe out the previous protections, Matt Bowman of the Alliance Defense Fund argued, they gave the Department of Health and Human Services, “an agency which says it agrees with Planned Parenthood Services,” total discretion over the “enforcement of conscience protections.” The new regulations stipulated that other issues such as patient access trumped the protections of conscience medical providers had possessed. J. Scott Ries, vice president of the Christian Medical Association, contended that these rules ignored the fact that many controversial emergency contraception prescriptions sometimes functioned as abortion drugs. These changes might cause medical caregivers to be censured “for refusing either to refer patients to abortion providers” or to mention abortion as an option while counseling clients. The CMA also complained that since Obama took office, conscience protections had often been ignored. Physicians had been compelled to refer their patients to abortion suppliers, an OB-GYN doctor had been fired for refusing to counsel patients about abortion, and numerous medical students had jeopardized their future in the profession by refusing to participate in abortion training. Some Christian medical caregivers feared that these regulations might cause pro-life advocates to leave the profession and pro-life students to avoid practicing certain types of medicine.<sup>89</sup>

Mark Rodgers and Loredana Vuoto asserted in the *National Review* that some younger evangelicals had voted for Obama because his commitment to “social-justice issues like overcoming racism, combating poverty, and tackling global issues like AIDS . . . trumped

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<sup>89</sup> Edward Lee Pitts, “Weakened Protections: The Obama Administration Strikes Elements of Conscience Protections for Pro-life Medical Providers,” Feb. 21, 2011, <http://www.worldmag.com/webextra/17672>.

abortion.” Other religious conservatives, however, felt betrayed because Obama had not kept his promise to reduce the number of abortions.<sup>90</sup>

While many conservatives applauded Obama’s promise to expand aid to faith-based organizations that provide social services, some conservatives and many liberals protested his policy. Conservatives, most notably Albert Mohler Jr., president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, warned that relying on government money is dangerous because religious agencies may become dependent on funds that someday may be removed. Secularists and civil libertarians like Susan Jacoby complained that Obama had not acted on his promise to prohibit religious hiring discrimination or proselytizing in all organizations that receive federal funds to provide social assistance. Mohler countered that the right of religious organizations to hire workers who share their commitments and to evangelize while dispensing social aid is central to their mission.<sup>91</sup> Stanley Carlson-Thies, who served in the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives during Bush’s first term, contended that “while the Bush administration tried to learn from successful faith-based poverty fighters, the Obama administration appears to be using the faith-based office as a way to convince independent Christian and Jewish nonprofits to follow the administration’s agenda.”<sup>92</sup>

For some religious conservatives, Obama’s demeanor, persona, and actions have eschatological overtones. In response to Obama’s Cairo speech, *Newsweek* editor Evan Thomas declared, “In a way, Obama’s standing above the country . . . above the world, he’s sort of God.” Evaluating this remark, former Bush speechwriter Michael Gerson, described the president’s

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<sup>90</sup> Mark Rodgers and Loredana Vuoto, “Praying Politics: Abortion, the Religious, and the President,” <http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/226807/praying-politics/loredana-vuoto>.

<sup>91</sup> Albert Mohler, Jr., “Can Faith-Based Programs Keep the Faith?” Feb. 11, 2009, <http://www.albertmohler.com/2009/02/11/can-faith-based-programs-keep-the-faith/>; Susan Jacoby, “Keeping the Faith, Ignoring the History,” Feb. 28, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/01/opinion/01jacoby.html>.

<sup>92</sup> Quoted in Martin Morse Wooster, “Faith, Hope, and . . . the Hand of God in the Social Safety Net,” May 24, 2010, <http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/faith-hope-and-%E2%80%89%E2%80%89%E2%80%89%E2%80%89>

perspective as “Olympian.” He continued, “Obama seldom chooses to be a participant in ideological struggles. He aspires to be history’s referee.”<sup>93</sup> Upset with Obama’s “state capitalism,” *National Review* editor Jonah Goldberg complained that “our messianic president” sought to convince religious organizations to support his crusade to “expand the scope and role of government” to create the “Kingdom of God on Earth.” Such a quest smacked of the Progressive concept that the state, in the words of German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, was the “march of God on earth,” which was “a major theme of Liberal Fascism.” It also reflected the views of social Gospeler Richard Ely, who argued that “God works through the State in carrying out His purposes more universally than through any other institution.”<sup>94</sup>

During the 2008 campaign, Matthew Avery Sutton argued, Republicans exploited evangelicals’ apocalyptic fears through an ad titled “The One,” which portrayed Obama as a messiah. His internationalism, limited support for Israel, Nobel Peace Prize, and plan for universal health care coverage fit with expectations many evangelicals have of the Antichrist.<sup>95</sup> Although Obama was attacked during the campaign as a celebrity and a superstar, not directly as the Antichrist, Sutton insisted that Obama’s enthralling promises of peace and prosperity have made some religious conservatives wary.<sup>96</sup>

### **Final Assessment**

Some consider Obama’s unconventional faith a political advantage, while others view it “politically problematic” and detrimental.<sup>97</sup> For Obama, Stephen Mansfield argued in *The Faith*

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<sup>93</sup> Kyle Drennen, “Newsweek’s Evan Thomas: Obama Is ‘Sort of God,’” <http://newsbusters.org/blogs/kyle-drennen/2009/06/05/newsweek-s-evan-thomas-obama-sort-god> ; Michael Gerson, “Obama vs. the Deniers,” <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/06/09/AR2009060902594.html>.

<sup>94</sup> Jonah Goldberg, “Closing Time,” Aug. 25, 2009, <http://www.nationalreview.com/liberal-fascism>.

<sup>95</sup> Matthew Avery Sutton, “Why the Antichrist Matters in Politics,” *New York Times*, Sept. 27, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/26/opinion/why-the-antichrist-matters-in-politics.html>.

<sup>96</sup> Francis Martel, “Lawrence O’Donnell Investigates: ‘Is Barack Obama The Anti-Christ?’” <http://www.mediaite.com/tv/lawrence-odonnell-investigates-is-barack-obama-the-anti-christ/>.

<sup>97</sup> Miller, “Finding His Faith.”

of *Barack Obama* (2008), faith “is transforming, lifelong, and real.” For many Americans, Obama seems to be “the Everyman in a heroic tale of spiritual seeking.” Millions see him as “at least a fellow traveler and at most a man at the vanguard of a new era of American spirituality.”<sup>98</sup> In a June 2009 op-ed Mansfield contended that Obama’s “big-tent approach” to religion and spirituality “is perfectly in step with the country he now leads.” Like the vast majority of Americans, he believed that there are many paths to God and that all religions contain fundamental truths.<sup>99</sup> Mansfield hoped that Americans had come to a moment when their “common devotion to God may fuel a national resolve” that “can break cycles of poverty,” challenge racism, reinforce ethical conduct, and “end the moral scourges of our time.” Obama might be able to help “wed faith to a political vision” to produce meaningful changes.<sup>100</sup> Many socially liberal Christians continue to applaud Obama’s efforts to use government programs to reduce poverty, provide jobs and health care, and expand gay civil rights.

Most socially conservative Christians, by contrast, criticize Obama for supporting pro-choice measures, allowing federal funding of embryonic stem cells, refusing to defend marriage as a heterosexual institution, and devising economic stimulus packages.

In the final analysis, the two sides sharply disagree over what responsibilities the Bible assigns to government and whether alleviating poverty and improving the economy is best done through governmental action or the private sector. As the election of 2012 approaches, hopefully Americans will have a better understanding of Obama’s faith and how it helps shape his policies. By moving beyond confusion and misunderstanding, we can focus our debate on the perceived

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<sup>98</sup> Mansfield, *Barack Obama*, 143 (first and second quotations) , xxi (third and fourth quotations).

<sup>99</sup> Stephen Mansfield, “Obama’s Faith Fits Our Times,” *USA Today*, June 1, 2009; Falsani, “I Have a Deep Faith.” See also Scott Lamb, “Stephen Mansfield: Obama’s Big-Tent Religion,” <http://online.worldmag.com/tag/pluralism/>.

<sup>100</sup> Mansfield, *Barack Obama*, 144.

merit of Obama's proposals and those of his Republican rival and, as Christians, carefully assess how the worldviews of the candidates will affect their leadership of our great nation.