

## 6.4 Barack Obama (6/26/06) Keynote Speech at Call To Renewal Conference

### Detailed Review

#### This Resource's Key Interpretations and Insights Related to the Purposes of This Website

- (1) In this important speech **Obama spells out his position on the primary focus of this website--how best to promote healthy relationships between faith & politics.** He succinctly and accurately describes **the unhealthy polarization on the issue as it existed in 2006, and he does so in terms that highlight the responsibilities of both the Right and the Left in creating it over the preceding decades** (see p. 3).
- (2) **Obama proposes ways to move beyond the polarization** that are basically compatible with those I'm trying to promote on this website. Since he is speaking at a conference of evangelical social justice progressives, most of the speech deals with **what progressives need to understand and act on that will make faith & politics healthier:**
- There are good reasons why most Americans are religious (p. 3)
  - How his journey toward finding his own faith community in an African-American, liberal social justice Christian church led to an understanding of faith & politics he believes is normative--we have a calling to witness for the moral values of our faiths in the public square and to stand up for social justice for all (p. 4)
  - Other kinds of Christianity and other major world religions have similar kinds of religious groundings for their moral values that have political implications and, thus, also need to witness for them in the public square (p. 5)
  - While the typical liberal idea that government should be involved in solving social problems is crucial, the typical conservative ideas that these problems are cultural and require personal responsibility to be solved are also key; and Obama affirms that morality is not exclusively religious (p. 6)
  - Secularists are wrong when they ask believers to leave their religion at the door before entering into the public square, and they can find much common ground with the moral values of religious persons and groups (pp. 6-7)
  - The liberal bias against faith-based programs and the far-right's view that American should be a Christian nation are challenged (p. 7)
- (3) Toward the end of the speech, Obama makes several points; I agree with his goals--**when religious persons bring their own religion-specific values into the public square they need to find ways to relate them to other faith positions (religious and secular) and we should use caution when considering legalizing moral values or making church/state boundaries too rigid--but not the political philosophy he uses to justify them.** (pp. 7-9)

*Barack Obama's keynote address at the Sojourners/Call to Renewal "Building a Covenant for a New America" conference in Washington, D.C., June 26, 2006.*

(Note: this is the full text of the speech [with my various kinds of emphases and review comments added]. A clean copy of the speech can be found at <http://sojo.net/blogs/2012/02/21/transcript-obamas-2006-sojournerscall-renewal-address-faith-and-politics>, where you will also find a link to a full-length, 40-minute video of the speech. You may want to listen to the speech or read the clean copy of it on that site before looking at my review here. *Also note that this text from Sojourners is not a word-for-word transcription; this is not a problem, except where noted.*)

(It's helpful to know this speech was given at the Sojourners "Call to Renewal Conference." I characterized this organization as center-right Christian with respect to faith and center-left progressive with respect to political social justice.)

~ Introduction ~  
Faith & Politics

(Note: gray boxes throughout are my dividers.)

Good morning. I appreciate the opportunity to speak here at the Call to Renewal's Building a Covenant for a New America conference. I've had the opportunity to take a look at your Covenant for a New America. It is filled with outstanding

policies and prescriptions for much of what ails this country. So I'd like to congratulate you all on the thoughtful presentations you've given so far about poverty and justice in America, and for putting fire under the feet of the political leadership here in Washington.

But today I'd like to talk about **the connection between religion and politics** and perhaps offer some thoughts about how we can sort through some of **the often bitter arguments that we've been seeing over the last several years.**

I do so because, as you all know, we can affirm the importance of poverty in the Bible; and we can raise up and pass out this Covenant for a New America. We can talk to the press, and we can discuss the religious call to address poverty and environmental stewardship all we want, but it won't have an impact unless we tackle head-on **the mutual suspicion that sometimes exists between religious America and secular America.**

This speech directly addresses the focus of this website. It's the primary source for Obama's position on faith & politics, and I believe one of the best short answers we have to the key issues involved.

Note: he is well aware here of the polarizing conflicts surrounding this subject that still make it so difficult to address.

However, from my perspective Obama doesn't have an important tool to deal with the religious/secular divide--the postmodern idea that secular philosophical positions are also grounded in faith. (More on this below.)

~ First example from his personal experience ~

Setting the scene--

A political progressive fails to state publicly how his own faith grounds his values

I want to give you an example that I think illustrates this fact. As some of you know, during the 2004 U.S. Senate General Election I ran against a gentleman named Alan Keyes. Mr. Keyes is **well-versed in the Jerry Falwell/Pat Robertson style of rhetoric that often labels progressives as both immoral and godless.**

Indeed, Mr. Keyes announced towards the end of the campaign that, "Jesus Christ would not vote for Barack Obama. Christ would not vote for Barack Obama because Barack Obama has behaved in a way that it is inconceivable for Christ to have behaved."

**Jesus Christ would not vote for Barack Obama.**

Now, I was urged by some of my liberal supporters not to take this statement seriously, to essentially ignore it. To them, Mr. Keyes was an extremist, and his arguments not worth entertaining. And since at the time, I was up 40 points in the polls, it probably wasn't a bad piece of strategic advice.

But what they didn't understand, however, was that **I had to take Mr. Keyes seriously, for he claimed to speak for my religion, and my God.** He claimed knowledge of certain truths.

Mr. Obama says he's a Christian, he was saying, and yet he supports a lifestyle that the Bible calls an abomination.

Mr. Obama says he's a Christian, but supports the destruction of innocent and sacred life.

And so what would my supporters have me say? How should I respond? Should I say that a literalist reading of the Bible was folly? Should I say that Mr. Keyes, who is a Roman Catholic, should ignore the teachings of the Pope?

I agree. This is the heart of the personal side of the issue of faith & politics in our postmodern world. Each of us needs both to respect religious and philosophical pluralism and witness publicly to how our own deepest values are grounded in a particular faith (religious or secular).

Unwilling to go there, I **answered with what has come to be the typically liberal response** in such debates — namely, I said that we live in a pluralistic society, that I can't impose my own religious views on another, that I was running to be the U.S. Senator of Illinois and not the Minister of Illinois.

But Mr. Keyes's implicit accusation that I was not a true Christian nagged at me, and I was also aware that **my answer did not adequately address the role my faith has in guiding my own values and my own beliefs.**

~ A big problem ~

Three decades of unhealthy polarizing approaches to the issue of religion & politics

Now, **my dilemma** was by no means unique. In a way, it **reflected the broader debate we've been having in this country for the last thirty years over the role of religion in politics**. For some time now, there has been plenty of talk among pundits and pollsters that the political divide in this country has fallen sharply along religious lines. Indeed, the single biggest "gap" in party affiliation among white Americans today is not between men and women, or those who reside in so-called Red States and those who reside in Blue, but between those who attend church regularly and those who don't.

Conservative leaders have been **all too happy to exploit this gap, consistently reminding evangelical Christians that Democrats disrespect their values and dislike their Church, while suggesting to the rest of the country that religious Americans care only about issues like abortion and gay marriage; school prayer and intelligent design.**

Democrats, for the most part, **have taken the bait. At best, we may try to avoid the conversation about religious values altogether, fearful of offending anyone and claiming that - regardless of our personal beliefs — constitutional principles tie our hands. At worst, there are some liberals who dismiss religion in the public square as inherently irrational or intolerant, insisting on a caricature of religious Americans that paints them as fanatical, or thinking that the very word "Christian" describes one's political opponents, not people of faith.**

I believe this is one of the best centrist descriptions of how the Right and the Left contributed to the unhealthy polarization on this issue for several decades leading up to the 2004 election.

As this website describes, since that time, **centrist forces (including this speech) are helping create a healthier dialogue.**

Now, such strategies of avoidance may work for progressives when our opponent is Alan Keyes. But over the long haul, I think we make a mistake when we fail to acknowledge the power of faith in people's lives — in the lives of the American people — and I think **it's time that we join a serious debate about how to reconcile faith with our modern, pluralistic democracy.**

~ His First Main Point ~

**Calling progressives of all kinds to understand why and how they need to be witnesses for the political implications of their faith (religious or secular) for the sake of a healthier nation**

And if we're going to do that then we first need to understand that **Americans are a religious people**. 90 percent of us believe in God, 70 percent affiliate themselves with an organized religion, 38 percent call themselves committed Christians, and substantially more people in America believe in angels than they do in evolution.

This religious tendency is not simply the result of successful marketing by skilled preachers or the draw of popular mega-churches. In fact, it speaks to **a hunger that's deeper** than that - a hunger that goes beyond any particular issue or cause.

Each day, it seems, thousands of Americans are going about their daily rounds — dropping off the kids at school, driving to the office, flying to a business meeting, shopping at the mall, trying to stay on their diets — and they're coming to the realization that something is missing. They are deciding that **their work, their possessions, their diversions, their sheer busyness, is not enough.**

**They want a sense of purpose, a narrative arc to their lives. They're looking to relieve a chronic loneliness**, a feeling supported by a recent study that shows Americans have fewer close friends and confidants than ever before. And so they need an assurance that somebody out there cares about them, is listening to them - that they are not just destined to travel down that long highway towards nothingness.

For those of you who don't consider yourself to be "religious" for any of a variety of reasons, I encourage you to read on. Obama soon takes into account non-religious persons and communities. However, I believe all of us can identify with Obama's description of a hunger for a deep sense of purpose in our lives. That's one of the reasons why, unlike Obama, I've argued in this website that it's better to use the more inclusive phrase "faith (religious and secular) & politics" rather than the narrower "religion and politics" to point to this social reality.

~ Second example from his personal experience ~

His spiritual journey toward African-American faith and community and how it shaped his views on religion & politics

And I speak with some experience on this matter. I was not raised in a particularly religious household, as undoubtedly many in the audience were. My father, who returned to Kenya when I was just two, was born Muslim but as an adult an atheist. My mother, whose parents were non-practicing Baptists and Methodists, was probably one of the most spiritual and kindest people I've ever known, **but grew up with a healthy skepticism of organized religion herself**. (Partly because of the hypocrisy she had seen in the church early in her life.--**this sentence is in the speech, but not the transcript**) As a consequence, **so did I**.

I really value Obama's willingness to weave some very personal, sometimes painful, parts of his own faith journey into this intellectual position paper on such a volatile subject. (See my review of 6.3 Mansfield (2008 & 2011) *The Faith of Barack Obama* on the website for a detailed account of Obama's faith journey.)

It wasn't until after college, when I went to Chicago to work as a community organizer for a group of Christian churches, that I confronted **my own spiritual dilemma**.

I was working with churches, and the Christians who I worked with recognized themselves in me. They saw that I knew their Book and that I shared their values and sang their songs. But they sensed that **a part of me that remained removed, detached, that I was an observer in their midst**.

And in time, I came to realize that **something was missing** as well — that **without a vessel for my beliefs, without a commitment to a particular community of faith, at some level I would always remain apart, and alone**.

And if it weren't for the particular attributes of the historically black church, I may have accepted this fate. But as the months passed in Chicago, I found myself drawn - not just to work with the church, but to be in the church.

For one thing, **I believed and still believe in the power of the African-American religious tradition to spur social change**, a power made real by some of the leaders here today. **Because of its past, the black church understands in an intimate way the Biblical call to feed the hungry and cloth the naked and challenge powers and principalities. And in its historical struggles for freedom and the rights of man, I was able 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. As a source of hope.**

This African-American heritage is the primary influence on Obama's faith that makes it not only personal but also social in a this-worldly sense.

As the speech goes on, we'll see that this has implications for not only the responsibility of private individuals and communities for charity but also some governmental political responsibility for social justice. It is precisely the fact that African-American Christians passed through the painful experiences of slavery and Jim Crow that makes them especially focused on this-worldly social justice for all, regardless of how conservative their personal faith is.

And perhaps it was out of this intimate knowledge of hardship — the grounding of faith in struggle — that the church offered me a second insight, one that I think is important to emphasize today.

This position on religious doubt comes from the fact that Trinity UCC is a liberal African-American congregation.

Faith doesn't mean that you don't have doubts.

You need to come to church in the first place precisely because you are first of this world, **not apart from it**. You need to embrace Christ precisely because you have sins to wash away - because you are human and need an ally in this difficult journey.

It was because of these newfound understandings that I was finally able to walk down the aisle of Trinity United Church of Christ on 95th Street in the Southside of Chicago one day and affirm my Christian faith. It came about as a choice, and not an epiphany. I didn't fall out in church. The questions I had didn't magically disappear. But kneeling beneath that cross on the South Side, I felt that I heard God's spirit beckoning me. I submitted myself to His will, and dedicated myself to discovering His truth.

### Useful Links

The first three books reviewed in this Section 6 of the website all point to the importance of this speech for understanding Obama's stance on religion & politics. Each one can add its own unique angle to what you find in the speech:

6.1 Gary Dorrien (2012) *The Obama Question: A Progressive Perspective*. **Dorrien points out how Obama's faith has played a key role in how he has governed during the first three years of his presidency.**

6.2 James T. Kloppenberg (2012) *Reading Obama: Dreams, Hope and the American Tradition* [paperback edition with new preface; hardback (2011)]. **Kloppenberg supplies little known information about the influence of Obama's formal education on his politics that supplements the influence of Trinity United Church of Christ. This book describes in depth the biographical sources of Obama's ideas in this speech.**

6.3 Stephen Mansfield (2008 & 2011 Revised and Updated) *The Faith of Barack Obama*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson. **This is only book-length account of Obama's faith journey and its implications for his politics, first as it existed in 2008 during the Democratic primaries, and second as it existed in 2011 during the first three years of his presidency.**

(See [Section 6, 2012 Election Resources](#) on the website for links to these reviews.)

That's a path that has been shared by millions upon millions of Americans — evangelicals, Catholics, Protestants, Jews and Muslims alike; some since birth, others at certain turning points in their lives. It is **not something they set apart from the rest of their beliefs and values**. In fact, **it is often what drives their beliefs and their values**. And **that is why** that, if we truly hope to speak to people where they're at — to communicate our hopes and values in a way that's relevant to their own — then **as progressives, we cannot abandon the field of religious discourse**.

One of the primary goals of this speech is to encourage secular political progressives to reengage with religious people and their discourse. Another is to tell religious political progressives not to withhold speaking about the religious foundation of their political values in the public square.

Because when we ignore the debate about what it means to be a good Christian or Muslim or Jew; when we discuss religion only in the negative sense of where or how it should not be practiced, rather than in **the positive sense of what it tells us about our obligations towards one another**; when we shy away from

religious venues and religious broadcasts because we assume that we will be unwelcome — **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**.

More fundamentally, the discomfort of some progressives with any hint of religion has often prevented us from effectively addressing issues in moral terms. Some of the problem here is rhetorical — **if we scrub language of all religious content**,

**we forfeit the imagery and terminology through which millions of Americans understand both their personal morality and social justice.**

Imagine Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address without reference to "the judgments of the Lord." Or King's I Have a Dream speech without references to "all of God's children." **Their summoning of a higher truth helped inspire what had seemed impossible, and move the nation to embrace a common destiny.**

Our failure as progressives to tap into the moral underpinnings of the nation is not just rhetorical, though.

**Our fear of getting "preachy" may also lead us to discount the role that values and culture play in some of our most urgent social problems.**

After all, the problems of poverty and racism, the uninsured and the unemployed, are not simply technical problems in search of the perfect ten point plan. **They are rooted in both societal indifference and individual callousness — in the imperfections of man.**

Solving these problems will require changes in government policy, but **it will also require changes in hearts and a change in minds.** I believe in keeping guns out of our inner cities, and that our leaders must say so in the face

Here we see center-left Obama rejecting the either/or of the polarized Right and Left as he embraces both the Left's emphasis on government action and the Right's emphasis on individual responsibility. He believes our social problems are deeply personal and cultural. While many can't be solved without some governmental assistance, that alone is inadequate.

of the gun manufacturers' lobby - but I also believe that when a gang-banger shoots indiscriminately into a crowd because he feels somebody disrespected him, we've got a moral problem. There's a hole in that young man's heart — a hole that the government alone cannot fix.

I believe in vigorous enforcement of our non-discrimination laws. But I also believe that a transformation of conscience and a genuine

commitment to diversity on the part of the nation's CEOs could bring about quicker results than a battalion of lawyers. They have more lawyers than us anyway.

I think that we should put more of our tax dollars into educating poor girls and boys. I think that the work that Marian Wright Edelman has done all her life is absolutely how we should prioritize our resources in the wealthiest nation on earth. I also think that we should give them the information about contraception that can prevent unwanted pregnancies, lower abortion rates, and help assure that that every child is loved and cherished.

But, you know, my Bible tells me that if we train a child in the way he should go, when he is old he will not turn from it. So I think faith and guidance can help fortify a young woman's sense of self, a young man's sense of responsibility, and a sense of reverence that all young people should have for the act of sexual intimacy.

I am not suggesting that every progressive suddenly latch on to religious terminology — that can be dangerous. **Nothing is more transparent than inauthentic expressions of faith.** As Jim has mentioned, some politicians come and clap — off rhythm — to the choir. We don't need that.

In fact, because **I do not believe that religious people have a monopoly on morality**, I would rather have someone who is grounded in morality and ethics, and who is also secular, affirm their morality and ethics and values without pretending that they're something they're not. They don't need to do that. None of us need to do that.

Religion is not the only source of morality. This is a very important challenge to religious exclusivists.

Religious values are the source of moral values for a large portion of the American population. One of the key foundations of these values is a belief that humanity (social and individual) is "imperfect."

(See my review of 6.6 (2009) "Obama's Theologian: David Brooks and E.J. Dionne on Reinhold Niebuhr and the American Present" for information about how both King and Niebuhr influenced Obama in ways that make him a **Realistic Idealist** about what is possible individually and politically.)

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 square.** 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.

This is Obama's strongest, most concise indictment of the extreme-left secularist attempts to privatize religion—to push it out of the public square back into private homes and religious communities.

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.

Moreover, **if we progressives shed some of these biases**, we might recognize some **overlapping values that both religious and secular people share** when it comes to the moral and material direction of our country.

We might recognize that the call to sacrifice on behalf of the next generation, the need to think in terms of "thou" and not just "I," resonates in religious congregations all across the country. And we might realize that we have the ability to reach out to the evangelical community and engage millions of religious Americans in the larger project of American renewal.

In these paragraphs we see Obama proclaiming that all kinds of people and communities, which are often thought to be too divided to cooperate--the secular and the religious, political progressives and evangelicals, Christians and people of other faiths--can find "overlapping values."

Some of this is already beginning to happen. Pastors, friends of mine like Rick Warren and T.D. Jakes are wielding their enormous influences to confront AIDS, Third World debt relief, and the genocide in Darfur. Religious thinkers and activists like our good friend Jim Wallis and Tony Campolo are lifting up the Biblical injunction to help the poor as a means of mobilizing Christians against budget cuts to social programs and growing inequality.

And by the way, we need Christians on Capitol Hill, Jews on Capitol Hill and Muslims on Capitol Hill talking about the estate tax. When you've got an estate tax debate that proposes a trillion dollars being taken out of social programs to go to a handful of folks who don't need and weren't even asking for it, you know that **we need an injection of morality in our political debate.**

Across the country, individual churches like my own and your own are sponsoring day care programs, building senior centers, helping ex-offenders reclaim their lives, and rebuilding our gulf coast in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Here Obama is bringing in his strong commitment to the importance of faith-based organizations, which government needs to encourage.

So the question is, **how do we build on these still-tentative partnerships between religious and secular people of good will?** It's going to take more work, a lot more work than we've done so far. **The tensions and the suspicions on each side of the religious divide will have to be squarely addressed.** And each side will need to accept some ground rules for collaboration.

While I've already laid out some of the work that progressive leaders need to do, I want to talk a little bit about what conservative leaders need to do — some truths they need to acknowledge. For one, **they need to understand the critical role that the separation of church and state has played in preserving not only our democracy, but the robustness of our religious practice.** Folks tend to forget that during our founding, it wasn't the atheists or the civil libertarians who were the most effective champions of the First Amendment. It was the persecuted minorities, it was Baptists like John Leland who didn't want the established churches to impose their views on folks who were getting happy out in the fields and teaching the scripture to slaves. It was the forbearers of the evangelicals who were the most adamant about not mingling government with religious, because they did not want state-sponsored religion hindering their ability to practice their faith as they understood it.

Here he shifts briefly to challenge conservative Christians who want to make America a Christian nation. This goes against the First Amendment and denies the facts on the ground of the recent tremendous growth of religious pluralism.

Moreover, 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? How about Deuteronomy, which suggests stoning your child if he strays from the faith? Or should we just stick to the Sermon on the Mount - a passage that is so radical that it's doubtful that our own Defense Department would survive its application? So before we get carried away, let's read our bibles. Folks haven't been reading their bibles.

~ His second main point ~

The problem of relying solely on religion-specific values in the public square

This brings me to **my second point**. **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.

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. At some fundamental level, religion does not allow for compromise. It's the art of the impossible. If God has spoken, then followers are expected to live up to God's edicts, regardless of the consequences. To base one's life on such uncompromising commitments may be sublime, **but to base our policy making on such commitments would be a dangerous thing.** And if you doubt that, let me give you an example.

We all know the story of Abraham and Isaac. Abraham is ordered by God to offer up his only son, and without argument, he takes Isaac to the mountaintop, binds him to an altar, and raises his knife, prepared to act as God has commanded.

Of course, in the end God sends down an angel to intercede at the very last minute, and Abraham passes God's test of devotion.

But it's fair to say that if any of us leaving this church saw Abraham on a roof of a building raising his knife, we would, at the very least, call the police and expect the Department of Children and Family Services to take Isaac away from Abraham. We would do so because we do not hear what Abraham hears, do not see what Abraham sees, true as those experiences may be. So the best we can do is act in accordance with those things that we all see, and that we all hear, be it common laws or basic reason.

This is one of the few examples in the speech where I have a very different faith stance. I don't believe God commands us to do anything that we can't justify ethically. Hence, I wouldn't make this kind of distinction between personal faith and policy at any level.

### My Take

(and some coming reviews)

It's in the sections of the speech where Obama's makes his second point (above) and his third point (below) that I have some differences with his point of view on religion & politics. **I don't disagree with the conclusions he draws.** However, I do disagree with some of his views about religion upon which they are based. In my postmodern center-left theological view, all religions and the scriptures that ground them, not just some parts, must be seen in their historical and cultural context. Thus, everything needs to be constantly reinterpreted to some degree in each present time and place. (For more on this, see pages 1.2, 1.3, 5.1, 5.2 on the website.)

Just as significantly, the same is true of all forms of secular reason--there is no universal reason that's the ultimate arbiter of different points of view.

Obama certainly accepts this latter point when it comes to political policy. (See my detailed review of 6.2 Kloppenberg on the website for more on this.) However, it seems that when it comes to the personal dimensions of religion Obama has a modern center-right view of religion and scripture, which has caused some dissonance in his own personal faith stance. Historically, this has shown itself explicitly in his struggles to reconcile his personal and political views on the hot-button issues of abortion and gay marriage. Recently, he has stated his personal belief in the validity of gay marriage.

(There's more on all of the above in my Detailed Review of 6.3 Mansfield; see especially "My Take" on p. 11.)



~ His third main point ~

A sense of proportion is crucial in interactions between faith and politics

Finally, **any reconciliation between faith and democratic pluralism requires some sense of proportion.**

This goes for both sides.

Even those who claim the Bible's inerrancy make distinctions between Scriptural edicts, sensing that some passages — the Ten Commandments, say, or a belief in Christ's divinity — are central to Christian faith, while others are more culturally specific and may be modified to accommodate modern life. The American people intuitively understand this, which is why the majority of Catholics practice birth control and some of those opposed to gay marriage nevertheless are opposed to a Constitutional amendment to ban it. Religious leadership need not accept such wisdom in counseling their flocks, but they should recognize this wisdom in their politics.

I don't believe "a sense of proportion" is a very effective way to argue that positions on certain moral issues, especially hot-button ones, shouldn't be legalized.

But a sense of proportion should also guide those who police the boundaries between church and state. Not every mention

of God in public is a breach to the wall of separation - context matters. It is doubtful that children reciting the Pledge of Allegiance feel

Neither do I believe that "a sense of proportion" is a good way to arbitrate disputes on church/state issues.

oppressed or brainwashed as a consequence of muttering the phrase "under God." I didn't. Having voluntary student prayer groups use school property to meet should not be a threat, any more than its use by the High School Republicans should threaten Democrats. And one can envision certain faith-based programs —

targeting ex-offenders or substance abusers — that offer a uniquely powerful way of solving problems.

So we all have some work to do here. But I am hopeful that we can bridge the gaps that exist and overcome the prejudices each of us bring to this debate. And I have faith that millions of believing Americans want that to happen. No matter how religious they may or may not be, people are tired of seeing faith used as a tool of attack. They don't want faith used to belittle or to divide. They're tired of hearing folks deliver more screech than sermon. Because in the end, that's not how they think about faith in their own lives.

~ Third and concluding example from his personal experience ~  
Walking the Talk

So let me end with just one other interaction I had during my campaign. A few days after I won the Democratic nomination in my U.S. Senate race, I received an email from a doctor at the University of Chicago Medical School that said the following:

"Congratulations on your overwhelming and inspiring primary win. I was happy to vote for you, and I will tell you that I am seriously considering voting for you in the general election. I write to express my concerns that may, in the end, prevent me from supporting you."

The doctor described himself as a Christian who understood his commitments to be "totalizing." His faith led him to a strong opposition to abortion and gay marriage, although he said that his faith also led him to question the idolatry of the free market and quick resort to militarism (and the unwillingness to attend to poverty--in speech, but not in the transcription) that seemed to characterize much of the Republican agenda.

But the reason the doctor was considering not voting for me was not simply my position on abortion. Rather, he had read an entry that my campaign had posted on my Web site, which suggested that I would fight "right-wing ideologues who want to take away a woman's right to choose." The doctor went on to write:

"I sense that you have a strong sense of justice ... and I also sense that you are a fair minded person with a high regard for reason ... Whatever your convictions, if you truly believe that those who oppose abortion are all ideologues driven by perverse desires to inflict suffering on women, then you, in my judgment, are not fair-minded. ... You know that we

enter times that are fraught with possibilities for good and for harm, times when we are struggling to make sense of a common polity in the context of plurality, when we are unsure of what grounds we have for making any claims that involve others ... **I do not ask at this point that you oppose abortion, only that you speak about this issue in fair-minded words."**

Fair-minded words.

So I looked at my Web site and found the offending words. In fairness to them, my staff had written them using standard Democratic boilerplate language to summarize my pro-choice position during the Democratic primary, at a time when some of my opponents were questioning my commitment to protect *Roe v. Wade*.

Re-reading the doctor's letter, though, **I felt a pang of shame**. It is people like him who are looking for a deeper, fuller conversation about religion in this country. They may not change their positions, but they are willing to listen and learn from those who are willing to speak in fair-minded words. Those who know of the central and awesome place that God holds in the lives of so many, and who refuse to treat faith as simply another political issue with which to score points.

So I wrote back to the doctor, and I thanked him for his advice. The next day, I circulated the email to my staff and changed the language on my website to state in clear but simple terms my pro-choice position. And that night, before I went to bed, I said a prayer of my own — a prayer that I might extend the same presumption of good faith to others that the doctor had extended to me.

A good example of Obama's desire to walk-the-talk when it comes to being "fair-minded" when dealing with those who disagree with him on controversial issues.

~~And that night, before I went to bed I said a prayer of my own.~~ So I say a prayer every night. It's a prayer I think I share with a lot of Americans.

**A hope that we can live with one another in a way that reconciles the beliefs of each with the good of all.** It's a prayer worth praying, and a conversation worth having in this country in the months and years to come. Thank you. *(The sentence with the strike out is an error in the transcription. Obama actually said the next sentence.)*

(Click on this link for E. J. Dionne's review of this speech in *The Washington Post*, 6/30/06.)

[Link](#)