Barack Obama speaks out on faith and politics: 'Call to Renewal' Keynote Address

Sen. Barack Obama
Office of Sen. Barack Obama 6-28-2006

Good morning. I appreciate the opportunity to speak here at the Call to Renewal's Building a Covenant for a New America conference, and I'd like

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

What would my supporters have me say? That a literalist reading of the Bible was folly? That Mr. Keyes, a Roman Catholic, should ignore the teachings of the pope?

Unwilling to go there, I answered with the typically liberal response in some debates - namely, that we live in a pluralistic society, that I can't impose my 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 implicit accusation that I was not a true Christian nagged at me, and I was also aware that my answer didn't adequately address the role my faith has in guiding my own values and beliefs.

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, from Falwell and Robertson to Karl Rove and Ralph Reed, 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, some liberals 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.

Such strategies of avoidance may work for progressives when the 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 the lives of the American people, and join a serious debate about how to reconcile faith with our modern, pluralistic democracy.

If not 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 to 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 w0 04 of9 637.74 cm BT 200 0 0 20hT Qmay

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, Jerry Falwells and Pat Robertsons 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 reference 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

train a child in the way he should go, when he is old he will not turn from it. 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 all young people for the act of sexual intimacy.

I am not suggesting that every progressive suddenly latch on to religious terminology. Nothing is more transparent than inauthentic expressions of faith - the politician who shows up at a black church around election time and claps - off rhythm - to the gospel choir.

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 Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, Williams 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. 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

to be squarely addressed, and each side will need to accept some ground

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; to base our policy making on such commitments would be a dangerous thing.

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 saw a twenty-first century Abraham raising the knife on the roof of his apartment building, 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 are possible for all of us to know, be it common laws or basic reason.

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, a sense 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.

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 oppressed or brainwashed as a consequence of muttering the phrase "under God;" I certainly didn't. Having voluntary student prayer groups using 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 to attack and belittle and divide - they're tired of hearing folks deliver more screed than sermon. Because in the end, that's not how they think about faith in their own lives.

So let me end with another 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 that seemed to characterize much of President Bush's foreign policy.

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." He 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."

I checked my Web site and found the offending words. My staff had written them 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 reasonable terms - 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.

I wrote back to the doctor and 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.

It is a prayer I still say for America today - a hope that we can live with one another in a way that reconciles the beliefs of each with the good of