

*Sightings 5/31/07*

Obama's Faith: A Civil and Social Gospel

-- Robert M. Franklin

One by one Senator Barack Obama is passing the necessary tests for national leadership. Probing questions have been raised about his experience, race, early education, parents, voting record, statesmanship, and more. He has answered those questions with poise and respect. But when attention turns to Senator Obama's faith, I get worried.

As Martin Marty noted in a recent column ("Keeping the Faith at Trinity United Church of Christ," April 2, 2007), some media hounds have focused on Obama's home church of choice. Trinity United Church of Christ on Chicago's south side is one of the nation's most progressive African American mega-churches. Led for thirty-five years by the Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr., the church fuses into its core Christian identity a set of cultural strains that are vibrant in contemporary Black life, including liberation theology, Afrocentrism, and progressive politics. The church has appealed especially to baby boomers who came of age during the cultural revolution of the 1960s. Dr. Wright has managed to bring together the disciples of Martin Luther King, Jr. with the Black Nationalist disciples of Malcolm X, and to put them all in the service of promoting more equitable policies for the least advantaged members of our society. Indeed, he is often credited with making it possible for many disaffected Black separatists to return to the church and to seek change within the system.

Unfortunately, uninformed pundits (a deliberate oxymoron) from Fox TV recently weighed in on a congregation and a community about which they know very little. Their purpose is to embarrass Obama by insinuating that he is a closeted Black separatist or worse. But they fail to appreciate something distinctive about American religion and public life. The best of American political tradition permits -- and perhaps requires -- candidates both to acknowledge their ethnic and regional particularity, and to transcend that particularity in loyalty to the general human condition. John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mario Cuomo, and Barbara Jordan all illustrated this noble tradition.

In 2006, at a speech to Jim Wallis's Sojourners conference, Obama elaborated on his understanding of how faith should appear in the public square. It was a rational, balanced, thoughtful articulation of a socially responsible Christian faith, something rarely heard or said by politicians in our political culture. His words were especially assuring to people who feel that President Bush has abused religious language and personal faith to justify a horrific war and tax cuts for America's wealthiest citizens.

Obama's inner life appears to be driven by a civil and social gospel that America desperately needs at this hour. And that inner life has been nurtured by a congregation that loves God and celebrates the beauty and power of the Black experience in America. Why is this a cause for alarm? At a time when there is so much of what Martin Marty calls "wishy-washy, waning religion," it is exciting to see a congregation committed to improving the lives of people who have been the victims of bad public policy and public neglect.

The fact that churches like Trinity remain in the city and serve people on the margins of society suggests that they may be closer to the mission of Jesus than some of our finest cathedrals and suburban sanctuaries. And while I imagine that Fourth Presbyterian Church in downtown Chicago's Gold Coast neighborhood would love to have the Senator and his family as members, the working poor and those who have yet to enjoy the American dream need him more. I, for one, hope that Obama continues to undertake his ministry of inspiring hope among people who feared they might never dream again, while reconciling tensions within the Black political culture. If he can do these things while appealing to a large and diverse American public, then he will have passed the ultimate test of leadership: reminding us that we are better, wiser, stronger, and safer when we transcend our fears and work together rather than apart.

Robert M. Franklin is Presidential Distinguished Professor of Social Ethics at Emory University, Atlanta, and the author of *Crisis in the Village: Restoring Hope in African American Communities* (Fortress Press, 2007).