

Barack Obama
Call to Renewal Keynote Address
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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 to congratulate you all on the thoughtful presentations you've given so far about poverty and justice in America. I think all of us would affirm that caring for the poor finds root in all of our religious traditions – certainly that's true for my own.

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 over this issue over the last several years.

I do so because, as you all know, we can affirm the importance of poverty in the Bible and discuss the religious call to environmental stewardship all we want, but it won't have an impact if we don't tackle head-on the mutual suspicion that sometimes exists between religious America and secular America.

For me, this need was illustrated during my 2004 face for the U.S. Senate. My opponent, Alan Keyes, was well-versed in the Jerry Falwell-Pat Robertson style of rhetoric that often labels progressives as both immoral and godless.

Indeed, towards the end of the campaign, Mr. Keyes said 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.

Now, I was urged by some of my liberal supporters not to take this statement seriously. To them, Mr. Keyes was an extremist, his arguments not worth entertaining.

What they didn't understand, however, was that I had to take him seriously. For he claimed to speak for my religion – he claimed knowledge of certain truths.

Mr. Obama says he's a Christian, he would say, 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.

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.

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 believe in angels than do those who believe 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 round – 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 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 a long highway towards nothingness.

I speak from experience here. I was not raised in a particularly religious household. My father, who returned to Kenya when I was just two, was Muslim but as an adult became an atheist. My mother, whose parents were non-practicing Baptists and Methodists, grew up with a healthy skepticism of organized religion herself. As a consequence, I did too.

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.

The Christians who I worked with recognized themselves in me; they saw that I knew their Book and shared their values and sang their songs. But they sensed a part of me that remained removed, detached, an observer in their midst. In time, I too came to realize that something was missing – 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.

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 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; it is an active, palpable agent in the world. It is a source of hope.

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: that faith doesn't mean that you don't have doubts. You need to come to church precisely because you are 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 your 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 one day and affirm my Christian faith. It came about as a choice, and not an epiphany; the questions I had did not magically disappear. But kneeling beneath that cross on the South Side of Chicago, I felt I heard God's spirit beckoning me. I submitted myself to His will, and dedicated myself to discovering His truth.

The path I traveled has been shared by millions upon millions of Americans – evangelicals, Catholics, Protestants, Jews and Muslims alike; some since birth, others at a turning point 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 them.

This is why, 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 – we cannot abandon the field of religious discourse.

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, Jerry Falwell's and Pat Robertson's 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 to tap into the moral underpinnings of the nation is not just rhetorical. 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; it will also require changes in hearts and minds. I believe in keeping guns out of our inner cities, and that our leaders must say so in the face of the gun manufacturer's lobby – but I also believe that when a gang-banger shoots indiscriminately into a crowd because he feels somebody disrespected him, we have a problem of morality; there's a hole in that young man's heart – a hole that government programs 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 can bring quicker results than a battalion of lawyers.

I think we should put more of our tax dollars into educating poor girls and boys, and 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 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. 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 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. 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 the 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 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 America's renewal.

Some of this is already beginning to happen. Pastors 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 my 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. National denominations have shown themselves as a force on Capitol Hill, on issues such as immigration and the federal budget. And across the country, individual churches like my 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.

To build on these still-tentative partnerships between the religious and secular worlds will take work – a lot more work than we've done so far. The tensions and 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 progressives need to do on this, I think the conservative leaders of the Religious Right will need to acknowledge a few things as well.

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. That during our founding, it was not the atheists or the civil libertarians who were the most effective champions of this separation; it was the persecuted religious minorities, Baptists like John

Leland, who were most concerned that any state-sponsored religion might hinder their ability to practice their faith.

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 within our borders, whose Christianity would we teach in the schools? 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 so radical that it's doubtful that our Defense Department would survive its application?

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.

This may be difficult for those 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 the possible. At some fundamental level, religion does not allow for compromise. It insists on 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; 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 website, 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 all. It’s a prayer worth praying, and a conversation worth having in this country in the months and years to come. Thank you.