

## Obama's Eloquent Faith

By E. J. Dionne Jr.

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Many Democrats discovered God in the 2004 exit polls.

Specifically, they looked at the importance of religious voters to President Bush's majority and decided: We need some of those folks. Off Democrats went to their Bibles, finding every verse they could -- there are many -- describing the imperative to help the poor, battle injustice and set the oppressed free.

Now, human beings often find God in unexpected places, so why shouldn't the exit polls be this era's answer to the burning bush? And a lot of Democrats insist, fairly, that they were people of faith long before the results of 2004 were tabulated.

Yet there is often a terrible awkwardness among Democratic politicians when their talk turns to God, partly because they also know how important secular voters are to their coalition. When it comes to God, it's hard to triangulate.

So, when a religious Democrat speaks seriously about the relationship of faith to politics, the understandable temptation is to see him as counting not his blessings but his votes. Thus did the Associated Press headline its early stories about Barack Obama's speech to religious progressives on Wednesday: "Obama: Democrats Must Court Evangelicals."

Well, yes, Obama, the senator from Illinois who causes all kinds of Democrats to swoon, did indeed criticize "liberals who dismiss religion in the public square as inherently irrational or intolerant." But a purely electoral reading of Obama's speech to the Call to Renewal conference here misses the point of what may be 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. (You can decide on Obama's speech yourself: The text can be found at <http://www.obama.senate.gov/speech>.)

Here's what stands out. First, Obama offers the first faith testimony I have heard from any politician that speaks honestly about the uncertainties of belief. "Faith doesn't mean that you don't have doubts," Obama declared. "You need to come to church in the first place precisely because you are first of this world, not apart from it."

In an interview yesterday, Obama didn't back away. "By definition, faith admits doubt," he said. "Otherwise, it isn't faith. . . . If we don't sometimes feel hopeless, then we're really insulating ourselves from the world around us."

On the matter of church-state separation, Obama doesn't propose some contrived balancing act but embraces religion's need for independence from government. In a direct

challenge to "conservative leaders," he argued that "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," he continued, "that during our founding, it wasn't the atheists or the civil libertarians who were the most effective champions of the First Amendment," but "persecuted minorities" such as Baptists "who didn't want the established churches to impose their views."

Like most liberals who are religious, Obama finds a powerful demand for social justice embedded in the great faith traditions. He took a swipe at those who would repeal the estate tax, saying this entailed "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."

But he insisted that social improvement also requires individual transformation. When a gang member "shoots indiscriminately into a crowd . . . there's a hole in that young man's heart -- a hole that the government alone cannot fix." Contraception can reduce teen pregnancy rates, but so can "faith and guidance" which "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."

And if you think this sounds preachy, Obama has an answer: "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."

Obama's talk will inevitably be read as a road map for Democrats struggling to speak authentically to people of faith. It's certainly that, but it would be better read as a suggestion that both parties begin to think differently about the power of faith.

"No matter how religious they may or may not be," Obama said, "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."

I think I hear some rousing "Amen!" out there -- from Republicans no less than from Democrats.