

AMERICAN PROPHETS BY JACK JENKINS

SUMMARY OF CHAPTER 2: The Personal is Political-and Spiritual

"Why Barack Obama had a vested interest in faith groups-and Why Religious Left activists consider him as one of their own"

"At the Democratic National Convention on July 27, 2004, Illinois state senator and US Senate candidate Barack Obama deliver(ed) the convention's keynote address. Obama's ability to wrap human stories around policy and offer a hopeful vision for America resonated with a political junkie like Joshua DeBois, then a student at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. "Out of nowhere, he started talking about the 'awesome God' that we serve in the blue states, said DuBois who thought, 'that is the guy I need to try to work for.'" (Dubois was hired by Obama's Senate Campaign). "A year later, Obama asked if anyone at the office wanted to work with him on...a book chapter on faith and a speech on faith for a conference organized by progressive Christians. (DuBois) raised his hand...It was the beginning of a professional relationship that would add another booster rocket to Obama's already ascendant career and define for an entire political generation what the intersection of religion and political could look like for a Democrat...Dubois would later become the president's house pastor and would lay the foundation for one of the most robust religious outreach efforts of any Democratic campaign in modern political history, allowing Obama to lean on religion to enhance his hopeful message and survive political turmoil. To analyze the 2008 campaign is to expose why so many progressive faith leaders see Obama as not just one of their own, but also as a product of the left-leaning religious heritage they claim."

OF ZEALOTS AND CONVERTS

"Obama's mother, an anthropologist (taught) her son about several religions at once, dragging young "Barry" to Christian churches, Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines, and ancient Hawaiian burial sites. Later after he graduated from Columbia University, he espoused a "more of an intellectual view of religion."

"(Barack) took a job as a community organizer in Chicago's South Side with the Developing Communities Project (DCP). In addition to organizing through houses of worship, the position (included) 'serve as consultant to local parishes' and 'spend time in theological reflection with clergy.' (This had a profound impact on Obama). He put forth DCP as a 'powerful tool for living the social gospel, one which can educate and empower entire congregations and not just serve as a platform for a few prophetic leaders.' The experience of working at the DCP helped lead him to Jesus...Gone was his understanding of faith as merely an academic curiosity. (He found a home in) Trinity United Church of Christ on Chicago's South Side, where he committed himself to Christ in response to an altar call from Rev. Jeremiah Wright, Jr. He also expressed an affinity for Judaism."

"Obama cultivated friendships with a variety of faith leaders. He was part of the Saguaro Seminar, 1997-2000 (a brain trust initiated by Harvard political science professor, Robert Putnam and convened to (help Putnam better understand 'social capital' in preparation for his book, *Bowling Alone*). This group included: Jim Wallace, Sojourner's president; George Stephanopoulos (Bill Clinton's Aide), E.J Dionne (author and Washington Post columnist); Kirbyjon Caldwell (Houston megapastor and counselor to George Bush), Ralph Reed (former head of the Christian Coalition). According the Wallace, 'Obama was one of the least known people in the group.' Most of the think tank eventually warmed to Obama. Dionne (told his wife) 'I think this guy might be president.' (Wallace and Obama) had extended dialogues about theology during seminar bus rides, including what it meant to be a progressive Christian."

"Senator Obama delivered his 'Faith and Politics' address at the "Building a Covenant for a New America' conference by Sojourners and its faith-based anti-poverty initiative, Call to Renewal. (It) brimmed with foreshadowing of the kind of campaign he would launch less than a year later; it issued a rallying cry for a resurgent Religious Left, fusing an unapologetic rejection of the Religious Right's dominance in American politics with a clarion call for Democrats to embrace faith: '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 I think it's time that we join a serious debate about how to reconcile faith with our modern, pluralistic democracy...as progressives, we cannot abandon the field of religious discourse.'"

"Eight months later Obama told the crowd of thousands in Springfield, Illinois, he was 'giving all praise and honor to God for bringing us here today' (as) he announced his candidacy for the presidency of the United States making sure to (say) that it was in 'Chicago's poorest neighborhoods' that he 'learned the meaning of my Christian faith. DuBois recalled 'We had the first full-on faith outreach department in a (Democratic) Presidential campaign. Faith outreach was part of a larger strategy that was ultimately all about votes."

(During the 2004 presidential campaign **Mara Vanderslice Kelly** (the Grassmere group) **attempted unsuccessfully** to start a **faith outreach** spot on **Howard Dean's** short campaign and then with **John Kerry's** campaign. She later said, 'At the end

of the day they ended up feeling **faith was something to run away from**, to hide from, to draw the least amount of attention to." She was able to actualize her vision for faith outreach in Michigan. "We got a bigger share of Catholic voters than any of the comparable neighboring states," she noted.) "Compared to Kelly's (2004) attempts, **Obama's faith outreach machine** in the 2008 campaign-officially the Religious Affairs Department-was a **leviathan**. (Kelly) bolstered (Obama's 2008 campaign) with her own independent PAC, the Matthew 25 Network.

(Examples of Obama's faith-oriented campaign included:

- South Carolina- 40 Days of Faith and Family Initiative (Gospel concerts, a campaign presence at Bible study groups to inform how Obama's faith informs how he thinks about issues) Obama talked about his faith at Redemption World Outreach Center megachurch in Greenville.
- Obama spoke at preacher's conferences in 2007
- Obama's speech at the General Synod of United Church of Christ was entitled 'A Politics of Conscience' structuring his address round the UCC tagline, 'God is Still Speaking'
- Obama addressed the AME Conference in 2008
- Michelle Obama gave a rousing talk at the National Baptist Convention
- There were separate weekly prayer-and-strategy calls for Catholics, African American Christians, evangelicals, and Jews.
- Faith-related campaign materials such as 'Answering the Call,' 'Believers for Barack,' 'People of Faith for Obama,' 'Catholics for Obama, Materials in Hebrew for Jewish congregations.
- Publishing a Weekly American Values Report)

DIVINE DEFENSE

"Obama's religion work was not without troubles:

- His 2007 speech at the UCC General Synod triggered an investigation into whether the congregation might have jeopardized its tax-exempt status by hosting a political speech.
- Religion also proved to be a liability because his candidacy was haunted from day one by a right-wing whisper campaign that claimed he was a Muslim...being a Muslim doesn't disqualify someone from public office (according to the) US Constitution. Obama never publicly visited a (mosque). Campaign officials reportedly asked Rep. Keith Ellison to cancel a trip at an Iowa mosque on Obama's behalf. (Obama distanced himself from public Muslim events.)
- One of the campaign's Muslim outreach directors was linked to an old business connection with a controversial imam; the other was blasted for going to a meeting with the Council on American-Islamic Relations, a group that would later meet with both the Obama and Trump administrations
- (Page 47 - Jenkins handles the nuanced controversy between Obama and Rev. Jeremiah Wright in such a superficial way (did not include pertinent information) to obfuscate Obama's unwillingness to lose political points by standing up for Wright)
- Obama was caught on tape at a San Francisco fundraiser describing rust belt voters in Pennsylvania and the Midwest in less than flattering terms 'get bitter...cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or antitrade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations.' (Obama addressed this later by saying), 'I'm a person of deep faith and my religion has sustained me through a lot in my life.' The faith team redoubled its outreach.
- Obama met with 30 evangelical leaders in Chicago in June 2008. While he was peppered with questions from Rev. Franklin Graham about his father's Muslim heritage, he was more successful at winning praise from California megapastor Rick Warren.

Faith outreach softened the impact of scandals that could have halted his journey to the Oval Office helping him to build up a 'reservoir of trust.' Outreach to black pastors helped tip the scales by election day. One study showed that Obama made gains with people of faith across the board nationally.

"After the election, Mike McCurry of the 'Daily Beast' raved about the impact of Obama's Religious Affairs operation. But as Obama cautioned, 'keeping the faith...is never easy...it takes persistence and dedication...failure to understand it or take it seriously can sometimes mean having to endure dark nights of the soul.'"