

The Candidate and His Prophetic Pastor:  
Obama and Wright  
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March 18, 2008

Prophets tell the truth that nations do not want to hear.

Prophets remind nations that there is a God who moves in history, that there is a God who requires both justice and righteousness. Prophets give voice to the voiceless, to the poor, the marginal, the oppressed. Prophets disrupt complacency and a sense that the world is the way it is because it is natural and good and right for the world to be the way it is since nature and/or God created it so. Prophets give warning. Prophets pronounce woe, weeping and gnashing of teeth if nations do not turn toward justice. Nations hate prophets. People in power hate prophets. Prophets face vilification and persecution, yet still speak the truth. They can do none other.

Pastors take care of their people. They are present for each one. Pastors bless and baptize babies, teach children and teenagers, preside over rites of passage and confirmation celebrations; pastors marry lover and beloved; visit the sick and speak blessings and the promise of eternal life over the dead. Pastors are present to the individual. Pastors help individuals come into a personal relationship with the Divine, with radical love, with Jesus. Pastors help individuals grow into the women and men God intended them to be. Pastors help individuals know their purpose and encourages them to live into that purpose.

For twenty years, Rev. Jeremiah Wright served as pastor to presidential candidate Barack Obama. Wright helped bring Obama to a relationship with Jesus Christ. Wright along with the Trinity United Church of Christ provided a church home, a church family for Obama. The Afro-centric commitment of the congregation no doubt helped Obama come to terms with his own African heritage. The teaching and practice of unconditional love and unfailing, ceaseless encouragement that is often found in Black church no doubt helped Obama bring his whiteness and blackness, his deprivations and privileges, his ordinariness and his extraordinariness together into a cohesive whole. He came to know and to embrace his own holiness. However, Jeremiah Wright has not only been a pastor to Obama, but Wright has been one of the first and the few African-American pastors who pastors his Queer parishioner within the context of their own integrity. He speaks out nationally against homophobia. He helps them to know and to embrace their own holiness.

At the same time, Obama sat in the pews while his prophetic pastor preached righteousness and justice. In the past twenty years, the religious public discourse in the United States has been mainly about righteousness understood as personal piety and individual sexual behavior. It has been a discourse where preachers spoke against abortion and homosexuality. It has been a discourse that preached traditional family and traditional gender roles. It sided with the United States in an anticommunist foreign policy that was not at all reluctant to project American military power across the globe. This discourse of the religious right was largely silent on issues of economic inequality, poverty, racial, gender, and sexual orientation discrimination. It was silent about the prison industrial complex in the United States and the

war on drugs. The voiceless for whom they spoke was a fetus in a woman's womb. It was silent on issues of environmental justice.

Conversely, the Black church tradition is a tradition of prophetic witness where the emphasis is on justice; the emphasis is on systemic justice. It speaks for the voiceless. It speaks to and for people who live on the margins of society. It tells the weak and the vulnerable that God lives inside their weakness and becomes their strength. The prophetic Black church tradition tells people who live within the injustices of society that God is just, that individuals and nations must face the justice of God, and God is not a respecter of persons. The prophetic Black church teaches a radical love. It teaches that Jesus lived, taught, fed, healed, suffered, died and rose from the dead to demonstrate a radical love that felt compassion for the suffering and who could love even his enemies and pray forgiveness in the midst of his own torture and murder, the forgiveness of a thief and forgiveness of his own persecutors. The prophetic Black church teaches a social gospel that requires the Christian witness to be made manifest in the world by the way it takes care of the real world needs of people.

Jeremiah Wright is a pastor/preacher in this tradition. The sound bites that have been played over and over *ad nauseam* in the media have been taken out of context to paint Wright as some kind of America-hating, Black nationalist separatist extremist who is preaching hate and leading his congregation down a dangerous path. However, when you hear longer passages of these sermons, the truth comes forth. For example: we hear the sound bite of Wright saying "Hillary ain't never been called a nigger." What you do not hear on the news is the passage where he explains that Jesus was a poor Black man – classic Black liberation theology; see James Cone and others. He speaks about racial profiling and the treatment of Blacks as non persons.

Jeremiah Wright is telling the truth. He says further in that sermon that Jesus teaches us to love our enemies, to love the hell out of our enemies.

Another example: in the clip where Wright says that we Blacks do not sing God bless America, but rather we say, God damn America for her treatment of Black and poor people. Again, the list of injustices he cites is accurate. What the news clips do not show is his primary point, and that point is that God never fails. He points his people past the injustices of the United States to the justice of God without rendering those injustices nonexistent by not calling them by name. Further, in his sermon following 9/11 which has also been a part of the news loop, he reminds us of U.S. foreign policy that has caused a great deal of death and suffering around the globe. Still, again, Wright's history is accurate. He is reminding people of the Biblical truth: "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap" (Galatians 6:7). This is also true for nations. It is a truth found in other religious traditions – the concept of karma in Buddhism. It is known as blowback in foreign intelligence circles. This is a truth that the nation does not want to hear. To translate this truth into a claim that Wright is saying that the United States in general or that the victims of 9/11 deserved this suffering and death is nonsense. He is pointing out cause and effect. Again, he is speaking a truth that the nation does not want to hear.

It is truth that is especially off-putting for people who have made America their god and Americanism their religion. In Book IV Chapter 8 of The Social Contract, Jean Jacques Rousseau writes about the civil religion. He names three types of religion. The first is a "true theism." There are no temples, alters, or rites. It is only "the supreme God and the eternal obligation of morality" (299). The second type exists in a single country; "Outside the single

nation that follows it, all the world is in its sight infidel, foreign, and barbarous” (299). The third type gives people two codes, two rulers, two countries. He says such religion “makes it impossible for them to be faithful to religion and to citizenship” (299). Rousseau’s critique of Christianity is limited by his own historical moment, and it is not useful for our thinking today. However, his description of a civil religion is still instructive. Rousseau proposes a civil profession of faith presented as “social sentiments without which a man cannot be a good citizen or a faithful subject” (303). Those who do not hold to these principles, according to Rousseau, ought to be banished “not for impiety, but as an antisocial being, incapable of truly loving laws and justice, and of sacrificing, at need, his life to his duty” (304). He says: “The dogmas of the civil religion ought to be few” (304). They would consist of a providential divinity, an afterlife, happiness for those who act justly and punishment for those who do not, “sanctity of the social contract and the laws”, and rejection of intolerance (304).

We have a civil religion in the United States. It believes that God is on America’s side, that our founding documents – The Declaration of Independence and The Constitution– are sacred. We are willing to banish anyone who challenges the sanctity of America’s laws and actions in the world. The American civil religion is not unlike the second form of religion that Rousseau describes. American civil religion carries with it the idea that the United States is exceptional and is called by God for some higher purpose. He lays out both the good and the bad aspects of this religion. In my opinion, what Rousseau describes as good and bad are both bad. I will quote him at length.

The second is good in that it unites the divine cult with love of the laws, and, making country the object of the citizens' adoration, teaches them that service done to the State is service done to its tutelary god. It is a form of theocracy, in which there can be no pontiff save the prince, and no priests save the magistrates. To die for one's country then becomes martyrdom; violation of its laws, impiety; and to subject one who is guilty to public execration is to condemn him to the anger of the gods: *secer estod*.

On the other hand, it is bad in that, being founded on lies and error, it deceives man, makes them credulous and superstitious, and drowns the true cult of the Divinity in empty ceremonial. It is bad, again, when it becomes tyrannous and exclusive, and makes people blood thirsty and intolerant, so that it breathes fire and slaughter, and regards as a sacred act the killing of every one who does not believe in its gods. The result is to place such a people in a natural state of war with all others, so that its security is deeply endangered.

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American civil religion is not as blatant as this, but it still lifts the nation and an uncritical patriotism to the level of the holy. Anyone who criticizes the nation's history, its historical documents, or its current policies is seen as not only un-American, but in a sense they are seen as committing sacrilege. Sadly, too many religious leaders have made their ministries and their religious communities into denominations of the American civil religion. Jeremiah Wright has not done this. He preaches justice and righteousness; he preaches Christ and Christ crucified. He understands his obligation is to go beyond an acquiescence to an American civil religion. Biblical prophets preached against idolatry, that is when we worship the created thing rather than

the creator. Jeremiah Wright is a modern-day prophet calling us away from the worship of idols – Americanism, racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, materialism, and militarism. He is calling us to worship the true and living God of justice, righteousness, love, and peace.

In the Friday 6:00 A.M. prayer meeting at my church, People’s Baptist Church in Boston, we have been praying that God would heal our land. We have been praying this prayer standing on the promises of the Bible, II Chronicles 7:14 “If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.”

Jeremiah Wright, standing in the tradition of prophets for righteousness, justice, love and peace – from the biblical Jeremiah to Martin Luther King Jr – has called our attention to America’s injustices. Because he is Barack Obama’s pastor and friend and Obama is running for president of the United States and may become the first Black president of the United States, his teaching and preaching has come to national and international attention. His prophetic critique of the United States has caused tension.

Good. Very good.

In his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” Martin Luther King wrote of a “constructive nonviolent tension that is necessary for growth” (291).

we must see the need of having nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men to rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood. (292)

Later, in this same essay, he writes of his disappointment with the white moderate “ more

devoted to order than to justice: who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice” (295). King famously says here that he and his movement are not creating tension, but bringing to the surface the tensions that are already present. He writes: “We bring it out in the open where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that can never be cured as long as it is covered up but must be opened with all the pus-flowing ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must likewise be exposed, with all of the tension its exposing creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured” (295).

It is for this reason that prophetic church ought to always exist in tension with the nation and with the status quo. It is because there will always be someone on the margins who, for whatever reason, is not enjoying the benefits of the nation or of the system equally.

Jeremiah Wright is doing God’s work by creating a tension that will cause America to look at herself, and to lance the boils that are making her sick. Jeremiah Wright, prophetic Black church along with Barack Obama calling the nation to do the work of forming a more perfect union may be the instruments that God is using to answer our prayers. S/He will hear from heaven, forgive our sins and heal our land.

Works Cited

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