

Obama and Ross Douthat's "Christian center"

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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[Skimming the NYT over the weekend, I read the following in Ross Douthat's summary of his new book:](#)

Our president embodies [America's] uncentered spiritual landscape in three ways. First, like a growing share of Americans (44 percent), President Obama changed his religion as an adult, joining Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ in his 20s after [a conversion experience](#) brought him out of agnosticism into faith. Second, he was converted by a pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, whose highly politicized theology was self-consciously at odds with much of historic Christian practice and belief. Finally, since breaking with that pastor, Obama has become a believer without a denomination or a church, which makes him part of one of the country's fastest-growing religious groups — [what the Barna Group calls the "unchurched Christian" bloc](#), consisting of Americans who accept some tenets of Christian faith without participating in any specific religious community.

The third point annoyed me. The 2008 election-season controversy over Jeremiah Wright was a whole heap of manufactured garbage, dirty politics that played on much of the electorate's reliable fear of black men who sound angry and use bad words. I was disappointed with Obama for distancing himself from Wright and eventually leaving his congregation, but right or wrong it was clearly about politics, not some sort of religious change on Obama's part. Now he's in the White House, and if he so much as visits a church it's a major news-light story and a huge undertaking for his security apparatus and fellow worshipers. So he doesn't go very often.

This is not even remotely what Barna has in mind when it [speaks of unchurched Christians](#), I thought, and I set Douthat down to go back to enjoying the only day of Holy Week that I didn't have ten church things to do.

Then this week I read Mark Silk's far more thorough [takedown of Douthat's piece](#). Insightful as usual, but I think he is too hard on Douthat's first two points quoted above:

This is offensive nonsense. Obama finding his way into a mainline Protestant church after growing up in a deracinated mainline Protestant family is about as much of a change of religion as George W. Bush going from nominal Episcopalian to born-again Methodist. Jeremiah Wright may indulge in liberationist and Afrocentric rhetoric, but Trinity U.C.C. is about as self-consciously in tune with historic (Protestant) Christian practice and belief as it's possible to be. Hasn't Douthat read Obama's own account of his adult acknowledgement of Jesus as his Lord and Savior?

But if you take Obama's [own account](#) at anything like face value, his path to faith was much more like a conversion than a mere getting-more-involved with the religious tradition of his youth. (I don't love Douthat's shorthand of agnosticism vs. faith, but that's mostly semantic.) And it is certainly true that the black liberationist tradition that Wright represents defines itself to a significant extent in opposition to the Christian establishment.

Now, some of us might characterize this opposition with words like "faithful" and "courageous." This may out us as less than enthusiastic about Douthat's largely rosy view of the 1950s religious landscape, "a Christian center [that] helped bind a vast and teeming nation together." But it doesn't refute his more immediate point, which is that this cycle's candidates for president represent starkly different threads of Christian tradition.

I do like where Silk ends, in response to Douthat's claim that a "Christian center" might counteract political polarization:

The problem in our time is not that religious causes have polarized the polity, but that they have been mapped onto partisan politics. The civil rights struggle was, like the Civil War, a sectional conflict--such that Northern Republicans joined with Northern Democrats to advance the cause, while Southern Democrats fought it. By consciously building a base of supporters on religious lines, the Republican Party has taken the normal cut-and-thrust of religion in America and institutionalized it politically. It's not bad religion that brought this about. It's bad politics.

Right. Though good religion puts up some resistance to being coopted, whether by a mainstream cultural establishment or by a particular political party.