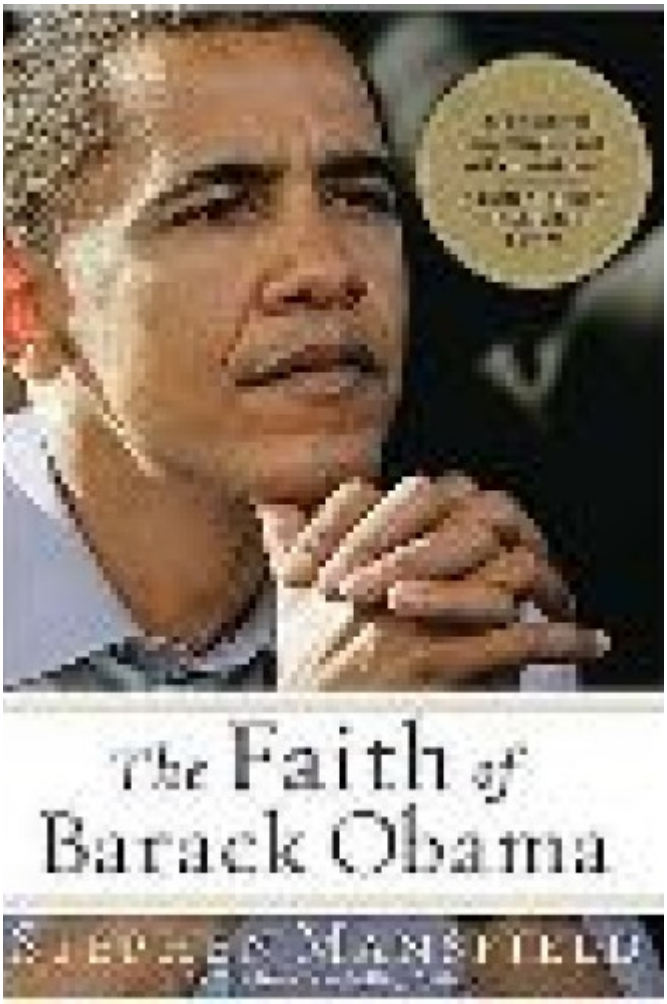
Liberal path

By Timothy Mark Renick in the May 5, 2009 issue

In Review

The Future of Liberalism

Alan Wolfe
Knopf



The Faith of Barack Obama

Stephen Mansfield
Thomas Nelson

Imagine that a stranger had walked up to you a few years ago and presented the following scenario about a man with unconventional religious roots:

His father was born Muslim. His mother was a self-described seeker who ultimately embraced atheism. His maternal grandmother rejected the strict Methodism of her youth, chiding what she referred to as its “sanctimonious preachers.” His maternal grandfather was a lapsed Baptist. His mother’s family participated in organized religion only during a stint when they attended a Unitarian church because, the man recalls, they “liked the idea that Unitarians drew on the scriptures of all of the great religions. It’s like you get five religions in one!”

As for the man himself, he was raised to hold all religions at arm's length. As a youth, he moved with his mother to a predominantly Muslim country where he attended mosque with his stepfather and learned the teachings of Islam in a public school. At home, his mother taught him to learn about, but also to question, all religious systems. Years later, the man would describe his mother as "a lonely witness for secular humanism, a soldier for New Deal, Peace Corps, position-paper liberalism." As an adult, the man eventually would become a Christian. But he would recall his conversion neither in terms of being born again nor in terms of certitude: "It came about as a choice and not an epiphany; the questions I had did not magically disappear."

Moreover, the stranger finally tells you, this man of unconventional religious background will become the 44th president of the United States.

Presented with such a proposition during most of the Bush presidency, you could not have been blamed for imagining it to be the plot of some fanciful Hollywood script. Indeed, a few years ago, many Americans would have thought it more likely that a deadly meteor would strike the earth than that a man of such religious background would be elected president. I would have had to count myself among them.

Of course, meteors do sometimes strike, and, as we now know, the stranger's implausible account would have been a prophecy. There has been much discussion about what Barack Obama's stunning rise to the White House may say about race in America. But what does it say about religion?

Two new books, each with a markedly distinct tone and focus, offer some fascinating answers. Stephen Mansfield offers an accessible, journalistic account of Obama's religious path and its intersection with his politics and policies. Alan Wolfe provides a wide-ranging scholarly defense of liberalism as the best political hope of America. Together, the books suggest something important about the shifting relationship between religion and politics in 21st-century America—and maybe something just as important about our collective past.

Wolfe, a professor of political science at Boston College, admits that, at least in recent years, religion and liberalism have made strange bedfellows. Indeed, in many Christian circles, liberalism has been viewed as religion's mortal enemy: God demands obedience to one, non negotiable truth; liberalism seeks to find truth in individual choice and collective compromise. God separates the righteous from the

unrighteous; liberalism asserts the equality of all peoples and the value of each honestly chosen path. God sees humans as sinners; liberalism builds from an assumption that human nature is good. As Wolfe contends: “Liberalism’s greatest contribution to thinking about society is a different way of thinking about ourselves: we are not merely what God ordains us to be . . . but what we create through our own deliberate acts.” So defined, liberalism, say many contemporary Christians, is blasphemy.

Wolfe suggests that this tension between religion and liberalism is neither necessary nor historically obvious. There was a time when liberalism was perceived as the great protector of religion in America—a time, in fact, when traditional Christian allegiance was not perceived as a litmus test for public office. “Thomas Jefferson was not only a deist,” Wolfe writes, “but so were, in one form or another, four of the first five American presidents, and the odd man out, John Adams, was a Unitarian who denied the existence of the Trinity.”

Yet these men were not hostile to faith. They were the authors of such tracts as the “Bill for Establishment of Religious Freedom” (Jefferson) and “Memorial and Remonstrance” (Madison). They were the generators and defenders of the First Amendment. Jefferson, Madison and Adams not only rejected the idea that opposition to the monarch was sedition; they equally opposed the concept that criticism of the church was heresy.

Not coincidentally, their strongest allies in their efforts to protect religious freedoms often were the most devout Christians of their day. For instance, it was a powerful Baptist preacher, John Leland, who convinced Madison that the Constitution’s Article IV, forbidding religious tests for public office, was not sufficient to protect religion; an explicit prohibition against the establishment of religion was needed as well. Wolfe observes, “Despite the claims by contemporary conservative politicians that the founders established a republic grounded in religion, the Constitution they wrote was strongly influenced by the Enlightenment reaction against orthodoxy.”

Wolfe’s point here is not merely that liberalism has a long and consistent history of protecting religious liberties in the American context, though he believes that it does. It is not merely to refute the common depiction by the media and by evangelical Christians of liberalism as something opposed to religion, though he finds such characterizations to be deeply misguided and ahistorical. Wolfe’s point is also to suggest a manner of being religious that has been increasingly lost amid the

bombast and hyperbole of our media-driven age.

There was a time when being a Christian meant making a free, conscious and individual choice. By the time of his death in 1841 at the age of 87, Baptist Leland had delivered over 8,000 sermons and baptized 1,524 adult converts. Perhaps because of his life's efforts, Leland held that true conversion is anything but easy and quick; true Christian conviction cannot be something into which one is born. In the essay "The Bible-Baptist," he wrote: "It is more essential to learn *how* to believe than *what* to believe." True faith is never coerced; it is never inherited. For Leland, belief is to be arrived at only through the exercise of one's personal mental powers and only through trial and error: "A man's mind should always be open to conviction, and an honest man will receive that doctrine which appears the best demonstrated: and what is more common than for the best of men to change their minds?"

By Wolfe's account, liberalism's commitment to respect for individual choice is important, in part, because it creates a certain and, yes, deeper kind of religious believer. Unlike a traditionalist—who has convictions consisting of what other, like individuals have believed precisely because they have believed it—liberalism demands that each person make a truly free choice based on judgments that are always to some degree personal and that are rarely easy.

In a parallel manner, true liberalism "opposes any and all effort on the part of the state to endorse one religion over another," while traditionalism seeks to align itself with the power of the state to establish at least an unofficial religious establishment. It is in this sense, Wolfe argues, that the Southern Baptist Convention, with its attempts to shape laws on issues ranging from abortion to gay rights and to elect politicians such as Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, has taken "a monumental shift" away not only from Lelandism but from the abiding principles of America's founding. In the process, something has been lost to many Christians: a respect for and appreciation of a way of coming to Christianity which is founded first and foremost in the thought and conscience of the individual believer.

Wolfe never mentions Obama in his account, but the parallels are important. Through the lens of traditionalism, Obama's religious background seems nothing less than frightening. As Mansfield points out, each nonconventional step in Obama's path to Christianity is, for his conservative critics, a reason for deep concern. Grandparents who openly criticized the churches into which they were born? Troubling. A Muslim father and a mother who embraced secular humanism, even

atheism? Disturbing. Long-term attendance at Jeremiah Wright's Trinity Church in Chicago, a place one critic labels "a black Marxist recruitment center"? Scandalous. From a traditionalist perspective—a perspective that models true belief in terms of continuity with the past and obedience to religious authorities and institutions—Obama's personal religious commitments must be revealed by those with whom he has been affiliated: father, mother, grandparents, preacher. His religious unfitness for office is evidenced in part by the traditions through which he has passed.

Mansfield's account of Obama's religious views offers little to calm traditionalist critics. From his speeches and writings, Obama emerges as a religious pluralist: "I believe that there are many paths to the same place and that is a belief that there is a higher power, a belief that we are connected as a people." Of his upbringing, he recounts with pride the fact that "in our household, the Bible, the Koran, and the Bhagavad Gita sat on a shelf alongside books of Greek and Norse and African mythology." He admits that initially he was, at best, a reluctant participant in church services: "On Easter or Christmas Day my mother might drag me to church, just as she dragged me to the Buddhist temple, the Chinese New Year celebration, the Shinto shrine, and the ancient Hawaiian burial sites."

Even after his conversion to Christianity, Obama's religious views are anything but traditional. While on the one hand he writes, "I am rooted in the Christian tradition" (hardly a declaration of orthodoxy), and he speaks of his "personal relationship with Jesus Christ," on the other hand he rejects traditional Christian views of divine punishment: "I find it hard to believe that my God would consign four-fifths of the world to hell." He trusts his own, modern readings of the Bible to ground his positions on topics such as abortion rights and homosexuality: "When I read the Bible, I do so with the belief that this is not a static text but the Living Word and that I must be continually open to new revelations—whether from a lesbian friend or a doctor opposed to abortion." Of Paul's apparent opposition to homosexuality, he writes: "I am not willing to accept a reading of the Bible that considers an obscure line in Romans to be more defining of Christianity than the Sermon on the Mount."

But what the traditionalist might find most troubling about Obama's brand of Christianity is his persistent refusal to claim that either he or the church truly knows the truth: "I think that religion at its best comes with a big dose of doubt." He adds: "There are aspects of the Christian tradition that I'm comfortable with and aspects that I'm not. There are passages of the Bible that make perfect sense to me and

others that I go, ‘Ya know, I’m not sure about that.’” Through out all of these passages, a phrase echoes that Obama uses to describe his conversion: “It came about as a choice and not an epiphany.”

For the traditionalist, such a circumspect, qualified approach is antithetical to Christianity. Doubt is not a component of faith. It is proof of one’s religious failings. Religion is not a choice. It is an all encompassing necessity. And those with whom you affiliate define who you are religiously.

Here is where Wolfe’s account of the roots of American liberalism adds important historical context. Through the lens of liberalism, Obama’s religious positions and struggles emerge as neither new nor scary. They certainly do not seem un-American. When we place Obama’s religious views alongside those of Jefferson, Adams, Madison and even Leland, the fit is striking. For Jefferson and Madison, the infinite God is too complex, too large, to be contained neatly within any one religious system, including Christianity, or within any one religious text, including the Bible. For Adams, to challenge the church is not equivalent to committing heresy. The thinking believer is obligated to separate those religious concepts to which one can accede from those to which one cannot, as Adams did with the concept of the Trinity. This is the very meaning of religious conscience. For Leland, the true Christian is one who recognizes that faith is not an inheritance but a daily and very personal struggle. Religious decisions are rarely final, and it is natural, even admirable, for the honest believer to have a change of mind.

Seen in this context, Obama’s actions—from his time spent at Trinity Church with Jeremiah Wright to his invitation to evangelical (and socially conservative) minister Rick Warren to deliver the invocation at his inauguration—may take on a new look. Obama’s decision to leave Trinity and his choice of Warren may ultimately prove merely to be the acts of another cynical politician trying to court support and votes, or if Wolfe is correct, the choices may be a sincere reflection of Obama’s brand of Christianity and his willingness to admit that even as a Christian believer he is flawed and must be open to others precisely because he will never possess all of the truth.

Mansfield concludes that Obama’s path to faith—with its many detours and false starts that have extended into adulthood—is “one fit for our age”: Obama “came as many of his generation do—not so much to join a tradition as to find belonging among a people; not so much to accept a body of doctrine as to find welcome for

what they already believe; not so much to surrender their lives but to enhance who they already are.”

Ironically, Obama’s unconventional path to faith may be the quintessentially American way of being religious.