

## **Barack Obama and the Paradoxes of Progressive Christianity**

James T. Kloppenberg

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### *Keynote Address for the Conference **Beyond the Culture Wars: Recasting Religion and Politics in the Twentieth Century***

Washington University in St. Louis

#### **Darren Dochuk**

Thank you for joining us tonight. Nice to see such a large, engaged crowd, and we look forward to our lecture and discussion today. My name is Darren Dochuk. I'm on the faculty here at the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics, and on behalf of Marie Griffith, our Director, and the entire faculty and staff, I'd like to welcome you to the keynote lecture of our conference, which has been running through today, and will continue until Saturday morning. The conference titled "Beyond the Culture Wars: Recasting Religion and Politics in the Twentieth Century," and this is really one of the central features of the conference, and we're all really looking forward to hearing what Professor James Kloppenberg has to say. And it really is a tremendous pleasure and a privilege to introduce our keynote speaker this evening.

Now, on our website, perhaps you've visited the Danforth Center website, you will see our statements of purpose really up front and bold, and there are at least four of those, and I'm going to highlight those tonight. First of all, they are to foster religious scholarship. Secondly, inform broad academic and public communities. Interrogate the intersection of religion and U.S. politics. Fourth, perform all of these tasks in a civil tone [laughter], in a manner that is "fit for polite company" [laughter]. We're all polite company, we're going to do well tonight.

Professor James Kloppenberg's career has been defined by the pursuit of these very same ideals, which is why he is just the right person to deliver our conference's keynote address, and is why we reached out to him at the earliest stages of planning. One look at his CV will tell you that he's achieved the first of these aims: fostering rigorous scholarship, many times over and in brilliant fashion. Kloppenberg has been the Charles Warren Professor of American History at Harvard since 2008. He assumed a professorship at Harvard in 1999 after a twenty year tenure in the Department of History at Brandeis University. He earned his PhD from Stanford in 1980. Over the course of his 35 year career, he's published extensively on European and American thought, culture, and politics. His first major book, which established his reputation as the lead intellectual historian of the progressive era, titled *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870-1920*, published by Oxford University Press in 1986. A breaking comparative study of philosophical and political discourse in France, Germany, Great Britain, and the U.S., *Uncertain Victory* forced historians on this side of the Atlantic to appreciate American theorists and activists from William James to Walter Rauschenbusch in cross-border contexts. From out of Kloppenberg's study,

deemed a “Tour de Force” by one esteemed critic, by another, an “exemplary analysis of a formidable topic,” emerged a riveting, explosive world of ideas, that a generation of historians subsequently took up for their own active inspection. Kloppenberg, in essence, helped invent a new genre of transatlantic intellectual and political history, one that has continued to generate our most important books. His peers indeed took notice of his innovation, and awarded him the Merle Curti Prize, issued by the Organization of American Historians for the best book in intellectual history. He was also nominated for the Pulitzer Prize.

Kloppenberg followed up on this foundational work by authoring a stunning range of articles and acclaimed texts. The books include *The Virtues of Liberalism*, by Oxford University Press, *A Companion to American Thought*, co-edited by Richard Wightman Fox and published by Blackwell, and most recently, *Reading Obama: Dreams, Hope, and the American Political Tradition*, published by Princeton University Press. The articles include several pivotal pieces in the *Journal of American History*, *Reviews in American History*, *Modern Intellectual History*, and discipline-shaping volumes such as *The Democratic Experiment: New Directions in American Political History*, really an outstanding state-of-the-field collection published by Princeton in 2003. In these, and numerous other essays, articles, chapters, and reviews that extend his resume, Kloppenberg has demonstrated the precision and analytical breath and sense of timing required of anyone who desires, as he does, to shape and reshape his field. We can look forward to seeing his rare skillset on display in forthcoming books: *Tragic Irony: The Rise of Democracy in European and American Thought*, and *The American Democratic Tradition: Roger Williams to Barack Obama*.

Kloppenberg has also demonstrated a skill for reaching multiple publics, the second of our shared goals. In and beyond his academic writing, he has assumed the task of educating people in the long histories of political thought and nudging them towards truth about citizenship that he holds dear. Both nuanced and animated, richly textured and invocative, *The Virtues of Liberalism* is indicative of this quest in the way it endorses spirited discourse about the ideas that underpin our society, and the need to reanimate them through vigorous, collective engagement. Kloppenberg’s most recent works have embraced the same burden of informing and inspiring readers. Clearly he labors from a profound sense of vocation, as a humanist to uplift his society through application, not just cogitation of high ideals. No wonder his writing has been embraced by wide audiences and disseminated through popular period articles like *Newsweek*, *The Boston Globe*, and *Commonweal*. And no wonder his resume is filled with fellowships and academic awards, from agencies that take this big picture seriously: The Danforth and Whiting Foundations, for instance, as well as the National Endowment for the Humanities, American Council of Learned Societies, and Guggenheim Foundation.

It goes without saying, then, that Professor Kloppenberg has long devoted himself to examining the intersection of religion and U.S. politics, the third of our shared ambitions. An intellectual historian at heart, Kloppenberg nevertheless sees ideas, religious ones included, as generative in political processes. Politics, in his estimation, is not merely the byproduct of interest or bold application of power. It is, and should be, an outgrowth of intellectual grappling with our greatest

philosophical traditions. As evidenced in his book, *Reading Obama*, and as we will hear tonight, our President makes little sense, in fact, when such grappling does not factor in. To understand Obama, he asserts we need to take seriously the strands of philosophical pragmatism, progressive liberalism, and Christian realism that have always informed this politician's worldview. In Kloppenberg's thick rendering of religion and politics, we are encouraged to value the life of the mind, considering the cynicism that clouds our current politics, this, I think, is a healthy and refreshing reminder.

Finally, in all of his endeavors, Kloppenberg has strived for that civil tone and polite company that we highlight here at the Center. Besides the fact that he is a Boston Red Sox Fan [laughter], suggesting some vulnerability where civil mindedness is concerned, Kloppenberg's record of vocation indicates that he is someone who speaks with conviction but also empathy and immense generosity. His teaching record is one sign of this. Having lectured across Britain and Europe, and occupied prestigious professorships in Cambridge and Paris, he has also won several teaching awards at Harvard, including the Joseph R. Levenson Memorial Teaching Prize for Senior Faculty, as voted by Harvard's undergraduate council. In between, he has found time to speak at elementary and secondary schools in and around Boston, help with teacher training programs, and sit on college boards – and he sits on Wellesley's College Board of Trustees. His service, a second sign of a generous spirit, is just as expansive and diverse. Besides presiding over his Parish Pastoral Council, he has also chaired faculty senates, tenure boards, and helped guide countless fellowship, award, and editorial committees.

Professor James Kloppenberg is in short proof that the civic virtues he has written so thoughtfully and thoroughly about for the past few decades, virtues that we at the Danforth Center seek to encourage and uphold, are alive and well, and no hazy, abstract, or antiquated things. It is an honor to have him speak to us this evening. Please help me welcome Professor James Kloppenberg.

[Applause]

### **Professor James Kloppenberg**

Thank you very much, Darren, that's going to be hard to live up to. Some of you will know that line of Lyndon's, "I wish my parents could've heard that. My father would've enjoyed it, my mother would've believed it," [laughter]. It does make me think of that line. It was the Danforth Foundation that really launched me on this path – a fellowship when I was in graduate school from the Danforth Foundation put me in touch with a large number of people who shared a commitment to the same kind of scholarship that was grounded in values. And that made a difference to me, and I'm very happy that the Danforth family continues to support an organization as worthy as this Center. The conference we've been part of so far today has been extremely rich so far. Those of you who were not here all day would not realize that this is the fifteenth paper that the conference goers have listened to during the course of the day. Now I entered graduate school in 1974 and I have never had a day in which there were fifteen papers. If I had known when I was asked to give this talk that I would be the fifteenth speaker, one, I might have

said no, but secondly, I would certainly have incorporated more lighthearted comments than I'm afraid I have in the paper. I will not threaten to dance, as Lyla did a little earlier, and you can all be grateful for that, but I am going to stick to my prepared comments because otherwise, if I start to extemporize, I might well go on all evening.

An article on the front page of the New York Times last Sunday must have surprised many readers. The headline announced "The Catholic Roots of Obama's Activism." "The Catholic Roots of Obama's Activism." The article detailed Obama's experience as a community organizer in the Developing Communities Project sponsored and funded by the Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago. As Obama himself has said many times, doing that work shifted his interests away from a career as a writer and toward law and politics. After Obama graduated from Columbia in 1983, he worked briefly in New York City before he accepted a job working out of a cramped, basement office in Holy Rosary Parish on the south side of Chicago. Harold Washington had been elected as the first black mayor of Chicago, but that made little difference in the lives of the people Obama and his fellow organizers were trying to help. For community organizers, disillusionment and cynicism are occupational hazards. What kept Obama plugging away, he later wrote, was "the dedication of the people he got to know in the Catholic social services work." Looking to expand that network, he began contacting ministers in Chicago's black churches, and that effort brought him to Jeremiah Wright and the Trinity United Church of Christ. There, Obama observed Wright's combination of Christian ethics and political activism, a hybrid with roots stretching back to the black church in the rural South, and the social gospel in the urban North.

Impressed by the commitment of Catholics and Protestants who devoted their lives to working for Chicago's dispossessed, Obama began to think about his own lack of community, his own rootlessness. His anthropologist mother had valued the great books of multiple religious traditions. She had read with her children a range of texts, including the Bible, the Quran, and the Bhagavad Gita. Although she described herself as 'spiritual,' she had no religious affiliation. She sent her son to two different Catholic schools while they were living in Indonesia, but Obama recalled having had no religious experience himself growing up. As those of you who have read *Dreams from my Father* (his remarkable memoir) already know, all of that changed when Obama began attending Jeremiah Wright's Trinity Church for his own reasons, which were quite different from the strategic calculations that had led him to the church in the first place. Initially intrigued by the blending of African, African-American, and Christian cultural themes in the services at Trinity Church, Obama one Sunday found himself slipping into a reverie that linked Wright's congregation to the struggles of oppressed people stretching from the wandering Israelites to enslaved Africans to the impoverished people that he had gotten to know in Chicago. Wright's sermon that day was a highly-charged plea on behalf of what he called "The Audacity of Hope." Not only did the service move Obama to tears, it convinced him that he had finally found in Christianity, a spiritual home of his own. He would remain, in his words, "a Christian, and a skeptic." A Christian and a skeptic. That combination strikes many Americans, both believers and non-believers, as unusual, perhaps even incoherent, and exploring it

will be one of my goals this evening. Jeremiah Wright later told Obama's biographer, David Remnick, that Obama came to him looking not only for a social gospel, but also, in Wright's words, "for a faith that doesn't put down other people's faiths." At Trinity, Obama found a form of pluralism that resonated with his own respect for multiple religious traditions.

One of the reasons that *New York Times* headline surprised people, of course, is that most Americans today do not associate Catholicism with Obama's kind of social activism. Most of the news stories in recent years, and for very good reasons, have concentrated on the conservatism of the Catholic church, particularly on the official Catholic opposition to contraception, abortion, and same-sex marriage, and on the cover-up of the abominable child abuse scandal. During the last year, though, that focus has begun to shift, and the election of Jorge Mario Bergoglio, the first Pope from the Southern hemisphere, is the reason why. One year after he was the surprise pick of the College of Cardinals, Pope Francis is everywhere. *Time Magazine* named him "Man of the Year." *The New Yorker* devoted a long, detailed cover story to him. Notwithstanding the Pope's radical critique of capitalism, which a right-wing American pundit called "pure Marxism," the flagship magazine of global free enterprise, *The Economist*, did a profile of Francis that was surprising not only for its length, but for its respectful tone. And finally, the editors of *Fortune Magazine* recently named Francis number one in their ranking of the world's fifty greatest leaders. By contrast, the leader of the world's most powerful nation, Barack Obama, just a year and a half after he was re-elected to a second term, did not make the list.

So, we need here, to discuss moving beyond the culture wars at a somewhat peculiar moment in American politics and popular culture. The Pope, who excoriates the work of money and the dictatorship of the market, is widely celebrated for relinquishing the splendor of the Papal apartments and the luxury of limos, for a modest guest house and a late model Renault. The President of the United States, a moderate, who enacted a very modest scheme of healthcare devised by The Heritage Foundation and first enacted in Massachusetts by Mitt Romney, is denounced as a socialist, not only because of Obamacare, but because he has had the audacity to suggest raising the taxes of the wealthy and raising the minimum wage. And when I proposed a title for these remarks to Darren, when I proposed "Barack Obama and the Paradoxes of Progressive Christianity," I had no idea just how deep those paradoxes would seem by late March of 2014. One progressive Christian, Pope Francis, is hot. Another progressive Christian, Barack Obama, has favorability ratings so low that many democratic candidates are asking him to stay away from their electoral campaigns, and the editors of *Fortune*, decided that as a world leader, he ranks below a Yankee shortstop who played 17 games last year, and the coach of the Johns Hopkins swim team [laughter]. Now, I realize that leaving Obama off the *Fortune* list was a stunt. It was a way for the magazine to attract attention to its annual list of billionaires, CEOs, and a few glamorous philanthropists. It was as if *US News* had left off Princeton or Wash U from its list of America's best universities. And yet, I think there's something more to it than that, and I'll get back to that.

Well, the title of our conference is "Beyond the Culture Wars: Recasting Religion and Politics in the Twentieth Century." I think the meaning of that title is ambiguous, and although I haven't talked with the organizers about it, I suspect that

ambiguity is deliberate. As Darren suggested this morning, the phrase might be understood to suggest that we have now moved beyond what James Davison Hunter and later William Bennett called the 'Culture Wars,' so we should get over it, and stop thinking inside those sterile binaries. Alternatively, the phrase might be taken to mean that we need to rethink the history of American politics and religion in the twentieth century so that our analysis as scholars can move beyond the culture wars – and several of the papers today suggested that that was, indeed, the case. Regardless of which meaning one chooses, though, I'm going to do what people who are invited to deliver a keynote address probably should not do. I'm going to suggest why one might want to question all the meanings embedded in the title of the conference.

To do that, I want to examine two figures: Pope Francis, and Barack Obama, who don't fit the categories of the culture wars. In my concluding remarks, I'm going to do something else I probably should not do, and that is to take issue with my friend David Hollinger, who delivered the keynote address at the last conference that the Danforth Foundation sponsored. Given that Andrew Preston said the spirit of David Hollinger is hovering over the proceedings of the conference and given how many of his colleagues, former colleagues, and former students are here, I do that with some temerity. But even so, even though I will do it in a tone of civil discourse, I assure you, I think there are important questions to be raised about one of the arguments that David Hollinger is making in his recent work. In the paper that Hollinger delivered here, he presents an impressive array of evidence concerning church-going in the United States, which he interprets as a clear indication of the continuing decline of religious belief among Americans, particularly among well-educated Americans like everyone in this room. Hollinger contends that the process of secularization, so clearly evident in Northern Europe, is actually continuing here, too, despite the fact that a vast majority of Americans still say that they believe in God. I've read several drafts of Hollinger's paper because it will appear in a volume of essays that I'm co-editing, a volume that will be called *The World of American Intellectual History*, and so it's been much on my mind. I'll conclude these remarks by raising a few questions about that argument. So, Pope Francis, President Obama, and Sir Hollinger [laughter]. I had hoped last night that I had cut down my remarks to the point where I could keep them under about 50 minutes, but discussions today were so rich that I've built back in probably most of what I took out, so I'm going to take most of the hour that Darren and Marie said that I could have.

Well, several features of the new Pope's words and deeds deserve our attention in this conference. First, it's worth emphasizing that Francis has not yet shown any interest in altering Church doctrine. Full disclosure, in the spirit of Healan Gaston's comments earlier today, I am an active member of a Catholic Parish, actually the Catholic Parish where the reform group, Voice of the Faithful, was founded, ten years ago, when I was the head of the Parish Council. The current chair of that group is a longtime friend, a man I coached baseball with and used to play basketball with. I belong to several groups of dissident Catholics who oppose the Church's stance on issues of sexual morality and advocate allowing women to become priests, and allowing all priests to marry – women as well as men, gays as well as straight. So I'm hardly a disinterested observer, I have a dog in this fight, and

I share the disappointment of many Catholics on the left that Francis has not signaled any changes in that domain. But I also share the sense of satisfaction among such dissidents that the Pope has quite explicitly recommended paying more attention to the problems of unbridled greed and persistent poverty than to the issues that obsessed his predecessors. Francis' decision to remove the ultra-orthodox Cardinal Raymond Burke, the former Archbishop of St. Louis, is one sign of that change. The Pope's denial that he is in a position to judge the lives of homosexuals is another. His lengthy exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, released last November, is perhaps the most striking of all. I think it might be considered the opening salvo in a new battle in the culture wars.

Although I suspect that all of you are familiar with some of the words that were widely quoted from that document when it appeared last November, I want to read a few passages to give you a clearer sense of two of its particular features.

First, consider this paragraph from chapter one:

The great danger in today's world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures and a blunted conscience. Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor.

Now that lament might seem familiar, even predictable, a refrain intoned by all Christians who have ever thought about the conflict between material goods and the beatitudes. But consider just the section headings of chapter two: "No, to the Economy of Exclusion," "No, to the Idolatry of Money," "No to a Financial System which Rules Rather than Serves," "No to the Inequality which Spans Violence." In short, Francis rejects the legitimacy of just about everything that has been taken for granted about the capitalist system for the last four decades. The Pope describes the accelerating increase in inequality throughout the world as indefensible according to Christian principles – principles that trump the supposed laws of economics. To make his case even more explicit, the Pope continues:

We can no longer trust in the unseen forces and the invisible hand of the market. Growth and justice requires more than economic growth, it requires decisions, programs, mechanisms, and processes specifically geared to a better distribution of income, the creation of sources of employment and an integral promotion of the poor, which goes beyond a simple welfare mentality. The economy can no longer turn to remedies that are a new poison, such as attempting to increase profits by reducing the workforce and therefore adding to the ranks of the excluded.

So, sending jobs overseas, downsizing the workforce, "a new poison," in our culture.

The Pope's critique of economic injustice, which includes an explicit condemnation of the theory of trickle-down economics is pretty blunt. But it's just one theme in the exhortation, even though it's the one that's received the most attention in the American press. Francis also addresses a second issue. He endorses a brand of ecumenical outreach that extends beyond the most influential documents of Vatican II. Not only does Francis call for greater cooperation and a mutual understanding among all Christians, Jews, and Muslims, who share, as he points out, a common heritage, he extends the [WORD? 26:46] dialogue to other religions, and

perhaps even more surprisingly, to another community of which the Catholic church has not always spoken generously, the community of agnostics and atheists. He stresses in his words “The importance of respect for religious freedom, viewed as a fundamental human right. This includes the freedom to choose the religion which one judges to be true, and to manifest one’s beliefs in public.” Now, this “healthy pluralism,” to use Francis’ phrase, one which genuinely respects differences and values them as such, does not entail privatizing religions in an attempt to reduce them to the quiet obscurity of the individual’s conscience, or to relegate them to enclosed precincts of churches, synagogues, or mosques. In other words, there’s no reason for Catholics or members of other religious traditions to keep silent on matters of public concern. Indeed, speaking out is exactly what Francis is doing in his exhortation. It’s just not the sort of intervention that people expect from a Catholic member of the hierarchy in this stage of our history.

Francis elaborates the twenty-first century Church’s commitment to toleration in these words:

As believers we also feel close to those who do not consider themselves part of any religious tradition, yet sincerely seek the truth, goodness, and beauty, which we believe have their highest expression and source in God. We consider them as precious allies [Kloppenbergh emphasizes “precious allies”] in the commitment to defending human dignity in building peaceful coexistence between peoples and in protecting creation.

Finally, Francis pointedly embraces the idea of a special encounter between what he calls believers and non-believers, who should be able to engage in dialogue about fundamental issues of ethics, art, and science. This too, he concludes, is the path to peace in our troubled world.

Of course we don’t know yet how many of those words come from Francis himself and how many of them come from another member of the Vatican team, but the thrust of the exhortation is unmistakable, and it constitutes a striking departure from the emphasis of Popes in the last several decades. It marks a return to the ecumenical spirit of Vatican II, and for that reason, progressive Catholics have found it as invigorating as conservatives have found it disappointing. I want to emphasize something that I think the fanfare surrounding Francis might have masked. *Evangelii Gaudium* is a return. It is not an altogether new departure for the Catholic Church. Its critique of unregulated capitalism echoes many of the themes first articulated by Pope Leo XIII in 1891 in his Encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. On the second theme, the Catholic Church claimed its acceptance of religious pluralism in the mid-1960s, in the Declaration of the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions and in the Declaration on Religious Freedom. These three documents have inspired generations of Catholic progressives like Chicago’s Archbishop Bernard Shell who helped Saul Alinsky start the Industrial Areas Foundation, and later, Chicago’s Joseph Bernardin who established the Developing Cities Project that employed Obama and other community organizers. For that reason, these documents constitute a crucial, if recently underappreciated, dimension of the tradition of progressive Christianity. I think we’ll need to keep that dimension in focus if we want to understand, even if I don’t think we can entirely move beyond, the culture wars. The divisions within the Catholic Church are wide and they are

very old – much older, and I would say much wider, than the divisions that were very nicely illuminated in Molly Worthen’s fine book *Apostles of Reasons* on the conflicts within the tradition of evangelical Protestantism.

First, the economy. Ever since Leo XIII released *Rerum Novarum*, conservatives within and outside the Catholic Church have contended that he *could not* have meant what he said. Leo offered a critique of laissez-faire that was as stinging as that in Francis’s recent exhortation. He endorsed both the value of labor unions and the necessity of state intervention, because of, in his words “the misery and wretchedness pressing so unjustly on the majority of the working class.” In place of the dogmas of classical liberalism, *Rerum Novarum* called for government intervention to secure a living wage that would ensure the dignity of every person. Like many American progressives at the same time, Leo XIII was as critical of revolutionary socialism as he was of unbridled capitalism. Not only Marxism, but all forms of socialism that ruled out private property ran afoul of the principles laid down by Thomas Aquinas. It was one of Leo XIII principle objectives as Pope to resurrect the ideas of scholasticism and to establish them at the heart of the teaching of all Catholic seminaries. In *Rerum Novarum*, he sought to occupy a middle ground between laissez-faire and socialism, and for that reason, many American progressive reformers considered Catholics like Father John Ryan to be their allies.

Now, Brendan Paine’s paper on prohibition earlier today reminds us there was a big difference between some of the cultural reforms advocated during these years and the thrust of the socioeconomic measures that were popular among many urban progressives. John Ryan’s writings, particularly his book, *A Living Wage: Its Ethical and Economic Aspects*, published in 1906, provided a sturdy rationale for the arguments being made by workers struggling to establish labor unions and the progressive reformers who supported them in that effort. Catholics constituted a majority of church-goers in most industrial cities in the United States, including Chicago and Detroit, cities we talked about today, and *Rerum Novarum* inspired many of these Catholics to link their labor activism to their religious faith. Father Ryan, like most Catholics in Europe and the United States, grounded his political principles on the ideas of natural law and objective truth – ideas antithetical to those embraced by progressives who were influenced by William James and John Dewey. James and Dewey in fact routinely excoriated scholasticism as unphilosophical and unscientific dogma, but philosophical differences did not prevent many non-Catholics from aligning with Catholics in the labor movement. As Ryan himself put it in a speech in New York: “Since we’re all in for the common good, we should aim to emphasize those elements that are common in our social doctrine and minimize the differences that are not based on essential principles.” Despite the fact that Catholic social and political theory rested on scholastic foundations, distinct from pragmatism, and distinct from the new social sciences that undergirded much American social and economic reform, shared objectives facilitated at least a degree of cooperation in the ragged coalition of progressives who reshaped America in the early twentieth Century. That, I think is where Kip Kosek’s priest, Luigi Lugitis’ focus on ownership, especially home ownership, comes from (that’s one of the papers, for those of you who weren’t here, that’s one of the

papers we heard this morning on a priest interested in decentralization and the ownership of property) comes out of this scholastic tradition, inflected by people like Leo XIII and John Ryan.

During the 1920s that coalition fell apart. As American culture split along fault lines having to do with the emergence of religious fundamentalism and other social and political interactions against rapid cultural change. During the 1930s though, the alliance between urban Catholics and liberal Protestants reemerged, and it became an important pillar of Franklin Roosevelt's Democratic Party. Father Charles Coughlin was complaining about his fellow priest, when he called John Ryan, "Right Reverend New Dealer," but the characterization was accurate enough. It was only in the late 1960s and 1970s, for reasons having to do with issues other than labor organizing and economic equality, that American Catholic workers began to gravitate towards the Republican Party. I suspect we'll talk about the many reasons for that shift as the conference proceeds tomorrow and Saturday. The animosity toward Catholics that was expressed so openly by thinkers such as James and Dewey, and sometimes, although more often in private, even by Catholic progressive's political allies, such as Walter Rauschenbusch, Florence Kelly, and Jane Adams, that animosity is hard to fathom if one looks only at *Rerum Novarum*, and only at John Ryan's arguments for a living wage. But those arguments, like the arguments of Francis, in *Evangelii Gadium*, did not emerge in a vacuum. Instead they reflected the tensions lingering from an earlier stage in the culture wars. Ultramontane Catholicism had done much to earn the suspicion of liberals. The French Revolution, particularly in the civil constitution of the clergy, had forced priests and their congregations to choose between their religious faith and their commitment to the Republic. And that militant secularism had flavored movements towards greater democracy throughout Europe. In response to decades-long attempts at deconfessionalization by secular reformers, the Catholic Church set itself in implacable opposition to *liberté, égalité, and fraternité*, as well as to science and democracy and just about anything else that looked like the modern world [laughter].

Thus, in 1864, Pius IX announced the *Syllabus of Errors*, which condemned everything modern as contrary to Catholic doctrine. He convened the first Vatican council, which promulgated the notorious doctrine of Papal Infallibility. When the nation of Italy emerged from the Franco-Prussian war and declared its sovereignty over the entire peninsula, the Pope excommunicated all the leaders of the new nation and declared himself a prisoner in the Vatican. Most disastrously of all, at least from the perspective of American Catholics, Pius IX condemned the idea of religious pluralism. Not only were other religions false, but Catholics were enjoying to work for the unification of Church and State under the authority of the Catholic Church. As John McGreevy has shown in *Catholicism and American Freedom*, there was a lot in nineteenth-Century Roman Catholicism for non-Catholic Americans not to like, and there was much for even Catholic Americans to regret. That's why Vatican II was so crucial for the development of progressive Christianity and the Catholic turn toward religious pluralism was deeply influenced by the Americans who helped shape the outcome of that council. John Courtney Murray is certainly the best known of these American Catholics, and he did play an important role. But

Murray was just one among the many clerics and lay advisors in Vatican II who first advanced an argument that has since become a staple in the sociology of religion: Whereas European nations emerged from the chaos of the sixteenth century Wars of Religion as confessional states, in which a single faith was declared the official state religion, England's North American colonies were havens for a motley collection of dissidents from the beginning. For that reason, the idea of a single official, established religion was implausible by the time of the ratification of the United States Constitution. David Sehat has made a convincing case in *The Myth of American Religious Freedom*, for the de facto establishment of Protestant Christianity of the more-or-less official religion of the new nation, but that "more-or-less" was immensely significant, especially if you look at the United States in relation to the nations across the Atlantic. Whereas European dissidents had to struggle for centuries to topple state religions and establish the freedom of conscience as an important principle, a tradition of dissent in England's North American colonies began about five minutes after orthodoxy was established [laughter]. Re-reading Vatican II's declaration of religious freedom recently, I found myself wondering if the drafters were aware how closely they hewed to the arguments that Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson and Thomas Hooker made against John Winthrop. We should note, of course, that the presence of all those Puritans in the New World was itself a consequence of the bloody wars of religion that shaped the history of Europe and the Western Hemisphere.

As many of you know, Brad Gregory's recent book, *The Unintended Reformation*, makes the case that all the conflicts in Western civilization – all the culture wars, right down to our very own day – descend directly from that conflict. Much as I admire Gregory's erudition, and as much as I've learned about the Reformation from both of his books, I think he exaggerates the degree of unanimity that existed prior to the protests of Lutheran, Calvin, and the rest of the reformers. Because the reformation authorized challenges to the idea that the Catholic Church had sole possession of a unitary, unchanging, absolute truth, Gregory contends, that we have suffered ever since from a debilitating pluralism and relativism. Individuals' desires, whatever they are, have become sovereign, because in our celebration of diversity we've lost touch with the idea that, in Gregory's words, "There is truth in the domains of human morality, values, and meaning." I think there's a problem with that argument.

As scholars such as Hans Kung have shown, Christians began arguing about the meaning of their faith and about the proper practice of the virtue of *caritas* central to the earliest Christian communities not in the early sixteenth century, but in the second or third Century. It was then that early Christian writers such as Justin and Origen tried to bolster the new faith against Pagan critics by downplaying the first Christians' emphasis on simple communities of believers, living together in a spirit of Christian love. Instead, they constructed a theology that displaced *caritas*, and elevated the doctrine of a divine *logos* that drove history, thereby setting off the first culture wars – the first ones to erupt within the Christian tradition. Confidence in unchanging truth and absolute authority entered a new phase in the fourth century when the Bishop of Rome, a man named Siricius, declared himself Pope – another new development that had no precedent. It

entered another new phase when his successors proposed the previously unknown idea that there could be no appeal beyond the authority of the Pope, and then another new phase when Augustine tried to silence the Donatist and Pelagian heresies by emphasizing the institutional authority of the Church and advancing the fateful ideas of original sin, predestination, and the trinity. Okay, you see my point [laughter].

From the origins of Christianity, critics and reformers have challenged existing doctrines and practices, and they have disputed the authority of Church leaders by characterizing them as contrary to the authentic message of Jesus. As crucial as the Reformation was, and as crucial as the culture wars of the 1920s, and the 1960s and 70s, and the 1990s have been in the United States, all of those battles rest on top of layers of conflict, buried strata from earlier struggles that go back as far as the origins of Christianity. I'm currently completing a work, as Darren mentioned, on the study of democracy in Europe and America that begins in the ancient world, and pivots on the long-term consequences of the sixteenth century wars of religion. Perhaps for that reason, I think the recurrent battles over theology, metaphysics, ethics, and political theory that have raged from the Reformation to our own day, constitute, for many people at least, a continuing struggle to understand and to live up to the ideals of what we now call the Judeo-Christian tradition. Our history has been a series of culture wars between the living spirit of *caritas* and its degradation and deformation into absolutist dogmas of various kinds. If believers were to place next to the central virtue of *caritas*, another Christian virtue, humility, as was manifested in say the lives of Erasmus or Francis of Assisi, they might be less inclined to claim sole possession of the truth or to reject the ideas and practices of people who disagree with them. Cultivating such a disposition might make all of us, whether we are religious or not, somewhat less sure of ourselves and of our own grip on the truth. Ever since Vatican II at least some parts of the Church have been moving in that direction, in fits and starts, hardly in a straight line. Vatican II officially acknowledged both the legitimacy of diversity and the separation of church and state, and since the mid-1960s, the Church has become accustomed to proclaiming such ideas, just as Francis has done recently, as the authentic principles of Christian teaching.

In sum, when one combines the economic criticism of Leo XIII and John Ryan with the ideas of ecumenism from Vatican II and from Francis' recent exhortation and from the contributions of Americans like John Courtney Murray, it's possible to see how the activism of Barack Obama, Christian and skeptic, can be traced back to his experience with Catholic social action. If that is true, why then has Obama been subjected to so much criticism, both from conservative Catholics, and from evangelical Christians? The answer to that question brings me back to my misgivings about the title of our conference. The answer, as you know, has to do with the deep and obvious rifts in contemporary American culture, and that is true within each of the communities – of blacks and whites, Jews and Muslims, Catholics and Protestants. Just as American Protestantism has been divided from the beginning, with disgruntled Congregationalists giving up on Harvard and founding Yale, and nineteenth century Methodists fracturing over the question of slavery, so twentieth century evangelical Protestantism has never been monolithic and neither

has American Catholicism. Colleen McDannell's book, *The Spirit of Vatican II*, shows vividly how one Catholic family, progressive on some issues, traditional on others, handled its satisfaction with Catholic teachings before, during, and after the Second Vatican Council. McDannell's mother, who is the protagonist of her fine book, chafed under the discipline of 1950s Catholicism and welcomed the reforms of Vatican II. But she was among the millions of American Catholics who believed the changes did not go nearly far enough. When Pope Paul VI rejected the findings of the commission he authorized to study contraception and abortion, McDannell's mother was among the countless Catholics who expressed their outrage. Since then, American Catholics have followed their consciences rather than official Church teaching, and the percentage of Catholic women who have used contraception and who have had abortions since *Roe v. Wade* has very little from those of non-Catholics. McDannell's mother was equally upset when the hierarchy ignored another study, this one in 1971, another papally-inspired study, one that was asked by the Pope to be done, that found no historical or theological grounds for the doctrine of celibacy, which has been in place for only one of the two millennia of the Church's history.

In recent decades, of course, the frustrations of progressive Catholics have grown. When Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger helped John Paul II tug the Church back to pre-Vatican II forms of worship, and when, as his successor, Benedict XVI, Ratzinger disciplined wayward priests and nuns who deviated from orthodoxy or who condemned the Church's response to the exposure of child abuse. Millions of Catholics protested and many left the Church. Many of those disgruntled Catholics and former Catholics now nod in assent to the Papacy of Francis. Some of them at least relish the prospect that those who once hunted down dissidents – enforcers of orthodoxy like Raymond Burke and Boston's former Cardinal Bernard Law – now become the hunted, or at least, might lose their privileged and influential positions. Like members of Evangelical Protestant communities, American Catholics have long been an unruly bunch. It's certainly true that Rome's authority powerfully influenced American Catholics with consequences that soured relations between Catholics and non-Catholics. Yet tensions have existed within the Catholic Church as well. Especially since Vatican II, progressives have proclaimed with as much passion, with as much conviction, and I would say with as much accuracy, as conservatives, that they embody the genuine principles of a Catholic tradition, especially if that tradition is understood as it was in the documents of Vatican II, as a pilgrim Church, a Church always searching for answers rather than already knowing the final truth.

Well, that was the kind of Catholicism that Barack Obama encountered in Holy Rosary Parish; that is why he was drawn to the people he worked with there. Maybe that's why he was in Rome today, meeting with Francis, and I wish I could break up my talk now, as one of our earlier sessions did, by showing a video – I'd love to show you the private conversation that Obama had with Francis in the Papal apartments, but alas, we're going to have to wait. We don't have access to that. We do, though, have access to his book, *The Audacity of Hope*. There, Obama traced the long history of Americans whose commitment to social reform was inspired directly by their religious faith. From John Witherspoon and John Leland in the eighteenth

century; Frederick Douglas and Abraham Lincoln in the nineteenth; through Walter Rauschenbusch and John Ryan and Dorothy Day; from Martin Luther King and T.D. Jakes to Rick Warren and Jim Wallace. Obama provides a litany of those who combine the Christian faith with progressive politics. He understands that the current association of religious faith with political and cultural conservatism is a recent phenomenon.

In my book, *Reading Obama*, I tried to trace his discussion of religion and politics in his writings and in the speeches that he gave in the first two years in his presidency, and I'm not going to repeat the details of those arguments here. Instead, I will conclude by addressing the apparent paradox of Obama's own Christian faith and his willingness to admit that he remains uncertain about the answers to so many questions. Obama unhesitatingly accepts what he calls Christianity's value of love and charity, humility and grace – that he believes. Yet, he also embraces the cultural pluralism of anthropologists, the antifoundationalism of historians of science, and the fallibilism of pragmatist philosophers. Obama professes a particular tradition of Christianity. It derives from the early Christians' commitment to *caritas* over *logos*, and the tradition of Christian skepticism that stretches from Erasmus to nineteenth and twentieth century Christian theologians who rejected dogma and conceived of faith as a struggle with doubt.

Let me end with the deepest paradox of progressive Christianity of the sort Obama professes. His religious faith has led him to host the first Easter breakfast, and the first Passover Seder in the White House, which is captured in the photo at the top of the poster that was created for this conference. Yet many conservatives who call themselves Christian, and at least one of the most distinct scholars of American religion, my friend David Hollinger, question whether Obama's version of Christianity should count as religion at all. For them, [laughter] – my reaction exactly – for them, it seems instead just a veiled form of secularism. In the paper he delivered here, at the Danforth Center, around the time Pope Francis released *Evangelii Gaudium*, Hollinger argues that proponents of liberal Catholicism, such as Charles Taylor and James Carrol, and of liberal Protestantism, such as Harvey Cox, contribute to the further secularization of American culture whether they know it or not. They serve, in Hollinger's words, as stepping stones toward a post-Christian world. In as much as they follow the path of William James, in treating religious faith in terms of the meaning it provides for their lives, rather than in terms of their obedience to a supernatural being, they belong not to the category of the religious, but to the category of the secular. If that is true, then one would expect that the upbringing of Barack Obama would be a textbook example of how secularism works. His mother made sure that he understood the core of Christianity, and that he was familiar with the basics of Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Shintoism, and as he put it in *The Audacity of Hope*, "The Gods of Greek and Northern African mythology." Even though Obama's mother carefully explained to him the socio-cultural function of religious belief, he did not grow up to become Emile Durkheim, or William Brann, the editor of the *Iconoclast*, that Charles Postle told us about this morning. Instead, dissatisfied with his own rootlessness, he became immersed in the community of the Holy Trinity United Church of Christ. That experience, as he puts it in *The Audacity of Hope*, "Helped me shed some of my skepticism and embrace the

Christian faith.” But he also realized, in his words, “That faith doesn’t mean that you don’t have doubts, or that you relinquish your hold on this world.” He decided to be baptized by Jeremiah Wright, and he and Michelle decided to be married in Wright’s Church, because he found the Christian message the source of a sustaining purpose, which he thought had been missing in his life. It came about, he wrote, as a choice, and not an epiphany: “The questions I had did not magically disappear, but kneeling beneath that cross on the south-side of Chicago, I felt God’s spirit beckoning me. I submitted myself to His will, and dedicated myself to discovering His truth.”

The point I want to make in conclusion is simply that Obama’s choice seems to me not merely an empty gesture, but a real decision, to opt for a particular orientation toward the meaning of his life. Also in *The Audacity of Hope*, he explains the modest resurgence of religious observance in America with these words: “Americans,” he wrote, “are deciding that their work, their possessions, their diversions, their sheer business, are not enough. They want a sense of purpose, a narrative arc to their lives, something that will relieve a chronic loneliness or lift them above the exhausting, relentless toll of daily life.” Rather than just traveling along what he calls a long highway toward nothingness, at least some of them are choosing to travel instead, as Obama himself did, toward religion, but toward a form of religion consistent with their doubts, their awareness of complexity, their passion for understanding and engaging the world, rather than escaping from it. In that commitment, too, there are parallels between Obama’s faith and that of Pope Francis.

So, can we move beyond the culture wars in our understanding of the relation between politics and religion in twentieth century American history? Of course, we first have to complicate any one-dimensional understandings of what counts as conservative or liberal religion. As I’ve tried to show by looking at the example of the Catholic Church, there are cross-cutting pressures at work at any moment, as well as across time. Whether we’re looking at Justin or Augustine, at Luther or Calvin, at Winthrop or Hutchinson, at Jane Addams or John Ryan, Whittaker Chambers or William F. Buckley, Cesar Chavez or Daniel Berrigan, Jeremiah Wright or Barrack Obama, Pope Benedict or Pope Francis. The conflicts between contemporaneous believers, within as well as across traditions, suggest the persistence of culture wars which are a perennial feature of our history that I think is not going to end anytime soon.

And yet, I find myself not consoled by that knowledge, instead I’m deeply disturbed by the particular conflicts of our own moment, and by the increasing polarization of American public life. I think it reflects not merely the willingness of wealthy, right-wingers to fund those fanning flames of the culture wars; I worry that it suggests the return of the deepest divide in American history, one that threatens the fragile ethic of reciprocity on which democracy itself rests. My study of democracy concentrates on, not only the ideas of democracy, although that is central to the book, it also shows the devastating and long-lasting effects of civil war, particularly the sixteenth-century wars of religion, the English civil war of the seventeenth century, the civil war that the French revolution became in the 1790s, and, closer to home, the disastrous effects of the United States’ civil war. Although that war did end slavery, and the civil war amendments ostensibly secured equal

rights for all Americans, it was, of course, not enough. The end of reconstruction reestablished the subjugation of many African-Americans, it enshrined white supremacy, and it cemented the conviction of many Americans, North and South, that the United States would remain a white-man's-country, even if the Confederacy had been defeated. The increasing sharpness of the partisan divide in national elections since the 1970s, the resurgence of confederate symbols and slogans in recent decades, seem to me not harmless expressions of nostalgia, but signs that racism and xenophobia remain treasured values for many Americans. The unprecedented lack of respect accorded to Barack Obama in Congress and the news media, including, but hardly limited, to that decision by the editors of *Fortune* magazine, likewise signals the persistence of a sensibility that his election as president only inflamed. Many of those who share that sensibility see the struggle to preserve white supremacy as part of a broader campaign against ideas such as a progressive income tax, economic regulation, insurance against unemployment and old age, and against the idea of international cooperation.

It's clear that many on the political left and many scholars contend that only those who renounce religion are capable of thinking for themselves; only they are capable of battling the particularly virulent forms of hatred that tarnish some varieties of American conservatism. But I think that judgment is mistaken. It rests on a misunderstanding of the nature of much religiosity in the contemporary United States, as well as throughout American history. Many American believers have been seekers and skeptics, not defenders of dogma and exclusion. Suspicion of progressive believers complicates the task of forging alliances between religious and secular Americans who share the same progressive aspirations. Such alliances were possible among eighteenth century champions of independence, nineteenth century abolitionists, and twentieth century progressives, New Dealers, and members of the civil rights and anti-war movements. I think they should remain possible today.

Well, I've learned a lot from the discussions today, and I hope the rest of our sessions this weekend will give us all a clearer understanding of the many ways in which politics and religion have intersected in modern America. I believe that they will. I thank you for your attention, and I look forward to your comments and questions.