Demonization in Democracy  
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We are in a conflict between good and evil, and America will call evil by its name.  
- George W. Bush

Politics and Religion

The First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America declares:
“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” The amendment is a classic expression of the desire to separate Church and State. It is a clear sign that, though the founding fathers of America respected personal religion and its effects on morality, they were somewhat fearful of the proven power of religious institutions to become the force of law.

1 Therefore, the architects of American ideology strove to achieve the disestablishment of faiths by creating absolute divisions between institutions of a spiritual nature and institutions of a political nature. It is crucial to recognize, however, that the separation of Church and State does not necessarily, and has not historically, led to the separation of religion and politics. In many ways what the above legislation does is merely make “religion an open marketplace in which religious groups [are] free to compete for the bodies and souls of the people.”

2 It provides every religion with an equal opportunity to edify or corrupt the minds of the American public and the elected officials that represent them.

The aim of this essay will be to explore how religious conceptions of evil have shaped serious political dialogue in the United States. The essay will argue that notions of evilness have been used by the political establishment to create a sense of extreme and inherent otherness and, therefore, to distract citizens from the substance of complex and often unjustified policy programs. This essay will demonstrate that such a phenomenon is a threat to critical thought and
democracy in the United States because it helps individuals and groups escape from the burden
defending the logic of their arguments. In this essay, we shall: i) look at the influence of evilness
on the Presidential election of 1960; ii) explore the way in which President George W. Bush has
used the language of evil; and iii) evaluate the presence of symbols of evil in criticisms of
Barack Obama.

A Catholic in the White House?

Our journey through the tangled history of the relationship between evil and American
political discourse begins with an investigation of the 1960 Presidential election between John F.
Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon. In that election an overt controversy emerged regarding the
religious convictions of the two candidates. On the one hand, Richard Nixon was a Protestant
and, therefore, part of the religious tradition that had dominated American culture since the time
of the founding fathers. John Kennedy, on the other hand, was a Catholic and, therefore, a part of
a religious minority that had never before been able to claim that one of its members was the
President of the United States. Though someone looking at these simple facts through modern
lenses might not be able to appreciate the significance of the religious gap between the two
candidates, to the voters of the 1960 election the presence and importance of religion was very
clear. In The Making of the President 1960, Theodore White argues that the division between
Protestants and Catholics was “the largest and most important division in American society.”
It was rooted in the religious wars of the sixteenth century and nourished by the discrimination that
Catholic immigrants suffered in the early twentieth century.

Patricia Barrett, in Religious Liberty and the American Presidency, demonstrates the
existence of a religious tension in the 1960 election when commenting on the overwhelming
quality and quantity of religious literature circulating during that time. According to her research,
over 230 unique types of anti-Catholic political literature were distributed in 1960. The literature was clearly designed to weaken the credibility of a Catholic politician by attacking Catholics on a variety of issues, including the so-called fundamentally irreconcilable nature of Catholic notions of authority and the American system of government and the hypothesized insidious plan of the Catholic Church to steal public money in order to advance the Catholic doctrines on “birth control, marriage, and medical practices.” Were these pieces of literature merely fragments of bigotry distributed within little and harmless congregations? Or were they signs of a systematic effort by the political opponents of Kennedy to give the Catholic presidential candidate an inherently diabolical quality?

One thing is certain: the use of this literature was not an aberration and not something unknown to the majority of the American people. When John Kennedy began to pursue the Presidency in 1960, some of the best known and most respected Protestant Americans such as Billy Graham and Norman Vincent Peale portrayed the Catholic tradition “as an alien religion that threatened U.S. traditional values.” “These nativists”, according to Carty, “perceived Catholics as ignorant immigrants who could never fully assimilate into mainstream Protestant American culture.” Several Gallup polls conducted in the few years prior to the Presidential campaign revealed that because many Americans felt the nature of Catholicism was “alien,” “many Americans would not support any Catholic for the presidency.” Catholics were often characterized by conservative Protestants “as foreign and culturally unfit for office.” The National Association of Evangelicals publicly opposed Kennedy “on religious grounds” and claimed that Kennedy’s candidacy was a threat to U.S. political culture. Paul Blanshard, a popular anti-Catholic commentator, called Catholics “deviant, ignorant and illiberal.”
All of these criticisms seemed to ignore the explicit declaration by John Kennedy that he believed in an America “‘where no Catholic prelate would tell the President—should he be Catholic—how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote’”\textsuperscript{12} Kennedy stated in a major speech about the religious issue on September 12, 1960, that he believed in an America “‘where there is no Catholic vote, no anti-Catholic vote, no bloc voting of any kind’”\textsuperscript{13}. These critics deliberately ignored the uncomfortable truth that “Kennedy was able to win the Democratic presidential nomination by successfully distancing himself from unpopular Catholic political positions and strongly asserting his commitment to separation of church and state.” \textsuperscript{14} For instance, Kennedy agreed with Supreme Court decisions that limited federal aid to Catholic schools, and he opposed official recognition of the Holy See through the appointment of a U.S. ambassador to the Holy See. He had also asserted that “‘nothing takes precedence over [one’s] oath to uphold the constitution.’”\textsuperscript{15} Why then did political opponents of Kennedy continue to use obviously false religious arguments to paint Kennedy with the colors of inherent otherness?

The most probable answer to this question is that the exclusive religious language was used because it was, and continues to be, one of the simplest and most effective ways to challenge a candidate without looking at the substance of his or her policy. By trying to place Kennedy in the category of the extreme other—a person who is alien—his political opponents were able to give Kennedy an apparently natural quality that is best called “evil.” They attempted to make Kennedy unelectable because, even if Kennedy was able to demonstrate that he clearly had a better platform than Nixon, his opponents could make the claim that he, through insidious means, was merely using his platform to fool the public in order to acquire power—as an evil person would. If Kennedy was considered evil, no logical or empirical argument that he made
could be trusted and, therefore, his ability to persuade potential supporters would be hindered. Moreover, because the media, public, and Kennedy himself were forced to respond to the challenge of inherently religious and political otherness—evilness—it became extremely difficult for Kennedy to communicate the substance of his policies.

Though the actual word evil was rarely explicitly used by the most prominent opponents of Kennedy, several speeches from the Nixon camp seem to associate Kennedy with qualities often attached to conceptions of evil. Some of the most powerful criticisms of him came from religious leaders and religious groups, and was inspired by the religious issue. It is difficult to argue that the American public would not identify a relationship between these comments and the conception of evilness.

Another point that suggests that the religious rhetoric of Kennedy’s opponents was intended to distract the public is the fact that some political scientists—who are much less concerned with questions of religiosity—imply that there was an obvious opportunity to use religion as a needed distraction in a tumultuous 1960 political milieu. In The First Modern Campaign, Gary A. Donaldson suggests that the visions that Nixon and Kennedy had for the country were remarkably similar. Nixon, for example, “was criticized often for simply agreeing with Kennedy.” There were several instances when “Nixon pointed out that he and Kennedy did not differ on goals… the two candidates only differed on the means of achieving them.” People struggled to identify a gap between the basic positions of both of the candidates on “matters of principle, on their vision for the nation, and certainly on how they approached the cold war.” In an article written early during the campaign, columnist Eric Sevareid joined those that claimed “there was very little difference between the two men” when he wrote that Kennedy and Nixon “were little more than tidy, buttoned down junior executives on the make,
and the choice was between ‘the lesser of two evils.’”\textsuperscript{18} Considering the climate of the 1960 presidential campaign, it is quite possible that one of the chief tasks of the candidates and their campaigns was to make the other candidate appear more evil. If the public cannot see, or does not want to see, a difference between the actual ideas of the candidates, then critics start to attack the character of the opposing candidate. They need to demonstrate that the candidate they oppose has something wrong with him or her that cannot be corrected. If we look at the anti-Catholic statements above, we might expect that the Nixon team did this best.

Interestingly, however, history teaches us that Kennedy found a way to win the 1960 election. Kennedy received 303 electoral votes compared to only 219 electoral votes for Nixon. Could our thesis be wrong? Did the implicit language of evilness not affect the behavior of voters? If we look deeper, we discover that Kennedy’s victory actually has the potential to prove our point. It shows the power of a character assassination resting on a spirit of exclusiveness.

For example, when examining how the religious issue was used by the presidential campaigns themselves, we discover that it was Kennedy and not Nixon that made religion a major issue and freely used the language of otherness. According to the Research Division of the 1960 Republican National Committee, as of October 18, 1960, Kennedy had publicly talked about religion 48 times and Nixon only 9 times.\textsuperscript{19} On September 12, 1960, Kennedy delivered an entire speech to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association on his understanding of the separation of Church and State.\textsuperscript{20} Conversely, Nixon declared, “Religion will be in this campaign to the extent that the candidates of either side talk about it. I shall never talk about it.”\textsuperscript{21} Adam Clayton Powell, a respected African American politician, was paid $50,000 by Kennedy to deliver ten Kennedy campaign speeches in which he claimed that all bigots would vote for Nixon and all right-thinking Christians, Jews, and African Americans would vote for Kennedy.\textsuperscript{22}
Powell argued that leaders were “changing the white robes of the Klan for the black robes of the Protestant clergy.” He declared that Nixon represented “the worst forces of bigotry in America.” 23 In a speech to an African American audience in Baltimore, former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt claimed, “[I]f we discriminate against Mr. Kennedy because he is a Catholic, other kinds of discrimination may soon follow.” 24

Voting data suggests that the statements designed to provoke the language and symbols of bigotry were enormously effective. An unprecedented seventy percent of African Americans voted for Kennedy, an unexpected four out of every five Jewish Americans voted for Kennedy, and more than seven out of every ten Catholics supported Kennedy. 25 A computer model developed by researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology determined that Kennedy received a net gain of 22 electoral votes because of his religion. 26 According to Carty: “In the 1960 election, the Democratic Party relied on a minority coalition of Catholic, Jewish, and African Americans who recognized a common purpose… By portraying the Democrats as bigotry’s eternal foes, [Kennedy] appealed to racial and religious minorities.” 27 Nixon actually stated explicitly that the religious issue caused more problems for him than it did for Kennedy. He said, “I was getting it from both ends: Republican Catholics were being urged to vote for Kennedy because he was of their religion; and Republican Protestants were being urged to vote for him to prove that they were not biased against Catholics!” 28

It seems that what Kennedy was able to do was to transform and secularize the religious language of otherness in order to make his opponents appear evil. The Kennedy campaign overtly encouraged his audience to compare some of his opponents to a powerful symbol of evil in 1960 United States—the white supremacy movement. Moreover, the decision of his campaign to mention the potential for discrimination against Jewish people as a consequence of
discrimination against a Catholic certainly could have had the capacity to provoke memories of the Holocaust—a rather recent international symbol of evilness. Why would someone want to risk being placed in one of those two categories?

Kennedy presented people with a very simple choice: join the evil forces that oppose me or vote for me. Such a proposal had exactly the same effect the anti-Catholic proposal did. It made the election about something other than policy. It made the election a war between a deeply rooted evil and dangerous worldview, and its “good” alternative. If Kennedy was able to persuade people that such a war was at the heart of the election, he did not need to emphasize his platform. He did not need to admit that his policies were curiously similar to the policies of the existing Republican administration. Kennedy simply needed to create a culture of fear within minority communities. The campaign speeches, voting results, and scholarly analysis of the Kennedy campaign suggest that he did that effectively. He manipulated the religious issue and corrupted political dialogue with vague and dubious moral criticisms. In short, Kennedy succeeding in doing what his opponents were also trying to do to him—attempting to use the symbols and language of evil to weaken the opposing campaign. The reason Kennedy won was because he did it better.

Fear and Loathing in the White House?

In *Liars! Cheaters! Evildoers!* Tom De Luca and John Buell, speaking to an American audience, argue that “Demonization of political leaders in order to discredit their programs and allies is as old as our republic.”29 De Luca and Buell explain that Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln were all targets of intense moral criticism. Moreover, the authors suggest that Prohibition, McCarthyism, and attacks on major income redistributing programs such as the New Deal “are often argued in ways that demonize character.”30 One would expect, however, that the
myth of progress on which the United States is founded should have helped purify the political sphere of these tragically general and covertly religious assaults on reasonable political dialogue. It seems perfectly logical to imagine that time has made the American people more tolerant and, therefore, better able to evade the narrowness of the extreme exclusiveness mentioned above. Unfortunately, however, the truth is that the opposite has happened. Since the manipulation of the religious issue in 1960, America has developed an appetite for religious conceptions of evilness. The language and symbols of evil have been resurrected and become an explicit and key element of American public policy. Perhaps the best example of this seemingly counter cultural phenomenon is the advent of President George W. Bush.

When talking about Bush in The President of Good and Evil, Peter Singer asserts, “No other President in living memory has spoken so often about good and evil.” According to Singer, Bush spoke “about evil in 319 separate speeches, or about 30 percent of all the speeches he gave between the time he took office and June 16, 2003.” “Bush,” Singer argues, “has consistently painted the international scene in moral terms… [W]hen speaking about foreign aid, free trade, and the Kyoto Protocol, Bush puts his views in moral language.” Bush makes no apologies for his deep spiritual convictions, and he allows them to guide his decisions on some of the most important challenges of our generation. Two specific examples of the influence of an idea of evilness on the policy of Bush are found in the way he has approached the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, Bush responded by saying, “Today our nation saw evil.” He claimed that the United States was attacked because it was “the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world.” He said that the United States would “make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them.” In
October of 2007 the United States began a military attack on the country of Afghanistan that was
designed, from the perspective of George Bush, to punish the terrorists in the region for the
events of September 11 and “to cause other countries like Syria and Iran to change their
views.” The zeal of Bush, however, seems to have impeded reasonable deliberation about the
best response to those attacks. According to Singer, only six days after the attacks, Bush issued
an ultimatum to the Taliban that stated: if they did not turn over bin Laden and Al Qaeda, then he
would strike. Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader, responded to the ultimatum by saying that if the
United States could provide evidence suggesting that bin Laden was involved in the attacks than
he would hand bin Laden over to a court in a Muslim country. Apparently Omar offered to meet
with U.S. officials and a suggestion was made to consult the Organization of the Islamic
Conference. Bush, according to Singer, ignored these responses and fulfilled his plan to attack
Afghanistan. In *Bush at War* former Secretary of State Colin Powell said, “Bush was tired of
rhetoric. The president wanted to kill somebody.”

What is significant about how Bush responded to the crisis is the fact that he did not need
to defend his action with proof, an effort to build consensus, or an effort to explore alternative
options. Bush felt that he had witnessed evil and was determined to respond. He made no effort
to conceal his convictions: he mentioned the word evil four times in his speech to the American
people on the evening of September 11. Bush was able to consider behavior legitimate because
he considered himself “on a mission from God.” When talking about the faith of Bush, Bruce
Bartlett—former policy advisor to Ronald Reagan—said, “Absolute faith overwhelms [his] need
for analysis.”

The tendency of Bush to overwhelm reason with faith manifested itself again in March of
2003, when the United States began a military mission in Iraq. This mission, which was
considerably more controversial than American efforts in Afghanistan, was part of the Bush war on terror—a program that, when examined carefully, is a mere euphemism for an imagined war on evil. The presence of the idea that the Iraq war was a conflict between good and evil becomes most apparent when we look at the arguments used to defend the war. Singer correctly identifies two separate arguments. One argument was that Saddam Hussein was violating international law by developing weapons of mass destruction and, therefore, should be forced to endure the serious consequences of ignoring his obligations to the United Nations. The second argument was full of classic Bush moralism and the language of good and evil. The core of the argument was that the war could be justified because it would free an oppressed people from a cruel tyrant.

It seems relatively obvious that the first argument was the weaker of the two, because of a disturbing absence of supporting evidence and because of direct contradictions against it. When Bush, for example, was asked if he was afraid of defying the United Nations and beginning the Iraq war without its approval, Bush said, “when it comes to our security we really don’t need anybody’s permission.” Furthermore, when the Central Intelligence Agency presented two senior officials in the Bush administration with a confidential report that showed that a thorough investigation revealed that “The claims of Iraqi pursuit of natural uranium in Africa are… highly dubious,” Bush completely ignored the report. In his State of the Union address, a speech that followed the publication of the report, Bush stated that Iraq’s attempts to purchase uranium from Africa were a significant piece of evidence. According to some reports, prior to the beginning of the Iraq war a Lebanese-American business man informed the United States that Saddam was prepared to allow American troops to search his country for weapons of mass destruction, willing to give the Americans the man suspected of the 1993 World Trade Center bombings, and was pledging to hold elections. The response of the Bush administration was a refusal to
negotiate and the statement: “Tell them that we will see them in Baghdad.” Are these the words of someone concerned with a violation of international law? Are these the words of someone who cares about the burden of proof?

The probable truth is that the second argument--of good versus evil--was of greater influence on the decision of Bush. Bush has a history of using moralistic rather than legalistic arguments. He was clearly aware of the weakness of his first argument; and, when speaking in public, Bush never hesitated to use the language of good and evil or right and wrong to justify his decision. In a speech delivered to the United Nations in 2002, Bush said, “Liberty for the Iraqi people is a great moral cause… The people of Iraq deserve it.” When asked by popular author Bob Woodward if he had spoken with his father about the war in Iraq, Bush said, “He is the wrong father to appeal to in terms of strength. There is a higher power I appeal to.” According to Bernstein, Bush is a president “that uses the almighty to justify controversial political and military decisions, and sees himself as the leader of the battle against Evil.” Bush began a war with Iraq because of his belief that he was involved in a conflict that moved beyond the boundaries of law or politics. Bush felt he was leading a holy war.

Returning to a defense of the war, however, we still need to contend with a possible counter-argument: namely, that Bush was merely using the precautionary principle when perpetrating these acts, and that he was simply attempting to eliminate regimes that could become a serious threat to American safety. Rather than being motivated by a particular understanding of evil, this line of reasoning goes on to say, Bush was motivated by a desire to protect the American people and to do it in a proactive way. Unfortunately, however, Singer has highlighted the improbable nature of such inspiration as it is quite inconsistent with the way in which the president handled other large policy challenges. If we look, for example, at how Bush...
responded to the climate change crisis, we can identify a disturbing lack of foresight and ambition.\(^5\) Again, despite an enormous amount of evidence presented by an international institution, this time the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Bush refused to accept the Kyoto Protocol and permitted greenhouse gas emissions to increase at an alarming rate. All of this has happened during a period of time when overwhelming data has demonstrated the existence of anthropogenic global warming and when the risks of not taking immediate action are so great that they outweigh the much more limited costs of taking action. If Bush were truly committed to the precautionary principle and the idea of global justice, would he not respond to the climate change crisis—a crisis considerably clearer than the potential presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq? Or does a simplistic dualism, which makes the United States a defender of good and Islamic nations the incarnation of evil, encourage Bush to begin a war of material and spiritual significance?

Bernstein believes that Bush’s insistence “to speak about ‘evil ones,’ ‘the servants of evil,’ [and] ‘the axis of evil’… blocks serious deliberation and diplomacy.” He has argued that the speeches of Bush are “used to ‘justify’ risky military interventions and to \textit{trump} serious consideration of alternatives in responding to real dangers.”\(^5\) He has even gone so far as to say that Bush and his administration had “a disdain for contemplation or deliberation, an embrace of decisiveness, a retreat from empiricism, [and] a sometimes bullying impatience with doubters and even friendly questioners.”\(^5\) In short, the religious rhetoric of George W. Bush is a major stumbling block for people that wish to challenge conventional wisdom. It is a powerful political tool that has allowed Bush to silence public opinion, to silence the counsel of his advisors and to silence declarations of the international community. How is it possible, in the religious and pluralistic environment of the United States, to tell someone that he or she should stop talking
about God or compartmentalize his or her religious convictions? It is very possible that feelings of personal spiritual guilt or doubt would cause a reluctance to make such claims. Moreover, an awareness of the inverse bigotry used brilliantly by the Kennedy campaign could make opponents fear that their criticism will only be used to fuel and redirect the hellish fire that the inflammatory comments of Bush were so good at creating.

Simply stated, the task of challenging religious rhetoric is not easy. It is inevitably offensive and often is a violation of political prudence. For those who opposed the policies of Bush, therefore, it was clear that there was a considerable strategic obstacle in front of them and it appeared that more ingenuity than ever was required to get around it. The Bush epoch had reawakened, intensified and almost institutionalized religious rhetoric and a concept of evil and otherness. Any successful opponent would need to change that.

A Muslim in the White House?

During the 2008 Presidential Election, the American people were forced to ponder why they should seriously consider a young, little known Senator named Barack Obama. Senator Obama was the Democratic candidate for President and he had a history that was somewhat mysterious for the average American. Obama, in order to acquire the trust of the people, needed to define himself to his voters and persuade them that he was prepared to lead. This challenge, however, was not uncomplicated. As a presidential candidate, Obama was forced to define himself against the deeply dualistic background created by the Bush administration. For at least eight years the language of good and evil had been an overt part of the consciousness of the American people and, therefore, the task for Obama, his opponent Senator John McCain and the people that wanted to discredit either of them, would be to effectively use the religious language
made popular by George W. Bush; someone needed to follow the example of Nixon, Kennedy, and Bush, and make his opponent the other.

Perhaps not surprisingly, it was the opponents of Obama that made the clearest effort to include the conception of evil in the political dialogue of the presidential campaigns. In many ways the conception of evil was used the same way in the 2008 Presidential Election as it was in the 1960 election. Rather than making the word “evil” the heart of their attacks, the people that were trying to weaken the credibility of Obama used symbols of evil complemented by explicitly religious language. This clever combination of conventional political resources manifested itself in the form of strange allegations about the religious commitments of Obama. Senator Obama, who is Christian, was called a Muslim, an extremist, and a communist. He was compared to Hitler and named the antichrist. The most powerful representations of evil known to the American people were used against Obama and, though there were times when his policy was criticized, such criticism was not made with the enthusiasm of the accusations mentioned above. Bush had made the pundits and the public addicted to the rhetoric of evil, and they needed their daily dose.

For better or for ill, the American people got what they seemed to be looking for. For example, Mariel Garza, a columnist for The Los Angeles Daily News, made her readers aware of the presence of “many nasty Obamagrams.” In one of her articles, Garza claims there is a “New Racism” at the heart of attacks on Obama, and she uses a popular Internet story called “The Jihadist Candidate” to prove her point. The story, which can be found on popular rightist websites www.anobamanation.net, www.dontvoteobama.net, and www.intelligentconservatism.com is a so-called true story of a Muslim Senator from Illinois “with close ties to The Nation of Islam and the violent Muslim overthrow in Africa”
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(www.anobamanation.net). The name of the Senator in the non-fiction story is Barack Hussein Obama and this character is married to “a bitter, racist, anti-white, anti-American wife.” Obama is said to have “several black racist Nation of Islam Louis Farrakhan followers as members of his Illinois Senatorial and campaign staffs,” and, according to the story, the church of Obama “reprinted the Hamas Manifesto in their bulletin.” What could the author of this article be trying to communicate? It seems apparent that he or she is trying to attack the essence or inherent qualities of Obama rather than his policies.

If we continue searching, we discover that these explicitly religious attacks on Obama are not aberrations. Garza explains that “it’s not only a few people whispering about an anti-American Obama.” If you Google Obama and Muslim, you get 1,120,000 hits; Google Obama and terrorist, and you get 619,000 hits. One of the articles you will probably find when doing your Google search is an article published by The Brisbane Times in which the reader discovers that a Roman Catholic priest in South Carolina “has told parishioners they should refrain from receiving Holy Communion if they voted for Barack Obama.” According to this priest, “supporting him ‘constitutes material cooperation with intrinsic evil.’” Another interesting article appears in the December 3rd issue of the Los Angeles Times. In that article the author asserts, “The Great American Smear is back” and “[t]his year, the victim is Democratic presidential candidate Sen. Barack Obama.” The times article explains that a widely distributed Internet message had called Obama “The Enemy Within” and another message, this one spread by Fox News, fearfully reported that Obama had spent four years in an Indonesian madrasa—an Islamic school. To its credit, the Times suggests “the rumors are false and vile” and argues that the “bigotry” of the statements “speaks to the post-9/11 revival of the ancient Christian loathing of Muslims.” Finally, in a Newsweek article by Jess Henig and Emi Kolawole, we find that
one popular e-mail circulated during the early part of the presidential campaign “claims that Obama is a Muslim,’ attended a ‘Wahabi’ school in Indonesia, took his Senate oath on the Koran, refuses to recite the Pledge of Allegiance and is part of an Islamic plot to take over the U.S.” These articles lead one to believe that America might be in danger of an overdose on evil!

If one looks deeper in the always exciting region of cyberspace, he or she will discover that on www.buttons.cafepress.com they can purchase their official Evil Obama button for only $4.78 Canadian; a ten pack is only $22.35. If you choose to visit YouTube, a significant source of information for many North Americans, you will find a video claiming that Obama is the Antichrist. The video is called “Behold the Antichrist is Here (Obama)”; and thus far 8,384 people have viewed the video. If you are the type of person that enjoys reading a book about the evilness of Obama, you will be glad to learn that Doctor Jerome R. Corsi, a best-selling author and Harvard educated political scientist, published a book called The Obama Nation: Leftist Politics and the Cult of Personality. In late August the book was #1 on the New York Times best-seller list and naturally provoked intense praise and criticism. In the Preface of the book Crosi explains that he has called the book an ‘Obama Nation’ because embracing “Obama’s radical leftist politics, driven by the cult of personality he has intentionally manufactured, would be an abomination.” Such a statement is explicitly religious and, to the large Christian population in the United States, it basically means that God feels an Obama Presidency is abhorrent and ought to be forbidden. Corsi defends this powerful assertion by trying to reveal the dark history of Obama. Corsi calls Obama the son of “a polygamist,” “a chronic alcoholic,” and “a bigot.” He uses the language of Ann Coulter to call Obama’s autobiography “‘a dimestore Mein Kampf’” that “is bristling with anger at some imputed racist incident.” Corsi argues that Obama
has some “instruction in Islam” and “that Obama’s experience with Islam predisposes him to Islam in a way that is reflective of his political associates, his political advisors, and his specific policies regarding the Middle East.”

Such assertions are clearly a distraction from the issues. They are meant to do nothing more than substitute the symbol of evil used by Bush—Islam—with an even more palpable symbol: an Islamic presidential candidate. Obviously these criticisms are a challenging distraction for Obama because he is attempting to introduce himself to the American people, become an attractive public figure, and communicate a bold new vision for the United States. Such a task is extremely demanding when his campaign team is forced to make official statements such as: “Barack Obama Is Not and Has Never Been a Muslim. Obama never prayed in a mosque. He has never been a Muslim, was not raised a Muslim, and is a committed Christian who attends the United Church of Christ.”

Republican Presidential Candidate John McCain may have been hoping that Obama would not be able to escape the shadow of false religious criticisms because, during the election, McCain was seeking his own salvation. McCain was in the less than enviable position of trying to defend a Republican Party that had become enormously unpopular. He needed to explain eight years of intensely controversial policy decisions made by Republican President George W. Bush, and he, at the same time, needed to make himself seem unique. The United States, when being led by a Republican President, became involved in two wars, entered an extraordinary economic crisis, and did little to respond to various environmental challenges or to improve its poor health care and education systems; though it is the richest country in human history, the U.S. continued to ignore the growing prosperity gap within and outside of its borders. According to one article in the Washington Post, seventy-five percent of the electorate in the United States “said the
country was going in the wrong direction”. Considering these negative factors, it is clear to see why McCain, the Republican candidate for President, certainly would not want to talk about policy. A shrewd politician would want the failed policy program that they represented to become invisible. They would pray for a miracle.

Fortunately on August 29, 2008 McCain seemed to find his miracle. That day he announced that unknown, folksy, Christian everywoman—Alaska Governor Sarah Palin—would become his running mate. *World Magazine* followed the announcement with an article that introduced Palin by describing her as “a signal to red-meat conservatives.” Palin, according to the article, was “pro-life and pro-marriage.” “She served as head of her high school’s chapter of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes” and had the power to “energize evangelicals.” When talking about Palin, a former friend claimed, "She is the real thing as far as being a Christian.” Such an ally was precisely what McCain needed. He and his supporters needed someone that could exaggerate the spiritual contrast he was trying to create between himself and Obama. He needed someone with the vocabulary of Bush. He needed someone who, from the perspective of the large Christian population, represented the forces of good and could oppose the force of evil—Obama.

The fact that Palin was selected primarily for this reason should have been obvious. The Republican Party had myriad strong potential vice presidential candidates including former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani, former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, and even former Democratic Vice Presidential candidate Senator Joseph Lieberman. Each of those people was highly popular, experienced, and considered policy experts. They knew how to govern, they knew how to shape legislation, they knew the issues. As was mentioned earlier, however, the issues may not have matter so much to McCain. He risked losing if policy issues became central.
He needed to make the election about something remarkably vague and something that could not be measured. He needed to make the election about right and wrong and good and evil. Palin, when combined with the Obama criticisms mentioned above, did just that.

Robert Paul Reyes says it quite well when he explains that “Sarah Palin has all the gravitas of a feather duster, the former beauty queen is blissfully ignorant of the world outside of Alaska. The only time she comes in contact with the outside world is when Putin's head hovers over the governor's mansion.” He argues, “Palin proved herself to be an airhead when she flubbed her interviews with Katie Couric and Charles Gibson, but until now we had no idea about the breathtaking extent of her ignorance.”

“John McCain”, according to Reyes, “ran one of the dirtiest and most inept presidential campaigns in history. McCain ran an undisciplined campaign that shifted focus every few days… his most colossal blunder was selecting Palin as his running mate.”

A very conservative and internationally recognized columnist—Charles Krauthammer—claimed that from the perspective of a person who believes in Republican policy, “Palin was a mistake.” Krauthammer argues. “She completely undercut McCain's principal case against Obama: his inexperience and unreadiness to lead. And her nomination not only intellectually undermined the readiness argument. It also changed the election dynamic by shifting attention, for days on end, to Palin's preparedness, fitness and experience.”

What Reyes and Krauthammer also imply, yet do not fully articulate is that McCain knew what he was doing. He knew that Palin was ill equipped from a policy perspective and that his choice would inspire a series of pointless articles, such as the articles of Krauthammer and Reyes, about issues other than policy. Palin was introduced in order to close off dialogue, reinforce polarization, and deepen partisanship. She satisfied the “temptation to place political actors and their programs in
bins of good and evil” and, therefore, weakened “compromise and reasoned discussion of the best course to follow”\textsuperscript{71}. We must ask ourselves: has anything changed since 1960?

Actually, on first examination, there is a strong temptation to suggest that something has changed. In the Presidential Election of 2008, Obama and not McCain emerged victorious. Obama, though he was made the symbol of evil, won the support of the majority of the electorate. He did not follow the example of Nixon, Bush, or McCain, and he did not suffer defeat. What happened? Did Americans finally become aware of their addiction to evilness and vote for a candidate rather than against someone? Obama did market himself as someone with “the audacity of hope” and someone who looked for consensus and common ground. He was compared, during and after the election, to the great uniter and emancipator Lincoln. Because Obama won, it is not absurd to assume that these political values did as well.

Though it is possible that hope triumphed over evil, we should not overlook the fact that Obama, was often compared--at perhaps a greater frequency than he was compared to Lincoln--to another president who was also known for his youthfulness, charisma, and great rhetorical ability. He was compared to this president because of a perceived similarity in style and substance. And if you have not already guessed, this president ascended to the highest office in the land about 50 years ago, his name was John Kennedy, and this unexpectedly problematizing comparison prompts the question: how similar was the Kennedy and Obama style and did that similarity have anything to do with strategy? Did it have anything to do with an inversion of the politics of otherness in order to wield the power of the rhetoric of evil?

Consider, for a moment, an article published by Mike Allen in \textit{Politico} as early as the Democratic presidential primaries in 2008. In his article, Allen reported on an alleged “smear” campaign targeted at Obama and perpetrated by his political opponents. At the heart of this
campaign, not dissimilar to the one undertaken during the actual presidential race, was a suggestion that Obama was Muslim: he was shown in a photograph with the clothing of a Somali elder—a style of clothing often associated, in America, with the Islamic tradition. Importantly, Obama could have ignored the picture; he could have better explained its source, or he could have used the additional attention to communicate a message of hope and discuss policy. What did he do? Rightly or wrongly, Obama instead went straight to the Kennedy playbook and utilized the alleged smear campaign to slander his opponent thus reversing the good and evil association. More specifically, his campaign manager released a scathing criticism of the picture, calling it “the most shameful, offensive fear-mongering we’ve seen from either party in this election.” Quite tellingly, the campaign manager for Hillary Clinton responded to the Obama campaign by saying that “[t]his is nothing more than an obvious and transparent attempt to distract from the serious issues confronting our country today and to attempt to create the very divisions they claim to decry. We will not be distracted.” If, 50 years ago, the above quotations were coming from the Kennedy and Nixon campaigns respectively, would you really be that surprised? Probably not.

Additionally, if you traveled back to 1960, it probably would not astound you to hear a prominent civil rights leader accuse the Republican Presidential Campaign of "sowing the seeds of hatred and division" and connecting the campaign to a segregationist agenda in the United States. Nor would you be shocked to hear the Democratic candidate himself suggest—with the consequence of generating considerable media attention—that Republicans were trying to scare voters by highlighting an obvious uniqueness of their opponent and saying "he doesn't look like all those other presidents on the dollar bills." Amazingly, however, these comments come from 2008, and are made in the context of the McCain and Obama campaigns. They are statements
which endured beyond the campaign and added greater legitimacy to the assertions of former
president Jimmy Carter, who very publicly said that “an overwhelming portion of the intensely
demonstrated animosity toward President Barack Obama is based on the fact that he is a black
man, that he's African American.”\(^7^5\) Though it is very possible that Carter, Obama, and
Democratic supporters may be absolutely right about the presence of discrimination and the
source of animosity, we must wonder why they announced this truth so loudly. Was it merely to
condemn their opponents and defend a notion of pluralism, or was it to use the tool of exclusive
divisive language, and more subtly the rhetoric of evil, against its initial user in order to capture
the office Kennedy so cleverly captured before him? Politics in the United States may not have
come as far as some think it has.

**Escaping from the House of Fear?**

In *Lifesigns: Intimacy, Fecundity, and Ecstasy in Christian Perspective*, Henri J.M.
Nouwen speaks of the need to escape from the house of fear and enter the house of love. He
explains that “we are a fearful people” and that “fear has penetrated our inner selves so deeply
that it controls… most of our choices and decisions.”\(^7^6\) Nouwen follows this statement with the
observation that those who make us afraid can make us do what they want us to do. “So much
power is wielded by instilling fear in people and keeping them afraid,” Nouwen argues, that
“fear is one of the most effective weapons in the hands of those who seek to control us. As long
as we are kept in fear we can be made to act speak, and even think as slaves.” \(^7^7\) The reflections
of this great twentieth century thinker are helpful because they emphasize the major theme of
this essay. They communicate the reality that language meant to underline the inherent negativity
and danger of something or someone is immensely paralyzing.
Such language has the effect of forcing its audience to enter a dizzying and dark psychological state and to seek comfort in that which is familiar and simple. If a message of fear is powerful and affects a critical mass, it can lead to a type of authoritarianism and the annihilation of progressive ideas. It exhausts its audience in a way that makes it impossible for them to explore the totality of the proposals that they are being presented with.

Deep democratic energies, according to Cornell West, are fueled by the traditions of questioning, and hope. It seems, however, that religious conceptions of evil weaken these commitments in the minds and hearts of those that accept them. Is it possible for democracy to flourish in an age and place where the language of evil dominates the political dialogue? Or has the language of hope saved our interest in the substance of public policy?
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