

## **Race is sensitive subtext in campaign South Side church's tenets spark criticism of Obama by some conservatives**

Date: Tuesday, February 6, 2007

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The expected launch of Barack Obama's presidential campaign is still days away, but his quest to become the nation's first black commander in chief already is forcing a delicate examination of how candidates talk about race.

That conversation took an awkward turn last week when Sen. Joseph Biden (D-Del.) ruined his presidential campaign announcement with clumsy comments meant to praise Obama though widely interpreted as a putdown of other prominent black politicians. But Obama also faces his own challenges in dealing with race as he seeks to frame himself as a candidate who can bridge historic divisions not only of race, but class and religion as well.

Even the simple act of choosing a church can become fodder in a national political campaign, where every facet of a candidate's life and associations will be put under a microscope. A year before the first primary contests, Obama is taking fire from both the left and the right in these matters.

The product of a black Kenyan father, white American mother and a series of elite schools, Obama has prompted some African-Americans to question whether he is really in touch with their lives.

### **In conservative circles**

At the same time, conservative critics already have begun a buzz on the Internet about a far less known part of his biography: his adherence to the creed of the prominent South Side church he attends, Trinity United Church of Christ. The congregation posits what it terms a Black Value System, including calls to be "soldiers for black freedom" and a "disavowal of the pursuit of middleclassness."

In an interview late Monday, Obama said it was important to understand the document as a whole rather than highlight individual tenets. "Commitment to God, black community, commitment to the black family, the black work ethic, self-discipline and self-respect," he said. "Those are values that the conservative movement in particular has suggested are necessary for black advancement.

"So I would be puzzled that they would object or quibble with the bulk of a document that basically espouses profoundly conservative values of self-reliance and self-help."

In his published memoirs, Obama said even he was stopped by Trinity's tenet to disavow "middleclassness" when he first read it two decades ago in a church pamphlet. The brochure implored upwardly mobile church members not to distance themselves from less fortunate Trinity worshipers.

"As I read it, at least, it was a very simple argument taken directly from Scripture: 'To whom much is given much is required,'" Obama said in the interview.

That was then. On Saturday, Obama is expected to thrust himself into the hothouse atmosphere of presidential campaign politics, where the principles and teachings of

Obama's church might require some explanation for, say, some white, middle-class voters in Iowa or New Hampshire.

As a candidate who has presented himself as able to enliven a national discourse on faith--he filled his now-famous Democratic convention speech in 2004 with religious language--Obama would not be the first presidential candidate to invite an examination of the political implications of his religious beliefs.

Like President John Kennedy, a Roman Catholic, 2000 vice presidential candidate Joseph Lieberman, an Orthodox Jew, or current GOP presidential contender Mitt Romney, a Mormon, Obama at some point in a presidential campaign would be asked to explain how he would balance the tenets of his faith with his political positions.

The intended meaning behind certain Trinity precepts is complex, but some theologians argue that on one level they brush up against a number of the same issues raised by Biden's awkward choice of words.

"In both cases--in the value system and in the case of Biden's comments--we do have a situation where Americans are trying to talk across the wide chasm that is race," said Melissa Harris-Lacewell, a professor of politics and African-American studies at Princeton University.

Harris-Lacewell until last year attended Trinity when she taught at the University of Chicago. "Perceptually, blacks and whites live in vastly different worlds," she added. "Biden didn't mean it to be racist. Certainly Obama doesn't mean that God doesn't love white people. . . . Malicious [intent] or not does not necessarily matter if the ideas are prepackaged with all of this historical baggage."

Looking to weigh Obama down with some of that baggage, conservative critics have seized on Trinity's 12-point Black Value System, especially the portion relating to "middleclassness," as evidence that Obama is a divisive candidate who rejects mainstream American values and is primarily focused on the black community.

"I question his . . . ability to be able to reach out to a lot of people when he is committed to a group of people who are focused on helping a certain group of people," said Fran Eaton, editor of Illinois Review, a conservative political blog. "It seems wrong."

But Obama scoffed at the suggestion that Trinity espouses a value system that seeks to help blacks exclusively. "If I say to anybody in Iowa--white, black, Hispanic or Asian--that my church believes in the African-American community strengthening families or adhering to the black work ethic or being committed to self-discipline and self-respect and not forgetting where you came from, I don't think that's something anybody would object to.

"I think I'd get a few amens."

Trinity, which adopted the principles in 1981, highlights them in brief form on its Web site without elaboration. That leaves room for critics to fill the vacuum.

### **Difficult task awaits**

Political scientist Steffen Schmidt, an Iowa State University expert on the party caucuses in his state, said anything perceived as a rejection of the middle class will not sit well with voters. Fair or not, Obama must move quickly to explain the value system and what it means to him or risk having the issue defined by critics, he said.

Otherwise, Schmidt added: "There go the soccer moms and there go the NASCAR dads."

Explaining those religious ideas could prove a difficult task in today's political world where complex concepts must be reduced to pithy sound bites and attempts at nuance are often considered evidence of being wishy-washy.

Trinity's value system springs from an era when black Christians in Chicago were abandoning congregations they felt were too closely aligned with the administration of Mayor Richard J. Daley. A similar exodus was occurring around the country, with African-Americans turning away from black pastors they felt were too tepid in their response to the civil rights movement.

To curb black flight from the pews, Trinity's pastor, Rev. Jeremiah Wright Jr., embraced a theology of black liberation that held black Christians accountable for taking care of their own and for continuing to fight oppression, sharing in the struggle even if it didn't touch them. To this day, Trinity's congregation of 8,500 spans the spectrum from public housing residents to powerbrokers including Obama and other celebrities.

Vallmer Jordan, a church member who helped draft the precepts, said they were designed to empower the black community and counter a value system imposed by whites. "The big question mark was racism," he said. "Black disempowerment was an integral part of that historical value system. It became increasingly apparent to me that we black people had not developed our own value system . . . to help us overcome all we knew we had to battle."

He acknowledged that the principle on "middleclassness" was a hard sell, even then.

"There was a hunk of resistance to that principle," Jordan said. But eventually committee members came to understand its intention: "Any black person who identifies himself as middle-class psychologically withdraws from the group and becomes a proponent of strengthening and sustaining the system," he said.

Harris-Lacewell, the Princeton professor, said the "disavowal of the pursuit of middleclassness" is simply an argument against materialism and the pursuit of the American standard of wealth. Many white Christian churches also preach against materialism.

### **`That's going to resonate'**

"If [Obama] can figure out a way to get the sound bite for that," she said, "I actually think that's going to resonate with a lot of people beyond African-Americans."

In his early forays to address the issue of how faith affects his public life, Obama has had a fair degree of success. "If we truly hope to speak to people where they're at--to communicate our hopes and values in a way that's relevant to their own--then as progressives, we cannot abandon the field of religious discourse," he said in a widely praised speech last summer to progressive evangelical Christians.

Later, Obama and conservative Sen. Sam Brownback (R-Kansas), another potential presidential contender, received a warm welcome at Saddleback Church, the evangelical megachurch in California.

In addition to attempting to bridge religious divides, Obama now finds himself needing to bridge racial divides--even among blacks. Given his racial heritage and upbringing in a

white household, Obama has prompted skepticism among African-Americans who have questioned whether he has enough in common with them to reflect their interests.

Writing in the online magazine Salon, essayist Debra Dickerson summarized this point of view while crediting Obama with potentially opening doors for other non-white presidential candidates. "Barack Obama would be the great black hope in the next presidential race--if he were actually black," she wrote, later adding that he should be considered "an American of African immigrant extraction" and not a descendent of American slaves.

### **Biden's gaffe**

Obama received some unintended support in this regard from Biden just last week. In a newspaper interview, Biden sought to praise him as a worthy opponent. "You got the first mainstream African-American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy" he said in remarks seen by many people as condescending.

The gaffe gave Obama the opportunity to appear magnanimous in the face of an insult. Initially, Obama graciously said Biden "didn't intend to offend" anyone. But shortly after, he issued a statement that highlighted his connection to African-American political leaders who preceded him.

Calling Biden's comment "historically inaccurate," Obama praised Jesse Jackson Sr., Shirley Chisholm, Carol Moseley Braun and Al Sharpton as past presidential candidates who "gave a voice to many important issues through their campaigns, and no one would call them inarticulate."

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### **Excerpts from the Black Value System**

#### **COMMITMENT TO GOD**

"`The God of our weary years' will give us the strength to give up prayerful passivism and become Black Christian Activists, soldiers for Black freedom and the dignity of all humankind."

What experts say

Such a commitment stems from the time of slavery when God not only sustained the African-American community but also empowered the abolitionists and later fueled the civil rights movement.

#### **ADHERENCE TO BLACK WORK ETHIC**

"High productivity must be a goal of the Black workforce."

What experts say

In many ways, the Black Value System is intended to be an internal critique of the African-American community. Black people toiled during and after slavery so their children could have a better life. The value system asserts that subsequent generations owe it to their ancestors to do the same.

#### DISAVOWAL OF THE PURSUIT OF "MIDDLECLASSNESS"

"While it is permissible to chase 'middle-incomeness' with all our might, we must avoid . . . the psychological entrapment of Black 'middleclassness.' "

What experts say

Authors of the value system discourage black men and women from defining themselves by socioeconomic class. Instead, they should share in the collective struggle of the African-American community and work toward its empowerment.

Source: Trinity United Church of Christ, Tribune reporting