

Change Requires Truth Spoken to Power

On a National Council of Churches-sponsored visit to the Soviet Union in 1988, my travel group visited several Russian Orthodox Churches, and on a few occasions met with Russian Orthodox Church officials. Those meetings were singularly disappointing. You see, few church leaders of that time (and perhaps also in Russia today) were theologically profound or spiritually deep individuals. To rise to Church leadership under authoritarian rule mostly required some combination of political savvy and spiritual decadence. Perhaps a few Church leaders maintained integrity while walking the fine line that kept them out of political trouble, but most of the officials we met struck me as bureaucratic functionaries without much soul.

I thought about this while reflecting on the people Barack Obama appears to have chosen to be his top foreign policy advisors. These are not people whose outlook appears to have been deeply formed by Christian values, or Jewish or Muslim values for that matter, even though they may be nominally Christian or Jewish (but probably not Muslim). Instead of the Bush administration's Neo-Con chicken hawks, Obama is being advised mainly by Retro-Clinton chicken hawks. Too bad there is not a robust, progressive, humanistic presence in the Obama foreign policy advisory circle, the sort of presence I imagine might come from persons whose outlook on the world has been informed by a deep, vital, and capacious religious faith. Enough of predatory, nationalistic, militaristic foreign policy, for God's sake!

In this light, the estrangement that occurred between Obama and his former pastor, Jeremiah Wright, seems all the more tragic. Wright proved to be extraordinarily inept and imprudent when cast into the limelight, but his general outlook on the world could be a great tonic to help set Obama on a more peaceful and humane course were he to become Obama's spiritual advisor.

In his absence, I offer my services. I can tell you right now that the war in Afghanistan, like the war in Iraq, was and is a huge mistake. We could not succeed where the French failed in Vietnam, and we will probably not succeed (whatever that means) where the Russians failed in Afghanistan. In any case, we have no business being there. Virtually all of the reasons that are given are bogus or imperialistic.

Obama is going to need somebody to call him to higher standards of truth and decency than his chosen advisors seem likely to provide.

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