

# Turning the Prophetic into Civil Religion

*Barack Obama's March 4, 2007  
Sermon in Selma, Alabama*

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## **INTRODUCTION: OBAMA'S COLORBLIND RHETORIC**

Barack Obama began his first round of campaign rhetoric in 2007 by situating his candidacy in relation to the president who most symbolizes civil religious unity, Abraham Lincoln. Obama's candidacy for his first term in office as president began on February 10, when he stood at the Old State Capital building in Springfield, Illinois, where Lincoln had delivered his "House Divided" speech, and announced, "Lincoln once called on a house divided to stand together, where common hopes and common dreams still live, I stand before you today to announce my candidacy for President of the United States of America" (Lincoln, 1858; Obama, 2007). Lincoln's "House Divided" speech and Obama's announcement both claimed that hope for the national future is rooted in the unity of its people. But, just as Lincoln drew from Christian sources when he spoke of a "house divided" that he borrowed from Matthew and/or Mark in the New Testament of the Christian Bible (*Matthew* 12:25; *Mark* 3:25), Obama's speech drew from Lincoln.

Using references to God to construct civil religious unity has taken many forms in the history of U.S. presidential rhetoric. This tradition affected Obama's speeches in his "cosmopolitan style," a style according to Robert Bellah that is "selectively derived from Christianity" rather than traceable to one Christian theological vernacular in particular (Bellah, quoted in Frank, 2009, 609). Obama uses a "rhetoric of consilience" where "disparate members of a composite audience are invited to 'jump together' out of their separate experiences in favor of a common set of values or aspirations" (Frank and McPhail, 2005, 572).

To achieve this effect, Obama brought together a variety of theological positions to construct his civil religious style. David Frank argues that he built his rhetorical signature from "at least

six” different religious traditions, including “a prophetic expression of Christianity, a belief that God is still working in the world, that other religions and nonbelievers have access to truths, and that both the religious and nonreligious have a sacred responsibility to others” (Frank, 2011, 609). This prophetic aspect of Obama’s public theology, which others have called the “prophetic black tradition” or an “African American Christian faith tradition,” has been simultaneously central to Obama’s speech giving and troublesome to his construction of a conciliatory civil religion (Bell, 2009; Darsey, 2009; Frank 2011; Murphy, 2011).

This tension can be expressed as follows: Black civil rights theology allowed Obama’s speeches to capture the “prophetic tradition themes ‘of survival, and freedom, and hope,’” but also exposed Obama’s public image to the theme of “paring anger with hope” that black liberation theology has long directed against white oppressiveness (Frank, 2009, 173). Although Obama’s one-time pastor Jeremiah Wright most publically served as the well-documented prophetic gadfly pestering Obama’s efforts at using the hope of black theology as part of his civil religion, it is the theologian James Cone who has given the most complete theological treatment of black theology.

According to black liberation theology, Cone says, God explicitly sides with the oppressed in society and therefore cannot *in principle* be at the center of national power or authority of the presidency. In 1970 he argued:

The inability of American theology to define human nature in the light of the Oppressed One [Jesus Christ] and of particular oppressed peoples stems from its identity with the structures of white power. The human person in American theology is George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln rolled into one and polished up a bit. It is a colorless person, capable of “accepting” blacks as sisters and brothers, which means that it does not mind the blacks living next door *if* they behave themselves (Cone, 1990, 86).

This *topos* poses a rhetorical problem for Obama. I argue that although he uses the hope of the black prophetic tradition in his public discourse, he does so by stripping it of the resistant identity expressed by Cone and others. To show this, I describe the tension between black theology and “colorless” civil religion by exploring Obama’s March 4, 2007 sermon delivered in Selma Alabama’s historic African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church on the anniversary of the Selma “bloody Sunday” civil rights march. I

argue that Obama's sermon functions to move black theology from its prophetic orientation toward the model of radiant whiteness that Cone attributes to U.S. civil religion. To do this, I begin by defining the prophetic hope of black theology that Obama borrows from by paying particular attention to its refusal to become the hope of civil religious unity.

## **CONE AND DARSEY ON THE PROPHETIC HOPE OF BLACK LIBERATION.**

Civil religious rhetoric, as Bellah describes it in *Habits of the Heart* and elsewhere, helps construct national unity by appealing to commonly shared values (Bellah, 1985). Paralleling the Israelite's journey with God in the Hebrew bible, a covenant is said to exist between God and God's American people. When God's people fail to live up to their side of the bargain, prophetic discourse emerges to renew that covenant. The prophet is radical because s/he speaks to God's people *as* the voice of God with moral criticism that comes from the covenanted people's fundamental values.

Jeremiah Wright plays the role of the prophet in just this sense when in his sermons, media appearances, and books he speaks out of the black Christian tradition and challenges the fundamental moral values of American society. According to Bernard Bell, "The Rev. Dr. Jeremiah has scriptural and secular authority for his prophetic mission of warning the nation of divine judgment for transgressing our personal and national covenant with God and man" (Bell, 2009, 342). At a key moment, Wright, Obama's former pastor, created a difficulty for candidate Obama. The phrase "God damn America," taken from Wright's sermon entitled "Confusing God and Government," was replayed in the media without much contextual explanation (Wright, 2003). Wright's sermon curses a government that mistreats vulnerable populations in the name of God. In a larger sense, however, a prophetic rhetoric must be more complete than a denunciatory sermon. James Darsey argues that for a discourse to be truly radical, and not merely audacious—a term used by Martin Luther King Jr., Wright, and Obama—it must have a "clearly defined...position in the manner of genuine radicalism" (Darsey, 1997, 11). It must have a transformative aim. Cone comes closer to this than Wright. He advocates throughout his writings a black prophetic theology that refuses to simply fall in line with the rest of the American denominational system.

Cone's 1970 *A Black Theology of Liberation* provides a good example of prophetic discourse as it is later explicated by James Darsey in his influential book *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical*

*Rhetoric in America* (Cone, 1990; Darsey, 2009). Darsey defines prophecy in the United States both by situating it within the tradition of Jewish prophecy and by defining it in terms of the Aristotelian division of artistic proofs into *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos*, the most basic tools of the rhetorical critic. According to Darsey, the prophet speaks using reasoning (*logos*) built from the covenant relationship with God's people. The claim the prophet makes to God's people to renew their covenant is supported with backing from "self evidence." To back his liberationist claim that "God is the God of the oppressed" Cone points to the covenant that God made with the Israelites and demonstrated in the *Exodus* narrative. He declares,

The election [of Israel] is inseparable from the event of the exodus . . . Certainly this means, among other things, that God's call of this people is related to its oppressed condition and to God's own liberating activity already seen in the exodus (Cone, 2010, 2).

Cone reasons in a self-reinforcing style. He defends his claim that God is the God of the oppressed simply by declaring that God has always been the God of the oppressed.

Although this sort of reasoning is logically fallacious, because tautological, it functions to set the stage for the emotional or *pathos*-laden aspect of Cone's prophetic style. Darsey argues that the *pathos* of a prophetic rhetoric can appear when, "The prophet does not speak as a member of the group he is addressing . . . not . . . in the inclusive 'we.' As a messenger, the prophet speaks in the voice of the divine 'I,' and the message of judgment is against 'you the people'" (Darsey, 1997, 26). Cone does this by shifting his style of talk in the midst of an otherwise sober academic book on theology by using italics and an explanation point when he writes, "*You have seen what I did!*" (Cone, 1990, 2). By using the first person singular and second person plural to address his audience, Cone situates his voice as the voice of God and his audience as God's chosen people. This emotion helps to back his tautological argument that God is the God of the oppressed by taking on the voice of God and emotionally declaring the argument to be true.

Cone's *ethos* as a prophet follows from his grammatical adoption of the "I" of God. When the prophet speaks, s/he doesn't simply speak for God, but as God. To describe this, Darsey turns to a description of the theme of "rebirth" in the Hebraic prophetic tradition. He argues that whether it is meant literally or metaphorically, prophets acquire a "new teleology in their lives, and

it seems natural to express this event in terms of rebirth” (Darsey, 1997, 29).

Applying this analysis to Cone, we can see that the appropriate response requires that Christians must move away from siding with white oppressors in society and must become identified with the oppressed in society. Cone’s terms “white” and “black” metonymically function as stand ins for the oppressors of all people, on the one hand, and for all oppressed people on the other. Cone’s claim, then, requires his audience to return to a covenanted relationship with God by becoming black, i.e. to identify and be identified with the suffering caused by oppression in the world.

Cone’s use of metonymy stands in contrast to the assumption of David Frank in his celebration of Obama’s speech, “A More Perfect Union” (Obama, 2009). Frank is only partially correct when he argues that black theology “. . . condemn[s] all white people for the existence and perpetuation of structural racism” (Frank, 2009, 175). For Cone, to be white means to be on the side of the oppressor and to be black means to be on the side of the oppressed generally. It does not mean being on the side of one specific racial group or another. Still, as black liberation theology builds from the particularity of experiences of suffering by those at the bottom of society, it does stand in contrast to the universal, *even* colorblind, themes of Obama’s civil religious rhetoric.<sup>1</sup>

## **JEREMIAH WRIGHT AND BARACK OBAMA**

Obama’s home congregation in Chicago’s south side, Trinity United Church of Christ (UCC), lives the tension between white theology and styles of worship and black theology and styles of worship. The UCC denomination, which derives from the Puritan Congregationalists, places significant emphasis on congregational autonomy, among other things allowing congregations to determine the type of theological vernacular spoken from their pulpits.<sup>2</sup> Since 1971 Trinity has attempted to move past white Christian worship styles and assumptions in order to match congregational life to the culture of the people in the pews. Evidence of this comes from the church’s 1971 shift to the motto “Unashamedly Black and Unapologetically Christian” (Trinity, 2008).

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<sup>1</sup> For more on Obama’s post-racial colorblind politics see: Wise 2009; Wingfield and Feagin, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, see the UCC Constitution and Bylaws, Article V, section 18 (July 2, 2013)

Additionally, the congregation made a shift early on in its self-description from “negro” to “black.” Pastor Wright spoke of this transition in his 2010 book *A Sankofa Moment: The History of the United Church of Christ*:

In 1966, when the first sanctuary was built, the words that were outside on the bulletin board read: “Trinity United Church of Christ (Congregational).” That wording was purposely chosen to make sure that passersby, visitors, and potential members knew that we were not an ordinary Black church. We worshipped in the [white] congregational style of New Englanders. We did not have Black worship and we were not the Church of Christ or the Church of God in Christ (Pentecostal) (Wright, 2010, 38)!

By the time Wright took over the congregation on April 9, 1972 the church had made its shift from identifying with white congregationalism and from the term “negro” to “black” styles of service. In his book Wright pleads, “Please remember that the church was started [in 1961] by a white denomination for Negroes who knew how to worship properly” (Wright, 2010, 37).

The move that his congregation made from assimilation to white standards of worship to having a uniquely black worship style is central to the way that Wright frames Trinity’s new identity. Consciousness began shifting, according to Wright, when “In 1968, Dr. King was murdered and, in the words of Lu Palmer, ‘Negroes turned Black!’” (Wright, 2010, 39). At Trinity this transition took the form of a change in worship style and an adoption of the language of black liberation.

In his 1990 sermon “The Audacity to Hope,” Wright made an argument to his congregation whose signifying terms, which go back to Martin Luther King (King, 1964), Obama would later appropriate in his effort to persuade the electorate (Wright, 1993, 97-109; Obama, 2004). Wright encouraged his parishioners to rely on a hope given to them by God to face the seemingly insurmountable hardships in their lives. He proclaimed, “The vertical dimension is what saves us, for we are saved by hope, but hope that is seen is not hope, for if we hope for that which we see not, then do we with patience wait on it” (Wright, 1993, 103). Obama spoke in close parallel to this on July 27, 2004 when at the Democratic National Convention he advocated, “Hope in the face of difficulty, hope in the face of uncertainty, the audacity of hope.” Built from a similar theological impulse, Obama and Wright both call for a hope in the face of the unseen. They share an

eschatological vision of a better future than the present. However, whereas Obama's hope is eschatologically progressive, Wright's vision is eschatologically liberationist. Obama's speech sought to unify the nation. Wright prophetically accused the nation of its moral failings.

In appropriating Wright's sermon refrain in order to reenact the civil religious dream of Lincoln, which has been reconstructed by Bellah, Obama overtly violated the prophetic voice of the theological tradition from which Wright drew. Included in Wright's "The Audacity to Hope" sermon was, in direct contrast to Obama's version, an explicit rejection of Lincoln and the implicit racism in his call to national unity. Wright warned:

Lincoln is remembered as the 'Great Emancipator' of the slaves, but in reality, he did not see black Africans as equal with whites. (The issue of slavery was paramount for him because it threatened the unity of the country. The primary reason that the Civil War was fought was not to free the slaves, but to save the United States because the southern states wanted to secede and form their own nation.) (Wright, 1993, 104).

Wright's pastorate at Trinity began two years after Cone published his first book, *Black Theology and Black Power*, in 1969 (Cone, 2008). Cone's writing sought to bring together the two competing approaches to the fight for black liberation that had been underway since 1960s in American culture. In Cone's words, "Black theology is bringing Martin and Malcolm together, teaching us how to be both unapologetically black and Christian at the same time" (Cone, 2008). Trinity's new motto shared exactly this dual emphasis of Cone's black liberation theology.

Cone's insistence that King's eschatological hope was unique to the black American experience was tested by the civil religious impulses in King's early rhetoric. King's appeal to civil rights is best represented in the early 1960s in his "I Have a Dream" speech (King, 1963). In that famous speech, King filled in the content of his own eschatological hopes with an integrationist rhetoric of national unity. He argued that black liberation is achievable through the Lincolnian goal of perfecting the American union. King preached:

This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with a new meaning, "My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring." And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true.

In saying this, King was positioning himself in American rhetorical history in a genealogical parallel with Lincoln, as Obama later did. The goal of both was to not simply end black oppression, but to redeem the nation of its original sin of slavery. This is a central part of what Bellah describes as American civil religion. Bellah argues:

The whole epic struggle [over slavery], as far as most white Americans were concerned, was one of sin, judgment, and redemption in the *white soul*. There was indeed a black epic, and it is now being recovered. But the black man does not really emerge as part of the imaginative understanding of white Americans until at least the time of W. E. B. Du Bois, if not Richard Wright or Malcolm X. Thus the fundamental aspects of the American self-picture went unchallenged. For 50 years after the Civil War that picture was more self-congratulatory than it had ever been before, its self-satisfaction reinforced by the image of Lincoln freeing the slaves, a gesture most magnanimously shared with black Americans by the practice of name public schools in black ghettos after the Great Emancipator (Bellah, 1985, 55, my italics).

Bellah's concern with national unity and especially with the figure of Lincoln is looked upon negatively, and perhaps even cynically, by rhetors like Wright and Cone. Cone and those who accept the full prophetic character of the black liberation tradition take an alternative path. They avoid reducing black identity to U.S. American identity so as to remain critical judges of that identity.

King's eschatological hope proved an effective way for Obama to characterize his presidency. He appropriated the line "audacity of hope" from King's *Dream* speech and refigured it from Wright for use in his campaign. This is one of the many times Obama "echoed . . . the theological refrains sounded by King" (Frank, 2008, 168). The King side of the black liberation theology tradition was a welcome addition to the Obama campaign as it helped him construct his identity as a viable center of American civil religion.

Obama, like King, became a symbol of Lincoln's civil religious dream to redeem the nation of its original sin of slavery. Unlike King, however, and very much unlike Wright, he did so by constructing for himself an *ethos* as a post-racial politician. He did this through telling the story of his own hybrid identity: "My father was a foreign student, born and raised in a small village in Kenya" and "[My mother] was born in a town on the other side of the world, in Kansas" (Obama, 2004). His hybrid identity was the very

overcoming of a racially divided world that bothered what Bellah called the “white soul.”

Cone’s conception of prophetic rhetoric should be considered antagonistic to both the content of Obama’s eschatological hope and to his construction of himself as a post-racial politician. As I noted at the outset, Cone disapproved of this colorblind approach to black oppression as it capitulated to what he called “American theology.” From his perspective, capitulating to American theology would not result in racial liberation for black people, but, on the contrary, would continue requiring their enslavement to the white national dream of American civil theology. That dream, although occasionally allowing African Americans to join the national congregation, refuses to have its own identity changed in a way that doesn’t wash out the experience of black oppression in a colorblind society. By using the prophetic tradition to “engage...progressive politics through a re-enchantment of its rhetoric” (Frank, 2009, 170), Obama treats black theology as an exception that reaffirms the white norm (Cisneros, 2015). Other black people, not least Jeremiah Wright, were unable count themselves in Obama’s universal vision for this reason.<sup>3</sup>

## **FROM THE MOSES GENERATION TO THE JOSHUA GENERATION: OBAMA’S SELMA SERMON**

Obama’s March 4, 2007 sermon, delivered on the anniversary of the Selma march, was given in Alabama’s historic Brown Chapel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. In it, he made an appeal to African-American voters by using the rhetoric of black liberation theology. The audience Obama spoke to in Selma had gathered to remember a peaceful civil rights march that was met with oppressive police brutality forty-two years earlier. “Bloody Sunday,” as the massacre was called, stands as an exemplary moment of the excessive brutality faced by the peaceful movement civil rights movement. Gathered in commemoration of that event was a cross-section of African-American denominational affiliations. As the event was both a Christian worship service and a commemoration of Bloody Sunday, the service included an offering, prayers, and sermons.

Obama’s address served as the keynote sermon. The church leaders who sat with Obama behind the pulpit as the service got

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<sup>3</sup> For a psychoanalytic approach to Jeremiah Wright’s negotiation with whiteness see Gunn, 2015.

underway represented the denominations that composed his audience in the Brown AME chapel. African American denominational leaders spoke, including Bishop T. Larry Kirkland of the AME Church and Methodist Reverend Joseph Lowry of the Christian Leadership Conference. Other denominations represented at the service were Southern Baptist and Obama's own denomination, the UCC. This was a meeting at the cross section of elite African American denominations who had shared in the experience and discourse of black oppression and in what liberation was and was not afforded by civil rights legislation.

To convince his audience, all of whom were influenced by black liberation theology, that their efforts against black oppression should lead them to support his run for president, Obama used the *Exodus* narrative to describe his presidency as a continuation of the African-American journey toward freedom. In that discourse, the black American experience is read as a continuation of a Biblical narrative that describes how God reveals God's self to the oppressed and frees them from slavery.

God freed the enslaved Israelites from bondage and led them to the land of milk and honey, the Promised Land, Obama recalled. Similarly, black Americans live within that story through the eschatological hope that one day they will be free. The Biblical figure Moses, who led the people out of bondage, gave the Israelites hope that one day, after their experience in the desert on the run from slavery they would reach the Promised Land. Although Moses himself died before reaching the Promised Land, a new leader named Joshua took his place. It was this narrative that Obama used to convince his audience of their responsibility to support him in his campaign. John Murphy argues that, "Obama's articulation of the Exodus made plausible what had seemed unlikely: a successful political campaign embodying the high purpose and deep values of the civil rights movement. It made narrative sense" (Murphy, 2011, 402).

Obama's appeal to the *Exodus* narrative was well known to the audience in Brown Chapel. King was the Moses figure who gave black Americans the eschatological hope that was at the center of his contribution to black liberation theology. Cone emphasized the importance of King for the movement. "It is not possible," he wrote, "to speak meaningfully to the black community about liberation unless it is analyzed from a Christian perspective which centers on Jesus Christ. This accounts for the influence of Martin Luther King, Jr." (Cone, 1986, 37). Obama's comparison had even greater resonance for his audience because it picked up from the last public speech of Martin Luther King Jr.'s life. King concluded his address

by speaking as though he were Moses, who was unable to enter the Promised Land. Prophetically, he said,

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land! (King, 1968).

King's words have been retroactively read as predicting his own death and, as such, have been given a special place in the political theology of the civil rights movement. Obama reenacted this story in his sermon by praising King's followers, who, "Like Moses, . . . challenged Pharaoh, the princes, powers who said that some are atop and others are at the bottom, and that's how its always going to be" (Obama, 2007).

After God worked through Moses to free the Israelites from bondage and supply their needs in their forty years of wandering through the desert, God would not allow Moses to cross into the Promised Land. Obama recounted this narrative in his sermon, positioning King as Moses by alluding to his words in ways that were enthymematically picked up by his audience:

As great as Moses was, despite all that he did, leading a people out of bondage, he didn't cross over the river to see the Promised Land. God told him your job is done. You'll see it. You'll be at the mountaintop and you can see what I've promised. What I've promised to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. You will see that I've fulfilled that promise but you won't go there (Obama, 2007).

In recounting the relationship between the civil rights generation, the "Moses generation," and the job that the African American community had yet to do, Obama described those who continued to fight black oppression, including himself, as the "Joshua generation." Whereas the Moses generation set the eschatological hope in motion, the Joshua generation would actually take black Americans to the Promised Land, as Joshua did in the Biblical *Exodus* narrative.

Obama's goal was to do more than situate his candidacy as a continuation of the black American journey toward freedom. It was to disconnect his black liberation theological audience from an interpretation of prophetic rhetoric that sought a black identity separate from white America and to reorient it to an integrationist

mission closer to the ideal of King's *Dream* speech. This accounts for the central place of the term "hope" in his lexicon in his early campaign speeches. Obama had to orient the descendants of the civil rights movement to the type of hope he had in mind when he used the language of black liberation theology in his campaign. He did this by reinforcing the importance of hope for the black American experience of *Exodus*. But, instead of that hope being for a freedom from white America, the Promised Land that the Joshua generation seeks is joined more fully in the American dream of equality.

This rhetoric implies leaving behind a significant aspect of black liberation discourse that Wright, for one, was loath to part with and that Obama, with more than a little dismissiveness, ascribed to the wounds left on his generation. God tasked the Joshua generation with helping to more fully realize the dream of America by healing it of its sin of slavery and its after-effects. Whereas Cone and Obama's pastor Wright described the task of black Americans as resisting white slave culture, Obama constructed the Joshua Generation as fighting for the soul of America. Obama used, or some would say coopted, liberation theological themes to construct the African American experience as one working on behalf of, not against, America:

We're in the presence today of giants whose shoulders we stand on, people who battled, not just on behalf of African Americans but on behalf of all of America; that battled for America's soul, that shed blood, that endured taunts and formant and in some cases gave—torment and in some cases gave the full measure of the devotion (Obama, 2007).

Obama's reference to the nation's "soul" is a continuation of the civil religious *mythos* that Bellah described and Lincoln exemplified in his Second Inaugural Address. In that great speech, Lincoln suggested that slavery was an offense against God for which the Civil War was the punishment:

If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offences which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him? (Lincoln, 1865)

In Obama's sermon, the civil rights movements became more than a struggle for African American rights. It was positioned as a continuation of the attempt to redeem the American nation of its original sin of slavery. In this aim Obama was on King's side.

This was not, however, any sort of assurance that this would happen by itself or because white people now favored it, an expectation that was in any event proven vain in the aftermath of Obama's election, when strains of racism that had been recessive suddenly became virulent again with Obama himself as their object. In a humorous moment in Obama's speech, he emphasized the practical aspect of voting that was central to his visit that day to Selma. "If cousin Pookie would vote," he said; "if uncle Jethro would get off the couch and stop watching 'Sportscenter' and go register some folks and go to the polls, we might have a different kind of politics. That's what the Moses generation teaches us. Kick off your bedroom slippers, put on your marching shoes, go do some politics, change this country" (Obama, 2007).

In this passage Obama inappropriately conflates the political purposes of traditional voting politics and the non-violent politics of resistance of King's Moses generation. Downplaying the latter, Obama appeals to what others have called "racial neoliberalism," the "cast[ing] of human subjectivity and political decision-making in light of market rationality. It entails a particular type of citizen-subject who 'aspires to be self-actualizing and self-fulfilling'" (Cisneros, 2015, 359). Obama works to set aside subjective differences such as race in favor of focusing on the value of a subject as determined by their practical use as a voter.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

Obama's sermon at Selma shows the persuasive ease with which he navigates these tensions in political theology. His cosmopolitan civil religion brings together differences and constructs a nation unified in its implicit whiteness. The contrast between him and Wright and Cone could not be clearer. But then again, they weren't running for office or governing. For all its inclusiveness, however, the American civil religion cannot accommodate blackness as defined in the resistant character of the theology of Wright and Cone. Prophetically, they call the nation into question not to preserve it, but to remind it that God is the God of the oppressed and that America is Moses' Egypt.

Although prophetic rhetoric can cut off democratic deliberation by operating outside of the standards of reasoning privileged in public life, by its unwillingness to agree to the standards of public

deliberation the prophetic tradition reminds those willing to attend to the fact that there are people excluded from the national discussion table. Although Obama used the black prophetic tradition in his civil religious rhetoric, that tradition has the rhetorical resources of prophecy to refuse his post-racial invitation. This should be seen as “meaningful incivility” because it uses “fire and strength” to remind the public that its efforts at constructing civil religious unity are not on the side of the oppressed in society (Darsey, 1997, ix-x).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Additional proof of the inferences I have drawn is found in the philosophical rhetoric of Cornel West. This rhetoric is explicitly based on the prophetic black tradition. West’s mingling of the themes of black liberation with American pragmatism, a white progressive discourse (West, 1989), led him to celebrate Obama’s candidacy, but then to “become one of his major critics” (Boynton, 2008).

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