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The Real Issue with Sen. Obama's Comments

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The news media and political pundits have been dissecting the now infamous comments of Sen. Barack Obama in which he told a group in San Francisco that hard economic times explain why some people cling to religion, guns, and certain political convictions.

Sen. Obama was speaking at a private fundraising event, but his comments became public when leaked to the media. Sen. Hillary Clinton and a host of others accused Sen. Obama of elitism and being out of touch with ordinary Americans — charge that may well gain traction in the crucial days leading up to the Pennsylvania primary next Tuesday.

Take a look again at the words most often cited from Sen. Obama's comments:

"It's not surprising then they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations."

I will let the political pundits have their day with this. My interest is theological, for Sen. Obama has given us a near-perfect expression of a *functional* view of religious belief. In other words, Sen. Obama said that "religion" is a coping mechanism for hard times — lumping religion with other issues his audience members were presumably to find strange and alien.

A functional view of belief assumes or "brackets" the question of whether the beliefs are true. One who holds to a purely functionalist view of religious conviction is not concerned with the truthfulness of these beliefs, but only with the *effects* the beliefs have on the believer, both privately and in social contexts.

No one but God knows Sen. Obama's heart, but we are left with his words. In this case, the words are very similar to what is so often heard from political figures. When speaking of their own faith they often speak of how it functions. Sen. Clinton spoke this way at the "Compassion Forum" at Messiah College on Sunday night, but we must note that Republicans often speak the same way — valuing "faith" as if faith has no object.

A functional view of belief appears when people speak of their beliefs or the beliefs of others in merely pragmatic form. It can be a way of avoiding the particularities of belief — speaking only of how their belief system functions in their lives. This function can be in terms of a coping mechanism, hope, comfort, moral guidance, or any number of effects.

In the early stages of modernity, many thinkers — assuming that there is no validity to religious beliefs in terms of truth — nevertheless noted what they described as its functions. Sigmund Freud detailed his psychiatric theory in *Totem and Taboo*. Karl Marx defined religious belief as "the opiate of the people," used by the politically powerful to oppress workers and keep them subservient. Other figures spoke of religious belief in more positive terms, describing its contributions to social order and cohesion.

In other words, functional views of religious belief are found among both conservatives and liberals. In one famous example, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, a

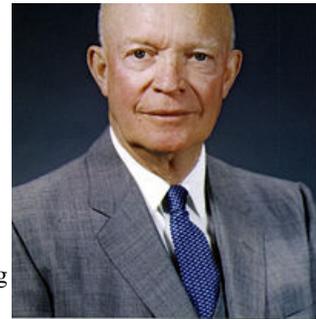


Republican, conveyed a functional view of religious belief in an almost quintessential expression. Speaking on Flag Day in 1954, President Eisenhower said: “Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply felt religious faith—and I don’t care what it is.”

As presidential historian William Lee Miller once noted, Eisenhower was a “fervent believer in a very vague religion.”

Christians should learn to detect a functional account of religious belief when listening to public figures speak. Liberals tend to speak in functional terms of meaning and purpose. Conservatives tend to speak functionally in terms of social order, stability, and morality.

None of these is a substitute for authentic Christianity — a faith that is predicated on being *true* — not merely meaningful or helpful.



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