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IT WAS A COOL, OVERCAST TUESDAY IN JULY 2004, AND BARACK Obama was making the expected round of meetings before his speech that evening at the Democratic National Convention in Boston. He had come at the request of John Kerry, who upon meeting Obama knew that the young man might very well be the face of the Democratic Party's future. Kerry wanted Obama's story and thoughtful oratory to feature in the convention's symbolic pageant just then unfolding before the watching world.

That afternoon, Obama walked the Boston streets with his friend, Chicago businessman Martin Nesbitt. At each stop, eager crowds formed and pressed ever closer to the thin black state senator from Illinois.

"This is incredible!" Nesbitt gushed. "You're like a rock star!"

Turning to his friend, Obama replied, "If you think it's bad today, wait till tomorrow."

Nesbitt looked puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"My speech is pretty good," Obama explained. Clearly, he already had some sense of his destiny.¹

That evening, after being introduced by Illinois senator Dick

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Durbin as “a man who can help heal the divisions of our nation,” Barack Obama strode to the rostrum to give the speech he was certain would resonate throughout the nation. Seventeen minutes later, he had decisively taken his place on the American political stage.

It was, by all accounts, the best speech of the convention, the kind that some politicians pray to give just once in their lifetimes. Though Obama did not shrink from extolling the superior heroism of John Kerry and the righteousness of Democratic Party values, he managed a tone that was somehow wise and apart. There was a nod to the limitations of government to solve problems, a call for an end to the political strife tearing at the nation’s soul. Scripture and the poetry of the American experience surfaced gracefully, and all was infused with Obama’s own story and what the promise of a “skinny kid with a funny name who believes that America has a place for him, too,” might mean to others.

It was a masterful performance, and for those who listened to the speech with an ear for the overtones of faith, there was a single sentence that signaled a defining theme in Barack Obama’s

*“We worship an
awesome God in
the Blue States.”*

life. It came toward the end, at a moment when Obama criticized the pundits who divide the nation into red states, or those that lean conservative and Republican, and blue states, or those that tend to vote Democratic. At

the beginning of a sweeping passage designed to reveal the folly of such labels, Obama exulted, “We worship an awesome God in the Blue States.”

The sentence was nearly buried in the rhetorical flourishes

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that followed. Though the words are but nine among more than two thousand, Obama intended them as a trumpet call of faith. No longer, he was saying, would the political fault lines in America fall between a religious Right and a secular Left. Instead, a Religious Left was finding its voice: *We, too, have faith*, they proclaimed. *Those of us on the political Left who believe in a woman's right to choose an abortion and who defend the rights of our gay friends and who care for the poor and who trust that big government can be a tool of righteousness—we also love God. We, too, have spiritual passion, and we believe that our vision for America arises from a vital faith as well. No longer will we be painted as the nonbelievers. No longer will we yield the spiritual high ground. The Religious Right has nothing on us anymore.*

It was a conscious attempt to reclaim the religious voice of the American political Left. Those nine words were meant to echo the footsteps of nuns and clergymen who marched with Martin Luther King Jr., of the religiously faithful who protested the Vietnam War or helped build the labor movement or prayed with César Chávez. Barack Obama was raising the banner of what he hopes will be the faith-based politics of a new generation, and he will carry that banner to whatever heights of power his God and the American people allow.



The faith that fuels this vision is fashioned from the hard-won truths of Obama's own spiritual journey. He was raised by grandparents who were religious skeptics and by a mother who took an anthropologist's approach to faith: religion is an important force

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in human history—understand it whether you make it your own or not. Nurtured as a child in the warm religious tolerance of the Hawaiian Islands and the multiculturalism of Indonesia in the late 1960s and early 1970s, he grew into a young man for whom race was more of a crisis than religion. As the son of a white American mother and a black African father who left the family when Barack was only two years old, he felt too white to be at home among his black friends, and too black to fit easily into the white world of his grandparents and mother. He was a man without country.

Ever the emotional expatriate, he was haunted by displacement through his college years and through his troubling experience as a community organizer in Chicago. It was not until he rooted himself in the soil of Trinity United Church of Christ on Chicago's South Side that he began to find healing for his loneliness and answers for his incomplete worldview. He experienced for the first time both connection to God and affirmation as a son of Africa. He would also be exposed to a passionate Afrocentric theology and a Christian mandate for social action that permanently shaped his politics. Through Trinity, he found the mystical country for which his soul had longed.

Yet he also found that through this country flowed a bitter stream. As he quickly came to understand, Trinity Church's broad Christianity was permeated by a defining, if understandable, spirit of anger: toward white America, toward a history of black suffering, and toward a U.S. government that consistently lived beneath the promise of her founding vision. If Obama himself refused to drink from this bitter stream, he was mentored by those who did. The senior pastor at Trinity, Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr., had for decades given poetic voice to the anger

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of his people, and when his sermons reached the broader American public during the 2008 presidential campaign, it created the worst crisis of Obama's candidacy.

Still, besieged by critics from both the political Right and Left, Obama initially refused to abandon his pastor. Neither did he abandon his role as a champion of the Religious Left, and in this his timing was perfect, for the religious winds were just then shifting in American politics.



As the 2008 presidential campaign season unfolded, the Religious Right—the coalition of faith-based social conservatives that had defined the debate over religion in American politics for nearly three decades—was in disarray, if not decline. Jerry Falwell and D. James Kennedy, revered fathers of the movement, had recently died. Other leaders had been sidelined through scandal and folly. Ted Haggard, president of the influential National Association of Evangelicals, had fallen into disgrace through drug abuse and sexual immorality. Pat Robertson, once the leading voice of the Religious Right, had earned nationwide scorn when he called for the assassination of Venezuela's Hugo Chávez and then intimated that Israel's prime minister, Ariel Sharon, lay in a coma due to God's anger over Israeli "land for peace" policies. Clearly, the lions of the movement were passing from the scene, but a passing of the baton to a new generation of national leaders was nowhere in sight.

No longer unified and able to speak with one voice, the leaders of the Religious Right each went their own way in endorsing Republican candidates. Pat Robertson, long an antiabortion stal-

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wart, endorsed Rudy Giuliani, the only pro-choice candidate among the Republicans. Bob Jones III, leader of the deeply fundamentalist Bob Jones University, endorsed the only Mormon candidate in the race, Mitt Romney. Longtime Religious Right kingmaker James Dobson issued statements attacking first Fred Thompson and then John McCain, only to endorse Mike Huckabee less than a month before the ex-governor dropped out of the race, much too late to have done any good. Strangely, few among the Religious Right seemed initially interested in Huckabee, a former Baptist preacher who spoke openly of his faith and extolled the virtues of faith-based politics. Of the remaining highly visible pastors in the nation, Joel Osteen and T. D. Jakes strained to remain nonpolitical, while Rick Warren and Bill Hybels went to great lengths to show that they were sensitive to and in some cases sympathetic with the priorities of the Religious Left, particularly as expressed by Barack Obama.

This fraying of the Religious Right was worsened by a surprising defection: evangelical voters, a mainstay of Republican politics for decades, began abandoning their party. By February 2008, esteemed pollster and cultural analyst George Barna was reporting that “if the election were held today, most born again voters would select the Democratic Party nominee for president.” Though in the 2004 election, George W. Bush had enjoyed a lopsided 62 percent of the “born again” Christian vote as opposed to the 38 percent who voted for John Kerry, by 2008 a mere 29 percent of born again voters were committed to Republican candidates. Some 28 percent were unsure of who they would vote for, while more than 40 percent had already chosen to vote for a Democrat.² Scandals, loss of leadership, and the

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declining fortunes of the Bush administration were prying evangelical voters from their traditional moorings just when candidate Barack Obama was proclaiming a new brand of faith-based politics.

Adding to the dissolving influence of the Religious Right were the religious preferences of a rising new generation whom demographers reported would be voting in record numbers. Polls indicated that the majority of Americans ages seventeen to twenty-nine intended to vote for a Democrat in 2008 and that Barack Obama was their leading choice.³ Moreover, it was not just his politics but his unorthodox spirituality that won them. Religiously, the majority of America's young are postmodern, which means they do faith like jazz: informal, eclectic, and often without theme. They have largely rejected organized religion in favor of a religious pastiche that works for them. They think nothing of hammering together a personal faith from widely differing religious traditions, and many acquire their theology the same way they catch colds: through casual contact with strangers. Thus, when Obama speaks of questioning certain tenets of his Christian faith or the importance of doubt in religion or his respect for non-Christian religions, the majority of the young instantly relate and welcome his nontraditional faith as a basis for his—and their—left-leaning politics.

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loss of the Religious Right's national leadership, the drift of born again voters toward the Democratic Party, and the religiously liberal, pro-Obama lean of young voters—changed the role of religion in the 2008 election. For a Religious Left just reclaiming its political voice, the marketplace of religious ideas in American politics was more open than at any time in a generation. It was a reality not lost on Barack Obama.



Also not lost on Obama are the possibilities of his astonishing popularity, which propels both his politics and his religious vision into the national psyche. He is regarded in American culture very much as Mark Nesbitt suggested on that afternoon in Boston before the now-storied convention speech: “like a rock star.” He draws some of the largest and most enthusiastic crowds in American political history, he is backed by global celebrities like Tom Cruise and Oprah Winfrey, and he is considered the Midas touch for any political candidate he endorses. “We originally scheduled the Rolling Stones for this party,” New Hampshire governor John Lynch joked at a rally. “But then we cancelled them when we realized that Senator Obama would sell more tickets.” His many achievements become the building blocks of his legend. Oddly, one campaign book even reminds readers that Obama has won more Grammy Awards (two, for the recordings of his books *Dreams from My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope*) than Jimi Hendrix and Bob Marley combined (zero).⁴

There are, too, those connections that the faithful take as signposts of destiny. Obama filed his papers with the Federal Election

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Commission in hopes of becoming the nation's first black president, one day after what would have been Martin Luther King Jr.'s, seventy-eighth birthday. Elected to the U.S. Senate, Obama was assigned the same desk that Robert F. Kennedy used, the culmination of a political journey begun forty years to the day after Kennedy was sworn in on January 4, 1965.

A sense of destiny is similarly suggested by the tale of his exotic background and the soul-searching it inspired. He has told this story in his two best-selling books, *Dreams from My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope*, both confirmation that Obama is among that rare breed of politicians who can write with skill and inspiration. His saga contains all the wrenching, ancient themes of human history and literature: the longing for place, the yearning for a father, the hope for a destiny. Like his politics, his life story is one that the public seems to embrace, and largely for its universal themes. In an unfathered, untethered generation, Obama often seems the Everyman in a heroic tale of spiritual seeking. Americans, as a people born of a religious vision, find in Obama at least a fellow traveler and at most a man at the vanguard of a new era of American spirituality.

There is also the appeal of his unusual openness, equally a function of his faith. In his books as in his speeches, he does not spare the details of drinking, drugs, sex, and dysfunction. He is a man comfortable with confession. This makes him a refreshing change from most American politicians. Asked by talk show host Jay Leno if he had inhaled when he smoked marijuana, Obama answered simply, "That was the point." His reply was typical of the transparent Obama charm and unself-conscious spirituality that many Americans have come to find so endearing.

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It is just such endearment that is winning adherents across the political spectrum. Obama himself tells of Republicans leaning in to him and saying in hushed voice, "I'm going to vote for you." He relates with mock puzzlement that his reply is often, "I'm glad." And then after a moment, "But why are we whispering?" Though his politics are decidedly liberal—his rating by the

National Abortion Rights Action League is consistently 100 percent, his rating by the American Civil Liberties Union hovers around 80 percent, but his rating by the American Conservative Union is always in the single digits—he is drawing disaffected Republicans in surprising numbers.

These, then, are the dynamics that promise to train the magnetic pull of Obama's spirituality on American culture for years to come. He is unapologetically Christian and unapologetically liberal, and he believes that faith ought to inform his politics and that of the nation as a whole. Also important, he is handsome in a media age, well reasoned, and articulate, and he is not going away. Should he lose the presidential race in 2008, he can run for office as often as he likes for the next twenty-four years and still be younger than John McCain is as these words are written. In short, he is going to be a political and religious force to be reckoned with in American society, and both his supporters and his detractors are well served by understanding why.

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What follows in these pages is an attempt to understand the religious life of Barack Obama and the changes in American religious history that he has come to represent. There is no attempt here to press a political agenda, nor is there a desire to rage against the realities of his life. Sufficient the rage of current American politics. This book is instead written in the belief that if a man's faith is sincere, it is the most important thing about him, and that it is impossible to understand who he is and how he will lead without first understanding the religious vision that informs his life. Equally important, there are often such riches of beauty and wisdom to be gained from a life informed by faith that the contemplation of it becomes its own reward. This is the spirit in which this book has been written.

Still, Barack Obama is a political being, and there can be no shrinking from the political implications of his faith. That it should be done kindly and generously is the insistence of this book. That it must be done at all is an insistence of the current religious vacuum in American political life.

1

To Walk Between Worlds

BOBBY RUSH IS AN IMPRESSIVE MAN. BORN IN THE DEEP South town of Albany, Georgia, in 1946, he later moved with his family to Chicago, Illinois, and rose to become a United States congressman. Along the way, he served in the U.S. Army, earned a bachelor's degree and two master's degrees, became an ordained Baptist minister, and won such respect in his district on the South Side of Chicago that he is now in his eighth term in office.

He also has the courage of his convictions. He was a cofounder of the Black Panther Party in Illinois and spent years operating a medical clinic and a breakfast program for children. He was a pioneer in drawing attention to the agonies of sickle cell anemia in the black community. Not surprising given his track record, on July 15, 2004, Congressman Rush became only the second sitting

U.S. congressman to be arrested—not for corruption or payola scams but for protesting human rights violations at the Sudanese Embassy in Washington, D.C.

Truly, Bobby Rush is an impressive man. So, why, in 1999, did thirty-eight-year-old Barack Obama, who had served in the Illinois senate only three years, decide to challenge Bobby Rush for his congressional seat? It could not have been the numbers. Rush's name recognition was more than 90 percent, while Obama's was barely 11. It also could not have been any political differences. Everyone knew that the two men held nearly the same views. It was one of the reasons that Rush often expressed hurt over Obama's challenge.

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Whatever moved Obama to run against Rush, it was not a pleasant experience for the younger man. From the outset, Rush's approval rating was more than 70 percent. Then, not long into the campaign, Rush's son, Huey Rich, was tragically shot on his way home from a grocery store. The young man hung between life and death for four days. Though it was distasteful at the time for anyone to mention a political benefit to the tragedy, the outpouring of sympathy did seem to galvanize support

for Rush, particularly among undecided voters. Soon billboards arose in the district, proclaiming, "I'm sticking with Bobby."

It never got better for Obama. Even President Clinton entered the

fray and supported Rush, breaking his own policy of not endorsing candidates in primaries. Rush won with twice the vote Obama received—approximately 60 percent to 30 percent—and Obama was forced to admit that “[I got] my rear end handed to me.”

There had been hurt and bitterness—the bad blood that fierce political battles can leave between men. Years went by, though, and with distance came a mellowing. The same Rush who had once described Obama as a man “blinded by ambition” came, in time, to a different view. After Obama entered the U.S. Senate, Rush said, “I think that Obama—his election to the Senate—was divinely ordered. I’m a preacher and pastor. I know that was God’s plan. Obama has certain qualities. I think he is being used for some purpose.”¹

Rush is not alone in this. Increasingly, words such as *called*, *chosen*, and *anointed* are being used of Obama. Though these terms have long belonged to the native language of the Religious Right, they are now becoming the comfortable expressions of an awakened Religious Left, of a faith-based Progressive movement. Moreover, they are framing the image of Barack Obama in the minds of millions of Americans.

Perhaps this should be expected. Perhaps this is nothing more than a by-product of the uniquely American need to paint politics and politicians in messianic terms. Perhaps this is what comes, in part, from a people believing themselves a chosen nation.

Yet what is unique about the use of such terms as applied to Barack Obama is how foreign they are to the religious worldview of his early life. We must remember that if he ascends to the presidency in 2009, he will be the first American president to do so having not been raised in a Christian home. Instead, he spent his early years

under the influence of atheism, folk Islam, and a humanist's understanding of the world that sees religion merely as a man-made thing, as a product of psychology. It is this departure from tradition in Obama's early years that makes both his political journey and his religious journey so unusual and of such symbolic meaning in American public life.



The story of the religious influences that have shaped Barack Obama is best begun with the novel faith of his grandmother, Madelyn Payne. She was born in 1922 to strict Methodist parents in the oil boom town of Augusta, Kansas. Though modern Methodists are known more for their eagerness to accommodate the sensitivities of secular society—removing offensive “gender bias” from their hymns, for example—the Midwest Methodists of the 1920s and 1930s exacted a higher price for righteousness. There was no drinking, card playing, or dancing in the Payne household. In church on Sundays, the family heard often of how small the army of the saved truly is compared to the vast numbers of those in the world who are going to hell. There were, too, the petty tyrannies that often attend religion in a flawed world: people shunned one another, lived lives at odds with the gospel they claimed to hold dear, and failed to distinguish themselves in any meaningful way from the world around them.

These hypocrisies were not lost on Madelyn Payne. She would tell her grandson often of the “sanctimonious preachers” she had known and of the respectable church ladies with absurd hats who whispered hurtful secrets and treated those they deemed beneath them with cruelty. What folly, she would recall with disgust, that a people would

be taught to ignore all the geologic evidence and believe that the earth and the heavens had been created in seven days. What injustice, she would insist, that men who sat on church boards should utter “racial epithets” and cheat the men who worked for them. Barack regularly heard such bitter sentiments in his grandparents’ home, sentiments that profoundly shaped his early religious worldview.

Madelyn was frequently described by neighbors as “different,” a gentle word for her eccentricities, and few were likely surprised when she met, and then secretly married, Stanley Dunham, a furniture salesman from nearby El Dorado. If the marriage was not exactly the attraction of opposites, it was at least the blending of incongruities. He was notoriously loud, crashing, and gregarious; friends said he could “charm the legs off of a couch.” She was bookish and sensitive. He was a Baptist from a blue-collar world. She was a Methodist whose parents were solidly middle class. Though in their generation these seemingly slight differences were enough to separate couples of less determination, Stanley and Madelyn fell in love and later married on the night of a junior/senior prom just weeks before her high school graduation in 1940. For reasons that remain unclear, her parents were not told of the union until her diploma was well in hand. They did not receive the news well, though this seemed to make little difference to the headstrong and increasingly rebellious Madelyn.

With the onset of World War II, Stanley enlisted in the army and ended up slogging through Europe with General George Patton’s tank corps without ever seeing real combat. Madelyn worked as a riveter at the Boeing Company’s B-29 plant in Wichita. In late November 1942, their daughter, Ann Dunham, was born.

Stanley Dunham has been described as a kind of Willy Loman,

the tragic, broken character in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. There are similarities. Returning from war and grasping the promise of the GI Bill, Stanley moved his young family to California, where he enrolled at the University of California–Berkeley. Obama would later recount kindly of his grandfather that “the classroom couldn't contain his ambitions, his restlessness, and so the family moved on.”² It was the pattern of a lifetime. There was first a return to Kansas and then years of one small Texas town after another, one dusty furniture store leading to the promise of bigger rewards at still another store farther up the road.

Finally, in 1955, just as Ann finished the seventh grade, the family moved to Seattle, where Stanley acquired a job as a salesman for Standard-Grunbaum Furniture, a recognized feature of the downtown area at the corner of Second and Pine. For most of their five years in Seattle, the family lived on Mercer Island, “a South America-shaped stretch of Douglas firs and cedars,” which lay across from the city in Lake Washington.³ While Stanley sold living room suites and Madelyn worked for a bank, young Ann began drinking from the troubled currents of the counterculture just then beginning to sweep through American society.

The high school that Ann attended was far from the stereotypical 1950s image. In the very year that she began classes at Mercer High, John Stenhouse, chairman of the school's board, admitted before the House Un-American Activities Subcommittee that he was a member of the Communist Party. Already at Mercer, there were recurring parental firestorms over the curriculum, long before such conflicts became commonplace throughout the nation. Most complaints centered on the ideas of Val Foubert and Jim Wichterman, two

instructors who were perceived as so radical for the time that students called the passageway between their classrooms “Anarchy Hall.” Together the two men had determined, without apology, to incite their students to both question and challenge all authority.

Foubert, who taught English, assigned books such as *Atlas Shrugged*, *The Organization Man*, *The Hidden Persuaders*, 1984, and the most strident of H. L. Mencken’s cultural commentaries—none of which are extreme by today’s standard but which were certainly out of the mainstream in 1950s America. Wichterman, who taught philosophy, assigned Sartre, Kierkegaard, and Karl Marx’s *The Communist Manifesto*, and did not hesitate to question the existence of God. Parental upheavals ensued, which Foubert and Wichterman dubbed “Mother Marches.” “The kids started questioning things that their folks thought shouldn’t be questioned—religion, politics, parental authority,” John Hunt, a student at the time, remembered, “and a lot of parents didn’t like that and tried to get them [Wichterman and Foubert] fired.”⁴

None of this upheaval was of much concern to Stanley and Madelyn Dunham, though. Having long before shed the quaint faith and suffocating values of rural Kansas, Ann’s parents were comfortable with the innovations in the Mercer High School curriculum. They had even begun attending East Shore Unitarian Church in nearby Bellevue—often referred to in Seattle as “the little Red church on the hill”—for its liberal theology and politics. Barack would later describe this as the family’s “only skirmish into organized religion” and explain that Stanley “liked the idea that Unitarians drew on the scriptures of all the great religions,” excitedly proclaiming, “It’s like you get five religions in one!” “For

Christ's sake," Madelyn would shoot back, according to Barack, "It's not supposed to be like buying breakfast cereal!"⁵

Though what has come to be known as the Unitarian Affirmation of Faith is, in fact, an overly simplistic reworking of the ideas of James Freeman Clarke, it does serve to hint at what the Dunhams accepted as true: "the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, the leadership of Jesus, salvation by character, and the progress of mankind onward and upward forever." That Stanley and Madelyn believed in a God of some description is confirmed by Barack. However, they were likely skeptics—Barack says that Madelyn espoused a "flinty rationalism"—regarding the divinity of Jesus, whom they would have accepted as one good moral teacher among many but certainly not a god. That man is perfectible, that men ought to live as brothers, and that society would climb ever upward if they did are all truths that were agreed upon in the Dunham home, though Ann would in time accept these possibilities only on the most secular terms.

In truth, Ann Dunham was already on a journey beyond the freethinking of her parents, beyond her friends at Mercer High School, and yet in keeping with the philosophical trends of her times. She had absorbed the broad spirituality and social vision of the East Shore Unitarian Church. She had also been paying attention in the classrooms of Foubert and Wichterman. Having begun with her parents' religious skepticism, Ann went even further and declared herself an atheist.

During after-school gab sessions in the coffee shops of Seattle, her friends began to realize how fully Ann had thought through her beliefs. "She touted herself as an atheist, and it was something

she'd read about and could argue," remembers Maxine Box, who was Dunham's best friend in high school. "She was always challenging and arguing and comparing. She was already thinking about things that the rest of us hadn't." Another classmate, Jill Burton-Dascher, recalls that Ann "was intellectually way more mature than we were and a little bit ahead of her time, in an off-center way." "If you were concerned about something going wrong in the world," Chip Wall, a friend, explains, "[Ann] would know about it first." She was, he says, "a fellow traveler. . . . We were liberals before we knew what liberals were."⁶

As the decade of the 1960s dawned and Ann approached the end of her high school career, friends expected she might chart a bold course: college at a European university perhaps, or studies back east among the nation's Ivy League. They soon heard that Stanley had found a new job—yet another furniture store with yet bolder promises of success—this time in Hawaii. Though some remember that Ann did not want to go, it was not long before letters began arriving from Honolulu, describing how she had enrolled in the University of Hawaii for the fall term of 1960.

Only the year before, Hawaii had achieved statehood. This was likely part of the attraction for Stanley. His adventurous, ever-unsatisfied soul yearned for what appeared to be a new frontier. A fresh start in a new state, far from the American mainland, seemed ideal. He was entering his forties—the onset of midlife crisis for most men—his only daughter had just finished high school, and the darkness of the 1960s had yet to descend. Life was full of promise, though for Stanley this would mean going where that promise lived: a new place, a new role, a new crowd to charm.

Stanley could not have known that his life would be both graced and anguished by the comings and goings of his daughter and the little biracial boy she would bring into the world.

He could not have known that it would be the last move of his life or that he would eventually pass his days in a small Honolulu apartment, if not embittered then at least disillusioned by his few achievements. He could not have known that in the meantime, his wife would rise to become the first female vice president of the Bank of Hawaii and would do so without a college degree, an astonishing achievement for a woman in that era. And he could not have known that his life would be

both graced and anguished by the comings and goings of his daughter and the little biracial boy she would bring into the world.



Ann Dunham met Barack Obama Sr. while she was a freshman and he a graduate student at the University of Hawaii. He must have appeared exotic to her, with his rich, full voice; his Kenyan accent; his chiseled features; and his studied worldliness. He had come to Hawaii on the wings of extreme good fortune: his government had sent him abroad to study on a scholarship created for the rising leaders of Jomo Kenyatta's Kenya. Though he now spent weekends with Ann, listening to jazz, drinking beer, and debating politics and world affairs with their friends, he had only a few years before lived a Kenyan village life, herding goats and submitting to

the rituals of a village witch doctor. Now, in the West, he had rejected the Muslim faith of his youth just as he rejected the babblings of all witch doctors. Religion is superstition, he insisted. It falls to man to fashion his own fate and the fate of his nation. This was what he intended to do when he finished school and returned to Kenya.

Things moved quickly for Ann and her new love. Sometime late in the fall of 1960, she conceived a child. Several months into 1961, she and Barack married, and six months later, friends in Seattle were receiving letters announcing the birth of their son, Barack Hussein Obama, born August 4, 1961.

What followed immediately after is now well-known. Barack Obama Sr. continued to live in Hawaii only a short time after the birth of the son who bore his name. An opportunity to earn his doctorate at Harvard proved too enticing, and he left, to return only once more before his death in 1982 of alcohol, bitterness, and a car crash. The pictures of young Barack make it hard to imagine any father walking away from such a child. In time, Ann and Barack would learn that Barack Sr. had been married in a Kenyan village ceremony long before he met Ann and already had other children. She would file for divorce in 1964.

There are many things to admire about Ann and how she raised her son, and certainly among them is the way she kept the positive memory of Barack Obama Sr. alive in her son's heart. Though a less-generous soul might speak only ill of such a man, Ann regularly rehearsed his virtues to young Barack. The boy knew nearly from birth that his father had grown up poor in a poor country on a poor continent, and that only through hard work and toughness

had he risen to esteem. “Your brains, your character, you got from him,” she assured him, and so worked to keep a deforming bitterness from settling into her son’s spirit.

The years after Barack Sr.’s departure, and while the family was still in Hawaii, were nearly idyllic for young Barack. There were frequent trips with Grandfather Stanley to the Ali’i Park, joyous days at the beach, and adventures such as deep-sea fishing off Kailua Bay that seared themselves happily into his memory. A photograph survives from this time of Barack swinging a baseball bat nearly as long as he is. It is an image of a child who is loved and content, a picture taken by a member of the family who clearly delights in those spindly legs, that broad smile, that beautifully shaped head. Madelyn, whom young Barack called “Toot”—short for the Hawaiian word for grandmother, *Tutu*—read to her grandson by the hour, eager to pass along the literary joys she had known as a child through the Great Books her family ordered by mail on the plains of Kansas. These were happy times. The haunting of race, rootlessness, and an absent father are for later years.

Creeping into Barack’s remembrance of these years is a man named Lolo Soetoro, a friend and a fellow student of his mother’s at the University of Hawaii. He soon after became Barack’s wrestling partner and Stanley’s loyal opponent in chess. Within two years, he was more, and Ann told her son that Lolo had proposed marriage, that she had accepted, and that it meant they would move to the other side of the world, to a place called Indonesia.

It says much about Ann Dunham Soetoro that she would uproot her son from the glories of Hawaii and move him in the mid-1960s to one of the most troubled places on earth. Indonesia had been

led for decades by its revolutionary founder, Sukarno, a man more adept at words than administration. He had attempted to build his country on five ideals he called the Five Fundamental Principles: nationalism, internationalism, democracy, social prosperity, and belief in God. These were intended to be the essence of the Indonesian spirit. However, Sukarno's era in Indonesia is testament that words alone do not make a nation. By the 1960s, Sukarno's ineptitude had led to widespread suffering. As historian Paul Johnson has written: "Food rotted in the countryside. The towns starved. Foreign investment vanished."⁷ Meanwhile, Sukarno's personal behavior became an international scandal. He acquired wives and mistresses freely, and his foreign jaunts were famous for his sexual foraging. During a visit to Indonesia in 1960, Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev was shocked to see Sukarno chatting happily and openly with a completely naked woman.⁸

To cover the disasters of his leadership, Sukarno secretly gave the nod to a coup by the Communist Party in 1965. Sukarno's generals and handpicked officials were murdered, their daughters raped, the bodies of their wives and children thrown into the Lubang Buaja, the Crocodile Hole. The coup failed, however, and a General Suharto, the strategic reserve commander, took over. In a bloody backlash against the communists, hundreds of thousands were butchered, perhaps as many as a million. These horrors slowed to an end in 1966, only a year before Ann began to raise her six-year-old son in Jakarta.

The years that young Barack's family lived in Indonesia will likely remain among the most controversial of his life. The facts are simple enough, though. The family initially lived in a small,

flat-roofed bungalow at 16 Haji Ramli Street. Barack, who was known as Barry in these years, ran the dirt streets around his house, wearing a sarong, the traditional wraparound skirt worn by men, and played soccer by the hour with the neighborhood children. Because

*Barack accompanied
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Lolo, his stepfather, was a Muslim, young Barry was listed as Muslim in official documents. Occasionally, he accompanied Lolo to a nearby mosque on Fridays and prayed at his side for the blessings of Allah.

In 1968, Barry began first grade at St. Francis Assisi Foundation School, which was a few blocks from his home. As each school day began, he would cross himself, pray the Hail Mary, the Our Father, and whatever else the attending nuns required. The atheist Ann and the Muslim Lolo endured this Catholic influence because the education at the school was among the best available. Two years later, after Lolo landed a job with an oil company and moved the family to a better neighborhood, Barack entered a public school now called Model Primary School Menteng 1. Here again, Barack was listed as a Muslim, which meant that he studied the doctrines of Islam during the required two hours a week of religious instruction.

His life was a religious swirl. He lived in a largely Muslim country. He prayed at the feet of a Catholic Jesus. He attended a mosque with his stepfather and learned Islam in his public school. At home, his mother taught him her atheistic optimism. She was,

wrote Obama years later, “a lonely witness for secular humanism, a soldier for New Deal, Peace Corps, position-paper liberalism.”⁹

Lolo’s faith was more complex. Though he called himself a Muslim and urged Islam on Ann and Barack as a means to connect to the community, he was not very religious. This is surprising to many contemporary Westerners who think of Islam only in terms of the strident, fundamentalist strain that is causing so much heartache in the world today. Indonesia in the late 1960s and early 1970s was often violent for political reasons, but seldom for the sake of religion. The Islam of Indonesia in those days easily blended with Hinduism, Buddhism, and even animism, to produce a broad, eclectic spirituality. The daily experience of this blend is best described as folk Islam, a superstitious and occult fringe faith comprised largely of rituals to drive away evil: incantations against the evil eye, charms to ward off spirits, symbols to assure blessing, and ancient understanding of spiritual power and its uses.

Lolo lived on the folk edge of Islam, teaching young Barack superstitions and rituals popular on the streets of Jakarta. He believed, for example, that a man took on the powers of whatever he ate, a cherished pagan notion through the centuries. He often brought tiger meat home in hopes of making his stepson a fiercer, more powerful man. Yet the doctrines of orthodox Islam held little sway with Lolo. For example, he employed a young male cook who liked to dress up as a woman on weekends, something a more faithful Muslim would never have allowed in his home. Indeed, the young man’s life would have been in peril among fundamentalists. Lolo also loved women, drink, and Western music. Barack would later recall his stepfather’s passion for Johnny Walker Black and

Andy Williams records. “Moon River” was nearly the soundtrack of his Indonesian memories.

Obama has written that his mother taught him to view religion as “a phenomenon to be treated with a suitable respect, but with a suitable detachment as well.”¹⁰ It is just this detachment that may

His stepfather lived on the folk edge of Islam, teaching young Barack superstitions and rituals popular on the streets of Jakarta.

have proven the greatest emotional lesson of his years in Indonesia. He was to live in a Muslim country but be taught by his stepfather’s example to ignore the most fundamental teachings of Islam. He was to attend a Roman Catholic school, but regard Christianity as no more than superstition. And he was to love a mother who viewed all religion as nothing more than a man-made tool for contending with the mysteries of

life. Only through a steely shielding of the heart, only through a determined detachment, could a child of Barack’s age be exposed to so much incongruous religious influence and emerge undamaged. Perhaps, though, the damage was in the detachment itself.



The question that will surface again and again about Obama’s years in Indonesia is this: Was Barack Obama a Muslim? If he was a true Muslim, then his conversion to Christianity in his later years would make him *murtadd* in the eyes of Muslims: an apostate.

Orthodox Islam would insist that such a man be rejected by his community and, in some jurisdictions, marked for death.

This extremism regarding apostates is not buried in an earlier age of Islam but is still very much alive and has actually intensified in recent decades. The revered and controversial Pakistani scholar Sayyid Abul Ala Maududi, for example, argued fiercely for the execution of apostates, and his thinking is typical of the reasoning that might be applied to Barack Obama's story:

The heart of the matter is that children born of Muslim lineage will be considered Muslims and according to Islamic law the door of apostasy will never be opened to them. If anyone of them renounces Islam, he will be as deserving of execution as the person who has renounced *kufr* [infidelity to Islam] to become a Muslim and again has chosen the way of *kufr*. All the jurists of Islam agree with this decision. On this topic absolutely no difference exists among the experts of *shari'ah*.¹¹

The question of whether Obama fits this description is complicated somewhat by the way a man becomes a Muslim. In Islam, a man submits to Allah and enters the community of faith by reciting the creed *There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his Prophet*. These are the words a Muslim speaks over his newborn child and hopes to have upon his own lips at his death. They are the keys to faith, the pathway of conversion.

Did young Barack say these words in honor of Islam? Yes, certainly, both at his stepfather's side in the Jakarta mosque on

Fridays and in the Islamic religious instruction he received several hours a week in school. Does this make him a Muslim in his childhood and therefore a *murtadd* now? Neither the Koran nor the *Hadith*, the systematic compilation of Muslim teaching, addresses this issue. The question seems to vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, but the majority opinion among Islamic teachers, despite Maududi's insistence to the contrary, is that a child must have reached puberty before his confession of faith amounts to a full conversion. Barack was years from puberty in his last months in Indonesia, so he is not to be considered a full convert to Islam, and therefore he is not an apostate now.

It is an interesting question, and one that will likely surface often. If Barack Obama should ascend to the presidency and offend Islamic mullahs by his policies, there could conceivably be a *fatwa* [religious decree] issued against him from some renegade jurisdiction on the

basis that he is an apostate. It would be untrue, of course, in light of the consensus of Islamic teaching. Still, some enraged mullah might take note that Obama's biological father was an apostate from Islam. This could be held alongside his own childhood confession of faith as sufficient evidence to rule him a *murtadd* and deserving of death. It would all be a lie, of course, and nothing more than a manufactured excuse for murder. Nevertheless, it

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would be the first time in American history that such a charge could be engineered against a sitting president.

Though religion permeated Barry's years in Indonesia, what may have had an even greater impact on the course of his life were his mother's efforts to give him a superior education. This came in the wake of a decline in Ann and Lolo's relationship and her realization that she did not want to lose Barack to Indonesia. She long had preached the virtues of cultural sensitivity, of never becoming a boorish outsider to the indigenous people. Now, she began to fear that the tentacles of this strange land were wrapped too tightly around her son. No, she would not lose him to the East. He would be an American, she determined, and education was the best way to make this so.

From the time they arrived in Jakarta, she had supplemented his local schooling with a correspondence course from the States. Determined to seal her son to the West, Ann redoubled her efforts. Each morning, she awakened her son at 4:00 a.m., fed and dressed him, and began drilling him in English for three hours before he traipsed off to school. It was not a pleasant experience. Barry resisted, claimed illness, and generally fought his mother at every step. In time, the lessons took hold, and Barry began to show a facility for language and learning that surprised even Ann. Though it could not have seemed the case at the time, these early morning sessions and the mental rigors they required may well have been the spark of the intellectual fires that gave him, ultimately, an exceptional mind.

These efforts were evidence that Ann had turned her attention to America. The progression that followed is unclear, perhaps by design. Obama's little sister, Maya, was born, and not long afterward

Ann made plans for Barack to return to the States. Ann and Maya initially remained in Indonesia and then in a matter of months returned to America. There followed a divorce. The three—Ann, Barack, and Maya—would see Lolo only once more in their lives, when he traveled to Los Angeles ten years later for treatment of the liver ailment that ultimately killed him at the age of fifty-one.

Upon his return to Honolulu in 1971, Barack was enrolled in the esteemed Punahou School. It was a turning point in his young life, one that determined much that would follow. Until then, other than the intelligence his mother recognized in him, there seemed to be little exceptional about his life. He lived with middle-class grandparents and followed his quixotic mother as she chased her loves and her dreams. He was a bright ten year old, but nothing as yet indicated the promise of his life: nothing concretely presaged the ascent to come. Punahou was the beginning of distinction.

He gained admission through the good graces of his grandfather's boss, an alumnus of the school. After interviews and testing, Barack was admitted and thus became part of a tradition that dated to 1841, when Punahou was founded to educate the children of Hawaii's Congregational missionaries. In the more than a century and a half since, it had become "an incubator for the island elites."¹² Barack was a student there for a vital seven years of his life. Academically and athletically, he thrived. He maintained a solid B average, threw himself into his love of basketball, and even wrote for the school's literary magazine.

Yet in these years he also began the agonizing search for belonging as a man of mixed race. Who was he really? What tribe

could he claim as his own? Mixed in with his natural adolescent search for both freedom and definition was a more subterranean yearning to belong to a like people, to have a place among a nation of like kind. Hawaii did not make this easy. It offered too much, seemed to affirm too many options. There was no prescribed path, no single style or type that stood out. In hotel rooms, along with the Gideon Bible, guests were often surprised to find both the Book of Mormon and the Teachings of the Buddha. Every ethnic and religious option was represented on the streets of Honolulu. Even at Punahou, the clocks in the library showed the times in Third World nations, an attempt by the administration to reinforce its message of multiculturalism. None of this made it easy for Barack to single out his unique place in the world.

During his years at Punahou, he tried on personas as another man might try on clothes. Was he the angry radical brother or the educated, upwardly mobile black? Was he intent upon destroying the system or rising within it? Should he drift in bitterness into drugs and parties—and gripe sessions where he poured out his excuses for failure—or should he nurse an “I’ll show them,” angry drive and take on the world? Was it denying his blackness to date a white girl or running from his white world to socialize only with blacks? More vitally, was he fully any one thing in

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the world? White? Black? American? He wasn't sure. He read Baldwin, Ellison, Hughes, Wright, and Dubois, but found no map for the country he sought. All of them ended, he concluded, "exhausted, bitter men, the devil at their heels."¹³

Graduating from Punahou in 1979, he attended Occidental University in Los Angeles for two years but found himself sinking into the aimlessness of some of his friends. He knew he had to pull himself out of the bog. He decided to transfer to Columbia University in New York, and there followed what he later described as a "fundamental rupture in my life." He had not come to a grand plan and certainly had no political ambitions. Yet he did decide that he wanted to, as he put it, "make my mark," that he yearned to be noticed, to do something important—perhaps even to live an exceptional life.¹⁴ He became more serious about his future but was still aware that he had "no guide that might show [him] how to join this troubled world." When he slipped into the back pew of New York's Abyssinian Baptist Church one Sunday and felt the sweet sorrow in an ancient song, he was void of the faith that gave the song wings. He belonged there and didn't, much as it was for him in the world. He was, as his sister, Maya, would later say, walking "between worlds."¹⁵

The truth is he was lonely. By the time he finished college with a degree in political science in 1983, he was living half a world away from his only family. His father, whom he had not seen in more than a decade, had recently died. It is possible that having learned detachment from his anthropologist mother, he had made detachment a lifestyle. He was in a self-imposed prison, one created by both his need and his curse to look upon the world as though he

were not a part of it. He became a rootless wanderer and was haunted by “the mixed blood, the divided soul, the ghostly image of the tragic mulatto trapped between two worlds.”¹⁶

This was his state when he landed in Chicago in 1985. He had recently tasted work in the New York corporate world and found it thin. Arriving in a city he barely knew, he went to work for a social improvement organization called Developing Communities Project. His Herculean task was to mobilize people on Chicago’s South Side to make positive change in their community. His world now became the roiling, largely black, deeply frustrated, poverty-ridden yet often joyful streets of the neighborhoods that gave the world both the music of Muddy Waters and the fiction of Upton Sinclair. Obama gave himself to any cause important to the people—from asbestos to crime, from church unity to prostitution—as a means of building consensus and thus political power. He spent many of his days interviewing people about their needs and complaints. He called meetings, cajoled, endured repeated humiliation, and enjoyed minor victories. He was ambitious and came to see the connection between crisis and power. As he wrote later in *Dreams from My Father*, “Issues, action, power, self-interest. I liked these concepts. They bespoke a certain hardheadedness, a worldly lack of sentiment; politics, not religion.”¹⁷

Yet religion became his crisis, personally and professionally. He admitted to coworkers that he was “not very religious” and was told that this only put a barrier between himself and the people. In the community, people wanted to know where he got his faith before they wanted to hear his ideas for social improvement. But he had no faith, not in the religious sense. His work with pastors

hadn't helped that cause. Though he found some clergymen who were willing to roll up their sleeves and work to heal the community, many pastors he met were either politicians with clerical collars or men who were too tradition-bound to be of any use—or to offer any refreshment to his parched soul.

He was also pressing against the limits of his mother's worldview, and it was a disturbing experience.

I had no community or shared traditions in which to ground my most deeply held beliefs. The Christians with whom I worked recognized themselves in me; they saw that I knew their Book and shared their values and sang their songs. But they sensed that a part of me remained removed, *detached*, an observer among them. I came to realize that without a vessel for my beliefs, without an unequivocal commitment to a particular community of faith, I would be consigned at some level to always remain apart, free in the way that my mother was free, but also alone in the same ways she was ultimately alone.¹⁸

Ann had loved him, imparted to him a sense of the power of his gifts, and cheered him on as he rose in the world. Much of what he became was due to her devotion. Yet she could not give him what she did not have. As a woman who had rejected faith and looked upon human society much as a scientist looks at cells through a microscope, she paid the price for her detachment by ultimately having no belonging, no tribe, no people to claim for her own. Though she could be a warm and broadly spiritual person, she was isolated by the detachment she prized. Her legacy might

have been his own had he not come to realize the horrible price of her beliefs.

It was as these thoughts troubled his mind that Barack Obama landed in a pew at the 8:00 a.m. Sunday service of Trinity United Church of Christ. He had met some weeks before with the pastor, Jeremiah Wright, though the topic of the discussion had been the community and how Trinity was often perceived by other churches. Obama had a dual agenda. He listened respectfully as Wright talked, but he was also scanning the spirit of the man and testing the waters in light of a change he was considering. The meeting ended, Obama grabbed some material about the church at the front office as he left, and then he let weeks go by.

He was wrestling—with his conscience, his cynicism, his intellectual approach to faith. Asked if he would join a friend at church, he demurred.

And I would shrug and play the question off, unable to confess that I could no longer distinguish between faith and mere folly, between faith and simple endurance; that while I believed in the sincerity I heard in their voices, I remained a reluctant skeptic, doubtful of my own motives, wary of expedient conversion, having too many quarrels with God to accept a salvation too easily won.¹⁹

Nevertheless, questions raging and doubts unresolved, he came. As he sat in that Trinity pew early that Sunday morning, he settled into the comforting mercies of the African-American church. He knew that this church, like most of its kind, had long ministered to

the community as it did to the man, that individual salvation and collective salvation were both noble goals of the black gospel. This idea pleased him. He also felt peace at the notion that in the black church “the lines between sinner and saved were more fluid,” that “you needed to embrace Christ precisely because you had sins to wash away” and not because you walked in the door perfect as a glowing gift for God.²⁰ This he needed to know as he sat there, a man of doubt and conflict.

The sermon that day was on a topic that would live in his soul and in his politics. It was called “The Audacity of Hope.” In the skilled rhetorical hands of Jeremiah Wright, the lesson mounted into a grand symphony of uniquely African-American preaching. Searing biblical content was overlaid against social commentary and all brought to bear on the sufferings and promised victories of each individual life in the congregation. Somehow, beginning with the slender hopes of Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel, Rev. Wright managed to reflect on the injustices of Sharpsville and Hiroshima, the follies of state and federal government in America, and the callousness of the middle class. Despite the broad range of references, or perhaps because of them, a laser of hope penetrated Barack’s soul. At sermon’s end, he found himself in tears.

It was a beginning. The process that followed took months and could not be hurried. And when the turning came, it was not attended by angels and flashes of light. In the retelling it did not have the ring of the famous conversions of history, with their great moral transformations and dramatic encounters with God. Instead, it was a decision to enter a faith by joining a people of faith, to come home to a community and so come home to God. Indeed, as Obama

TO WALK BETWEEN WORLDS

has explained, “It came about as a choice and not an epiphany; the questions I had did not magically disappear. But kneeling beneath that cross on the South Side of Chicago, I felt God’s spirit beckoning me. I submitted myself to His will and dedicated myself to discovering His truth.”²¹

2

My House, Too

PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE SAM BROWNBACK WAS FEELING relieved. Appearing with Barack Obama at a 2006 World AIDS Day summit sponsored by Rick Warren's Saddleback Church, Brownback said he felt a bit more "comfortable" than he had the last time the two presidential candidates shared a stage. "We were both addressing the NAACP," he told the crowd of several thousand. "They were very polite to me. I think they kind of wondered, 'Who's this guy from Kansas?' And then Barack Obama follows, and they're going, 'Okay, now we've got Elvis.'"

Assuming that Warren's evangelical church would be home turf for a conservative Roman Catholic like himself, Brownback then turned to Obama and said, "Welcome to *my* house!" The audience exploded with laughter and applause. A few moments later, though,

Obama took the stage and said, “There is one thing I have to say, Sam. This is my house, too. This is God’s house.”¹

Once again, Obama showed his skill at intercepting the political long pass. Brownback intended an appeal to his base. Obama wasn’t having it. Refusing to yield an inch of the religious high ground, he made it clear to all that not only would he not be moved from his rightful place in the Christian fold, but he also would not allow newcomers to the crisis of AIDS, newcomers like Warren’s evangelicals,

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to forget that Obama’s political tribe began addressing that issue long ago. *Be a Christian with me, Sam*, he was saying, *but don’t act like my older brother. This is my house, too.*

Though Obama was declaring his membership in the universal house of God, his more local house of faith is far removed from Rick Warren’s Saddleback Church and the largely white enclaves of Lake Forest, California. Instead, Obama’s spiritual house sits nearly half a continent away, in the heart of housing projects and steel mesh-wrapped businesses on Chicago’s black and proud South Side.

A visitor to a Sunday morning service at Trinity United Church of Christ is first struck by the worshippers who walk the weary streets of their South Side neighborhood en route to their spiritual home. Mothers balance on high heels while wrestling handfuls of fussy children along broken sidewalks; fathers make a game of carrying sweetly dressed daughters on broad shoulders past the

never-quiet traffic on West Ninety-fifth Street. Some have walked for miles, yet there is determination in each step born of a spiritual hunger and a universal yearning to assume a place among one's people.

Drawing near to the impressive yellow-beige building that houses Trinity Church, the visitor also senses the care and planning that pervades the life of this spiritual family. Kind but imposing security men are positioned strategically around the building, each dressed stylishly for church but with earbuds and walkie-talkies protruding. Some are armed, as has become the unfortunate need of many large churches around the nation. Stepping from the obviously loved and tenderly maintained grounds through the main doors, the visitor is greeted by older men and women who put the loving face on this carefully crafted system of hospitality.

If the visitor is late, he may well be asked to stand in lines defined by velvet ropes and fastened to brass stands, much as he might see at an upscale movie theater. The message is clear: *This is not just a church; this is a cultural phenomenon, a religious experience of historic importance for the people who attend.* Hundreds throng to enter, sometimes arriving in the still-dark hours of the morning just to get a seat. Don't be late.

Passing through the lobby, the visitor might easily miss the first symbols of the defining vision of this people. A picture of a black Jesus hangs behind an information desk, His arms extended around a black family radiating joy and contentment. There are, too, black faces in the biblical scenes depicted in the glorious stained glass of Trinity Church. These are silent testimony to the theological vision at the heart of this African-American family of faith.

While the crowd begins to fill up the nearly twenty-seven hundred seats of the contemporary-style sanctuary, the visitor cannot help but notice the clothing of the worshippers. There are, of course, the brilliant dresses, hats, and fashionable suits one expects of a black church in America. There is also more casual attire—jeans and leather jackets; stepping-out-at-night, low-cut dresses; and even work clothes worn by the city bus driver who did not have time to change. All are welcome. Yet in larger numbers than most black churches can boast, the worshippers at this church dress in the attire of Africa. Dashikis and flowing robes sing their colors in African hues, and huge turbans bound with exotic knots are worn by women who understand the power of the statement they make. One quickly realizes that this is not a fashion show: these are the uniforms of a worldview.

Ushers wearing white gloves seat all comers, while older women keep a mothering eye on the waiting crowd. “Sir, is that a recording device? Oh, your electronic Bible? Okay then, enjoy the service.” “Ma’am, we don’t allow cameras. May I ask you to put that away until you leave the grounds?” All is done with kindness and grace, yet with the underlying firmness of elders tending their clan.

Indeed, the whole system of gathering has obviously been crafted with an eye to serving the outsider while protecting church members from intrusion. This is, after all, a spiritual family of nearly ten thousand, where a U.S. senator and the most famous woman in America, Oprah Winfrey, sometimes attend. Members of the press are kindly tagged and assigned a handler. Attendees smile knowingly at an unshaven French camera crew in jeans and boots, now escorted by an elegant Nigerian woman in a brilliantly colored gown, explaining

what may and may not be done. Reporters who stray off-limits may well be met by mountainous security men, some former members of the Chicago Bears, who gently suggest a return to bounds.

At the exact moment of the published starting time, a woman moves to the pulpit to make announcements. So striking is her manner that years after seeing her for the first time, Barack Obama remembered the “graying hair” and “no-nonsense demeanor.” At her first word, the crowd immediately falls to silence. This is a disciplined congregation.

If the visitor does not allow himself to be bored by this ritual of information sharing common to all churches, he may come to understand something of the soul of this people from these few introductory moments. Careful attention over time will reveal that on a budget of nearly \$10 million—respectable but not exceptional for a church of its size—Trinity sponsors more than seventy ministries and dozens of educational institutions around the world. There are alcohol and drug-addiction outreaches, ex-offender programs, hospices, counseling services, elder care, and many other social services of nearly every kind. The church has given more than a million dollars to the United Negro College Fund and has raised hundreds of thousands to support

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scholarships and schools, some as far away as Africa and the Middle East. There are academic programs, college preparatory services, and even college fairs. Consciously resisting a “silo mentality,” in which wealth is stored but not used, Trinity clearly intends to invest wealth to change the culture of its people. It also clearly intends to break from the black church of tradition. Trinity sponsors a large outreach to gay and lesbian singles, an emphasis both unusual and controversial among African-American Christians.

Listening a bit more closely, the visitor may come to understand that this is not just a congregation of the downtrodden. There are in attendance multimillionaire businessmen, politicians, medical doctors, and hundreds of teachers and college professors, including at least a dozen from the prestigious University of Chicago. The church is sometimes criticized in its own community for being too “buppie”: black, upwardly mobile, professional. This fact does not seem to bother the pastors. Several of them hold degrees from Ivy League schools, and no senior staffer is without an impressive academic résumé.

The announcements completed, the worship begins. Often, it starts in a manner reminiscent of any evangelical megachurch in America: an energetic leader in black jeans and a T-shirt exhorts and shouts for response between lively songs carefully chosen to energize the crowd, drums and bass guitar throbbing. Yet here at Trinity, this continues only for a short while before the choir files in, several hundred strong, and takes the lead. Choir members are dressed in a loosely coordinated African color scheme, each showing individuality and yet connection to the whole in their dress.

The music now ended, a few prayers are voiced; then a young man

takes the pulpit. His name is Rev. Otis Moss III, and he is the new lead pastor. Tall and handsome, he is thirty-seven years old, a Yale graduate, and he comes to Trinity from a successful pastorate in Georgia. His oratorical skills are immediately obvious. He speaks in a warm, clipped style that captures both Ivy League and the street; that is, both college professor and black poet. It is easy to understand why the congregation chose this man to guide them for the decades to come.

His sermon is wrapped around the theme of the crucifixion of Jesus, and it is a masterpiece of exposition and tender narrative. He summons characters from history and gives them personality and voice. Cadence and repetition mount, bringing the crowd to its feet often and driving home the central theme. Scholarship—the dissected New Testament Greek word, the patiently explained custom from the time of Jesus, the carefully chosen historical anecdote—merges with a pastor’s insight into human nature to craft an impact on the congregation that is at once educational, inspiring, and of unsparing challenge. Few sermons as good will be preached anywhere in America on this Sunday morning.

The outsider, particularly if he is white, will notice two likely unexpected characteristics of the preaching. The first is the altered detail of Bible stories from what he has known. Jesus is a “half-naked

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man of color,” who loses His life at the conspiring hands of a corrupt white Italian nation and the coconspirators within His own race. Probably, the white visitor has never thought of the crucifixion story in this way. The second feature is how at any moment in the sermon, a Bible story might be shifted to its racial or political parallel today. Trumped-up charges against Jesus at the hands of the Pharisees swiftly become the means of understanding how the Los Angeles police plant evidence or how George W. Bush will likely have to place weapons of mass destruction in Iraq where there were none before. These asides excite the crowd as much as the passionate biblical narrative of the sermon, and the visitor notes that even the few white members of the congregation often stand up in support of these moments of political commentary.

Hovering over all is the spirit of a man who is not present, who is only occasionally mentioned, but who nevertheless pervades the whole. He is referred to with honor in nearly every prayer. His name, offered as an aside in an announcement, prompts applause. During the sermon, the difficulties he has endured of late are compared with the sufferings of Jesus and His abuse by both the cowardly religious and the sinfully political. When the sermon concludes with an impassioned description of Jesus being lifted up on the cross, this man is also portrayed as one whose sufferings will allow him to be lifted up and vindicated before a watching world.

His name is Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr., and he has been the senior pastor of this people, until recently, for thirty-six years. When he first became their shepherd in 1972, the congregation numbered only eighty-seven souls but had already found the courage to declare themselves “unashamedly black and unapologetically Christian.”

Ablaze with purpose and with his red-tinged Afro nearly a symbol of his passion, Rev. Wright began building in those days what would become a Chicago institution and the largest church of the United Church of Christ denomination.

Now, though, these achievements tend to fade behind the fire-storm that has attended the end of his pastoral ministry. For this is the man whose raging statements have been viewed on YouTube hundreds of thousands of times, who has declared that “God damns America,” that racism rules the United States—the “U.S.K.K.K.A.”—and that the horrors of September 11, 2001, were “America’s chickens coming home to roost.” And he also is the man who has perhaps become the largest political liability for his spiritual son, Senator Barack Obama.

Ask about the man’s character among his congregation, though, and a different picture forms. A deacon recalls when Dr. Wright spoke at a struggling church nearby and afterward refused his honorarium, insisting that instead the money be used for the church’s meager building fund. An older woman recalls traveling to Africa with her pastor and noticing the tears in his eyes as he taught about the motherland of his race. Then there are tales of the tender reminiscences of childhood that fill his sermons, of the pastoral gentleness of his visits to troubled homes and of his generosity in a poor community.

Older men cackle as they recall Rev. Wright’s humor—and his strong language. He is known for lacing his sermons with the vocabulary of the street. A visiting minister to Trinity recently found himself at a point in his sermon where he shouted the word “No!” as part of a story. Then, pausing, he said instead, “Hell, no!”

With a smile, he explained, “Jeremiah Wright taught me that.” The crowd erupted in knowing laughter. Dr. Wright might be a “cussin’ preacher,” but he’s their preacher, and they love him.

Wright was born in 1941 to a Baptist pastor’s home in Philadelphia. The son and grandson of ministers, he enrolled as a freshman at the historically black Virginia Union University when he was eighteen. Before he finished his degree, though, he left the school to join the U.S. Marines. Stories vary as to why. The nobler version is that he was inspired by John F. Kennedy’s “Ask not what your country can do for you” speech and gave up his student deferment to serve his country. The more likely reason is that he became disenchanted with Christianity’s weak support for the civil rights movement and lost interest in a pastoral calling. Whatever the cause, he served in the Second Marine Division and then transferred into the Navy. He returned to college in 1967 when he enrolled in historically black Howard University in Washington, D.C., earning a bachelor’s degree and a master’s degree in English.

There was turmoil beneath the surface of this journey. Wright, characteristically, tells the story, sparing nothing. At Virginia Union, he had begun to see “the underside (or the seedy side) of the Black church and hypocritical Black preachers.”²² This disillusionment paralleled the rise of the civil rights movement. Wright participated in sit-ins and resisted “the ‘honkies’ I was growing to hate with each passing day.”²³ Bluntly, he says, “[in those days I] was singing as a soloist in the traveling university choir, getting drunk for the first time in my life, and trying to sort out my call to ministry.”²⁴

His mentor was Dr. Samuel Proctor, a professor he met at Virginia Union and a leading black educator who served also at North

Carolina A&T and Rutgers University. Wright remembers that at the time, Proctor “produced more African American PhDs at Rutgers than any other person in the history of the school.”⁵ More important for the man Wright would become, “Proctor was always pointing me to a higher calling and a deeper commitment to a faith grounded in a carpenter from Capernaum who knew oppression, who knew hatred and who knew colonialism, but who also knew (personally) a God who was greater than any government and who promised a peace more powerful than any peace the ‘world’ could ever give.”⁶ With Proctor’s encouragement, Wright reclaimed his sense of calling to ministry and began to prepare by earning a master’s at the University of Chicago Divinity School and later a doctorate at United Theological Seminary.

As he stepped into ministry, he was fully aware of the crisis of faith in the black community. Blacks were leaving the Christian church in the 1970s for other religious traditions that seemed to belong more naturally to the black experience. The Nation of Islam and the Black Hebrew Israelites, among others, thrived as a result. “They didn’t know African-American history,” Wright insists. “They were leaving churches by the boatloads. The church seemed so disconnected from their struggle for dignity and humanity.”⁷ About this time Wright accepted the lead role at Trinity United Church of Christ.

He would build at Trinity on the foundation of a new black theology, one that began to emerge in the late 1960s to fierce controversy. Wright would insist, though, that this theology—the Christianity that arises organically from the black experience, that in fact *is* the black experience—did not originate in the 1960s or

even in America. It was fashioned, he would preach, in the struggles of the Old Testament people of God and through the birth of a New Testament faith. It was hammered out on the anvil of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and systematized by black thinkers and theologians for generations before finding its public voice in the crises of race that attended the troubled decade of the 1960s in America. It was the theology, he would proclaim, of a people determined to be subjects in history, not objects.

The symbolic call to arms of this black theology may have been sounded on July 31, 1966, when fifty-one black pastors took out a full-page ad in the *New York Times* demanding results in eradicating racism. The age was in turmoil, and the black church was beginning to engage—and engage aggressively. A manifesto issued by a gathering of black theologians in Atlanta three years later ended with Eldridge Cleaver’s battle cry: “We shall have our manhood. Or the earth will be leveled by our efforts to gain it.” The killing of their leaders and the suffering that plagued their communities were too much to tolerate in silence any longer. Though the black churches came late to the battle for social equality—Martin Luther King Jr. had been kicked out of his denomination just years before for the “excesses” of his political activism—when they finally took up the challenge, they did so with a vengeance.

In 1969, theologian James Cone issued the Magna Carta of black theology, a work called *Black Theology and Black Power*. Influenced by Stokely Carmichael’s black power ideology, Malcolm X’s intellectual taunts of white Christianity, and Martin Luther King Jr.’s demand for civil rights, Cone built a theology of and for the black experience. At the heart of this theology was the idea of

liberation. Since Jesus described Himself as a liberator—whose task was to “preach good news to the poor . . . to proclaim freedom for the prisoners . . . to release the oppressed”⁸—the work of the church now ought to be the same.

This core idea sounds Christian enough, but Cone came to emphasize this matter of liberation nearly to the exclusion of all other biblical doctrines. On the matter of revelation, for example, he maintained that revelation only occurs where God enters history to liberate the oppressed from their oppressors. That was a break from the traditional perspective that God speaks through Scripture, by the Holy Spirit, and through the anointed leaders of His church. Now, with Cone, liberation became both the means and the moment of revelation. “In a word,” Cone argued, “God’s revelation means liberation—nothing more, nothing less.”

Cone also insisted that all who suffer oppression are “black,” no matter their skin color. Being black meant taking the side of the oppressed against the oppressor. So when Cone proclaimed that Jesus is black, that whites want Christianity without blackness, and that the Scriptures can be interpreted only by blacks, he was issuing a call to reinterpret Christianity in terms of its lost themes of suffering and liberation, yet he was using language that assured resistance from both white and traditional black churches. In this sense, the black experience became ultimate for Cone:

I still regard the Bible as an important source of my theological reflections, but not the starting point. The black experience and the Bible together in dialectical tension serve as my point of departure today and yesterday. The order is significant. I am black

first—and everything else comes after that. This means that I read the Bible through the lens of a black tradition of struggle and not as the objective Word of God. The Bible therefore is one witness to God’s empowering presence in human affairs, along with other important testimonies.¹⁰

The corollary is, of course, that whiteness is oppression, that whiteness is slavery, that whiteness is power in opposition to the very thing that Jesus Christ came to do.

Even for those who understood Cone’s language—Jesus is a “black” man come to destroy “white” systems of oppression—his message was radical and often violent. A typical sentence from his *A Black Theology of Liberation* reveals the sentiments that enraged white readers and thrilled many black activists: “Black theology must realize that the white Jesus has no place in the black community, and it is our task to destroy him.”¹¹ Similarly, “black theology is concerned only with the tradition of Christianity that is usable in the black liberation struggle.”¹² Or, “for too long Christ has been pictured as a blue-eyed honky. Black theologians are right; we need to dehonkify him and thus make him relevant to the black condition.”¹³ These statements were troubling enough to the society of the day, yet there were others that seemed designed to set a match, almost literally, to the tinderbox of animosity: “The black experience is the feeling one has when attacking the enemy of black humanity by throwing a Molotov cocktail into a white-owned building and watching it go up in flames. We know, of course, that getting rid of evil takes something more than burning down buildings, but one must start somewhere.”¹⁴

In the eyes of most traditional churches, both black and white, Cone was simply mixing Christianity with Marxism. He was re-making Jesus into a “People’s Messiah” who preached a message of political liberation rather than spiritual regeneration. Accordingly, some feared, a black man might shoot a white man or burn down a white-owned business and believe himself to be doing the will of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. The same Jesus who told His disciples not only to love all nations but also to teach them to do His will was being presented as a “whitey-hating” black man come to destroy all but black society. Evangelical scholar Francis Schaeffer had written that “liberalism is nothing more than humanism in theological clothing,” leading Cone’s evangelical critics to conclude that black theology was little more than black bigotry reworking the mission of Jesus.

Radical or not, violent or not, Cone’s vision launched a generation of black ministers, and Jeremiah Wright was among them. He became an expert in black theology, not only as Cone taught it but also as other theologians rearticulated and extended it. Taking the lead at Trinity United Church of Christ in 1972, just as black theology was filling its sails with the winds of the age, Wright began preaching his theology of liberation to the oppressed people on Chicago’s South Side. It was refreshing to their souls: a strengthening of their hopes in God, a confirmation of their political suspicions, a celebration of their history, an affirmation of the goodness of their race, and an arming for the cultural battles to come.

Through the years, the people of Trinity Church were exposed to a view of the United States far different not only from that taught in the nation’s schools, but also from that preached to most black

congregations and in most suburban churches of the country. For black people—both black in skin color and “black” as the oppressed—American history as Wright taught it was no longer a noble tale of the advancement of freedom. White Americans might get misty-eyed at the remembrance of Jamestown as the first permanent English settlement on the shores of the New World, but for blacks, Jamestown was where American slavery began in 1619. White Americans could boast of their intrepid founding fathers, but blacks at Trinity Church were urged to remember a compromising generation who spoke movingly of human equality yet who extended slavery. Let

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politicians tell lies about the glories of World Wars I and II, Wright would insist, but blacks should recall Jim Crow laws and a segregated army that only begrudgingly tolerated the black flying aces of Tuskegee. Having determined to see the world in terms of the oppressors and the oppressed, Wright found America on the oppressor side almost every time.

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America's support for Israel? No less than white imperialists oppressing a Palestinian people of color through a client state. America's post-9/11 war in Afghanistan and Iraq? Merely a tyrannical nation sending her people of color to colonize yet another people of color for little more than oil. So it would be with South Africa, Grenada, Native Americans, women, Bosnia, Somalia, Vietnam, gays, lesbians, and immigrants. Jesus came to liberate the downtrodden, and Jeremiah Wright would be His disciple, supporting the oppressed wherever they were to be found in the world.

His views set him in tension not only with many in white America but even with some of his fellow black churchmen. He stood for abortion rights, against school prayer, and for laws protecting gays and lesbians. He urged the U.S. government to pay reparations to blacks for slavery and to pour more foreign aid into Africa. He raged against the "prosperity gospel" of black and white churches and thought nothing of accusing a fellow pastor of promoting a "pimp theology for a prostituted church." His views flew hard and fast on the wings of his astonishing oratorical gifts, and he was not afraid to depart from any text in any sermon to expound on the evils of his society or his race.

Often of surprise to white observers, Wright did not simply wait for the U.S. government to fund the liberation of his people. Indeed, the notorious sermon in which he proclaimed that "God damns America" was titled "Confusing God and Government," a call to cease looking to government to fulfill the promises of God. Wright was not waiting for a government check. During his years at Trinity, he preached the values of black self-sufficiency and, despite his pastoral load, helped start corporations to bring prosperity to the

people in his community. He also raged against the insular values of a black middle class, of a people who had just enough to inoculate them against concern for others. He challenged both the wealthy and the poor of his congregation to give—and give radically—for the cause of Jesus in the world.

This, then, was Jeremiah Wright: brilliant, angry, successful, and unapologetic—passionate for his people, passionate for his Christ, and passionate to understand the world in exclusively liberation terms. And his critics raged. He was a “demonized man,” “anti-Semitic,” “a Communist fellow traveler,” and “a racist.” He was perceived to be the epitome of the problem with black leadership in America, a cult leader of heretical views.

Yet while his critics spewed, his influence and following grew. There seemed to be no middle ground in public opinion. Jeremiah Wright was either demon or deliverer.

The truth is that he was, and is, a conundrum, hard to reconcile, a mixture of greatness and grief. He could lead thousands to faith and then spout urban myth as gospel. He could proclaim the “old, old story” of Christian truth and the latest conspiracy theories in nearly the same breath. He could bitterly rail against his nation and yet be, as he was, the most respected black preacher of spiritual revival in the country. He could lead a people to holiness and swear like a gangbanger in the pulpit. He could be generous and small, ennobling and crushing, glorious and dark.

Then there were stories like this one that only extended the mystery. William A. Von Hoene Jr. was a white man in love with a black woman. She was a member of Trinity Church and an activist in the cause of her people. She was also in love with William—and deeply

troubled by it. How could she marry a white man and keep respect in her black community? Wouldn't a white husband undermine all she hoped to accomplish for her race? So in her torment, she broke off her engagement to William.

Jeremiah Wright heard about her crisis. He called her, asked her to "drop everything" to meet with him, and then spent four hours pouring out his heart. God does not want us to make decisions about people based on race, he told her. The future

belongs to those who are prepared to break down barriers. Racial divisions aren't acceptable, no matter the pain that caused them. Marry this man, he told her, and forge a new history together. And a few months later, Rev. Jeremiah Wright performed the ceremony in which the white William married his African-American bride.¹⁵

This from the racist pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ. This from the man who damns America in the name of God. This from the scholar who claims that Jesus is black. And all of this, the angry and the kind, the holy and the harsh, would come to bear on the life of Barack Obama.



The Sunday morning service at Trinity United Church of Christ has dismissed, and the visitor makes his way to the door. Walking out

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into the biting Chicago air, he falls in with the departing crowd to greetings exchanged through scarves and gloved hands.

The visitor finds himself behind a mother and her son. He has seen these two earlier that morning walking their half mile to church against the cold.

“Momma, do you wanna hear what I learned this morning?”

“Yes, baby. Tell me”

“I learned that the man who helped Jesus carry the cross was from Africa. He was prob’ly black.”

“That’s right, baby. What else did you learn?”

“Teacher also told us that some of the men at Antioch, where they sent out Paul and *Billabus* to be missionaries, some of those men were black like you and me too.”

“It’s Barnabas, honey, but that’s right. One of those men’s names even means ‘black man.’”

“That’s right, Momma. And did you know that there was an *unchun* from Ethiopia? He’s in the Bible and he was black too.”

“Baby, you say that word *eunuch*, but you are so right. That man was a black man from Africa. I’m so proud of you knowing that.”

“I know, Momma. I can’t wait to tell ’em at school. I bet they don’t know it.”

The visitor, having heard, begins to understand. And though he is white and of another theological stream, he looks back at Trinity United Church of Christ and sees it for a moment through different eyes, and as though for the first time.