Long before “God bless America” became the mandatory benediction for presidential campaign speeches, religion played a shaping role in presidential politics. George Washington, in his first inaugural address, spent nearly a quarter of his relatively short speech acknowledging “the Great Author of every public and private good,” and noting “the Invisible Hand which conducts the affairs of men” and which, he believed, represented a “providential agency” that had advanced the United States to the “character of an independent nation.” A recent historical study of the 1840 election between the Whig, William Henry Harrison, and the incumbent Democrat, Martin Van Buren, reveals the religious demographic of the vote, with preferences clearly marked by denominational affiliation and, in some cases, by theological perspective within denominations. While the fortunes of the economy loomed large in the election – Whigs nicknamed the president Martin Van Ruin as the economy slipped into recession – the peculiar pieties of Americans manifested themselves strongly on Election Day.

I begin with these historical references as a reminder that theological perspective, denominational ethos, and personal piety have played an important role in American public life for a long time, sometimes in deeply spiritual ways, often in more superficial veneers or even in embarrassing bigotry and prejudice. Woodrow Wilson’s expansive internationalist moral vision exemplified in the American crusade to make the world safe for democracy and in his quest to establish the League of Nations displayed him as an heir to the impulses of the 19th century Evangelical social reformers who railed against the evils of slavery and alcohol. Contrast that with Al Smith, the first Catholic candidate for president who endured vicious attacks from nativist and anti-Catholic antagonists. When pressed by reporters for how his views contrasted with various papal encyclicals
deemed inconsistent with American ideals, is reported to have replied, “Will someone tell me what the hell a papal encyclical is?”

Jimmy Carter, who spoke comfortably of his own evangelical piety, confounded liberal Protestants and secularists with the image of a sophisticated President who was also a regular Sunday School teacher in his Southern Baptist church in rural Plains, Georgia. Contrast that with Howard Dean who, in his attempt to claim the mantle of piety famously overreached when asked to name his favorite New Testament book. He responded, “the Book of Job.” Whoops. Where were Job’s friends when Howard needed them! Ronald Reagan somehow managed to convey the impression of a deeply personal Christian piety without any potentially awkward connection to a particular denomination, tradition, set of doctrines, or local church membership, something Barack Obama no doubt wished he could have done last Spring when his affiliation with Trinity United Church of Christ and the Rev. Jeremiah Wright nearly scuttled his candidacy.

George W. Bush is, in an odd and perhaps not immediately apparent way, reminiscent of Woodrow Wilson, though one would never confuse the two for the language and style of their piety remains dramatically different. Yet one senses in both presidents a highly personalized, one might even say pretentious piety that involves an almost mystical relationship to God or Jesus, a relationship granting them a privileged and uncontestable moral vision for the world that is inaccessible to the rest of us mere mortals and, therefore, unaccountable in political terms. There was for Wilson and is for Bush a principled – perhaps we might say “messianic” – certainty unencumbered by intellectual or religious doubt that leaves us somewhat breathless, either in admiration or fear. In the hands of ideological zealots such piety becomes a potent weapon, as likely to lead to tragedy and disaster as to the Kingdom of God.

On September 12, 1960, Democratic candidate John F. Kennedy gave a major speech before the Greater Houston Ministerial Association to address the significance of his Catholic faith in the face of the lingering anti-Catholic feelings of many voters. It was, from a political standpoint, a successful speech, reassuring the audience of Kennedy’s commitment to the separation of church and state and stressing that “I am not the Catholic candidate for president. I am the Democratic Party’s candidate for president,
who happens also to be a Catholic. I do not speak for my church on public matters, and the church does not speak for me.”

Central to Kennedy’s speech was a tight compartmentalization of faith, personal piety, and public responsibility. He called for a nation “where no Catholic prelate would tell the president how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote. . . .” He professed belief in an America “where no public official either requests or accepts instructions on public policy from the Pope, the National Council of Churches, or any other ecclesiastical source.” Kennedy noted that pamphlets quoting Catholic leaders had been circulating. “I do not consider these . . . quotations binding upon my public acts.” Rhetorically he concluded with what he perhaps intended to suggest was his true creed and his allegiance to his primary sacred text: “If I should win the election, then I shall devote every effort of mind and spirit to fulfilling the oath of the presidency. . . . For without reservation, I can “solemnly swear that I will preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution, so help me God.”

Kennedy’s attempt to privatize religion was not so much a reaffirmation of the separation of church and state, or the disentangling of religion and politics, as it was an attempt to divide private piety and public life into two separate arenas a President can inhabit at the same time without one shaping the other. It was as if he were saying, “Don’t worry, there’s nothing about my Catholic faith that will intrude into my public responsibility.” Given the political needs of the day, Kennedy may have had to say that. And given what we know of Kennedy, he was perhaps telling the absolute truth about himself! This makes all the more ironic the near canonization of the Kennedys by many Roman Catholics of a certain generation. I vividly recall the entryway to Alphonse Morello’s Funeral Home in Easton, Pennsylvania where I served as a pastor. On one side were portraits of Pope John Paul II and the Virgin Mary. On the other side of the foyer were Jack and Jackie. The holy family according to the Democratic Party!

In 2006, forty six years after Kennedy’s speech, another soon-to-be Democratic candidate for president, Senator Barack Obama, would give a markedly different speech about the relationship of faith and public life. Much had changed. Evangelicals, and more conservative Catholics had entered public life with vigor with the rise of the Moral Majority, the Christian Coalition, and family values leaders like Gary Bauer and James
Dobson. The so-called “culture wars” had raged with issues like school prayer, Roe v. Wade, the rights of homosexual persons, creationism and intelligent design captive to the political process and exploited eagerly in presidential campaigns, perhaps most dramatically in places like Ohio in 2004 where Bush’s slim majority rested, at least in part, on wedge voters provoked to anxiety over the specter of gay marriage. Religion had roared back into presidential campaigns in highly partisan ways, making candidates’ piety at least as important to many voters as their more traditional credentials.

In the wake of all of this, Obama’s speech proposed a new engagement of faith and public life, and by extension a new way to view the issue of piety and presidential politics. “It’s time,” said Obama, “to join a serious debate about how to reconcile faith with our modern, pluralistic democracy.” Obama was critical of conservatives, “all too happy . . . to remind evangelical Christians that Democrats [allegedly] disrespect their values and dislike their church, while suggesting to the rest of the country that religious Americans care only about issues like abortion and gay marriage; school prayer and intelligent design.” But his sharper critique went to the Democrats who at best, he said, “try to avoid the conversation about religion and values altogether,” or at worst, “dismiss religion in the public square as inherently irrational or intolerant, insisting on a caricature of religious Americans that paints them as fanatical.” Senator Obama demonstrated his split with Kennedy most clearly when he said, “secularists are wrong when they ask believers to leave their religion at the door before entering into the public square. . . . To say that men and women should not inject their ‘personal morality’ into public policy debates is a practical absurdity.”

One way to read Obama’s speech is to see it as a call for progressives to reacquaint themselves with the language of piety. But it is certainly also a call to liberate piety – and the church – from captivity by the far right of the political spectrum. As one commentator describes the organizers of the Moral Majority and Christian Coalition, “their primary goal was not religious but political; to enlist evangelicals, many of whom had eschewed political activism altogether, behind conservative Republican candidates.” Indeed, one of their colleagues described evangelicals as “the greatest tract of virgin timber on the political landscape.”
Many believe 2004 was the high water mark of the marriage of Evangelicals with the Republican Party. Sarah Palin’s selection was, in part, an attempt to re-ignite the wars of religion that had benefited Republicans in previous elections, but the strategy doesn’t seem to have gained much traction beyond the right wing base of the party. It does seem to be the case that the dominance of so-called family values as political litmus tests has slipped in prominence. Even Evangelicals are calling for a broader agenda. Richard Cizik of the National Association of Evangelicals, responding to critics like Dobson and Bauer, rejected the notion that an embrace of concern for creation meant betraying the pro-life cause: “Tell the parents of children who are mentally disabled because of mercury poisoning – tell them that the environment is not a sanctity-of-life issue.” And there are many Catholics beginning to stand up to the threats of bishops refusing communion to candidates over the issue of abortion, recalling their church to the broader moral agenda of a “seamless robe” concern for the sanctify of life championed by leaders like Cardinals Bernadin of Chicago and McCarrick of Washington.

I have no doubt that Senator Obama’s reflections on the relationship of faith and public life are sincere. They are consistent with his own religious biography eloquently laid out in his book, The Audacity of Hope. But there is also a political calculation. His speech in 2006 was given at a conference organized by the socially progressive Evangelical leader, Jim Wallis. Obama’s friendships include the well known Evangelical and author of The Purpose Driven Life, Pastor Rick Warren, as well as so-called “emergent church” leaders Tony Jones and Brian McLaren. At a closed door meeting of religious leaders with Obama in Chicago in June, only a handful of us represented the old liberal mainline Protestant churches. Most were a new generation of Evangelical leaders like megachurch pastor Joel Hunter and Rich Cizik who have broken from the old religious right in their embrace of other moral issues like global poverty, AIDS, the environment, education, health-care and the like.

At the meeting in Chicago with Senator Obama, Franklin Graham, son of Billy Graham, played the “guilt by association” ploy, noting Obama’s “Muslim background,” and then proceeded to relentlessly press the Senator on the question. “Do you believe Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life, the only way to salvation?” Rev. Joseph Lowrey, the old war horse of the Civil Rights movement, nearly bolted from his chair.
next to mine in objection to this line of questioning. Do we really need to know what our president thinks about this complex text from the Gospel of John? The exchange raised for me the central question of this lecture: “What kind of piety is needed in today’s public square, and in the occupant of the White House?”

Early in our history, John Adams wrote Thomas Jefferson about the dangerous and corrupting power of human self-deception: “Power always thinks it has a great soul and vast views beyond the comprehension of the weak; and that it is doing God’s service when it is violating all His laws.” Adam’s letter is cited in Reinhold Niebuhr’s book, *The Irony of American History*, written in 1952 to address the Cold War struggle between communism and freedom. Niebuhr was a profound public theologian who distained the naïve optimism of theological liberalism as well as the privatized piety of those whose religion actually masked the narrow parochialism of conventionality and American smugness. He called for an active, “realistic” engagement in the world, tempered by a healthy regard for original sin and its expression in human vanity and pride, both expressed in personal and corporate ways. Written in the years following the triumphs of World War II, Niebuhr’s book challenged the dangers of unrestrained American idealism. To read it today amid the new American messianic zeal and religious certainty of our current War on Terror is to be haunted by lessons not learned from Adams.

Not surprisingly, the President to whom Niebuhr turns at the end of his book is Abraham Lincoln, quoting from the Second Inaugural. It is worth hearing again in the current context:

Neither party expected for the war the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with or even before the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God’s assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes. . . . Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away.
Yet if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as we said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, “the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.”

Lincoln’s piety – and his rhetoric – saw beyond narrow partisan interest to an arc of providence that both encompasses and motivates our actions, and at the same time limits the seductive dangers of our own pretentions. Historian Allen Guelzo of Gettysburg College leaves us with an agnostic Lincoln in his book *Redeemer President*, agnostic in the sense of not being able to claim with certainty a personal relationship to a divine Father in the more classic evangelical mold. We are a long way from our current president who seems to have seen God face to face and who hears Him with some regularity. No, Lincoln’s is a different kind of piety, steeped says Guelzo in “faith in divine superintendency,” a confrontation “with the Calvinist God who could not be captured or domesticated. . . . who possessed a conscious will to intervene, challenge, and reshape human destinies without regard for historical process.” Guelzo suggests, echoing Niebuhrian themes, that

it was the tension between his Calvinistic “melancholy” and his bourgeois aggressiveness which acted as the best mutual restraint. . . . His confidence in the direction of providence kept his determinism from collapsing into helplessness in the darkest hours of the war, and it was his determinism that prevented his . . . optimism from soaring into arrogance in victory.

One wonders where we might be today had such a piety and rhetoric guided our nation through the seven years since September 11, 2001. Could we hope for a presidential piety and for forms of religious engagement in public life that move beyond secular distain on the one hand and partisan certainty on the other, in short, a piety rooted not in utter assurance and arrogance, but in a confident faith tempered by doubt and humility in our own human capacities? And could we dare hope for a political process where such a piety might actually be honored and valued rather than swept away before parochial moral litmus tests or lost in the foolishness of backing a candidate solely on the basis of whether he or she believes Jesus is the only way to salvation?
Niebuhr does not use the term piety. But surely it is to a public and personal piety that he refers as he draws his book on democracy’s struggle with Communism and his reflection on Lincoln to a close:

There is, in short, even in a conflict with a foe with whom we have little in common the possibility and necessity of living in a dimension of meaning in which the urgencies of the struggle are subordinated to a sense of awe before the vastness of the historical drama in which we are jointly involved; to a sense of modesty about the virtue, wisdom and power available to us for the resolution of its perplexities; to a sense of contrition about the common human frailties and foibles which lie at the foundation of both the enemy’s demonry and our vanities; and to a sense of gratitude for the divine mercies which are promised to those who humble themselves.

American voters are, it seems, easily seduced by optimistic and self-righteous interpretations of their own history, by messianic convictions about their current circumstances, and by the notion that their public life, their commonwealth, can easily be reduced to the diminished virtues of either “blue” or “red.” The road to the White House has not often been paved with theological subtlety or a piety marked by modesty in the face of the historical drama in which we are involved. In recent years in particular God has been enlisted in the partisan fray with an ideological certainty that makes a mockery of the awe toward which Niebuhr beckoned. But it is worth remembering – both in gratitude and in hope – that, at the most perilous moment in our national history, we were guided by a president more trusting in the mystery and majesty of God’s providence than in the platitudes and certainties of his own faith, a providence in which blue and gray were both inextricably linked and whose trajectory cannot and must not ever be easily conformed to our own crusade, no matter how grand or noble it might appear.