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Of Franklin Graham, Fox News and faith's distortion

Douglas W. Kmiec | Mar. 21, 2012

Commentary

I haven't always seen eye to eye with President Barack Obama. We disagree on abortion, the troop build-up in Afghanistan and a recent tendency to ignore those who have his best interests at heart.

That said, I have no basis to question or doubt the importance of faith in president's life or his unswerving commitment to ensure religious freedom for all. In a new book, *Lift Up Your Hearts* [1], I elaborate why it is that the president is so impressively well-informed on this sensitive topic, but suffice it to say that the president's integrity in these matters is well summarized by the nightly prayer he has revealed to many that "we can live with one another in a way that reconciles the beliefs of each with the good of all."

Recently, people who should know better, as well as some who seemingly never do, have assailed the president's faith commitment. In a televised interview, Dr. Franklin Graham openly questioned the president's faith, stating, "Under Islamic law, the Muslim world sees Barack Obama as Muslim." In response to the justifiable concern of the NAACP and preachers around the country that Graham had become an accomplice to those who see faith only as an occasion to divide us, Graham has now apologized, admitting his objections to the president's re-election are "policy stances," not the president's faith beliefs.

Graham, the son of an extraordinary man of faith and a gifted teacher in his own right, should indeed have known better. I was in the room during the 2008 primaries when he asked then-Senator Obama whether he believed that "Jesus Christ was *the* way, the truth and the life." This was the middle of a business meeting, and the question silenced the room. The senator paused and began to answer that *he* believed.

"No," Graham said, obviously looking for perfect orthodoxy. "Do you believe Christ is *the* way?"

This is an important question for individual believers for the fullness of the understanding of the New Testament, but in context, it had all the appearance of some kind of opposition trap. Obviously, a person running for national office has to keep in mind that everyone in the country does not share his Christian understanding. After all, as the Catholic bishops have been quick to remind, the Constitution guarantees that government will neither prescribe (the protection of "free exercise") nor proscribe (the limitations upon "establishing" religious belief under law).

So how did the senator respond? Impressively, the Obama respected the American constitutional framework, but did not rely on legalism. Instead, after a significant pause conveying the sincerity of his response, Obama gave the following home-run answer: "Dr. Graham," he said, "faith is very important to me, but my mother was not blessed with faith, but I know her to be the most caring, loving, empathetic person in my life. I cannot subscribe to an understanding of faith that suggests I will not have any opportunity to share eternity with her. Dr. Graham, Jesus is my way."

No one in the room had anything more important to say, or, as far as I was concerned, could have any doubt about the *bona fides* of the faith of Barack Obama. Certainly, it was reaffirmation for me that my choice, notwithstanding having held high post in the conservative Reagan administration, to endorse and work for Obama's election as president was correct. I still believe that, even as it has cost me dearly in position and opportunity and personal peace.

And those who never seem to know better or to learn? Well, here I speak of Fox News, the antithesis of fairness and balance in journalism. I used to find Fox a healthy counterpoint. If there was a time when Fox constituted the loyal, reasoned opposition, today the network is the fellow traveler of Rush Limbaugh, promoting heat over light, meanness over understanding, and, most recently, lie over truth. Responding to newly published claims that Obama criticized Fox for promoting the idea that Obama "is a Muslim," Fox anchor Bret Baier stated this week what has to be the falsehood extraordinaire: "For the record," Baier proclaimed, "we found no examples of a host saying the president is a Muslim."

The only way that statement could have any truth would be if Fox didn't bother to look.

June 2009: Fox's "Special Report" quotes an Obama advisor as saying Obama has "experienced Islam on three continents" and spent part of his childhood in Indonesia with his Muslim father.

Aug. 30, 2010: Fox co-host Brian Kilmeade on "Fox & Friends" states, "Wouldn't [Obama] have kept his name as Barry, and not Barack," if he were worried about the "24 percent of this country [that] thinks he is a Muslim."

Aug. 20, 2010: Chris Wallace on Fox's "Special Report" poses a question to Fox reporter Steve Hayes about how the Obama people will do "damage control" on the issue of "the growing number of people [who] think Obama is a Muslim, not a Christian." Cynically, Hayes responds, "We're likely to see him going to church a lot more."

And on and on, including a Bill O'Reilly interview with Donald Trump suggesting Obama's birth certificate may identify him as a Muslim and Fox highlighting conservative pundit Ann Coulter's column in September 2010 claiming Obama to be an atheist. Fox has even featured a guest priest questioning Obama's reasons for believing in the "precepts of the faith," suggesting that most believers fall in love with Christ, not the Ten Commandments.

In *Lift Up Your Hearts*, I introduce readers to a theology of kindness lived by the late Monsignor John Sheridan, who tragically died as a result of a canyon accident in which I was driving. John did not want to see the significance of Christ in our lives reduced to a trivial political cliché or talking point. Nor did he want our pursuit of an open, honest embrace of Christ in the public square to drive believers of other faiths from the community. In short, John believed it was possible and necessary to honor a Catholic understanding of Christ alive in our community, with ample room left for other faiths to inform and shape society as well.

This is what President Obama affirms, and it is wrong for those who should know better or those who never seem to know much at all to suggest otherwise.

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