

Harvey Cox interview for Confronti  
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Interviewer: With regard to his religious profile, what kind of Christian has Barack Obama been?

Harvey Cox: Well, he's been a serious practicing Christian. He doesn't advertise that very much. But he's quite obviously shaped by the black church tradition and seems at home and familiar when he's in that setting. I think you saw the real Barack Obama last year after the murder in the black Methodist Church in South Carolina. When he went down there for the memorial service. And he went into that church, and after he had spoken very eloquently, in a kind of black preacher style he broke out into song. Did you see that here?

Interviewer: No I didn't, but I read something.

Harvey Cox: He started singing Amazing Grace. He started singing perfectly naturally, as though it were really coming right from his heart. He says that the biggest intellectual influence on him, Barack Obama says, was the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, a Protestant theologian of the middle and latter part of the 20th century, who was also very much influence on me, I would say. Reinhold Niebuhr's major contribution, I would say, was that we have to live out a Christian life in the real world, we have to deal with the stakes and guilt of power and distortion, and we can't live it out in the world as we would like it to be. They called Niebuhr a Christian realist. So you have to make hard choices. And Obama talked about this in his Nobel Prize address, by the way, making these hard choices knowing that we are all fallible, we don't see things perfectly. We don't see them from the mind of God, when we make these choices we need to go ahead. So in that sense he is a practicing and theologically very well informed Christian. He says he's a Christian, many times he said that, and I believe him. I think that's who he is.

Interviewer: Is the Religious Right still a relevant political actor in the United States?

Harvey Cox: Not as much as it was, no. And I think the Religious Right is in a moment of crisis. A lot of it is generational. Younger evangelical Christians do not accept some of the agenda of the older Christian Right people. Especially on gays, on climate change, and on a number of other things. They are evangelical Christians but they don't accept the agenda of a Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson. So there's a generational split in the conservative wing of American Protestantism, where the Religious Right came from. And now it's a very serious problem because they are not at all certain what to do with Donald Trump. Some of them support him, although it's an embarrassment, for people who believe in family values, to be supporting Donald Trump. And some of them have finally said no. The main organ of the conservative Evangelical community is called Christianity Today. And two weeks ago they published their editorial against Trump. Now that's the first time they've done anything like that. So, I think you'd have to say it's a movement in serious crisis. It doesn't have the votes. It can't simply bring out the votes anymore, it doesn't have the kind of clarity of what they'd like to do. And for me that's all very good news. Let them be confused!

Interviewer: How could you define the current religious situation in the states?

Harvey Cox: The United States is a very big country, and extremely varied, and any kind of general description would be hard to do. I think one of the most interesting things is the growing number of people the polls show who are not aligned to any particular religious tradition, Catholic or Protestant or anything else. But who are not atheists. They insist, I'm not an atheist, I just do not join the Baptists or the Catholics or the Presbyterians. When asked what is your affiliation, they will say none, N-O-N-E. So they are called "nones," N-O-N-E-S. Now that's a very interesting development. They are looking for something. And I think it's very good that they're not satisfied with the current packaging of religion.

Interviewer: Is it still possible to cite the USA as the exception to secularization in the West? You said something answering the last question about secularization.

Harvey Cox: I don't think this question has any meaning, because of what I just said. I just don't think the term secularization has any helpful validity. What we see is something far more complex than that. Secularization simply really meant a decline in the influence and numbers and church attendance and all that. I think that's not the most interesting story. The most interesting story is what Carlo Nardella calls the migration of the sacred. And I use that term actually just now, in my lecture. The migration of symbols. We are moving away from discussions of secularization to migration, reappearance, and displacement, which is a more accurate way to think of it.