

Obama appeals to ‘social gospel’

March 14, 2012

WASHINGTON (ABP) - President Obama denied March 12 that he is “waging a war on religion,” citing his own work as a community organizer before entering politics as part of the “social gospel.”

Asked in a White House [interview with WHO television in Des Moines, Iowa](#), how he responds to charges by conservative Christians that he is anti-religion, Obama said: “I find this very puzzling, because my first job, my first real job out of college, was working with churches in low-income communities trying to make sure that the social gospel was made real,” the president said, “that people were getting help, sending their kids to school, being able to feed their families and having an opportunity to find a job.”

The social gospel is a name given President Barak Obama in a White House interview with WHO television in Des Moines, Iowa. to a movement prominent in early 20th century Protestantism that applied Christian ethics to social problems like poverty, racism and war. Scholars debate why it declined after World War I, but theories include that its embrace of neo-orthodoxy — a movement toward traditional Christianity away from the language of 19th century liberalism — conflicted with fundamentalism, another movement also on the rise that

insisted the Bible be read literally and interpreted as historical fact.

Though now dwarfed in influence by evangelicalism, which emphasizes a personal relationship with Christ and matters of private morality like abortion and homosexuality, the social gospel is alive and well in places including the historic mainline churches and the more progressive Baptist traditions. It occasionally pops up in politics.

Two years ago conservative commentator Glenn Beck called on Christians to leave their churches if they were preaching about social or economic justice, comparing it to communism. Jim Wallis of Sojourners fired back by calling on Christians to leave Glenn Beck.

Conservatives in the Southern Baptist Convention like Albert Mohler and Richard Land said that Beck had a point in that some on the left had abandoned traditional Christianity for a political agenda, but he went too far because some of those churches might be Southern Baptists carrying out the *Baptist Faith and Message* exhortation "to seek to make the will of Christ supreme in our own lives and in human society."

Discussing the proper relationship between faith and politics, Obama said: "Obviously my own personal faith is very important to me. I think the proper role here is to recognize that faith-based groups can do a lot of good out there that informs our values and who we are as a people, but when we start using religion as a bludgeon in politics, when we start questioning other people's faith, we start using religion to divide instead of bring the country together, then I think we've got a problem. And unfortunately we've seen that sometimes during the political season.

The president smiled with Channel 13 reporter John Bachman asked him if he agreed with 20th century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr that a Christian statesman has a hard time because he must choose between the lesser of

two evils.

“That’s one of my favorite philosophers, and it’s true,” he said. “Look, we are mortal. We are sinful, and in this world we’re always trying to deal with the compromises, the accommodations that are required in a big messy democracy where not everybody agrees on the same thing.”

Despite that, the president said he has great confidence in “the American people’s core decency” and that most people, wherever they come from, “want to do the right thing.”

“My job as president is to give them the tools to make sure they can succeed,” Obama said.

-Bob Allen is managing editor of Associated Baptist Press.