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The accolades are heaped too high

Michael Sean Winters | Jun. 9, 2009 NCR Today

OK, OK. I love the President also and, like most Americans -- Mr. Limbaugh and his ilk excepted -- I want him to succeed at the enormous challenges he faces. But, I do not think that it helps him if our accolades are such as to suggest he was born on Krypton.

First, there was John O?Malley?s article in America which suggested that Obama embodied the "spirit of Vatican II" [1] in his recent speeches at Notre Dame and in Grant Park on election night. Well, yes, the style of his rhetoric is different and more positive than the Manichean worldview of his predecessor. But, context is, if not everything, nonetheless significant. The Council Fathers spoke in an explicitly ecclesial context. The President does not. That is no fault of his: He is not an archbishop. But, the metaphor breaks down when you consider that the conciliar documents were achieved by consensus and the President?s election night address was delivered to a partisan crowd at the culmination of an explicitly partisan -- and proudly partisan -- event.

Today, David Gibson at Politics Daily, whose columns are always worth reading, sees Obama as resurrecting the "civic religion" tradition [2] in American political rhetoric. I have always been suspicious of that tradition which tends to reduce faith to a prop for Americanism. And, while I think such a "civic religion" can be said to have characterized the thought of the Founding Fathers, there are no more Deists. Gibson compares Obama to Lincoln, and there are undeniable similarities in cadence and rhetorical emphasis. But, Lincoln's greatness lay in his war leadership and whatever ills the nation faces, civil war is not among them. Besides, it took Lincoln longer to become Lincoln than it is taking Obama to become Lincoln .

So, yes, let's applaud the President for his gifts. They are as undeniable as they are welcome. But, let's not set him up for failure by heaping such praise upon him that he cannot possibly live up to the expectations we arouse.

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[1] http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=11688
[2] http://www.politicsdaily.com/2009/06/08/the-gospel-according-to-barack/