

Obama, Niebuhr, and the Politics of Hope

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Advent is a season of hope, but hope means different things to different people. Some Christians hope that the crucified, resurrected, and ascended Christ who has already inaugurated God's kingdom will come again to defeat all principalities and powers and hand over the kingdom to God the Father (I Cor. 15:24 and The Apostles' Creed). Not everyone, of course, holds this particular Christian hope. Not even all Christians. Other people (both Christians and non-Christians) find themselves caught up in forms of hope that look not so much to the future in anticipation and expectation as they do to the past. Their hope is not so much an anticipation of the coming Christ as it is a secular, sentimental nostalgia for "white Christmases" (even in Florida and Arizona), Bing Crosby, mistletoe, and Christmas trees. In order to understand any particular hope, it is often helpful also to understand the hopelessness from which it springs.

Advent 2009 in the United States may be an unusual season of hope, at least in comparison to those of recent memory. Many Americans are weary of a deep financial recession now approaching the end of its second year. They are discouraged by an official unemployment rate of ten per cent and an unofficial one that is much higher. They are emotionally exhausted by six long years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, a war that seems to have done little to spread democracy and has cost thousands of American lives, innumerable Iraqi and Afghan lives, billions of dollars, and appears to have enriched only corrupt political leaders and made life a living hell for those caught in the crossfire. Given the financial and political power of health insurance companies, the oil industry, and groups such as the National Rifle Association, many Americans have given up hope that anything can be done about the fifty million people who have no access to health care, the continuing destruction of the environment, and a society awash in hand guns and automatic weapons. As politicians continue to sell their souls to powerful financial forces (Wall Street, the banks, the health insurance companies, and the oil industry), the hopelessness of many Americans threatens to become cynicism and despair that any significant changes are possible in American society.

In this bleak national climate of hopelessness, the presidential campaign of Barak Obama in 2008 became for many people a candle of hope. After eight years of George Bush, Dick Cheney, and Karl Rove, many Americans had given up hope that anything could be done about the direction of American society. The Obama campaign's slogan of "Yes, we can" touched a nerve and evoked a remarkable response not just from liberal Democrats, but also from Independents and from those who previously had not participated in the political process. Although his Democratic rival, Hillary Clinton, and his Republican opponent, John McCain, dismissed his campaign as nothing but soaring rhetoric with little or no substance, large numbers of Americans heard something in Obama's appeal to "audacious hope" that turned a highly improbable, almost Don Quixote like campaign (reminiscent of that of Eugene McCarthy in 1968) into a political tsunami that flattened the Republicans who never seemed to understand

what hit them. And apparently still don't.

Like many other candidates for the American presidency, Obama published a book before he formally began his campaign. Unlike the books of most other aspirants to the White House, his became a best seller. Its title, *The Audacity of Hope*, was borrowed from a sermon by the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, pastor of Obama's home church, Trinity United Church Christ in Chicago. Wright eventually played a significant role in the national debate about the issues of race and ethnicity that surrounded Obama's candidacy. His publicity seeking performance at a meeting of the National Press Club prompted a major speech by Obama, "A More Perfect Union," that may eventually be recognized as one of the most significant statements on race in American history.

The Audacity of Hope includes a chapter on faith in which Obama describes how as an adult in Chicago he became a Christian, but the book does not offer a sustained discussion of what Obama means by hope. Hope does not even appear in the book's index. One brief, suggestive statement about hope can be found in the epilogue. Obama describes his experience of writing the keynote speech for the 2004 Democratic Convention in Boston, a speech that introduced him to the nation and first prompted speculation that he might some day become a candidate for the presidency. In writing the speech he found himself remembering people he had met in his first political campaigns in Illinois, some of whom he could name and some he could not, people who had faced significant hardships in their lives and had refused to surrender to them. As he reflected on their determination and self-reliance, he remembered the title of one of Wright's sermons—"The Audacity of Hope."

That was the best of the American spirit, I thought—having the audacity to believe despite all the evidence to the contrary that we could restore a sense of community to a nation torn by conflict; the gall to believe that despite personal setbacks, the loss of a job or an illness in the family or a childhood mired in poverty, we had some control—and therefore responsibility—over our own fate.

It was that audacity, I thought, that joined us as one people. It was that pervasive spirit of hope that tied my own family's story to the larger American story and my own story to those of the voters I sought to represent.¹

Given the prominence of the theme of hope in his book and in his campaign for the presidency, what does Obama mean by "audacious hope" and to what extent is it Christian hope? In this text hope seems to be not so much hope in God or the promises of Christ, but hope in what Obama refers to as "the American spirit," the inspirational lives of those Americans who refuse to give up in the midst of desperate circumstances. This "audacious hope" has its roots in the capacity of the American people to resist resignation and despair and assume responsibility for their own "fate." But is this Christian hope or is it simply an American optimism or a sunny national disposition?

In *The Audacity of Hope* Obama emphasizes the importance of values in his understanding of Christianity.² He is especially interested in the difficult question of the relation between Christian faith and other faiths (including secularism) in a democratic society. What is the role of religious faith in a pluralistic society? His response

is that all people of faith, including Christians, should “recognize the values that both religious and secular people share when it comes to the moral and material direction of our country.”³ That statement, of course, raises several difficult questions. First, what precisely are those values that religious and secular people share? Second, do those shared values necessarily trump other values and convictions that are central to particular religious faiths (suggesting perhaps some form of civil religion)? And, third, is hope one of those shared values? If so, to what extent is this shared hope a form of Christian hope? Obama insists that his claim that Christians can find common ground around shared values with non-Christians does not mean he is “unanchored” in his Christian faith. “There are some things that I’m absolutely sure about—the Golden rule, the need to battle cruelty in all its forms, the value of love and charity, humility and grace.”⁴ Interestingly, hope does not appear in this list of Christian certainties.

However, in the conclusion to this chapter on faith, Obama describes his visit in 2004 to Birmingham, Alabama, and the Civil Rights Institute across the street from the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church where four young African-American girls were killed by a bomb planted by white supremacists. After he returned home to Chicago, he remembered his daughter, Sasha, once telling him she did not want to die and his response to her that it would be a long time before she needed to worry about that. He writes:

I wondered whether I should have told her the truth, that I wasn’t sure what happens when we die, any more than I was sure where the soul resides, or what existed before the Big Bang. Walking up the stairs, though, I knew what I hoped for—that my mother was together in some way with those four little girls, capable in some fashion of embracing them, of finding joy in their spirits.⁵

What Obama hopes for here may not be uniquely Christian, but it is surely a hope many Christians would affirm.

On February 19, 2009, the National Public Radio program “Speaking of Faith” broadcast a conversation titled “Obama’s Theologian” that had taken place three weeks earlier at Georgetown University between David Brooks, a commentator for *The New York Times*, and E.J. Dionne, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and a columnist for *The Washington Post*, and was moderated by Krista Tippett.⁶ In that discussion Brooks reported a telephone interview he had had the previous year with Obama about a number of public policy issues. The conversation did not seem to be going anywhere until “out of the blue” Brooks asked him, “You ever read Reinhold Niebuhr?” “Yeah, I do,” said Obama. Brooks then asked, “Well, what does he mean to you?” To Brooks’ amazement, “he [Obama] proceeded to give a twenty-minute summation of *The Irony of American History* in perfect paragraph form.” Brooks and Dionne then spent the remainder of the program discussing to what extent Obama is a Niebuhrian realist and Niebuhr’s continuing relevance for contemporary social and political issues in American society.

If Reinhold Niebuhr is as significant an influence on Obama as Brooks, Dionne, and others believe him to be, does Niebuhr help us better understand what Obama means by “audacious hope?” To what extent would Niebuhr agree with Obama’s

description of hope? Might Niebuhr have questions and criticisms of “audacious hope?”

First, one can imagine Niebuhr might press Obama on the origin of audacious hope. As we have noted, *The Audacity of Hope* does not offer a sustained discussion of hope. Obama does not, for example, explain what it is in the structure of human nature and experience that accounts for the human capacity to hope in the midst of hopelessness. He seems more interested in audacity itself than in hope. Hope is simply an attribute of “the American spirit.” One can imagine, therefore, that Niebuhr might well press Obama on his understanding of how hope is related to what Niebuhr described as “human nature.”⁷

Hope, for Niebuhr, is rooted in the human capacity for self-transcendence. Human beings are both finite and free. Like all other created beings, their existence is finite and contingent, but unlike the rest of creation, their capacity for self-transcendence gives them a unique freedom to transcend their finitude. It is this freedom to imagine the infinite, to be finite but to know that one is finite and in so doing to be able to imagine infinitude, that makes human beings anxious. Anxiety, a concept Niebuhr borrows from Kierkegaard, is not itself sinful, but is simply a description of human existence. It is a fact of human nature, the consequence of human finitude and freedom, and as such is the precondition for both human creativity and human sin.

This human capacity for self-transcendence, as Niebuhr describes it, is the anthropological nexus for Christian faith, love, and hope. Over against Karl Barth’s denial that there is anything in creation that serves as the presupposition for God’s self-revelation and in agreement with Emil Brunner, Niebuhr argues that this human structure of finitude, freedom, and self-transcendence is “the point of contact” between God’s grace “and the natural endowments of the soul.”⁸ It is because human beings have this capacity to transcend their finitude, to transcend their present circumstances, no matter how desperate they may be, that they can also imagine a different world and, by means of the imagination, hope in the midst of hopelessness.

Niebuhr might well question Obama’s description of audacious hope as “the best of the American spirit.” Does that claim imply that Americans are somehow more hopeful than other nationalities? Does American hope differ either in degree or in kind from the hopefulness of other people? Obama never quite claims that hope somehow distinguishes the American people or the American spirit from other nationalities, but he does seem to believe that it is what joins the American people together. In Niebuhr’s categories, however, the capacity to hope is a manifestation of the human capacity for self-transcendence and is a universal claim about human beings, not one that pertains only to Christians. There is nothing peculiarly American, therefore, about audacious hope.

Second, the question that preoccupies the conversation between Brooks and Dionne is whether Obama is a Niebuhrian realist. Obama is often described as a “pragmatist” in a loose sense of that term, in the sense that he does not seem to value ideological purity, has expressed an interest in public policies that “work,” even if ideologically unfashionable, and yearns for bipartisan solutions and support for difficult social and political problems. To what extent, then, is Obama’s pragmatism a form of Niebuhrian realism, a realism that is profoundly paradoxical and deeply rooted in the paradoxical structure of human nature as both finite and free?

The capacity for self-transcendence inevitably leads to the denial of finitude either

by making the human more than he or she is created to be (the problem posed by pride) or by denying and fleeing from one's essential humanity (the problem Niebuhr described unfortunately as "sensuality"). Sin's corruption of human nature manifests itself in public policies that are either utopian in their denial of finitude and the reality of sin or apathetic in their fatalism, despair, and resignation to the way things are. Obama's slogan "Yes, we can" is a rhetorical denial of apathy, fatalism, despair, and resignation. His pragmatism and his willingness to engage in political compromise is a denial of idealistic and utopian ideologies.

At times Obama describes the difficulty of some of the economic and social problems now facing the American people in ways that suggest Niebuhr's recognition of the tragedy and irony of American history. Niebuhr repeatedly argued that love and justice, like history and eternity, are dialectically related, and that means there are "obligations to realize justice in indeterminate degrees; but none of the realizations can assure the serenity of perfect fulfillment." All realizations of justice, therefore, "contain contradictions to, as well as approximations of, the ideal of love."⁹ The imperfection of every attempt to realize justice, however, should not lead to a retreat into apathy and resignation. Such a position would sunder the relation between justice and love. In some of his public comments, Obama appears acutely aware of the ambiguity at the heart of American history, an ambiguity that suggests that the best of human intentions and all national policies are marred by self-interest. As Dionne put it,

The joy of a progressive worldview or a liberal worldview is indeed its hopefulness, its optimism, its sense of human possibility, but the core weakness of that worldview, as Niebuhr always understood, was a lack of awareness of human frailty, the human capacity to sin.

On other occasions, however, sin and ambiguity disappear from Obama's rhetoric and are replaced by an idealism that suggests that perfect love and justice can indeed be realized within history. In his Inaugural Speech on January 20, 2009, Obama argued that audacious hope is finally, ultimately hope not in God, but hope in the American people.

For as much as government can do and must do, *it is ultimately the faith and determination of the American people upon which this nation relies*. It is the kindness to take in a stranger when the levees break, the selflessness of workers who would rather cut their hours than see a friend lose their job which sees us through our darkest hours. It is the firefighter's courage to storm a stairway filled with smoke, but also a parent's willingness to nurture a child, that finally decides our fate.¹⁰

Such a statement might be read to imply that the meaning of history can indeed be found and realized within history. Niebuhr, on the other hand, argued that "it is impossible to regard history as redemptive," and "the hope of an adequate judgment and a sufficient fulfillment of the life of the individual in the historical process must lead to the most pathetic disillusionment."¹¹

So, is Obama a Niebuhrian realist? Appropriately, the answer seems to be ambiguous. On some occasions Obama reflects a realist's hope, but on others he embraces a hope congenial to liberal idealism. Consistency is not necessarily a virtue for politicians, at least not for the successful ones.

There is one last fascinating similarity between Niebuhr and Obama. In an important sense, both of them are decidedly unfashionable in this present post-modern world. Both seem to believe there is a coherent, unifying narrative to American history. In books like *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944) and *The Irony of American History* (1952), Niebuhr sought to make sense critically and theologically of the shape and direction of American history. And so does Obama. Niebuhr, however, said little about the relation between the larger American story and his own personal narrative. Not so Obama. No less critical of American history than Niebuhr, but not as explicitly theological, Obama is committed to “making sense” out of his own complicated personal biography in the context of the larger American narrative. Indeed, on several occasions Obama has said that he understands his personal narrative to be illustrative of our larger national story and the latter to be suggestive for how he understands his personal story. And in both Obama finds the basis for audacious hope.

In his history of the Obama campaign, *Renegade: The Making of a President*, Richard Wolffe describes Obama’s search for his own identity in light of his unusual racial and religious background. In a conversation with Wolffe, Obama acknowledged that in his work as a community organizer and in his campaign for the presidency, he discovered in listening to people that “everyone has a story that was sacred to them.”

And those stories tied in with my own. And that was always the intention with the book [*Dreams from my Father*], to try and locate my own experiences, that on their face seem pretty odd and atypical, within the larger American story. That’s what we are doing with our speeches and that’s to some degree what I think this campaign is about and what America is about: people from diverse backgrounds and unlikely places finding a common culture and a common set of values and ideals that make them American.¹²

One can imagine, though, that on this point Niebuhr might urge Obama to follow the lead of his brother, Richard. There is a narrative other than the American story which provides a better basis for understanding both our national identity and our personal, individual stories.¹³

Notes

- 1 Barak Obama, *The Audacity of Hope* (New York: Vintage Books-Random House, 2006), p. 421.
- 2 Ibid., pp. 231-268.
- 3 Ibid., p. 255.
- 4 Ibid., p. 265.
- 5 Ibid., pp. 267-8.
- 6 <http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/2009/obamas-theologian>.
- 7 See Volume One of Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1941), chapters 6 and 7.
- 8 Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, Vol. 2: 117.
- 9 Ibid., pp. 246-7.
- 10 <http://www.cnn.com/2009/politics/01/20/obama.politics> (Italics mine).
- 11 Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, Vol. 2:310.
- 12 Richard Wolffe, *Renegade: The Making of a President* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2009), p. 152.
- 13 H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan, 1941).