

Obama's Theologian
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It is a family joke that my father, who had been a university teacher for forty years and a political activist for more than sixty, made the biggest splash in the local papers for his efforts to save his favorite brand of ice cream at a local ice cream store in Oregon. Life is ironical.

The man whose insights we will talk about this morning is probably best known for a small prayer he wasn't entirely sure he wrote, although research suggests he did, "The Serenity Prayer":

Grant to us the serenity of mind to accept that which cannot be changed; courage to change that which can be changed, and wisdom to know the one from the other.

Most of us have heard that prayer although we may not even know its author was one of America's great theologians: Reinhold Niebuhr.

We may also be unaware that is not merely a personal prayer, but a social political one. "Grant us," --- grant our society, grant our nation. Niebuhr's work was all about paradox and irony. One of his great works was called "The Irony of American History" and he was always warning us about pride, so he might have appreciated the irony that one of the most influential thinkers of his age is remembered by the populace only in an anonymous prayer.

Republican columnist, David Brookes, tells a story about conducting an interview with presidential candidate, Barack Obama. The interview, he said, was not going well. It was the end of the day and they were both a bit tired, when Brookes asked Obama about his favorite theologian. According to Brookes, Obama told him it was Reinhold Niebuhr. Obama then relaxed and proceeded in well-constructed paragraphs to discuss Niebuhr's work, especially "The Irony of American History" and how it applied to the present time. Brookes confessed to being both impressed and heartened by that response.

I was thrilled to know of Obama's interest because I, too, was a bit of a Niebuhr fan or certainly had been back in the days when academic theology and philosophy was regular nighttime reading. Although Niebuhr was very popular among theological liberals, he wasn't optimistic and liberal enough for most of my Unitarian classmates. They tended to prefer Henry Nelson Wieman or Paul Tillich. It was kind of nice to know that Obama and I not only shared some time living in Hyde Park Chicago, an acquaintance with some of the Divinity School Faculty there, and attendance at Rev. Wright's Congregational Church, but also an admiration for the same theologian. Other people might have felt they could sit down and have a beer with George W., but obviously, I would much have preferred a late night beer and polish sausage in Chicago talking theology with Barack.

One of the interesting things about Niebuhr is that both liberals and conservatives have been drawn to him. He was friends with such figures as W.H. Auden and Abraham Heschel. He was quoted not infrequently by Martin Luther King Jr. Jimmy Carter admired him. On the right, not just a moderate like David Brookes but neo-conservative Michael Novak referred to him and even claimed him. John McCain has been heard to quote him. Although Niebuhr lived and wrote in the early 20th century in a world very different than the one we live in today, many, including our current president, find his thoughts still very relevant.

Niebuhr started his career as a pastor in Detroit where he was involved in the 1930's with labor rights and civil rights. His writings and his books got him noticed and he finished his career as a teacher at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. He was, however, never distant from either the church or society ---- well known in political circles and in religious circles he even made the cover of *Time Magazine* in 1948.

Perhaps one reason I was more interested in him than many other of my UU contemporaries, was my longtime interest in evil. Even as a kid I always wondered what it was that made bad things happen in society. I read about the persecution of the Jews in Germany. I read about the treatment of Blacks in America. I was in fear for my own future in the shadow of the atomic bomb. It seemed to me as a young child growing up in a prosperous land, that we were in a world filled with so many blessings, and yet humans were capable of such horrors. It puzzled me that it was not an aberration of bad guys and bogeymen, but was present in the behavior of whole nations.

Unlike most liberal theologians, Niebuhr took this problem seriously in all his work. So seriously, in fact, that he got a hearing from many who were not liberals.

Those of you who have not studied theology might be surprised to learn that a major part of it is not talking about God per se, but rather about humanity. What is the nature of being human? What is the human project all about? What are we to do? One of Niebuhr's early books, and the first one I read, was titled, "The Nature and Destiny of Man." When you are asked to do theology one of the categories you are always asked about is your doctrine of human nature. What do you believe about it?

Although Unitarians got their names from a certain doctrine about God, they actually split off from Calvinists because they had a more hopeful view of human nature than did the Puritans. They believed in human improvement and progress.

Niebuhr was not as optimistic as the 19th century Unitarians or as fatalistic as the 19th century orthodox. He did believe in sin. What he said is that we are only human. We are imperfect. We can only see from our own vantage point. We are tempted, however, to make our particular point of view, universal. We are tempted to think that we are more selfless than we are. We are tempted to ignore our flaws and to think we are wiser and better than we are. This is the classical sin of pride, identified by the Greeks, as *hubris* --- the belief that we are as perfect as the Gods. Being imperfect is not the sin, but acting as if one's own point of view and needs are absolute and universal leads to bad

behavior and sin. Making the mistake of lifting up one's own power at the expense of others, a lack of humility, leads inevitably to sin. He emphasized hubris, pride and overreach as problematical. However, he also said the opposite could be problematical. While hubris and pride spring from not recognizing our limitations, the other side of the problem is a lack of recognition of the divinity within or the best of humanity of aspiring to be more than our sensual needs. These are the sins of not living up to our best potential, the giving in to our animal nature: acquisitiveness, greed, addictions, what he called the sins of sensuality. Feminists criticized Niebuhr for failing to recognize how much this other side, the lack of esteem for the best in our nature, was equally problematical. They felt his doctrine of sin was too masculine and too First World in its critique --- not that it was wrong, but that it was incomplete.

In his later writings, Niebuhr moved on to social critiques. This is where he became influential. An early critique in "Moral Man" and "Immoral Society" looked at how groups of people, basically doing good individually --- kind parents, good neighbors, ---- none the less do harm as a group: oppress the poor, engage in prejudice and racism, make war, and so on.

In Niebuhr's own life, his mind changed over time. In his youth he was an active Socialist and Pacifist. The rise of Fascism challenged that Pacifism. Interestingly, he was early in publicly expressing concern about Hitler's plan for the Jews and he spoke of the necessity for intervention to save the Jewish populations of Europe -- to be our brother's keeper. He supported America's entry into the war for that reason. Following the war he became a staunch anti-Communist, even as he recognized the evil inherent in the American anti-Communism of Joseph McCarthy. Despite his support of World War II and a firm stance against Stalinism and its successors, he never saw war as a noble thing, only a lesser of evils. He foresaw troubles in Indochina in 1952 and opposed our entry into what would later become the war in Vietnam.

Niebuhr founded a school of thought known as Christian Realism. We are likely, he said, to be confounded, by our virtues as much as our vices. Americans have historically seen our nation as founded in innocence; a New Eden liberated from the corruption of old Europe. It was a democratic project on which we embarked and was a far more egalitarian economic and social milieu. It was one of the first countries, in fact, founded on a philosophy, but that often made us blind to our sins. Since we were "God's children", our slaughter of native peoples, our compromise with slavery, our land grabs, and so on, were usually clothed in ideologies of goodness --- winning more souls to God, civilizing the natives and the Africans. Manifest Destiny. From John Winthrop to Ronald Reagan the phrase "City on the Hill" was used to frame America as an exception to the rule, a heavenly city in a corrupt world.

This formulation, according to Niebuhr, is the cause of one of America's temptation to do wrong ---- the belief, with which we have historically been inculcated, that we are a morally superior nation. Once you begin to imbue yourselves with godlike qualities, you become blind to your own faults and limitations. National hubris is the downfall of great

nations and also helps a nation justify itself in doing wrong. What is perhaps more unusual in the American story is that our hubris is often rooted in our idealism.

Liberals and Conservatives alike have unusually utopian views for the nation --- different utopias perhaps, but utopias none the less. Niebuhr suggested that when we believe that we can realize utopian dreams, not merely make things a bit better, but realize utopia, we become dangerous to ourselves and to others. This was a part of what he called “the irony of American History,” that we are rooted in utopian ideals and as we gained more power we became dangerous in our belief in our goodness and our lack of awareness of acting from self interest. We became a powerful nation due in large part to our natural resources and our protection from the great war making powers of Europe, but, said Niebuhr, we were tempted to believe that we became rich and powerful through our own virtue, to believe that we were wealthy and powerful because God smiled on us for our virtue. Again, a lack of humility.

On the other side, however, there is the necessity to do justice, to confront the evils of the world and ameliorate suffering. This is what he came to grips with in the rise of Hitler -- that doing nothing, that refusing to use power, was a greater evil, leading to Holocaust and the slaughter of millions. He did not glorify war. He had a theory about when it was a better option to go to war, but he believed that we don't always have choices between good and evil, but often between what is bad and what is worse. Equally, we can never achieve perfection, only hope to do better than we are doing now.

In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in Niebuhr. As a liberal, I can say that our previous president, George W. Bush, certainly must have helped this resurgence. If ever an American political figure exemplified the things Niebuhr warned about, it was he. Conservative Michael Novak applauded Bush's acknowledgement of evil, but none the less warned of the hubris of nation-building and going into Iraq. Bush Sr., who had turned away from nation-building and conquest in Iraq, had his friends try to warn his son. Libertarian conservatives showed concern about Bush's encroachment on civil liberties. The military was disturbed by his bending and even breaking the rules against torture. In all these things, the conviction that he and his friends were so far on the side of good and righteousness that they could do no wrong, was the hubris Niebuhr warned against. Their thinking was: we are on the side of the right so we can exercise power in whatever way we choose. Whatever one thinks of the two wars in Iraq, the manner in which Bush Sr. and Bush Jr. approached the two wars shows the difference between a spirit of humility and a spirit of hubris. Bush Sr. showed real concern and even grief as he walked alone on the beach before sending troops to war.

Who can forget how different the attitude of his son as he landed on an aircraft carrier in a flight suit and made macho statements like “bring ‘em on”? One of the ironies that Niebuhr warned about is that those without power may make cautious statements, but when they acquire power idealism takes over and they take on disastrous projects. That is arguably true here. During the first election campaign George Bush Jr. warned Al Gore and the nation against taking on projects too big for us, like nation-building. Hardly two years later he had begun two wars, attempting to remake the Middle East in the

image of America. On the other hand, when it comes to economics, recent conservatives such as Reagan and Bush seem to go to the other end of the spectrum. Rather than feeling that the government can do nothing but good and acts from the best of motives, they moved towards deregulation and lawlessness, depending completely on some “invisible hand” to bring forth the best of all possible economic worlds thus eschewing the use of power for good altogether.

Of course, Niebuhr didn't let liberals off the hook. In leaving behind pacifism he essentially said that progressives had an insufficient doctrine of human evil as well. Niebuhr argued that we were often unwilling to use our power to confront genocide and the destruction of civilization. Today he might argue that modern liberalism has often failed to celebrate what we have accomplished. Until very recently, America was one of the most economically egalitarian countries in the world and one that first had faith in the gifts and talents of ordinary people. The last fifty years have seen a remarkable change in the position of racial minorities, women, and gays and lesbians due to their struggles for equity. All too often secular liberals have sounded like some Orthodox prophet who says that America is a nation of sinners and there is no health in us! Liberals, he might have argued, often fail to see how we participate in the sins of our nation --- even as we may work for civil rights, we participate in the privileges of being white, or male, or straight, or well to do and we do things which maintain the status quo.

Like conservatives, liberals can see others' blindness and ignore our own. And if we are currently more humble abroad than our conservative brethren, we often believe we can engineer more socially, scientifically, and economically than maybe in our human power. For example, liberals often see education as the answer to everything. There are many things that education can do; certainly it can help improve an individual's situation economically, but it is hard to argue that formal education leads to goodness. Our torture policies were designed by Yale grads and Berkeley professors. Our economic collapse was engineered by very smart operators on Wall Street. At one time we thought science would solve all human problems, but from the atomic bomb, to the environment, to cancer-causing chemicals, our scientific advances have caused life-threatening problems, due, in part to our lack of humility in employing our knowledge.

Niebuhr's call to us all was to do justice, make things better, but to do so with humility and the knowledge of our limited vision. It is a balancing act. We can do good things, but we will never get it completely right. I have to say that since I first read Niebuhr, I have actually adopted a more hopeful outlook than he had. He faced some of our darkest times. He would be the first to admit that he sometimes underestimated human possibility. Although a longtime supporter of Civil Rights, he was a bit late in supporting King's tactics to bring them about, fearing the backlash that would come. King, however, used Niebuhr as justification for his tactics. Change, he said, wouldn't come through sweet reason alone, through patience and waiting --- injustice had to be confronted and white selfishness overcome.

Niebuhr would have been surprised that the end of apartheid came without war as did the end of the Soviet empire and its domination of Eastern Europe. Humans have been able

to liberate themselves in ways outside his or any of our imaginings. For all the ills we face, we have seen some amazing changes for good without the use of violence.

As we face the tremendous issues of today with a president who claims Niebuhr as an influence, it is interesting to inquire into how he has put it into practice. There is no doubt that when it comes to relations abroad, the hubris levels have been dialed way back. The talk and actions of partnership with others, the active listening, the realization that the situation in Afghanistan is filled with no good alternatives and thus requires a great deal of argument and thought, renouncing torture ---- all are in the tradition of Niebuhr. It is policy that recognizes that there are limits to what our power can do, limits to what we know and understand, and yet also understands that we might need to take actions that may be morally hazardous in hopes of averting a worse outcome.

Domestically there is room for argument. Some say he has taken on too much, tried to do the impossible and shown hubris in doing so. Others say that he has given the opposition too much credit for good intentions, that he has been unwilling to use power forcefully enough to combat special interests at home. A week ago, I was at a lecture by my former teacher, religious historian, Martin Marty, a man who knew Niebuhr and was a neighbor and acquaintance of Obama. I asked him how he thought Obama was doing in relation to his admiration to Niebuhr. Dr. Marty was of the opinion that he trusted too much in reason in dealing with those who oppose his programs, and was too forgetful of their human tendency to put their self interest before the common good. Obama's followers have, in many cases been unrealistic and unNiebuhrian in our expectations. Niebuhr warned us, even Obama warned us, that an election doesn't bring on a whole new world. Change comes about slowly, incompletely, and with a lot of labor by a lot of people. Those who have criticized him for taking on too much are often those whose self interest is the status quo. He, too, is imperfect. In this time of crisis and moral hazard he has at times failed to be bold enough and at other times overestimated what he could do. But that, said Niebuhr, is the human condition.

It is a difficult balance --- humility and determination; acknowledging of our limitations yet attempting to be our best, working for goals that we know will never be totally realized, trying to do what is right with the realization that we cannot know for certain what that is. This is not a message we want to hear on a Sunday morning, nor on the political hustings. We want, we need, hope. That, is I think, not unrealistic. Amazing changes have happened in our lives. We have seen them. Many of us have helped bring them about. Will we see the world's problems solved? No. Can we improve the human condition and bring help to those who suffer? We can do a great deal, if we do so humbly and gladly and carefully.