

THREADS: Theological Motifs in President Obama's Nobel Remarks

© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine

University Congregational Church

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Reading: Psalm 9: 1-10

I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds. I will be glad and exult in you; I will sing praise to your name, O Most High. When my enemies turned back, they stumbled and perished before you. For you have maintained my just cause; you have sat on the throne giving righteous judgment. You have rebuked the nations, you have destroyed the wicked; you have blotted out their name forever and ever. The enemies have vanished in everlasting ruins; their cities you have rooted out; the very memory of them has perished. But the Lord sits enthroned forever, he has established his throne for judgment. He judges the world with righteousness; he judges the people with equity. The Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. And those who know your name put their trust in you, for you, O Lord has not forsaken those who seek you.

While the human race may hope for the enthronement of God and God's righteous rule over the earth, human beings are required to govern the nations with as much wisdom and skill as possible. On the one hand, one might pray that God's will is at work in the hands of those who stand at the helm of leadership. On the other hand, they are very human hands. The questions of justice, the problems of evil, and a vision for the future of the earth never tire of challenging the human imagination. Thoughtful reflections on the state of human affairs, human rights, the just distribution of resources, and the use of military power are never resolved. In a democracy such as ours every citizen has a mind and a voice that

demands prudent exercise. Leaders in every level of society are called to the challenge of wisdom, be they clergy, physicians, laborers, teachers, politicians, artists, or activists. In my mind this is not only the responsibility of citizenship, but also the task of religious institutions.

This morning I am inviting you to think theologically about President Obama's remarks on his reception of the Nobel Peace Prize. I am not here this morning to defend his selection as the winner of the Peace Prize, nor justify his statement. I do not intend for this to be a political apology for the content of his remarks.

Several commentators have written that the Nobel remarks are a reflection of Christian Realism and the thought of Reinhold Niebuhr. These include David Brooks of *The New York Times*, Fred Kaplan of *Slate.com*, and Chris Herlinger reporting for *The Christian Century*. There are certainly themes of Christian Realism and Niebuhr in Mr. Obama's speech and I will expand on these in just a moment. Indeed, in an interview with David Brooks in 2007, Mr. Obama stated that Niebuhr was one of his favorite philosophers. Brooks asked then candidate Obama how Niebuhr formed his thinking. The Senator said, "I take away the compelling idea that there's serious evil in the world and hardship and pain. And we should be humble and modest in our belief we can

eliminate those things. But we shouldn't use that as an excuse for cynicism and inaction."¹ We must be cautioned that Mr. Obama was not offering a lecture on Christian Realism. His speech is a political instrument that has within it elements of his own self interest which any Christian Realist would admit. Christian Realism is far more complex than this sermon or Mr. Obama's speech could possibly reflect. And I believe that Mr. Obama invites us to reconsider and re-appropriate Christian Realism in an era of international terrorism, especially the challenge of just war theory.

The Christian church has too easily preached love and peace. It was thought that all we needed was love and good will toward our fellow human beings. If we could somehow convince people that God's love would bring salvation to the world we would live together in harmony. I cannot count the number of sermons that I have written on the twin themes of love and peace. But there are significant faults with such simplistic faith. The most important is the problem of translating love into effective human relationships that provide for the welfare of all. The challenge of love is the challenge of justice. How does love translate into food for hungry bellies, knowledge for starving minds, shelter for

¹ David Brooks, "Obama's Christian Realism," *The New York Times*, 12/15/09; <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/opinion/15brooks.html>.

shivering bodies, medical care for the diseased? How does love express itself in the basic civil rights of human beings? If love cannot respond to these questions it is nothing less than sentimentality and God's love is a straw man for Christian piety.

A major challenge to the theme of love is the reality of human nature. Christian Realism posits the incapacity of human beings to completely transcend self-interest. Indeed, Christian love is often misused as an instrument of self-gain. We can emote about our love for lost sinners or starving children in India but that never transforms a lost soul or puts bread in the hands of a child. Others may be impressed by our expression of faith, but not the lost and led astray or the hungry.

Self-interest is a reality of human nature that we cannot escape. We must understand that it is not simply a matter of survival, though that is significant. Self-interest is rooted in the deep existential anxiety of our finitude. Niebuhr wrote that this awareness of our limitations and our death predisposes us to seek our security at the expense and even death of others. And that is always a choice. We live in the tension of finitude and the freedom to transcend the sin of security. We have the capacity to envision a community and its future that is creative and life sustaining. This is the anxiety in which we live. Niebuhr wrote:

“In short, man, being both free and bound, both limited and limitless, is anxious. Anxiety is the inevitable concomitant of the paradox of freedom and finiteness in which man is involved. Anxiety is the internal precondition of sin.”²

Now we must be careful here. Niebuhr is not saying that anxiety is sin. He is saying that anxiety is a characteristic of being human. Anxiety is the precondition of sin **and** it is often the source of human creativity and invention. In fact, anxiety can open the door not only to sin but also the door of human imagination and all of its possibilities. With possibilities the human mind can achieve remarkable things that range from computer chips to parliamentary forms of democratic government. Each step of achievement and creativity proves to be inadequate and we push for greater perfection in the effort to achieve security and permanence. This may result in new and improved artificial heart pumps or nerve gas. Anxiety drives us not only to create and invent but also to affirm our meaning and purpose in the face of our finitude.

Because of our insecurity and its attendant anxiety we often fall into the grasp of pride. We are charged with the lust for power. “The ego does not feel secure and therefore grasps for more power in order to make

² Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1941), Vol. I, p. 182.

itself secure.”³ We begin to believe that not only can we determine and create the security we hunger for; we assume self-sufficiency and deny the interdependent nature of life and society. We presume that we are the masters of our own fate and presume an extraordinary wisdom that allows us to determine and judge the destiny of others. Pride makes us blind to the needs of others. We all know that in the clutch of such hubris we often exploit others. We will do it in the name of “enlightened self-interest,” “human progress,” “democracy,” “God or Allah,” “law and order,” “the public interest,” “national security,” and *ad infinitum*.

For this reason evil exists in the world. Self-interest, anxiety, and pride create the cauldron for the lust for power and the inevitable oppression of human beings and all natural resources. Our pretensions too often lead us to exploit others, often resulting in strife and violence. The abuse of our freedom ironically enslaves us to ideologies, sensuality, materialism, and violence.

This is the broad background that is the foundation of Mr. Obama’s remarks. Specifically, he said, “I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people. For make no mistake: Evil does exist in the world.” Obama’s speech reflects the elements of

³ Ibid., p. 189.

good and evil that are the warp and woof of human history as well as human virtue. He notes the heritage of the Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. They represent the best that human beings can aspire too and yet he, as President of the United States, is required to defend his nation. “ Still, we are at war,” declares the President and, “I’m responsible for the deployment of thousands of young Americans to battle in a distant land. Some will kill, and some will be killed. And so I come here with an acute sense of the costs of armed conflict – filled with difficult questions about the relationship between war and peace, and our efforts to replace one with the other.”

He is filled with questions, as I am sure most of us are. And one of President Obama’s questions is the place and application of “just war” theory. He notes that just war theory establishes parameters on the application of military force, “if it is waged as a last resort or in self-defense; if the force used is proportional; and if, whenever possible, civilians are spared from violence.”

To his credit, Mr. Obama does not presume “a definitive solution to the problems of war.” “And it will require us to think in new ways about the notions of just war and the imperatives of a just peace. We must begin by acknowledging the hard truth: We will not eradicate violent conflict in

our lifetimes. There will be times when nations – acting individually or in concert – will find the use of force not only necessary but morally justified.”

My hope would be that we would, indeed, think anew about the notions of just war. I submit that we must first understand the concept completely. We must resist the temptation to use just war theory as a means of justifying our warring madness. Since World War II nearly every conflict has trotted out just war theory to assuage the conscience of various political administrations and the American people. Just war theory is both integrated and dynamic and we cannot pick and chose elements of it to legitimate military actions.

We must think anew about just war theory with the realization that the nature of warfare has significantly changed in the last sixty years. The war on terrorism challenges just war theory with the ambiguity of definitions – such as the identification of the enemy and the nation or state the enemy represents. If just war theory demands every effort of negotiation and diplomacy how is this done when an enemy such as Al-Qaeda has no boundary, is loosely organized if at all, and consists of multi national or tribal units? I would even ask if just war theory is a useful tool on the war on terrorism and if we need to construct a new moral model for

the uses of military power with such an enemy. Used properly just war theory is a bridle on the national inclination to use military power to resolve all conflicts. It sets moral standards for the justification of military intervention. Could an ethical model for the use of military power in an environment of terrorism also bridle the temptation of violence as our default response?

Mr. Obama rightly calls to question not only just war theory but the problem of how do nations respond to civil war and the violence perpetrated on people by their own government. What is the ethical response of nations to genocide in places like Darfur, Rwanda, the Congo, and so on? The President said:

“I believe that force can be justified on humanitarian grounds, as it was in the Balkans, or in other places that have been scarred by war. Inaction tears at our conscience and can lead to more costly intervention later. That’s why all responsible nations must embrace the role that militaries with a clear mandate can play to keep the peace.”

I do not disagree that inaction tears at our consciences. I am willing to discuss the role of military intervention. But I think that institutions such as the United Nations as well as our own government must establish the benchmarks of justice that such an intervention might establish. By what moral guidelines can we justify such action and what is the relationship between that action and the future security and well being of those

people? Mr. Obama challenges us to make difficult decisions about going to war and how we are going to fight that war. “When force is necessary, we have a moral and strategic interest in binding ourselves to certain rule of conduct,” declared the President. My question is when do we begin that conversation, at what levels of society and government, and how do we implement them both nationally and internationally?

The President understands that peace is not simply the absence of violence. He acknowledges the relationship between human civil rights and security from want. “A just peace,” he declares, “includes not only civil and political rights – it must encompass economic security and opportunity. For true peace is not just freedom from fear, but freedom from want.”

Christian realism puts love to work in the hands of justice. Justice recognizes the elements of self-service that are a part of our human nature and does not allow us to skirt around this reality. Because we can recognize the role of self-interest, anxiety and pride at work in our lives and in society we are challenged to justice. We are charged with the moral dilemma of caring for ourselves as we face the questions of just war, just distribution of resources, and mutual security. The needs are many, the obstacles are abundant, and the resources are increasingly

limited. For these very reasons the church shares a responsibility for articulating the complexity of human nature and the relationships of human beings. The human situation is multiplex and the Christian church cannot revert to its old habits of pronouncing judgment and what it thinks is the right thing to do. That only leaves the church irrelevant and powerless. The church can recognize the reality of human nature and all of the forces that are at work in societies – religious, political, social, historical, ideological, and economical. It can help the conversation by casting light on the needs and perspectives of others. The church can be the voice that warns us of the complacency of solution and recognize that every effort at peace and justice is incomplete and temporary. And the church can call us to a deeper faith. Niebuhr wrote in *The Irony of American History*:

“Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. There fore we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.”⁴

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⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1952), p. 63.