

Jefferson Quick, Timely Reads

Obama the Mystic

By: Reverend Charles Brock

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At a Presidential Prayer Breakfast, Barack Obama reflected briefly about his religious journey – highlighting his Christianity and emphasizing its role in his life as a community organizer in Chicago and his later career in public service.

“I’m grateful not only because I was broke and the church fed me, but because it led to everything else. It led me to embrace Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. It led me to Michelle, the love of my life, and it blessed us with two extraordinary daughters, it led me to public service. And the longer I serve, especially in moments of trial or doubt, the more thankful I am of God's guiding hand.”^[1] The latter is the third level of mysticism.

Obama comes close to liberation theology as well as the fourth level of identification mysticism.^[2] I have defined when he describes his encounter with the theology of his Chicago church: “inside the thousands of churches across the city, I imagined the stories of ordinary black people merging with the stories of David and Goliath, Moses and Pharaoh, the Christians in the lion’s den, Ezekiel’s field of dry bones. Those stories – of survival, and freedom, and hope – became our story, my story; the blood that had spilled was our blood, the tears our tears ... our trials and triumphs became at once unique and universal.”^[3]

Liberation theology, roughly defined, is using biblical texts, especially the exodus story, to help churches and others reflect on current problems of the oppressed. As Moses led his people out of slavery, so too must people arise and lead or assist people under oppression today.

It is interesting to see how Obama’s ideas worked out in foreign policy: Obama’s National Security document claims the United States will promote its values mainly “by living them at home,” and it will “recognize economic opportunity as a human

right.”[4] That means that “support for global health, food security, and cooperative responses to humanitarian crises” will share attention and resources with the fight against tyranny and torture – “which will be welcome news for rulers in places such as Burma and North Korea.”[5] Not a good omen.

Here is the context from his own writing: “America could best serve the cause of freedom by concentrating on its own development, becoming a beacon of hope for other nations and people around the globe. But if suspicion of foreign entanglements is stamped into our DNA, then so is the impulse to expand – geographically, commercially, and ideologically.”

“... Manifest destiny [in America’s past] also meant bloody and violent conquest – of native American tribes forcibly removed from their lands and of the Mexican army defending its territory. It was a conquest that, like slavery, contradicted America’s founding principles and tended to be justified in explicitly racist terms, a conquest that American mythology has always had difficulty fully absorbing but that other countries recognized for what it was – an exercise in raw power.

... Hawaii was annexed, giving America a foothold in the Pacific. The Spanish-American War delivered Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines into U.S. control ...

By the start of the 20th century, then, the motives that drove U.S. foreign policy seemed barely distinguishable from those of the other great powers, driven by realpolitik and commercial interests.”[6]

He has backed off from the foreign policy of the Bush Administration of nation building and vowed to close Guantanamo (which didn’t happen), end the wars in the Middle East (which also didn’t happen), and get along with the Muslims (which he tried to do, but the results are not good today). I think he fouled up in Afghanistan and Iraq by pulling out the troops too early according to the generals on the ground there. “Doing away with deadlines,” says General Nicholson, the current commander in Afghanistan, “is absolutely critical” [i.e. stupid] because the Taliban can no longer just wait until the Americans leave.[7] In my opinion, Obama was overly cautious about the Middle East, acted too quickly, and the early troop drawdowns led to a deeper mess.

“Obama redefined the exceptionalist idea” during his second term and set forth a new vision of exceptionalism based — not on America’s founding or divine designation — but on the extraordinary acts that Americans perform to help others in need, not just in the United States, but throughout the world. ... [He described](#) an America “defined by courage and passion and hope and selflessness and sacrifice and a willingness to take on challenges” that other nations cannot, or will not, tackle. ... Whether it is peacekeepers ending slaughter in the Balkans, Peace Corps workers toiling away in a

remote village in South America, a SEAL team rescuing hostages in the Middle East, or a church group welcoming a refugee family into a small town in Ohio, this concept of American exceptionalism was captured well by Hillary Clinton's 2016 phrase, "America is great because America is good." [8]

"What we got [with George W. Bush] was an assortment of outdated policies from eras gone by, dusted off, slapped together, and with new labels affixed. Reagan's "Evil Empire" was now "the Axis of Evil." Theodore Roosevelt's version of the Monroe Doctrine – the notion that we could preemptively remove governments not to our liking – was now the Bush Doctrine, only expended beyond the Western Hemisphere to span the globe. Manifest destiny was back in fashion." [9]

Obama was against the second war in Iraq. "I know that an invasion of Iraq without a clear rationale and without strong international support will only fan the flames of the Middle East, and encourage the worst, rather than the best, impulses of the Arab world, and strengthen the recruitment arm of Al Qaeda." [10]

America did not have a clear, consistent policy. "Why invade Iraq and not North Korea or Burma? Why intervene in Bosnia and not Darfur?" [11] But whether Obama came up with a clear foreign policy based on our earlier American ideals is a subject for debate.

In conclusion, we can see inklings of his mysticism in the musings of his first book, which helped to lead to his mature views. We have only looked at his foreign policy and there is much else to examine, especially his views on race, but his presidency was an attempt to put his faith into action.

[1] Jeff Mason, *At Prayer Breakfast, Obama talks about faith and foreign policy*, Reuters, Feb 6, 2014

[2] The fourth level of mysticism according to my definition is Identification with major religious figures or the biblical stories or accounts of the saints etc.

[3] Barack Obama, *Dreams from my Father*, 2004, p 294

[4] This idea can be found in Obama *The Audacity of Hope – Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* Crown, 2006, p 280-1

[5] 'Obama's national security strategy is light on the human rights agenda' *Jackson Diehl* May 31, 2010 Washington Post

[6] Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, p 281-2

[7] NPR *Morning Edition*, October 13, 2017 – interview with General Nicholson

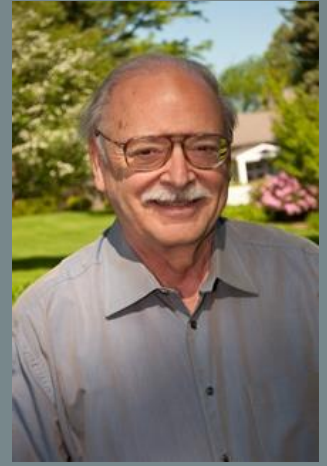
[8] Ronald A. Klain *It's time for Democrats to become the party of American exceptionalism* February 24 2017 Washington Post

[9] Ibid p 293

[10] Ibid 295

[11] Ibid p 302

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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