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Obama's Niebuhr Problem

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As a candidate for president Barack Obama identified Reinhold Niebuhr as one of the most important influences on his political and social thinking.[77] Obama's referencing of Niebuhr was not casual. Frequently, in diverse contexts, and before a variety of audiences, Obama either subtly or overtly offered Niebuhr as a guide for statesmanship. He obliquely referenced Niebuhr's two-fold test of toleration at the 2011 National Prayer Breakfast; he structured his Nobel Prize speech around Niebuhr's consideration of the problem of Christian realism in foreign policy; and, in unveiling the stimulus package, Obama placed the entire work in a context of Christian realism.[78] Clearly, Obama takes his Niebuhr seriously not only in theory, but also in practice. Obama's first term offered a lesson in Christian realism and governance.

Obama's recent re-election suggests that his first term in office was a sufficient political success. He was able to shepherd passage of significant pieces of domestic legislation, and to take significant actions in the area of foreign policy. But Obama's first term was also marked by stiff political opposition and slumping poll numbers. His electoral success ought not to mask the real difficulties he had in governing. These challenges came not only from the opposition, but also from a dispirited base. The political

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[77]David Brooks, "Obama, Gospel and Verse," *The New York Times,* April 26, 2007; Andrew Sullivan, "The Tragedy of Hope," *The Atlantic,* December 10, 2009, http://www.theatlantic.com/daily-dish/archive/2009/12/the-tragedy-of-hope/193096/.

[78]"Remarks by the President at the National Prayer Breakfast" (Washington Hilton, Washington, D.C., February 3, 2011), White House, Office of the Press Secretary, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/02/03/remarks-president-national-prayer-breakfast; "Remarks by the President at the Acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize" (Oslo City Hall, Oslo, Norway, December 10, 2009), White House, Office of the Press Secretary, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-acceptance-nobel-peace-prize; "The New Foundation" (Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., April 14, 2009), http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-on-the-Economy-at-Georgetown-University/.

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failure of Obama's first years had many causes—a slow economy that took many months to show signs of recovery, a determined opposition, the unrealistic expectations of supporters, the unresolved rumblings of racial politics. We argue that, for all the advantages it may bring for an approach to politics at once ethical and realistic, the Niebuhrian guide to statesmanship also exacerbated Obama's political problem: Niebuhr's political theory, with its emphasis on accomplishing proximate goods, its two-fold test of toleration, and its recognition of the necessity and ultimate error of partisanship proves to be a good guide for statesmen, but a hard sell for the public.[79]

Obama's political difficulties fell into two categories. First, it is not clear precisely how helpful a Niebuhrian approach to policy really is. Niebuhr claims that the statesman must attend to both the call of faith, and to the prudential political concerns of the moment. One must compromise one's ethical aspirations with the realities of political exigency. But how much compromise is the right compromise? Niebuhr offers no doctrine. We must make choices—but does Niebuhr help us see which choices?

A second category of difficulty is more overtly political: the Christian realist will not satisfy Christians or realists. The public, including both those who are impassioned political animals and those who pay scant attention to politics, prefers bright lines, stark contrasts, heroes and villains. We want to know that a policy is either good or it is bad; we do not have much patience for the sophistication of the statesman who understands that our best hope is to adopt a program that is more good than bad. To the extent that Niebuhr's framework for understanding policy deepens our appreciation for political complexities, it may also place the statesman at a rhetorical disadvantage in persuading the public to embrace the policy.

I. Obama's Link to Niebuhr

In the early part of the twenty-first century, American political commentators re-discovered Reinhold Niebuhr, and re-engaged with his thought. Liam Julian wrote of a "Niebuhr resurgence," a product, he argued, of our chastened and uncertain times.[80] John Patrick Diggins wondered *Why*

[79]Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996); and *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of its Traditional Defense* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944).

[80]Liam Julian, "Niebuhr and Obama," *Policy Review*, April–May 2009, 19–33; John Patrick Diggins, *Why Niebuhr Now?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). See also Richard Crouter, *Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics, Religion, and Christian Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 9–11. In February 2011, Princeton University's Center for Human

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Niebuhr Now? and provided a similar answer.[81] But part of the restoration of Niebuhr studies is due to the president's interest in the theologian, an interest first reported by Brooks though many others have explored the relation.[82] Obama's attachment to Niebuhr was at first remarkable, and by the end of his first term was well accepted.[83]

In many ways Obama's religious biography encapsulates the development of his identity. He was born to a secular anthropologist and an absent father (the senior Obama was an atheist of Muslim descent), raised as a young boy by his mother and Indonesian stepfather who observed some of the rituals of the Islamic faith (though apparently with little depth of feeling), moved to Hawaii to be raised by grandparents for whom religious belief was not a large part of life, and eventually made his way to Occidental College and Columbia University, bastions of secular liberal education. But after college, Obama's self-conscious search for community and meaning led him eventually to Trinity United Church. There, Obama found a home to work on his own faith in a Christian community of meaning. By the late 1980s Obama became a member of the United Church of Christ.[84]

In interviews and in his writings and speeches Obama has treated his deepening religious commitments as a journey. That he was shy about expressions of faith and full of questions raised doubts in some circles about the sincerity of his belief, and certainly a few of his beliefs were unorthodox.[85] Yet the fundamentals of Obama's expressed faith are within the mainstream of Christian belief in America. As president he has become

Values sponsored a conference on "The Niebuhrian Moment, Then and Now: Religion, Democracy and Political Realism."

[81](Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

[82]Mark Bowden, "The Salesman," *The Atlantic Monthly*, October 2010, 104.

[83]See Daniel Burke, "Obama Evokes Niebuhr, Black Church," *Christian Century* 128 (2011): 14–15; Gary Dorrien, *The Obama Question: A Progressive Perspective* (Lanham, Mich.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012); R. Ward Holder and Peter B. Josephson, *The Irony of Barack Obama: Barack Obama, Reinhold Niebuhr and the Problem of Christian Statecraft* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2012); Noah Kristula-Green, "Add Reinhold Niebuhr to Romney's Ticket," *The Daily Beast*, August 17, 2012; Kevin Mattson, "Why Obama and Romney Really Do See the World Differently," *Salon*, October 23, 2012, http://www.salon.com/2012/10/23/why_obama_and_romney_really_do_see_the_world_differently/; Eric Paul, "What Does Reinhold Niebuhr have to do with Drones?," *Justice Outside the City*, September 26, 2012, http://theotherjournal.com/justiceoutsidethecity/2012/09/26/what-does-reinhold-niebuhr-have-to-do-with-drones/.

[84]Holder and Josephson, 49–60; Barack Obama, *Dreams of My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1995), 98, 115, 133–135, 140–141, 274, 280, 286, 292; Barack Obama *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 203–204, 245–247, 251–252; Stephen Mansfield, *The Faith of Barack Obama* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 12–20, 53–57, 95–99.

[85]Cathleen Falsani, "Interview with Barack Obama," *Chicago Sun Times,* March 27, 2004; David Mendell, *Obama: From Promise to Power* (New York: HarperCollins/Amistad, 2007), 76–77.

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increasingly comfortable describing how his Christian faith shapes his approaches to policy. In 2009 he unveiled his economic stimulus with reference to the Sermon on the Mount; in 2011 he spoke in detail about the place of prayer in his daily life; in 2012 he announced his evolution on the issue of gay marriage not by reference to the separation of church and state, but by observing that his faith teaches him to respect the rights of homosexuals. Thus Obama's political development is inextricably bound to the development of his faith, and his religious biography provides a powerful lens through which to understand his politics.

The president's association with Niebuhr's thought and politics has been a recurring theme of political commentary.[86] Particularly in the wake of his Nobel Prize speech, commentators recognized in the president's rhetoric the themes of Niebuhr's great work on American foreign policy, *The Irony of American History*.[87] The association of Obama administration policy with Niebuhr's philosophy extends also to the areas of health care reform and economic policy.[88]

[86]These commentaries are treated in greater detail in Holder and Josephson, *The Irony of Barack Obama.* See George Packer, "Peace and War," *The New Yorker*, December 21, 2009, 45–46; Casey Blake, "Obama and Niebuhr," *The New Republic*, May 3, 2007, http://www.newrepublic.com/blog/open-university/obama-and-niebuhr; James Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama: Dreams, Hope, and the American Political Tradition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010); Richard Harries and Stephen Platten, the editors of *Reinhold Niebuhr and Contemporary Politics: God and Power*, dedicated the book to Barack Obama (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); In February 2010, CNN offered an appraisal of the president's first year in office entitled "How Obama's Favorite Theologian Shaped His First Year"; John Blake of CNN also published an article of the same name (John Blake, "How Obama's Favorite Theologian Shaped His First Year in Office," CNN Politics, February 5, 2010, http://articles.cnn.com/2010-02-05/politics/Obama.theologian_1_reinhold-niebuhr-president-obama-pastor?_s=PM:POLITICS; The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life sponsored a conversation between Wilfred McClay and E. J. Dionne, Jr. on the topic, entitled "Obama's Favorite Theologian? A Short Course on Reinhold Niebuhr," May 4, 2009, http://pewforum.org/Politics-and-Elections/Obamas-Favorite-Theologian-A-Short-Course-on-Reinhold-Niebuhr.aspx#2. See also Paul Allen, "The Obama-Niebuhr Connection," TheStar.com, June 14, 2008, http://www.thestar.com/news/uselection/article/443383.

[87]David Gibson, "Of Niebuhr and Nobels: Divining Obama's Theology," *Politics Daily*, December 12, 2009; Michael Gerson, "Obama Shows Maturity in Nobel Speech," *The Washington Post*, December 10, 2009; James Fallows, "Obama's Nobel Speech," *The Atlantic*, December 10, 2009, http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2009/12/obamas-nobel-speech/31598/; Fred Kaplan, "Obama's War and Peace," *Slate*, December 10, 2009, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/war_stories/2009/12/obamas_war_and_peace.html. Hendrik Hertzberg quoted the historian William Lee Miller: "It seemed to me as thoroughly Niebuhrian an utterance as we are ever likely to hear a sitting president utter" ("Presidents and Peace Prizes," *The New Yorker*, December 11, 2009, http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/hendrikhertzberg/2009/12/presidents-and-peace-prizes.html).

[88]Blake, "Obama and Niebuhr"; John B. Judis, "Obama, Niebuhr, and U.S. Politics," *The New Republic*, December 13, 2009, http://www.newrepublic.com/blog/the-plank/obama-niebuhr-and-us-politics; George Packer, *The New Yorker*, February 28, 2009, http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/georgepacker/2009/02/david-brooks-is.html.

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II. The Opportunities

When Obama took office he sought to use the crises he inherited to move policy in directions he favored.[89] In both foreign and economic policy, Obama's responses to crises reveal the breadth and depth of his debt to Niebuhr.[90] The reactions to Obama's decisions demonstrate a piece of his "Niebuhr problem"—that the subtleties of Christian pragmatism are difficult to explain to larger "red and blue" audiences.[91] Two cases illustrate the way Obama has charted a path that is at once Christian and realist, moral and hard-headed.

Obama's foreign policy has demonstrated the tensions that accompany Niebuhrian Christian realism. Though Obama came to prominence as an early opponent of the war in Iraq, he was no dove. On the campaign trail in 2007 Obama was criticized for being too willing to launch airstrikes in violation of the sovereignty of other nations. Though some believed Obama was playing a role to shore up his foreign policy credentials, after four years of experience he has demonstrated the opposite.

First, Obama's response to Muammar Gaddafi's assault on Benghazi in 2011 went beyond the requests of America's British and French allies, and far beyond the advice of some members his foreign policy team. Obama upset advisers of both realist and idealist camps.[92] Perhaps to counter the perception of the action as merely humanitarian, the bulk of Obama's speech describing his decision attended to arguments of American interests. Obama argued that the credibility of the United Nations Security Council was at stake, that inaction would have resulted in waves of refugees that could destabilize northern Africa and unsettle southern Europe, and that the United States had an opportunity to build stronger alliances by supporting the actions of our allies. Finally Obama argued that in some cases America can afford humanitarian action.[93] This was a classic American realist brand of

[89]Gerald F. Seib, "In Crisis, Opportunity for Obama," *Capital Journal,* November 21, 2008.

[90]See especially *The Irony of American History* (repr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), esp. 130–149; and *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (repr., Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011) ch.1, esp. 8–12.

[91]Even a more analytically precise set of tools does not allow Christian realism to be formulated for sound bites. See Dante Chinni, *Our Patchwork Nation: The Surprising Truth about the "Real" America* (New York: Gotham, 2011).

[92]With Secretary of Defense Robert Gates as the realist, and UN Ambassador Susan Rice and Samantha Power of the National Security Council as the humanitarians. See James Kitfield, "What's Eating Robert Gates?," *The National Journal*, June 11, 2011, http://www.nationaljournal.com/what-s-eating-robert-gates-20110611; Michael Hastings, "Inside Obama's War Room," *Rolling Stone*, October 27, 2011; Helene Cooper and Steven Lee Myers, "Obama Takes Hard Line With Libya after Shift by Clinton," *New York Times,* March 19, 2011.

[93]Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Libya" (National Defense University, Washington, D.C., March 28, 2011), http://www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/2011/03/28/president-obama-s-speech-libya#transcript.

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humanitarianism; America's security interests come first, but if we can afford to do good with minimal cost to ourselves, we are obligated to take action.

Idealists on both sides attacked Obama—on the right for not being willing to act unilaterally in the quest for a crusading righteousness, and on the left for not wholly relinquishing the use of coercive military force. Some argued that Obama should articulate a coherent "Obama Doctrine," one that included an expansive assertion of American power.[94] Of course, Niebuhr argued that the assertion of American power, whether for humanitarian or national security concerns, ought always to be constrained by the humble knowledge of the nation's power to err.[95] In contrast, and in a manner more in keeping with Niebuhr's thought, others argued that in the contemporary international situation no grand strategy is possible.[96]

Obama's response in Libya illustrates the difference between Christian realism and mere realism, and between Christian realism and Christian idealism. The realist does not see a sufficient interest in stopping Gaddafi in Libya, but the Christian realist sees an opportunity to prevent a humanitarian crisis at an acceptable cost. The Christian idealist holds out for a more perfect response, but the Christian realist takes the opportunity to accomplish a proximate good. Though it is too soon to evaluate the effectiveness of Obama's choice in Libya, and the September 2012 attack on the American consulate in Benghazi offers another reminder of the importance of sober expectations, Obama's decision seems in the short term to have been the right one.

Obama's domestic policies, likewise, have incited much heat and little light. Obama is clearly a progressive who believes in the power of good government, but charges of "socialism" are lazy and dishonest. On the other hand, Obama's progressivism is more moderate than many of his supporters believe—and much more moderate than many would like. Obama's stimulus plan is a case in point. Obama's left-of-center road in shaping economic policy reflects a Niebuhrian distrust of both left and right ideologies.[97] Obama wrote that "we have always been in a constant balancing act between self-interest and community, markets and democracy, the concentration of wealth and power and the opening up of opportunity."[98] Thus it is not entirely a surprise that Obama chose to stabilize the economic system, rather than to fundamentally

[94]John Bolton, "War-powers crisis; Obama's Libyan Debacle Could Undercut U.S. Credibility Elsewhere," *Washington Post,* June 7, 2011; Douglas J. Feith and Seth Cropsey, "The Obama Doctrine Defined," *Commentary*, July 2011, 11–18.

[95]Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, 2–6.

[96]"An Orienting Principle for Foreign Policy," *Policy Review,* October-November 2010, 3–12.

[97]*Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 266.

[98]*The Audacity of Hope*, 229.

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reshape it.[99] The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act—the $860 billion stimulus package—included tax cuts, short-term economic stimulus (including food assistance and job training), and longer-term programs to reconstruct and reorient the fundamentals of the economy.[100] To be sure, much of this programming was the result of deliberate behavioral science engineering, demonstrating the kind of faith in social science that Niebuhr abhorred. Yet Obama's tax cuts and short-term stimuli emphasized assistance to the lower and middle-class in the hopes of supporting demand for goods and services.

The stimulus thus looks like a textbook example of liberal pragmatism during an economic downturn. Yet in an April 2009 speech entitled "The New Foundation" Obama described his economic program quite differently. Obama placed his new economic foundation in the context of the Sermon on the Mount. Obama reminded his listeners of a parable at the end of the Sermon, a story of two men. One built his house on sand; the other built his house on a foundation of rock. And Obama concluded, "We cannot rebuild this economy on the same pile of sand. We must build our house upon a rock."[101] In that context the pragmatic economist is put to work for a Christian end. Thus in domestic politics Obama's economic policies are infused with the spirit of the Christian realist.

III. The Problem

There is no obvious constituency for Obama's faith-based politics. Obama's "new foundation" has garnered no new friends on the Christian Right. Yet some of the initiatives that he began in 2009 certainly seemed to have the potential to please, or at least partially mollify, his critics in this sector of the electorate. He continued the Office of Faith-based Initiatives and Neighborhood Partnerships that George W. Bush had founded, and even expanded its reach. He was clear about the necessity of allowing and encouraging the expressions of religiously motivated people as part of the public conversation. He regularly quoted scripture and religious figures in his speeches, and spoke of the necessity of his own life of faith for his work.

[99]Gary Dorrien, *The Obama Question: A Progressive Perspective* (Lanham, Mich.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 85–87; Robert Westbrook, "The Liberal Agony," *The Christian Century,* September 20, 2011.

[100]Ted Gayer, "Economic Policymaking During the Great Recession," in *The Obama Presidency: Change and Continuity*, eds. Andrew Dowdle, Dirk van Raemdonck, and Robert Maranto (New York: Routledge, 2011), 137–148; Raymond Tatalovich, "The Obama Administration and the Great Recession," in *Transforming America: Barack Obama and the White House*, ed. Steven Schier (Lanham, Mich.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 211–234; Suzanne Mettler, "Reconstituting the Submerged State: The Challenges of Social Policy Reform in the Obama Era," *Perspectives on Politics*, September 2010, 803–824; Dorrien, 90–97.

[101]"The New Foundation."

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The persistent attacks on Obama's faith are not only a matter of the president's policies. The White House has had many occupants whose relationship to Christianity was tenuous—but never before has there been a sustained chorus of rejection of any president's claim to be Christian. [102]

Obama's Christianity is a special problem for the Christian Right. The Religious Right accepts the fusion of its hopes with the destiny of America—particularly the America that it seeks to restore.[103] That America was founded as an explicitly Christian country; it has both a divinely bestowed providential grace, and a divinely fashioned mission in the world. The very essence of the doctrine of American exceptionalism is its uniqueness on the world's stage. Obama's distancing himself and his administration from that works well on the world stage for the statesman, but only by sacrificing the sacralized nationalistic claims of the Religious Right.

At stake is a question of Christian identity. Obama's vision of Christian realism seeks to bind the prophetic core of self-scrutiny to the pragmatism of statecraft that seeks to make sufficient progress, rather than finding pure and final solutions. His self-scrutiny of American motives denies the basic confidence of the Christian right. Instead of being willing to define American policy objectives as aligned with those of the Lord, Obama has sought to put American interests on a plane with the interests of other nations and groups. In his second inaugural address Obama redefined American exceptionalism in the context of the proposition that all are created equal, a proposition that requires the country to make a moral journey toward its promise. Thus Obama places self-scrutiny and self-criticism at the center of a new American exceptionalism. Further, Obama's claim of the Christian "totems" such as the Bible and prayer offends the Christian Right. Most importantly, Obama's promotion of a progressive prophetic model of Christianity would convict the Christian right of sin. In this Obama almost strictly follows the prophetic paths of Reinhold Niebuhr and Martin Luther King, Jr. In effect, Niebuhr, King, and Obama suggest that the true Christian will work in the public square to accomplish the concept of social justice, "caring for the least of these," that they derived from the teachings of Jesus Christ. By inference, those who do not take up this work feel that their own Christian faith has been called into question. The prosperity gospel is defined as sinful idolatry.[104]

[102]That so many reject the fact that Obama is a Christian is almost certainly bound up with his African descent.

[103]See Frank Lambert, *Religion in American Politics: A Short History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008), 204ff.

[104]See the critique in Obery M. Hendricks, Jr.'s "A Camel through the Eye of a Needle: Class, Political Conservatism, and Anti-Christian Economics," in *The Universe Bends Toward Justice:*

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On a second front, Obama's evangelistic rhetoric and Christian realistic pragmatism have caused a rift between the president and the left wing of his own party. The most liberal wing of the Democratic Party suspects the importation of religion into governing.[105] While it has always been an overstatement to see the Republican Party as the party of religious faith and the Democratic Party as the party of secular humanism, some in the Democratic Party are religiously irreligious.[106] Obama's relatively frequent turn to religious or biblically tinged language brought this group no comfort, but only a sense of abandonment of the theoretical basis of their party, the confidence in human goodness. The party that most insists on a separation of church and state cannot hear its spokesperson's call to public faith. Thus liberals ignored the foundation of the "New Foundation" speech. Obama's Niebuhrian suspicion of "our" own goodness was deeply upsetting not only to Christian conservatives, but also humanistic liberals.

Further, liberals tend to reject the realist model in both foreign and domestic policy. Though proudly dismissive of American explicit claims to righteousness or purity of purpose, the idealistic left wishes to act as if America is at heart the city on the hill. Thus, Obama is attacked for not closing Guantanamo immediately, not leaving Iraq and Afghanistan, not solving immigration reform, and not getting single-payer as a cornerstone of the health care plan. Here, liberals were the mirror image of the Christian right—they were certain of the goodness of their political vision and thus rejected any compromise of it as a form of blasphemy. The idealism of the left was just as cherished a notion as the religion of the right, and just as productive of blindness.

IV. The Irony of Christian Governing

Awakening victorious in 2012, Obama faced a considerably more complicated political task than four years earlier. In his victory speech Obama again took up the hope for political unity and the New Foundation, but he did so in the context of an obviously partisan struggle. The "passions" and "controversy" of politics, Obama said, "won't change after tonight." In 2008 Obama offered hope that politics itself might be remade, but he learned that politics is a natural

Radical Reflections on the Bible, the Church, and the Body Politic (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2011), 89–194.

[105]James L. Guth, "Obama, Religious Politics, and the Culture Wars," in *Transforming America,* 87.

[106]Lambert, 221–229, 237, 243; Amy Sullivan, *The Party Faithful: How and Why Democrats are Closing the God Gap* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 205–208.

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phenomenon that obeys its own natural laws. Niebuhr taught that political life is unavoidably and inevitably partisan, yet concern for justice requires engagement with political life. Those children of light who dream of a harmony of interests and a post-partisan politics either hide from themselves their aim (the triumph of their own partisan belief), or misunderstand the essence of social life and the distribution of powers. Partisans believe that their position is true or right, but Niebuhr taught that it is never the whole truth or the entirety of right. Ironically, the lesson of Obama's experience as president is that the Christian realist may appreciate the value of politics, but cannot satisfy the public's appetite for simple purity.

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