

What Goes Around Comes Around: Influences on Obama and the possibility of hope.

The ASCM and the Thirties

We are/have been recognising, A Century of Influence a history of the ASCM in Australia. Following the internal divisions in the 1920's the movement in the 1930's was committed to engagement with the important public issues of the day. Australia was then in the grip of economic depression and facing the threat of being enmeshed in another great war so soon after the war which it was hoped might end all wars. It seemed to many students that they faced not only a very uncertain personal futures but that the world faced difficult choices between differing economic and political systems which would lead to debate in many international forums including the WSCF. Inevitably students in Australia were drawn into these debates not only within the ASCM as well as in political clubs and societies on university campuses and in political parties and broader forums such as the peace movement.

One theologian who proved especially influential in these debates in the WSCF and in the ASCM was the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr introduced a note of realism into the debates of the 30's pointing to the flaws implicit in totalitarian systems of the left and right while defending democratic systems of government as providing a fairer way of tempering the excesses of power. He remained in the 1930's a socialist but was no longer a pacifist. He had no illusions about evils implicit in capitalism but at the same time he recognised the need to take seriously the issue of power. Being well motivated by high ideals, having the right ideas, even the right policies were not enough. The struggle going on during this period was not only about ideas, ideology it was also about

the distribution of power. And in the US context at least Niebuhr certainly believed that the democratic system while flawed provided at the very least an opportunity to limit the power of what C Wright Mills would later dub the 'military industrial complex' His intellectual depth impressed the most important American political thinkers of his time Henry Morgenthau and George Kennan while remaining based at Union Theological Seminary teaching theology.

Niebuhr and Obama

The name of Reinhold Niebuhr has recently resurfaced in the context of the rise to power in America of the former State legislator and then Illinois Senator Barak Obama . In 2007 the New York Times journalist David Brooks was interviewing the then Senator Obama, an interview which was going nowhere until Brooks introduced into the conversation the name of Niebuhr after which the interview certainly took off as Obama acknowledged the influence of Niebuhr on his approach to politics.

‘ Niebuhr] is one of my favorite philosophers. I take away [from his works] 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. I take away...the sense that we have to make these efforts knowing they are hard, and not swinging from naïve idealism to bitter realism.’ Barak Obama to David Brooks

Another quote from Obama illustrates the influence of Niebuhr’s thought on him

‘After all, the problems of poverty and racism, the uninsured and the unemployed, are not simply technical problems in search of the perfect

ten point plan. They are rooted in both societal indifference and individual callousness - in the imperfections of man.” (people he would say today)

Obama had spoken of the audacity of hope when he introduced democratic the democratic candidate for the presidency John Kerry at the 2004 Democratic convention pointing out that hope should not be confused with the kind of optimism that expects things will work out irrespective of any personal commitment.

‘No, I’m talking about something more substantial. It’s the hope of slaves sitting around a fire singing freedom songs; the hope of immigrants setting out for distant shores ...the hope of a skinny kid with a funny name who believes that America has a place for him, too. Hope in the face of difficulty. Hope in the face of uncertainty, the audacity of hope’.

Martin Marty has made the point that no one understands Niebuhr who fails to link his realism to hope.

In this speech Obama built on the vision of Martin Luther King as expressed in his ‘I have a Dream’ speech in Washington’ in the 1960’s. There is in the Chicago based Obama , always the sense of hope linked with an understanding of realities of power. Obama in Chicago was closely associated with community organization that continued (as it had in the 1960’s when Renate and I were students there) to echo the approach of Saul Alinsky of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF). Alinsky emphasized the power of community organization, the possibility of people power challenging the vested interests especially as represented by the Democratic machine that ruled the city of Chicago for so long.

Alinsky had obviously read Niebuhr writing ‘that false morality is often used to disguise what are truly self-interested motivations.’ It is unsurprising, and then, that Alinsky always assigned Moral Man and Immoral Society to his students of community organisation.

Obama then is a person of vision, and a politician, who has learned that he will have to deal with the realities of power as he tries to translate policy ideas into policy.

Recognizing uncertainty.

He is President of the United States at a time in which people face much greater sense of uncertainty and risk. This feeling of living in fragile times flows not only from the events of 9/11 as well as a sense that we simply cannot be sure of the future notwithstanding the ongoing growth of knowledge, the increasing power of technology and systems of communication and the ever increasing wealth of the most powerful nations on earth. The combination of the global financial crisis together with a sense of the limits to growth of the world threatens people with the sense that the globe is beginning to spin out of control. There is a widespread distrust of the most powerful as not being on top of things as much as they claim to be illustrated by their unwillingness to acknowledge the limits of their power and foresight. Of course this global uncertainty translates into seminars, schools and universities where young people are seeking to chart their life course.

Risk and uncertainty for students reflects the very big issues younger face today that are not dissimilar to those overpowering students in the

1930's. They create similar anxieties today. Some students may think of their future in terms a professional career, of future affluence and wealth but for many other students playing a part in shaping the world they live in is just as important driver. This very drama of globalization for some will dis-empower. For others they will present the challenge of their lives. It was this conflict within people and nations that Niebuhr drew from the biblical narrative and from his reading of both history and theology.

Why Read Niebuhr Again?

It is this combination of circumstances that is reminding people including, the current President of the United States, of the importance of reading of Niebuhr again. Niebuhr above all else was wary of the arrogance of power and human pride recognizing that in the modern scientific and technological society there was ever-present danger of ignoring their limits so much so that the limits of human reason were ignored. Niebuhr recognized the ongoing advances in science and technology and their benefits to the world. Faith is not the opposite of reason but the partner of reason and thus the importance in the modern era which challenges so many of our traditional assumptions to recognize the important role that religion plays in interpreting change and in managing the future. Niebuhr understood his responsibility to understand society while many of his comments reflected his understanding of the biblical narrative and his theology. He did not see the two worlds as separate worlds but rather as interrelated worlds in which each informed the other. As Robin Lovin suggests in summarizing Niebuhr's contribution to ethics

‘Moral choices are made when these complex and diverse elements are brought into some coherence. No single element determines the conclusion, and our thinking about all of the elements is apt to be subtly changed in the process of relating one to the other’ 102

Conclusion

The Australian Student Christian movement learned much from Niebuhr when it sought to relate faith to politics in the 1930’s as the world was about to become engaged in a second global war in the first half of the 20th Century. There is much talk of listening to the dire predictions of science concerning global warming and so on. Niebuhr would not ignore these predictions but he would want us to be engaged in looking for ways to manage the transition to a more sustainable globe that engaged with all the relevant issues policies and political movements. Universities continue to central to the most important debates thus the challenge of finding ways Christians in universities can work together to make an impact. Ecumenism was such an important theme when Renate and I were students.

In a sense Obama recognizes that the Christian position with which he identifies is expressed not so much by a principle as it is by a settled disposition, a set of attitudes that are both critical and responsible. It sits well with an emphasis on virtue and a focus on narrative in ethics. Like Niebuhr Obama understands both his need to understand society and on the other to respond as a player in politics who will from time to time draw on the biblical story because it provides an understanding of what is happening around him. He understands that in politics one does make moral choices but that in politics one needs to bring together that

commitment with an understanding of the relevant facts along with a recognition of the need to finally bring together these factors into an integrated policy decision or set of policy decisions I was taught that Niebuhr fundamentally was driven by a sense of hope. At least in this he has something in common with Barak Obama . Obama would like people to feel that they really can be responsible for change. ‘Yes we can’.