

Barack Obama and the Habit of Hope

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Books Reviewed:

The Irony of Barack Obama: Barack Obama, Reinhold Niebuhr, and the Problem of Christian Statecraft. By R. Ward Holder and Peter B. Josephson. Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2012. 232 pp. \$119.95 (cloth).

Reading Obama: Dreams, Hope, and the American Political Tradition. By James T. Kloppenberg. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011. 344 pp. \$24.95 (cloth).

The Audacity of Faith: Christian Leaders Reflect on the Election of Barack Obama. Edited by Marvin A. McMickle. Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 2009. 192 pp. \$17.00 (paper).

Religion, Race, and Barack Obama's New Democratic Pluralism. Edited by Gastón Espinosa. New York: Routledge, 2013. 296 pp. \$140.00 (cloth).

Fundamentalism in American Religion and Law: Obama's Challenge to Patriarchy's Threat to Democracy. By David A. J. Richards. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 326 pp. \$31.99 (paper).

Barack Obama's America: How New Conceptions of Race, Family, and Religion Ended the Reagan Era. By John Kenneth White. Ann Arbor, Mich.: The University of Michigan Press, 2009. 320 pp. \$28.95 (paper).

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Barack Obama burst onto the national stage with “The Audacity of Hope,” his inspiring speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention that anticipated his 2006 book *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*. Obama’s theme echoed his pastor Jeremiah Wright’s 1988 sermon “The Audacity to Hope,” as he sought to shed light on the spiritual dimension of Democratic politics in contrast to the religious skepticism of some on the Left and the more conservative religious stance of some on the Right.

Like all contemporary politicians, Obama has employed “the God strategy,” the eponymous title of an excellent study by David Domke and Kevin Coe that tracks in detail the evolution of religio-political language from Dwight Eisenhower to the present. The concern that arises with the use of the God strategy is that of the authenticity of a candidate’s faith as opposed to the politically expedient use of God language. Domke and Coe recognize that the question of a candidate’s personal faith is unknowable, but emphasize that there is little doubt that the strategic use of religious sentiments is one of “the realities of modern American politics.”¹ Clearly, religious pluralism and secularism are challenges no politician can ignore. Obama, whose rhetoric of hope has driven his political career, has been forced to embrace a centrist position that has placed him between religion and politics. A spiritually committed leader must enter the rough-and-tumble world of secular values and legislative realities, of technological methods and gridlock that by necessity divides statecraft from faith.

One of Obama’s greatest efforts has been the attempt to instill the habit of hope within an American society battered by Bush-era despair resulting from an unjust war, the governmental approval of torture, the advancement of the wealthy one-percenters, and the loss of trust, which is the fabric of society. By “habit” I do not mean a repeated behavior, but something closer to *hexis*, a dispositional energy that interacts with the wider environment, testing ideas and actions for their faithfulness. The habit of hope is a vague yet pragmatic reality in which hope transforms persons and communities, making it essential to deliberative democracy. The person’s experience of hope *dis-positions* the self, creating a new center of value and a new focus of action through the experience of an expanded sense of trust, confidence, and possibility. Hope must be pragmatically tested in the world

¹ David Domke and Kevin Coe, *The God Strategy: How Religion Became a Political Weapon in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 19.

of beings and things in order to build networks of community. After all, hope is about the realization of a more fulfilling future through action necessary for the amelioration of flawed humanity. It is the fulcrum of history that counters despair, determinism, and retrospective thinking with a propulsive interaction with the wider environment in which human flourishing can grow. Pragmatic hope is purposive and future-oriented.

Obama's abiding theme of hope as a religiously informed political instrument has envisioned America as a community in which humility trumps pride and self-interested individualism, and does so through a deliberative process. This is what he means by the renewal of the American Dream; pragmatic hope signals a cultural shift that motivates structural change. Obama's view of hope originated from one of Wright's sermons that interprets Hannah in 1 Samuel 1:1–18 in relation to her barrenness: "The most important word God would have us hear is how to hope when the love of God is not plainly evident. It's easy to hope when there are evidences all around of how good God is. But to have the audacity to hope when that love is not evident— . . . that is a true test of a Hannah-type faith."²

But Obama, as both a man of faith and a politician, also turns to John Rawls's idea of overlapping consensus so as to make clear the limits necessary for religious particularism to advance the public good, arguing that "the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific, values . . . subject to argument, and amenable to reason."³ This is a form of secular hope, which Christopher Lasch describes as "a deep-seated trust in life that appears absurd to those who lack it."⁴ The language of Rawls and Lasch may be unpalatable to people of faith, but for Obama it represents the best way to carry out an inclusive national project that hopes to build a pluralistic community rather than an alienated and distrustful society. The need for policy based in reason trumps revelation.

Obama lives between heart religion and political reason and engagement, and this suggests that his form of pragmatic hope tries to appeal to both the religious and secular voter. As a senator from Illinois

² Jeremiah Wright, "The Audacity to Hope" (1990); www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2010/july/audacityofhope.html.

³ Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope* (New York: Random House, 2006), 219.

⁴ Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: Norton, 1991), 81.

Obama stated, "What I am trying to do is balance a hard head with a big heart," while his wife Michelle observed, "Barack is not a politician first and foremost. He's a community activist exploring the viability of politics to make change."⁵ Obama's pragmatic hope informs his dearest values and goals, with its trust in the unknowable future and its open-endedness, malleability, and willingness to experiment. Entry into political life risks the subordination of hope to ideology and expediency in an increasingly technocratic world, but when allied with pragmatism, hope becomes culturally embedded and structurally normative.

Obama sees a boundary-breaking community arising from an end to the dogmatic identities of blue and red states, of liberals and conservatives. He proclaimed in "The Audacity of Hope" speech:

There's not a liberal America and a conservative America. There's not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there's the United States of America. The pundits like to slice-and-dice our country into Red States and Blue States; Red States for Republicans, Blue States for Democrats. But I've got news for them, too. We worship an awesome God in the Blue States.⁶

Obama's attempt to stake out a centrist position in which a shared sense of spirituality could possibly overcome social fragmentation meant that statecraft and spirituality must exist in a complicated and ironic dimension.

This dimension is the topic of *The Irony of Barack Obama: Barack Obama, Reinhold Niebuhr, and the Problem of Christian Statecraft* by R. Ward Holder and Peter B. Josephson. As the authors note, much has been written about Niebuhr's influence on Obama (Holder and Josephson, 2–3). The authors see Obama as deeply religious and a keen student of the Bible, his faith affirmed through the lens of black liberation theology. His entry into politics emanates from his desire to bring Christian faith to political life, and Niebuhr's Christian realism shapes Obama's perspective in powerful ways. But Obama is caught in a Niebuhrian web of irony in which human persons exist as both creatures that embody original sin and creatures made in the image of

⁵ Ryan Lizza, "The Agitator," *New Republic*, March 19, 2007; www.newrepublic.com/article/the-agitator-barack-obamas-unlikely-political-education.

⁶ Barack Obama, "The Audacity of Hope," keynote address, 2004 Democratic National Convention; <http://obamaspeeches.com/002-Keynote-Address-at-the-2004-Democratic-National-Convention-Obama-Speech.htm>.

God. The person, aware of this tragic situation, resides painfully between regret and freedom; the politician who is a Christian stumbles in the attempt both to exercise power and practice his or her faith.

Holder and Josephson provide a compelling examination of the problem of Christian statecraft as it applies to Obama. Obama's impossible challenge has been to transform the prophetic stance of his identity as a candidate into a presidential visionary of burning tongue and irresistible grace who chides the blindness of the majority and lifts up the marginalized. The most Obama can do is become "a cheerleader for the unity of the national interest with God's will" (Holder and Josephson, 16). The danger of political evangelism is that it inevitably embraces American exceptionalism with its defining quality not of hope, but of pride and idolatry. Obama's faith distances him from political success while political success distances him from his faith. According to the authors, no matter how deeply Obama embraces Niebuhr's Christian realism, he realizes that bringing his faith into politics "is not emotionally satisfying," that "the best work of politics inevitably involves us in sin." Nonetheless, "Obama is willing—at danger to his own soul—to embrace the most political life in the country" (Holder and Josephson, 192). This interpretation is overdetermined, and the authors' emphasis on Obama's Christian identity goes too far in stating the intensity of his faith commitment. For a man exposed to Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, and agnosticism during his childhood, a more nuanced understanding of Obama's pluralistic views would provide greater insight into the compromise of his faith as he has entered public life.

Holder and Josephson point to Obama's naiveté when they rightly see the young President's idealism as a stumbling-block to political achievement; Augustine's view of "the darkness of social life" would not allow for post-partisanship, support for the middle class, or reforms such as Obamacare (Holder and Josephson, 18). Obama's view of hope has had to become more pragmatic in order to enter the dirty world of politics. This is where Obama's Christian faith seems to falter, despite his repeated use of biblical themes in his speeches. Obama's incorporation of Rawls's notion of overlapping values to integrate diverse religious voices into the secular language of policy reflects the fact that the Christian politician longing for a Christian commonwealth is too much for the American public to abide and too much for a successful presidency (Holder and Josephson, 185). It is also more than Obama would want, given his approach to policy and the need for secular reason to be the primary mode of political life. The subordination of belief to the

health of public life is where Obama's faith becomes compromised, but it is also where hope becomes pragmatic, a form of realism that blends the tender and tough-minded, the heart and the head.

The Irony of Barack Obama follows Niebuhr's lead: no politician can possibly live up to the standards of Christian faith, much as he may want to do so. Obama was destined for spiritual failure simply because he is a politician. This does not give us a reason for despair, but for the realism of Niebuhr's ethics: the idealistic view of human possibility, such as Obama's reliance on technological instruments for improving healthcare, education, and the economy, merely indicates blindness to the reality of sin. Even as the authors argue that Obama's Christian realism adopts a Niebuhrian hermeneutic of suspicion, they assert that "Reinhold Niebuhr is not a superb guide for politicians" (Holder and Josephson, 182).

Holder and Josephson provide a much needed and incisive consideration of Obama's international affairs in the light of Christian realism. Obama inherited a foreign policy mess from George W. Bush, yet despite his promise to make significant policy changes, this has largely not been the case. The authors provide an excellent analysis of Obama's Nobel Peace Prize speech, which they note is "the most frequently-cited example in his presidency of a Niebuhrian moment": "He rejects doctrinal purity in the conduct of foreign policy, preferring instead a tragic paradox: national policy must aspire to a 'law of love' that cannot be realized because of the constraint of the necessities of the real world" (Holder and Josephson, 99). This places the ironic Obama squarely before the reader. Following this argument, the authors explore the cases of Afghanistan, Egypt, Libya, and China in terms of Obama's Christian realism, and the limited possibilities and expectations of Obama's foreign policy as informed by Niebuhr's ethics. This is a discussion well worth reading.

In his excellent book *Reading Obama*, James Kloppenberg offers a broad and deep interpretation of the education of Obama from 1961 to 2004. Kloppenberg's concern is not with theological analysis of the ironic dilemma of politician and believer. Rather, he studies Obama's intellectual development in a way that adds a broad expanse to the close reading found in *The Irony of Barack Obama*. Kloppenberg sees Obama's intellectual life as the product of three distinct developments: the history of American democracy as an unfinished project stretching from the seventeenth century to the present; philosophical pragmatism that "challenges the claims of absolutists . . . and instead

embraces uncertainty, provisionality, and the continuous testing of hypotheses through experimentation” (Kloppenber, xxxiv); and the complexity of American thought and culture in terms of debates over the validity of universalism and particularism that informed Obama’s decade-long education, and which led to his embrace of two central pragmatic principles, fallibilism and pluralism. These themes are interwoven throughout the book in a complex and rich narrative deserving of careful study.

In the second chapter, “From Universalism to Particularism,” Kloppenberg emphasizes the influence of the ethicist John Rawls on Obama’s thought. Beginning with Obama’s awareness of pluralism in his formative years, Kloppenberg interprets how Rawls’s work has shaped the “deeply held principles and frankly admitted uncertainties that characterize Obama’s approach to public life” (Kloppenber, 87). He analyzes Rawls’s theory of justice in relation to Obama’s work as a community organizer and constitutional lawyer, nicely melding the philosophical and practical dimensions of Obama’s career. As a community organizer, Obama came to the conclusion that Rawls’s theory of justice meant that “inequalities of wealth and authority are just only if they result in compensating benefits for everyone, and in particular for the least advantaged members of the society” (Kloppenber, 92). Obama’s work as a community organizer motivated him to explore the nature of power and of spirituality in order to analyze the conflict between self-interest and community.

Kloppenber argues that the most influential pragmatist on Obama’s thought has been Richard Bernstein, in his emphasis on fallibilism, the multiple contexts of individual experience, the role of individual interpreters in a community of inquiry, sensitivity to radical contingency, and the pluralistic nature of the universe. Bernstein’s pragmatism defines fallibilism as “the experimental habit of mind,” a statement that assumes the power of hope (Kloppenber, 133). This clearly informs Obama’s understanding of democracy as a willingness to engage ideological opponents in conversation, to embrace and defend pluralism and reject absolutism, and to leave religious and political views open to correction. Democracy for Obama is thus founded in the hope of diverse peoples, both secular and religious, brought together in lively and strenuous debate.

Kloppenber’s rich discussion of historical, legal, and philosophical influences on Obama is also discussed in terms of the role of religion in public life. The social justice inherent in Obama’s work as

a community organizer came to have a spiritual dimension for him thanks to the faith commitments of some of his colleagues. His malleable and generous view toward religious diversity and his charitable benevolence toward fellow citizens based on empathy must interpret religious values through the secular language of policy. Kloppenberg shows how Obama's views on the pragmatic quality of deliberative democracy rejects absolutism, dogma, authoritarianism, and intolerance so as to defend religious minorities, atheists, and secularists alike. But the problem Obama has faced in his thinking on the central importance of religion in American life comes from its conflict with the political: democracy is strenuous, and necessitates the compromise of faith. The love and beauty of one's religious vision become the fragments of spirit found in the art of the possible.

The virtues of Kloppenberg's book are many, even as it may overwhelm the reader with a multitude of complex ideas as the author offers a wide-ranging analysis of Obama's thought and philosophical influences, from James and Dewey to Rawls, Bernstein, Rorty, and Putnam, among others. Including more of Obama's own comments on these influences would enable Kloppenberg to make a stronger argument, though he is well aware that his book cannot possibly interpret the difficult ideas of these philosophers in great depth. The author's intention is that future scholars will develop and advance his work, and his informative "Essay on Sources" will help others to investigate more deeply the major themes and figures discussed in the book.

The Audacity of Faith: Christian Leaders Reflect on the Education of Barack Obama, edited by Marvin A. McMickle, is a collection of thirty-three sermons and essays by an ethnically diverse company of Christian leaders from the pulpit and the academy. McMickle organizes the book around four themes: the connection of Obama to Martin Luther King, Jr.; the evidence of a post-racial America in Obama's election; biblical sources for reflection on Obama; and the danger of belief in an Obama presidency above the work of God and the church.

The Audacity of Faith is a moving collection. A number of essays take up the ways in which Obama's presence and platform suggest that, while the idea of a post-racial America has not been realized with Obama's election, the most important step toward this distant hope is pragmatic, requiring hard work to heal the differences and conflicts found in public life. Many authors note the near catastrophic state of

the America in which Obama was elected: years of bloody war; a failed Bush presidency; the Great Recession; the need for health care, immigration, and education reform; and the lack of a real commitment to help the poor. Another major theme of the authors is the necessity for a process of reconciliation akin to post-apartheid South Africa's search for truth as central to the creation of a diverse yet united society. For the process of reconciliation to begin, they assert, America must face up to its long history of hypocrisy and marginalization of diverse peoples.

The attempt to see Obama in relation to Martin Luther King, Jr. is presented with excitement in Joseph R. Kutter's "The Inauguration: An Impossible Possibility." Describing Obama's biracial identity and his exposure to a variety of religions and cultures, Kutter writes, "Who dreamed up that story? . . . Our God is a God of improbable stories, and it seems that we have one here" (McMickle, 28). Obama's cosmopolitanism and biracial identity fit King's desire that we judge the person "not by the color of his skin, but by the content of his character" and King's turn to global values after 1965. Kutter, like many of the authors in the book, makes clear that the election of Obama echoes the ideas and commitments of Dr. King. But these writers all recognize, as Philip Yancey observes in "Working from the Bottom Up," that the practical implementation of hope will face hard challenges. The dream and the dreamer must engage the spirit of reconciliation in response to retrospective visions of those intransigent Americans averse to hope and fearful of change.

Perhaps the most beautiful piece is Emilie M. Townes's sermon riff on Matthew 25:34–40, entitled "No Days Off" (McMickle, 74–80). Townes's powerful voice arises from her contemporary vision of the faithful "totally missing the point of what it means to be / inheritors of the kingdom." She speaks about compassionate actions in the text from Matthew to illustrate the demand "to move beyond a ritualized, sterilized, codified, and cul-de-sac faith" to realize "there are no days off," the melody from which her improvisations flow. Townes calls out the faithful to make them realize that "we have the ability to shake the foundations with our witness." Tellingly, Townes mentions Obama only once in the sermon, underlining the truth that repairing the creation is the responsibility and joy of the Christian community: "we cannot set up one very human man, president obama, / to be our stand-in for atonement or our bulwark of salvation / we are the work

we must do in digging deep within our / hearts and souls to find the people God is calling us to be.” Townes perhaps best exemplifies the running theme of *The Audacity of Faith*, that the power of vision, prophecy, and reflection fire the workshop of being from which transformation is realized. The habit of hope, as illustrated here, energizes the spiritual power necessary for real change.

Tony Campolo’s essay, “Hope Has Its Reasons,” examines the tension of Obama’s life between spirituality and statecraft. Campolo defines pragmatism in its common usage as “seeking ways to get things done in the most efficiently successful manner,” and argues that Obama’s political actions must “always be critiqued by biblical principles so that God’s justice will trump pragmatic efficiency when the two are in conflict” (McMickle, 95). This points to philosophical pragmatism’s relation to Matthew’s call to judge by the fruits of charity. The politician Obama cannot be the prophetic Obama if he wants to implement policy. But Obama’s call for secular overlapping values to bring religious pluralism and the spirit of fallibilism into policy through pragmatic hope has the ironic advantage of making room for a living God existing in an ever-expanding environment who both relativizes and humanizes persons and communities.

The Audacity of Faith contains more than can be discussed here of Christian reflection on the meaning of Obama’s election: the President’s invigoration of American civil religion, the value of difference, and rich theological and biblical reflections on the Obama presidency. While this multifaceted collection enriches our views of the ways in which the Obama presidency has addressed the role of Christian faith in political life and motivated Christian work in the world, in some essays Obama is celebrated in ways that are too elevated. Emilie Townes reminds all those who have had Obama fever that there is much work to be done, and the President cannot possibly do it by himself.

In the preface to *Religion, Race, and Barack Obama’s New Democratic Pluralism*, editor Gastón Espinosa notes, “Democrats reached out to religious voters with a vengeance. . . . Obama set a new course of action for Democrats by promoting a new kind of religious and racial-ethnic pluralism” (Espinosa, xii). *Obama’s New Democratic Pluralism* examines how Obama achieved a startling victory by courting diverse religious communities on the left, center, and right. The majority of contributors are political scientists who examine major religious and ethnic groups, secularists, and women from both narrative and quantitative sociopolitical perspectives. These methods bolster the central

occupation of the anthology, the analysis of how and whether these groups were relevant to Obama's success.

The essays found in *Obama's New Democratic Pluralism* interpret his election through incisive analysis of diverse religious responses to Obama's 2008 run for President. Those looking for theological interpretation will be left a bit parched by statistical and social scientific analysis, but fans of sociology and politics will find the history of the religious communities under discussion and the interpretation of their voting patterns essential, particularly when these insights are compared to the ways in which Obama's religious outreach altered voter's choices.

All of the essays in the book are worth attention, but of particular interest is Corwin E. Smidt's "Evangelicals and the 2008 Election," for it illustrates the extent of Obama's outreach to the religious vote. Obama's 2004 "Hope" speech was remarkable for its attempt to lessen the God gap and appeal to the nation to see God as neither the property of the red or blue states or of any religious or ethnic group. Many Democrats resented Obama's appeal to Evangelicals who habitually voted against cherished Democratic values such as women's and gay rights. To his credit, the candidate attempted to make inroads into a diverse Protestant group that Democrats had previously ignored in order to change their culture. This was a fortuitous moment for such religious outreach, as Smidt points out, since American Evangelicals were undergoing a process of change due to the loss of traditional leaders such as Jerry Falwell and the rise of new voices such as those of Jim Wallis and Rick Warren, as well as the emergence of a new centrist generation of younger Evangelicals with clear commitments to addressing poverty, war, global warming, and immigration reform. Though Smidt concludes that the possibility of an Evangelical migration away from the Republican Party was a Democratic pipe-dream, Obama's outreach constituted his most radical attempt to instill the habit of hope through his campaign.

Perhaps the most important religio-political voting block for Obama was that of Hispanic Americans, who identified themselves as both Roman Catholic and as members of various Protestant denominations. In his essay "Latinos, Religion, and the 2008 Election," Espinosa begins his rich analysis from the perspective that, without the Latino vote, Obama would lose the election. Opponent John McCain was for many years a strong voice in the Senate for Latinos, and a supporter of legislation bringing justice to undocumented immigrants.

Espinosa argues that “Obama overcame these disadvantages to win the Latino Catholic and Protestant votes, including a plurality of those that vote pro-life and oppose same-sex marriage” through his religious outreach (Espinosa, 214). Catholic Republicans, Evangelicals, and pro-life campaign advisers joined the Obama team, and adopted Cesar Chavez’s rallying cry, “Sí se puede” (Yes we can).

Espinosa’s article is valuable because of the rapid growth of the Latino vote in the United States. Religious leaders such as Miguel H. Diaz and Wilfredo de Jesús addressed Latino groups about Obama’s concern for social justice, which was of great importance to the Latino voter regardless of a candidate’s political affiliation. Candidate Obama did this by supporting faith-based initiatives, immigration reform, and traditional marriage. Adding to his appeal to Latinos, Espinosa argues, was Obama’s conversion narrative detailing his experience as a born-again Christian. Finally, McCain’s failure to address the Latino community on important moral and religious issues led to his loss of the Latino vote. Espinosa notes, “Obama’s support was as much a result of McCain’s lack of outreach as of Obama’s strategies” (Espinosa, 227).

In the book’s conclusion, Espinosa smartly integrates the essays in the book to show that Obama overcame the God gap successfully through a religious outreach that, though it did not persuade a majority of white Evangelicals and white Catholics, cast the Democrats in a new light. This was particularly important because McCain “threw the Bush playbook in the trash” (Espinosa, 263). While Obama did close the God gap, his religious advisers during the campaign were sorely disappointed to find that President Obama went back on candidate Obama’s promises, and that his rhetoric did not match his avowed concerns for poverty, immigration, and traditional marriage. Espinosa thus ends this fine collection with the implications of both religious outreach and broken promises for the future, and for the spirit of a new Democratic coalition.

One rarely expects to find great passion in the work of a legal scholar, but this is what David A. J. Richards brings to *Fundamentalism in American Religion and Law: Obama’s Challenge to Patriarchy’s Threat to Democracy*. Richards sees his book as “an act of resistance—hence the tone of moral outrage, the impassioned voice, the contempt for those who perpetuate injustice and prejudice, using their power to silence dissent and abrogate the rights of others” (Richards, 13). Richards combines such boldness with a deeply learned discussion of religious fundamentalism and constitutional originalism

that offers a critique of patriarchal psychology as it funds a reactionary and repressive source-based authoritarianism. For Richards, patriarchal power drives the contemporary expression of legal and religious fundamentalisms. These movements have responded to the spiritual and sexual revolution of the 1960s with the violation of human rights and a moral slavery that refuses to allow persons the freedom to be who they are. Such repression is “reactionary, based on a sense of manhood humiliated by a reasonable threat to its legitimacy from the free voices of women and men who challenge the justice of patriarchal demands” (Richards, 275). Richards bases this critique around sexism, homophobia, and the violation of civil rights, and sees its roots in the ahistorical textual literalism anathema to both pragmatic legal theory and the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation.

In part one of *Fundamentalism in American Religion and Law*, Richards examines constitutional originalism in terms of its interpretive defects and dangers, and the psychology behind them. He is particularly adept at showing how patriarchal rejection of the rights of gays, women, and people of color has threatened originalists like Antonin Scalia from assenting to reasonable laws guaranteeing equal treatment. Richards studies Supreme Court cases concerning the rights of women and sodomy laws, writing that “the fact that Scalia cannot make elementary reasonable distinctions suggests a patriarchal rage that expresses patriarchal norms and values as moral certainties in a war on the voices of those who express reasonable doubts about such norms and values, seeing them as at odds with the norms and values of democracy” (Richards, 65). Comparing such rage and repression to anti-Semitism, Richards writes, “Homosexuals are to late-twentieth-century sectarians what the Jews have traditionally been to sectarians in the Christian West throughout its history: intolerable heretics to dominant fundamentalist religious orthodoxy” (Richards, 72). Thus, homosexuals and feminists today are named as religious heretics and political traitors.

Richards’s analysis leads him to turn to American fundamentalism to discover its appeal and underlying psychology. Part two offers in-depth analysis of fundamentalism in Catholicism, Protestantism, and Mormonism. Fundamentalism shares with originalism “a common set of normative convictions held with certainty and a common underlying patriarchal psychology” (Richards, 83). Richards delves deep into the history and thought found in each of these traditions to lift up the origins of unreasoned support for “gender binary (e.g.,

reason as masculine, emotion as feminine)” (Richards, 5) and the marginalization of Jews, homosexuals, and other peoples. In religious fundamentalism and constitutional originalism, patriarchal authority and the trauma of loss lead religious fundamentalism to embrace certainty and authority through cultural and structural organization of the patriarchal moral voice as superior. Richards sees patriarchal authority as the greatest threat to democracy today because it silences the voices of so many.

This is where Richards sees so much hope in Obama’s election and presidency. The contradiction between democracy and religious and legal fundamentalisms is broken by Obama’s background and perspective as a man who is “as forward looking on issues of gender as on issues of race, transcending old categories and inviting new understanding and debate” (Richards, 238). Richards attributes Obama’s anti-patriarchal character to his close relationship to his divorced mother and to his biracial identity. These aspects of his personal narrative “make possible a psychology that sees how false and unjust the patriarchal stereotypes of manhood and womanhood are” (Richards, 239). Obama’s 2008 inaugural address “made clear the power of democratic manhood to deepen our democracy” (Richards, 241). Here we again see the fallibilism and pluralism driving Obama’s “democratic resonance” (Richards, 245); Obama’s speeches and actions inspire the habit of hope that assumes free exercise of religion that must be expressed in democratic form through the secular language of policy. Obama’s judicial philosophy and spiritual sensibility reinforce historical consciousness and creative interpretation, and the defense of human rights in the face of patriarchal foundations of sexism, racism, and homophobia. Religious symbols, rituals, and leadership, in this view, must be revised to create inclusive communities, and civil religion must likewise be transformed in light of extreme religious intolerance and its relation to a jingoistic brand of patriotism. Richards forcefully argues that originalism and fundamentalism work together against the anti-establishment clause in judicial decisions, and perceives that such patriarchal positions serve as a profound threat to democracy. His hope is that “Obama has shown us the power in politics of something we know, as we know we are human: that resistance to patriarchy is rooted in our loving human natures, and the love of equals is the basis of democracy” (Richards, 278).

In *Barack Obama’s America: How New Conceptions of Race, Family, and Religion Ended the Reagan Era*, John Kenneth White

writes a book that argues for America's shift away from the Reagan era. While Reagan remains an inspirational figure in the Republican Party, his style of leadership and legislative philosophy have necessarily faded over time so as to be clearly distinct from the Republican philosophy of today. White offers a lively and convincing view that the hope for Obama's America is well-grounded in the historical changes that lifted Obama up as President. White implicitly rejects the great man theory of history, but writes of the forces that have met Obama's own political aspirations and spiritual commitments, and will continue to do so.

As the book's title states, White tackles the big issues: race, family, and religion. His discussion of race addresses the fact that "today, there is a growing lack of racial self-definition" (White, 39). Immigration, biracial identity, intermarriage, a shift in generational values, and a changed demography all strongly support his argument. He explores the changing nature of marriage through the experiences of interracial couples, sees Atlanta as moving from "a new South" to a "newer South" (White, 52) that is multiracial, multicultural, and multilingual, and analyzes both the confusion and the acceptance surrounding non-traditional and gay marriage. Obama breaks the boundaries of identity politics, something Richards also affirms, and in so doing reinvigorates hope in a culture previously creating despair.

White believes that political change relies on the types of conflict that emerge in culture and society, and which have developed from the profound split in the country caused by a conservative backlash against advances in human rights and the moral freedom of the 1960s. The culture wars most evident in the division of blue and red states, and which Obama has sought to mend through the renewal of public hope and deliberative democracy, represent the massive nature of conflict that has been the undercurrent of change in the past forty years. Like Espinosa, White uses both statistical and narrative evidence to present his case: statistics about traditional and non-traditional marriage, for example, are brought to life in stories about single parents, families of divorce, and non-traditional families living through these changes. White's energetic, even joyous voice inspires; his book has both scholarly depth and insightful narratives of Americans resolving conflict with the resilient creativity motivated by the habit of hope.

White sees the fruits of revolutionary change in the making of Obama's America. He writes, "Revolutions in race, family, sexual

identity, and religious life clearly show no signs of abating” and in fact continue to evolve: “a new, still unnamed, and not yet fully realized politics is emerging” (White, 184). He sees the result of such change emerging from “the death of the Reagan coalition” and an exhausted conservative philosophy (White, 185, 196). The role of religion in this transformation, White believes, rests with those Americans who have said they are spiritual but not religious. In chapter 5, “Shrunken Congregations, Soulful Citizens,” he discusses this phenomenon in his own life, as he finds the empty pews of his own Catholic church on Christmas Day shocking (White, 153). Despite the fact that voters apply a religious litmus test to presidential candidates, White sees “the refusal to live by established religious doctrine is altering the ways in which Americans practice their faith” (White, 164). While even within congregations there is an entanglement of the sacred and the profane, this points to the spiritual freedom of soulful citizens, the rejection of doctrine that places moral slavery upon gays and women, and new life within America’s rapidly growing religious pluralism, which includes atheists, agnostics, and secular humanists. This entanglement reflects deliberative democracy and the often messy debate that it encourages, and that has manifested itself in the culture wars.

White argues that the politics of discomfort underlying Obama’s America reveals the silence that exists between neighbors, the recalcitrance of conservatives, and “the difficulty of finding a common vocabulary” (White, 9). But in finding such a lexicon, culture is transformed, institutional structures are challenged and undermined, and individuals are given the right to respond to and revise new cultural values in their personal and professional lives as well as at the polls. Like Richards, White understands Obama’s rise from such a new cultural landscape to be a result of the struggle against norms that placed marginalized Americans in an iron cage from which they could be viewed, but only occasionally freed. Because Obama has had to navigate religious pluralism, foreign cultures, a single-parent family, and biracial identity, he has been able to break the constructs of Reagan’s America in place during the Bush years. The author writes, “Obama had become the antithesis of the incumbent he sought to replace” (White, 214). New generations of Americans embraced the creative freedom that emerged from such a conflicted society; as Obama noted, “We are the ones we’ve been waiting for” (White, 213). But while Obama the candidate undoubtedly helped lift the nation with hope, his actual domestic and international accomplishments project

a more realistic view of the President and the actual practice of politics. As the Nobel Peace Prize illustrates, Obama was glorified prematurely and unrealistically.

The books reviewed here examine Obama from diverse perspectives, but they all celebrate his presidency as a sign of a transformed America. Such celebration lacks some of the critical acumen that one desires, and they certainly prompt the reader to think about Obama's failures and broken promises. More sober treatment of Obama's thought and practice, his flaws and foibles, would contribute to our understanding of the President, and would add insight to the necessity of philosophical pragmatism's entry into public life.

These books also speak to different audiences. The most accessible of all is *The Audacity of Faith*, which brings to Christian leaders and laity not only an inspiring view of Obama, but also valuable lessons in how to read politics and culture religiously and apply new ideas in community. The general audience will find *Reading Obama* challenging but intellectually exciting, and well worth the effort. Similarly, *Barack Obama's America* is an approachable and entertaining study of the conflicts and forces underlying social and cultural change. *The Irony of Barack Obama*, *Fundamentalism in American Religion and Law*, and *Religion, Race, and Barack Obama's New Democratic Pluralism* are particularly geared to the scholar, though Espinosa's anthology has the virtue of including multiple essays that will appeal to different audiences who want to pick and choose.

The authors of these books embrace in different ways not just Obama's rhetoric of hope, but the way in which his cultural power rests in the persistent inculcation of the habit of hope. As Obama nears the end of his presidency, voices of disappointment and disillusionment are being heard, and he has become to some a figure whose promise to reenchant the world has gone awry amidst the tooth and claw of Washington politics. As Brendan Nyhan writes, "Our disappointment with him ultimately reflects the mismatch between our expectations for presidents and the partisan realities of the contemporary era."⁷

But such disappointment also reveals the hungry soul in need of hope. It affirms that Obama has reinvigorated a culture with the habit of hope, the disposition that we can repair the world even as we

⁷ Brendan Nyhan, "Our Unrealistic Hopes for Presidents," *The New York Times*, December 12, 2014.

reject the messenger. The fault lies with the ugliness of actual governing in which Obama has accomplished just enough to make many Americans desire more. The habit of hope can repair the world, but it cannot be a burden placed on just one man. To different degrees, the authors reviewed here portray Obama in a glowing light, but as we move in future to a post-Obama era, studies of this President will no doubt offer a more balanced view of his accomplishments. Hopefully they will also offer more insight into that thorniest of problems—the relationship between faith and politics—and the question of pragmatic hope's true value.