

Barack Obama: renewing the social vision in America

by [Bruce Duncan, C.Ss.R.](#)

President [Barack Obama](#) has sketched a vision of social renewal in the United States that overlaps very closely in many areas with Catholic and more broadly Christian social thought. In his 2006 book, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, he stresses the notions of the common good, of social justice and of equality of opportunity, along with individual responsibility.

Few US presidents before their election have revealed so much about their own personal lives and aspirations for social change as has Barack Hussein Obama. His *Audacity of Hope* is an extraordinary account of how he has thought through many of the negative aspects of American public life and policies, especially of race and inequality, and what needs to be done to renew and change America for the better.

This book complements his earlier more personal account of his life and struggles in *Dreams of My Father* (1995/2004), but focuses much more on public policy issues. Writing clearly with a great power of language, Obama sketches a moral vision of the future, and calls on the US to recommit itself to ‘a set of ideals that continue to stir our collective conscience; a common set of values that bind us together despite our differences’ (p. 8).



Obama is of course appalled by past racism, but also by the failure of the Bush Administration to address social inequality and the entrenched poverty of many working class Americans and immigrants. He laments the redistribution of wealth to the financial elites, as well as the reckless adventurism and deceit over the Iraq war. Americans, he writes, ‘are weary of the dead zone that politics has become, in which narrow interests vie for advantage and ideological minorities seek to impose their own versions of absolute truth’ (p. 9).

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He writes with passion: ‘I am angry about policies that consistently favour the wealthy and powerful over average Americans, and insist that government has an important role in opening up opportunity to all. I believe in evolution, scientific inquiry and global warming’ (p. 10).

Even before the recent financial meltdown, Obama denounced the ‘ethic of greed’ and materialism in US culture, and their effects in government, finance and public policy. ‘In 1960, the average CEO made forty-two times what an average hourly worker took home. By 2005, the ratio was 262 to 1’ (p. 62). Between 1971 and 2001, average workers received no gain in incomes, while the ‘income of the top hundredth of a percent went up almost 500 percent’ (p. 192).

But Obama is also a pragmatist, schooled as he has been as a community worker in the South Side of Chicago, trying to reconcile opposed groups and come to solutions that will work. He brings this emphasis into national politics, trying to rise above the party-political factionalism and build a wide

consensus, so ‘we can ground our politics in the notion of the common good’ (p. 9), a key phrase for Obama.

He is determined to seek a major change of direction in US policies, including in the economic area, and rein in the excesses of laissez-faire, neo-liberal ideological views. ‘There is the absolutism of the free market, an ideology of no taxes, no regulation, no safety net – indeed, no government beyond what’s required to protect private property and provide for the national defense’ (p. 37). Instead he called for careful government regulation to ensure that ‘markets and fiscal discipline could help promote social justice’ (p. 34).

His chapter on values seeks to remind Americans that their ‘individualism has always been bound by a set of communal values, the glue upon which every healthy society depends. We value the imperatives of family and the cross-generational obligations that family implies’ (p. 55). He argues that the Golden Rule is not just a call to charity, but ‘a call to stand in somebody else’s shoes and see through their eyes’ (p. 66).

Barack Obama became a Christian because of his involvement with church groups animating community renewal and sustaining the moral vision of oppressed blacks in particular. Yet he recognises that people of good will may disagree on key issues, such as abortion, but he asks that ‘proposals must be subject to argument and amenable to reason’ (p. 219), and not advanced simply as religious imperatives.

As much as he can, Obama wants to be as inclusive of marginalised groups, including gay people and racial minorities, along with those without a religious allegiance. His chapter on race is not hectoring, but based on finely nuanced reflection on his own life and experience. This is the case too for his chapter on family. The chapter, *The World beyond our Borders*, argues for a more multilateral engagement with the rest of the world in addressing the urgent issues of peacemaking, global warming, hunger and poverty.

Obama has thought through many of these themes with great care, and articulated them cogently in hundreds of speeches. No wonder he seems so at ease in his major speeches, and writes many of the key ones himself, or even speaks off-the-cuff.

Obama has become president of the United States at a most difficult time. Yet it is also a moment of opportunity, when Americans, shocked at the consequences of the neo-liberal policies of the Neo-Conservatives and others, are demanding a major renewal of their values and institutions, including more astute regulation of markets. They want to ensure that the markets serve the common good not just of all Americans, but of the whole world. It is also an unprecedented moment for people inspired by Christian social traditions to engage in the conversation about making changes for the better.