

Obama's peace prize speech explores the ethics of warfare: Echoes of Niebuhr

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Nine days after announcing that he would send more troops to Afghanistan and set July 2011 as the start of a gradual withdrawal, President Barak Obama gave a similarly nuanced speech in accepting the Nobel Peace Prize.

Obama condemned religious-inspired violence, so-called holy wars, but also offered a defense of the just-war tradition in the face of “evil” in the world.

In his December 10 acceptance speech in Oslo, the U.S. president said that “given the dizzying pace of globalization, and the cultural leveling of modernity, it should come as no surprise that people fear the loss of what they cherish about their particular identities—their race, their tribe and, perhaps most powerfully, their religion.”

Still, religion had been used “dangerously” to “justify the murder of innocents by those who have distorted and defiled the great religion of Islam, and who attacked my country from Afghanistan,” Obama said.

“These extremists are not the first to kill in the name of God; the cruelties of the Crusades are amply recorded. But they remind us that no ‘holy war’ can ever be a just war. For if you truly believe that you are carrying out the divine will, then there is no need for restraint—no need to spare the pregnant mother, or the medic, or the Red Cross worker, or even a person of one’s own faith.

“Such a warped view of religion is not just incompatible with the concept of peace but I believe it is incompatible with the very purpose of faith—for the one rule that lies at the heart of every major religion is that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us.”

At the same time, Obama spoke of the just-war tradition, asserting that the world must acknowledge what he called a “hard truth.”

“We will not eradicate violent conflict in our lifetimes. There will be times when nations—acting individually or in concert—will find the use of force not only necessary but morally justified,” Obama said.

The Christian Science Monitor reported praise from former U.S. House of Representatives Speaker Newt Gingrich, a Republican and potential presidential candidate in 2012, who credited Obama for taking a realistic view of war and peace.

The *Monitor* noted also the reaction of activist Paul Kawika Martin, of the anti-war group Peace Action, which has criticized Obama for expanding U.S. military presence in Afghanistan. Martin said that while he and others credited Obama for his stated commitment to nuclear disarmament, “we believe he has missed opportunities to advance non-military solutions.”

In his peace prize address, Obama acknowledged his debt as the first black U.S. president to the example of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., another Nobel laureate and an advocate of nonviolence.

Yet, as an elected head of state, Obama said that he is “sworn to protect and defend my nation” and could not be solely guided by such examples as King and Mahatma Gandhi, the nonviolent campaigner for the independence of India from Britain.

“I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people,” Obama said. “For make no mistake, evil does exist in the world. A nonviolent movement could not have halted Hitler’s armies. Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda’s leaders to lay down their arms.”

One analyst, Fred Kaplan, writing in the online magazine *Slate*, said Obama’s speech was “a faithful reflection” of the views of the theologian-ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr, whom Obama has acknowledged as an influence on his own thinking.

Niebuhr emphasized in his 1952 book, *The Irony of American History*, what he described as “the limits of all human striving, the fragmentariness of all human wisdom, the precariousness of all historical configurations of power, and the mixture of good and evil in all human virtue.”

Similarly, Obama's speech acknowledged: "Even those of us with the best of intentions will at times fail to right the wrongs before us."

Yet, the U.S. president endorsed love-infused idealism. "Nonviolence practiced by men like Gandhi and King may not have been practical or possible in every circumstance but the love that they preached—their fundamental faith in human progress—that must always be the North Star that guides us on our journey." -*Chris Herlinger, Ecumenical News International*