

POST-DENOMINATIONAL (and Palin; a case study) - 2008

MCCAIN PICKS POST-DENOMINATIONAL PALIN

John Allen of the National Catholic Reporter says that John McCain's running mate, Sarah Palin is an example of a post-denominational Christian. No longer identified by particular practices or beliefs of separate Christian traditions, a post-denominational Christian has a style of believing that draws from many sources and is highly individualized.

The initial confusion surrounding Palin's denominational identity, therefore, has a simple explanation: She doesn't have one. Instead, Palin appears to be part of that rapidly expanding galaxy of "post-denominational" Christianity, where elements of Evangelical and Pentecostal styles of faith and worship fuse into a myriad of unique local combinations, and where old denominational loyalties are essentially dead.

Though post-denominationalists are, by definition, difficult to catalog and index, they're unquestionably numerous. 2007 survey conducted by LifeWay found that fully one-third of American Protestants were contemplating attending a different church in the future, and of that group, only one in four said it would be important that their future church belong to the same denomination as the one they currently attend.

Indeed, Ron Dreher over at Crunchy Con has noticed the same thing about Palin, asking "What kind of Christian is Sarah Palin?"

It's hard to say. People say she's an Evangelical, but what does that mean, really? Is she a Pentecostal? A Bible churcker? Christianity Today reports that she was baptized a Catholic as an infant, but her parents raised her in Bible churches. She has attended Pentecostal churches in recent years. It sounds like she's like a lot of US Christians today: a little of this, a little of that.

Allen says to that we should not confuse post-denominationalists for Evangelicals.

Not all post-denominationalists are conservative Evangelicals. The "emergent church" movement, for example, is often considered an expression of independent Christianity, and the relatively loose and flexible approach to creedal matters of some emerging churches – sometimes called "generous orthodoxy" – is regarded as unacceptably fuzzy by many Evangelicals. Globally, however, the largest share of the post-denominational universe is occupied by various forms of Evangelical and Pentecostal spirituality, with a strong emphasis on Biblical literalism and a lively sense of the supernatural.

Some of these independent Christians are even hesitant to adopt descriptive labels such as "Evangelical" or "Pentecostal," for fear that such terminology could breed a new form of denominationalism. This is part of what makes estimating the total Evangelical or Pentecostal population in America, or the world, such a maddening exercise, because depending upon the day of the week and what mood they're in, many believers these days (including, perhaps, Palin) might consider themselves both, or neither.

Post-denominational Christians share a common identity and have formed their own culture. They may look like generic evangelicals to us main-liners, but they know each other when they meet:

Although independent Christians spurn membership cards, they typically have little difficulty recognizing one other – in part, because there's a shared culture formed by music, conventions in praise and worship, and spiritual language, which different congregations dip in and out of to varying degrees.

For example, those who watched Palin's announcement speech yesterday in Dayton, Ohio, might have noticed a throaty roar from the crowd when she said, "We are expected to govern with integrity and goodwill and clear convictions and a servant's heart."

That reaction wasn't simply about approval of good government; the phrase "servant's heart" is a popular bit of Evangelical terminology, used as a short-hand for Christian humility. A quick web search reveals thousands of churches, ministries, and bands that use some variation of "servant's heart" in the title; there's even a residential cleaning service in Calgary called "Servant's Heart."

Ironically, traditional Catholics may lean toward Palin while many post-denominationals will tend to identify with Biden:

There's a bit of political irony for [Roman] Catholics. Given Palin's strong pro-life credentials, it's likely she will appeal to the most strongly "denominational" Catholics, those most devoted to traditional Catholic identity and teaching. Meanwhile, what one might call "post-denominational Catholics," meaning those for whom religious branding carries less theological significance, may embrace Palin's Democratic rival, Delaware Senator Joseph Biden, the lone Roman Catholic on either ticket, because of his progressive stands on social and political matters. In other words, the denominationals on the Catholic side will back the post-denominationalist, while the Catholic post-denominationalists will probably pick the candidate who bears the Catholic denominational label.

Posted by Andrew Gerns on August 31, 2008 6:00 AM

MCCAIN'S VP CHOICE A WOMAN -- AND A POST-DENOMINATIONALIST

By JOHN ALLEN JR.

Published: August 30, 2008

When news broke yesterday that Republican presidential candidate John McCain had named little-known Governor Sarah Palin of Alaska as his running mate, religion writers across the country and the curious in the blogosphere scrambled to figure out her denominational affiliation.

Palin was briefly touted as the first Pentecostal to run on a major party ticket. A spokesperson, however, told the Associated Press yesterday that although the 44-year-old mother of five grew up in the Assemblies of God, the largest organized Pentecostal denomination in the world with an estimated 57 million members, she does not consider herself a "Pentecostal."

Her primary place of worship in Juneau, Alaska's capital, is said to be the "Church on the Rock," an independent congregation founded in January 2000. Palin's spokesperson, however, said the governor also attends different churches.

The initial confusion surrounding Palin's denominational identity, therefore, has a simple explanation: She doesn't have one.

Instead, Palin appears to be part of that rapidly expanding galaxy of "post-denominational" Christianity, where elements of Evangelical and Pentecostal styles of faith and worship fuse into a myriad of unique local combinations, and where old denominational loyalties are essentially dead.

Though post-denominationalists are, by definition, difficult to catalog and index, they're unquestionably numerous. A 2007 survey conducted by LifeWay found that fully one-third of American Protestants were contemplating attending a different church in the future, and of that group, only one in four said it would be important that their future church belong to the same denomination as the one they currently attend.

Globally, the World Christian Encyclopedia estimates that roughly 20 percent of the world's 2.2 billion Christians today are part of what it calls "independent Christianity," defined as forms of faith and worship "separated from, uninterested in, and independent of historic, denominationalist Christianity." Typically, these folks eschew any label other than "Christian" for their religious identity.

Religious sociologists and theologians point to any number of explanations for the rise of post-denominationalism: the spread of a consumerist ethos and "comparison shopping" within Christianity; disillusionment with what are seen as petty denominational differences; the increasing liberalism of some mainline Protestant denominations, leading more conservative church-goers to seek alternatives; even the category-blurring character of post-modernity itself.

To be sure, not all post-denominationalists are conservative Evangelicals. The "emergent church" movement, for example, is often considered an expression of independent Christianity, and the relatively loose and flexible approach to creedal matters of some emerging churches – sometimes called "generous orthodoxy" – is regarded as unacceptably fuzzy by many Evangelicals. Globally, however, the largest share of the post-denominational universe is occupied by various forms of Evangelical and Pentecostal spirituality, with a strong emphasis on Biblical literalism and a lively sense of the supernatural.

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The term is so common, in fact, that Christian comedian Tim Hawkins has poked fun at it. "I hate it when somebody tells me I've got a servant's heart," Hawkins says. "It means they want me to start stacking chairs."

When Palin pledged to govern with a "servant's heart," Christians, especially those with an Evangelical background, had no trouble recognizing one of their own, even without the convenience of a denominational

label on Palin's résumé. (It's akin to a public figure making reference to a "near occasion of sin" or a "state of grace"; even without an official bio, Catholics would recognize a fellow member of the tribe.)

Palin's nomination, therefore, does not simply mark a breakthrough for women, or for western states. She also puts a face on the fastest-growing and most dynamic segment of global Christianity these days – even if it's proving difficult for journalists and political handicappers to get their minds around.

Finally, there's a bit of political irony for Catholics. Given Palin's strong pro-life credentials, it's likely she will appeal to the most strongly "denominational" Catholics, those most devoted to traditional Catholic identity and teaching. Meanwhile, what one might call "post-denominational Catholics," meaning those for whom religious branding carries less theological significance, may embrace Palin's Democratic rival, Delaware Senator Joseph Biden, the lone Roman Catholic on either ticket, because of his progressive stands on social and political matters.

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No wonder it's all so confusing.

IS PALIN AN EVANGELICAL?

Christianity Today - Sarah Pulliam

John McCain's vice presidential pick Sarah Palin has a Pentecostal background, but reporters seem to be struggling to define her faith.

A profile in the Wall Street Journal says she's Lutheran.

The Washington Post writes, "Her evangelical Christian faith -- she believes in creationism and is adamantly opposed to abortion -- may help [McCain] court skeptical social conservatives."

Hm. I'm not sure those two beliefs necessarily link to an "evangelical Christian faith."

Instead of assigning a label to her faith, Eric Gorski of the Associated Press reports that a business administrator in Pentecostal Assemblies of God told him that her home church is The Church on the Rock, an independent congregation. A spokeswoman for the McCain-Palin campaign told Gorski that Palin attends different churches and does not consider herself Pentecostal.

Tennessean religion reporter Bob Smietana writes that Palin grew up among evangelicals, and attended the Wasilla Assembly of God as a teenager and young adult. Smietana writes that while in Juneau, Alaska's capital, she sometimes attends Juneau Christian Center, an Assemblies of God congregation.

Boston College professor Alan Wolfe writes at The New Republic that Palin is an evangelical, shaped by the region in which she lives.

"... she is not a Southern evangelical, and therein lies a tale."

Southern Baptists, he writes, became preoccupied with sin, while those in the west were more libertarian where sins could become forgiven.

He writes, "Sarah Palin named two of her children after witches, once took drugs, and refused to sign a bill forbidding domestic benefits for gay couples. Any one of these--especially the first--would raise suspicion in the eyes of a traditional Southern Baptist."

With Richard Land's high praise, however, I'm not seeing that suspicion quite yet.

"Palin, the gun-toting mom, has a libertarian streak in politics and a libertarian streak in religion," Wolfe writes. " ... [W]hile Palin may be quickly endorsed by men speaking in Southern accents, she is neither a Billy Graham nor a Jimmy Carter. American evangelicalism, like John McCain, has many mansions. Sarah Palin inhabits only one of them."

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life broadly describes Palin as Protestant. Although it's clear that some evangelicals are excited about her, I wonder whether she calls herself an evangelical.

Update:

Fred Barnes wrote last summer in the Weekly Standard how Palin's faith impacts her politics.

"Her Christian faith--Palin grew up attending nondenominational Bible churches--was a minor issue in the race," Barnes wrote. "She told me her faith affects her politics this way: 'I believe everything happens for a purpose. In my own personal life, if I dedicated back to my Creator what I'm trying to create for the good . . . everything will turn out fine.' That same concept applies to her political career, she suggested."

Jay Newton-Small at Time Magazine asked Palin some religion questions two weeks ago.

What's your religion?

Christian.

Any particular...?

No. Bible-believing Christian.

What church do you attend?

A non-denominational Bible church. I was baptized Catholic as a newborn and then my family started going to non-denominational churches throughout our life.

As a side note and not religion related, someone asked me if I feel a kindred spirit with Sarah Palin because our names are so similar. Apparently, her middle name is Louise, so it's Sarah Louise Pulliam vs. Sarah Louise Palin. Just a few typos and I'd be running for VP.

Posted by Sarah Pulliam on August 30, 2008 3:04AM

Spiritual Politics A blog on religion and the 2008 election campaign.



Trinity College
HARTFORD CONNECTICUT

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Palindrome

First thought: Gilgoff's right to draw attention to Richard Land's enthusiasm for Palin as Veep in his CBS interview of a few weeks ago. So she's the ticket's energizer bunny: activated evangelicals plus Alaska oil. See Sarah run.



Second thought: Palin gives religious right leaders--real, supposed, or would-be--all the grounds they need to jump on board McCain's bus. But for them it's the old dodge of pushing for all you can get, knowing that at the end of the day you'll be there for your seat.

What rank-and-file evangelicals will think is another question. They flocked to Huckabee even though the putative leaders were very lukewarm. They are not, in a word, easy to command. Even though the religious right has had women in leadership positions going all the way back to the 1970s, traditional gender roles are part of its stock in trade, and having a youngish, inexperienced Mom a heartbeat away...well, we'll see.

Third thought: McCain's choice of Palin shows how undead the religious right remains in the American political system. The Republican Party birthed it, and to this day cannot disown it. Abortion politics will be as big as ever this fall; the culture wars will continue apace. The game will only be changed by a substantial Obama victory.

Fourth thought: This choice will weaken McCain's appeal to Jewish voters. Over the past two decades, nothing has kept Jews in the Democratic camp more than the GOP's embrace of the religious right in particular and evangelicals in general. One of the appealing things about McCain to Jews has been his uncomfortable relationship with both. Palin is not only a strong values-voting evangelical, she's got a Buchananite past--and there's no one in the Republican Party more noxious to Jews than Pat Buchanan.

Posted by Mark Silk at 01:19 PM