

Progressive Religion Is Not an Oxymoron

By David E. Roy

Sarah Palin's Religion

Mike Rhodes, Community Alliance editor, asked me to do some research on the topic of Sarah Palin's religion and what this might portend for the nation if she were to be elected vice president.

One of the problems with this assignment is that there has not been any extensive focus on her until she was nominated. As a result, in-depth information about Palin (including her religion and its role in her life) that is reliable and verifiable is not yet fully available. (As with others, I have wondered if this is not part of the campaign strategy, the creation of an appealing image without baggage, but this is beyond the topic for this column.)

Quite a number of sources indicate that her parents joined a Pentecostal Assembly of God church when she was four. She did not leave this until she was 38, in 2002 (she was born in 1964). It is reasonable to assume that this religious tradition has deep roots in her psyche and therefore is fundamental in shaping her world view.

Pentecostalism

Pentecostalism traces its roots to the description of the events on the day of Pentecost in the book of Acts in the New Testament. Pentecost is the Greek name for a Jewish festival (the Feast of Weeks) that occurs 50 days after Passover. It was originally a celebration at the end of the harvest of grain. (See the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 5, pp 222-223.) The author of Acts (assumed by most scholars to be the author of Luke) describes the Pentecost following Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection as the day in which the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles with the sound of a violent powerful wind and manifesting as tongues of fire on their heads. At the same time, they began to speak in foreign tongues that Jews from other nations could understand, even if the speakers themselves did not know what they were saying.

While most Christian traditions understand this as the birth of the Christian church, Pentecostals focus intensely on the so-called gifts of the spirit that were evident that day as tangible signs or evidence of the Holy Spirit. The ability to speak in foreign tongues is not understood to be a metaphor, but something literal. This is something that is practiced with great energy among the 20 million Pentecostals.

However, speaking in tongues today no longer has to be any actual foreign tongue and the speaker is normally accompanied by someone who somehow manages to translate the message to the church. (The 2008 Rogue Festival had an amusing offering called "Pentecostal in Wisconsin" that gives some insight into the culture. See <http://roguefestival.com/rogue08/?p=158> and, for a clip, <http://www.ryanpaulson.com/> .)

Other gifts of the spirit include healing and the popularized understanding of prophecy, namely the ability to foretell what is going to happen.

Pentecostalism a Form of Evangelicalism

Broadly speaking, Pentecostals can be considered to be a specialized form of Evangelicalism. As such, Pentecostals maintain an unwavering belief in such ideas as the bible being the inerrant word of God, Jesus being fully divine, the absolute centrality of Jesus as the only way toward salvation, the world as a battleground between good and evil, God having a plan for and control over everything that happens, among others.

As I indicated in an earlier column (July, 2008) many evangelicals today are starting to shift their focus from the divisive issues of abortion and homosexuality to more traditional Christian concerns about poverty and oppression (including slavery), as well as the environment. If this trend were to continue, there would be a softening of the tensions among Christians of different backgrounds, as well as with non-Christians, and an increase in the willingness to cooperate to solve these fundamental problems.

However, Palin appears to be renewing the energy around at least abortion and possibly homosexuality. If this is true, then it likely will re-infuse the political-religious dialogue with the polarization we have seen so much of in recent years.

Another idea that Pentecostals most often support is the Rapture/end-times scenario that I discussed in last month's column. Again, I have no idea of where Palin is with this belief.

The Timing of Palin's Religious Transition

According to the article on Palin in Wikipedia, she left the Pentecostal Assemblies of God Church in 2002. This coincides with the year she termed out as mayor of Wasilla and ran unsuccessfully in a state-wide election primary as the Republican candidate for lieutenant governor. Prior to this, as mayor, she had opposed limiting the hours that bars could serve alcohol, a position contrary to her church's no-drinking principles.

It would be journalistically and politically important to try to understand her motives for this transition, but without more research (including interviews with Palin and others), these limited facts do not lend themselves to any substantial insight into why she moved from a Pentecostal church to a more typical fundamentalist Christian church, nor do they lend any serious insight into how she might choose to govern when her religious values are at odds with the religious and social values of her constituents.

The only substantial clues about how she might govern come from her statements and actions as mayor and governor that do not have much if any religious frame: dismissing appointed city officials and demanding loyalty to her for reinstatement, calling people who oppose her actions as governor "Alaska haters," among others. The only one that might have been motivated by religious convictions was when she discussed the possibility of banning books from the local library.

In the interviews with ABC's Charlie Gibson, she appeared to be trying to dodge his comments when he suggested she seemed to be talking about a holy war when she said in her old church that, "Our national leaders are sending US soldiers on a task that is from God."

First she tried to suggest that she was not being quoted exactly, but Gibson pointed out that these were her "exact words."

Then she tried to link her comments to Lincoln's famous words during the Civil War about hoping to be on God's side, without the certainty that tends to characterize fundamentalists of all stripes. As Doris Kerns Goodwin makes quite clear in *Team of Rivals*, Lincoln was far from a religious fundamentalist. Palin's comments do not appear to be in the same spirit as Lincoln's.

Palin's Current Church and Its Beliefs

Palin's current church, the Wasilla Bible Church (<http://wasillabible.org/>), appears to be a typical fundamentalist Christian church. In reading through some of the sermons posted on-line, there is a definite emphasis on God's love, but it is still subject to qualifications. Further, God is view as loving *and* wrathful and vengeful, the kind of stern father that George Lakoff discusses as the prototype for the raising of the political conservative.

While we should no more assume that candidate Palin subscribes to every belief of her current (or former) pastor and church than candidate Obama and his former church and pastor, it is fair to assume that she would be in accord with the broad themes of this tradition. One of these themes is a sharp divide between right and wrong, good and evil, a divide that is often portrayed as a life-and-death struggle of war-like proportions. We have had eight years of this already and the damage this leads to is unmistakable.

I believe you can see evidence of this perspective in Palin's response to Gibson's questions about her readiness to be president: "I'm ready," she said. When he pushed and asked if she had any moment of self-doubt, she said,

I didn't hesitate, no. ... I answered him, "yes," because I have the confidence in that readiness and knowing that you can't blink, you have to be wired in a way of being so committed to the mission, the mission that we're on, reform of this country and victory in the war, you can't blink. So I didn't blink then even when asked to run as his running mate.

The choice of words is striking: **confidence** in one's **readiness**, **not blinking** in the face of danger or challenge, **being hardwired** for (battle?), **committed** to the mission, **victory in the war**.

This mindset does not bode well for governing an extraordinarily diverse nation within the context of and even more diverse world where the various fundamentalisms, both religious and secular, seem intent on cataclysmic conflict. We need people who can balance reason and passion, can handle complexity, know their shortcomings, can truly understand those who are radically different in a compassionate manner.

The Culture of Contempt

Another thing that concerns me, something I see as a legitimate religious concern, is how easily she adopted the role of spokesperson for what I call the culture of contempt. If Christianity is built from the ground up (or the top down, the inside out) by the idea of God's gift of unconditional love, then there is no place for this virulent contempt. Because of our psychological need to avoid shame, of which contempt is an intense form, the use of this kind of denigration of others has a powerful impact. It shifts the whole mindset of those in the audience from reason to thick, raw emotion.

The fact that Palin was so willing to employ this in her debut speech fits in with the perspective that victory is all important and that, de facto, any and all means are fair. This is compatible with a fundamentalist perspective since the believers know without a doubt they are on the side of right, that God is on their side in whatever the struggle may be.

I am pretty sure this is not the right way to go (though I had better not say that I am absolutely convinced ...). I am sure, however, that one of the worst things we can do, as tempting as it might be, is to demonize her for this would be perpetuating the very problem we see in Palin and her most ardent supporters.

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