

Progressive Religion ... Is Not an Oxymoron

By David E. Roy

Barack Obama and Rick Warren: Who is Co-opting Whom?

Gay-rights activists were understandably upset with Barack Obama's selection of the Rev. Rick Warren to give the invocation at Obama's inauguration.

Warren, for all the love and purpose he preaches, has clearly condemned gays and the idea of gay marriage. Though he is one of the more moderate of the visible leaders of the Christian evangelical movement, nonetheless he appears to have taken a hard line on this issue.

Pandering or Community Organizing?

So, is this "shameless pandering" on Obama's part, an early move to position himself for the 2012 election?

Or, is this another example of Obama's philosophy of community organizing on a grand scale? If the latter, this would mean that part of the motivation to invite Warren is to invite by proxy a large number of evangelicals to the table to rub elbows with others who feel quite differently about this and other key issues important to social and political progressives.

Is Obama Channeling Lincoln?

If Obama is taking his cues from Doris Kearns Goodwin's account of Lincoln's presidency (described in her book, *Team of Rivals*), his move to invite Warren to play a central role on the day of the inauguration would make sense in at least two ways:

First, as the title of Goodwin's book implies, Lincoln brought into his cabinet the men who opposed him for the nomination to the then-new Republican Party in 1860. These three, as well as others in Lincoln's official cabinet, embodied sometimes strongly divergent views about key issues, including slavery.

Yet Lincoln was able to create a team out of these rivals and this team held each other and the nation together during a horrific period. This is due in part to Lincoln's ability to keep those with strongly different viewpoints from leaving the fold.

Second, according to Goodwin, Lincoln was extraordinarily skillful in building public opinion in support of his major decisions (the Emancipation Proclamation being a prime example). He would not move or act on an issue, regardless of the pressure he received, until he sensed that the majority of the public was either persuaded or on the cusp of being persuaded.

When it came to slavery, because of his belief in waiting until the right moment, Lincoln was intensely criticized for dragging his feet. He was harshly denounced by

those whose views on the most profound issue of human rights of that era were more liberal than the population in general.

Yet, by waiting until what he judged was the pivotal moment, he was able to move the entire nation toward a goal that many originally thought was beyond reach.

Gradual Changes Among Conservative Christians

To this perspective on Obama's possible motives for selecting Warren, I would add my own experience with clergy and churches over the past 35-40 years. Several key issues that used to dominate conservative evangelical Christians have diminished significantly with time.

1. The Role of Women at Home and in the Church

One has to do with the role of women at home and in the church. While you will still find fundamentalists attempting to model the sociological account of the oppression of women woven throughout the Jewish bible and the Christian New Testament, in a great many conservative circles this has become virtually a non-issue.

In practice, women are not subordinate to men either at home or at church in the vast number of those settings. Additionally, women are also serving as ordained pastors today in traditions that previously made that role off limits.

2. The Attitude Toward Divorce

A second key change is the attitude toward divorce. In the past, anyone getting a divorce was subject to shame and rejection from leadership positions in the church and, all too often, ejection from the church itself.

While few if any conservative churches recommend divorce, they recognize the reality of it and provide counseling and divorce recovery groups. These groups do not shame the participants.

Today, even clergy from conservative churches who divorce are not necessarily cast out of a church leadership role.

3. The View of Psychotherapy

A third change, while not as basic as the previous two, is the attitude of conservative evangelicals toward psychotherapy. When I was in seminary, it was not unusual to hear clergy and even some seminarians argue that any and all psychotherapy was in some fashion a rejection of God. That is, if one prayed and studied the bible, that was enough. Seeing a psychotherapist was to engage in a secular art that had no place in the life of a true Christian.

Today, by contrast, there is an exceptionally conservative Christian graduate program on the west coast (Biola) that educates clinical psychologists and marriage and family therapists. Locally, the fairly conservative Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary has a program for MFTs.

Relationships Lead to Transformation

I outline all of this to argue the point that when conservative Christians are in dialogue with those who are more liberal, but with whom there is enough overlap in values and worldview, this helps to transform those in the conservative camp in the direction of becoming at least more moderate.

So, the question I would raise, as I did in the title to this brief commentary, is who is co-opting whom? I would argue that there is an excellent chance that Warren is being co-opted by Obama and not the other way around.

Nonetheless, Persuasive Pressure Needs to Continue

Does this mean that we should sit back and just let things happen? Of course not. Persuasive pressure needs to continue to be applied, particularly if we understand that Obama may behave like a good politician (in the positive sense of this) and act when he has a sense that public opinion has shifted enough to support more liberal decisions.

However, it does mean that the pressure needs to be applied in a respectful manner. A shout from the heart can be loud and clear but it doesn't have to be derisive and disrespectful. Our task is to build public opinion in support of this fundamental human right that stems from a core human need – to be in an enduring intimate relationship. This goal cannot be reached by demonizing the opposition, as tempting as this might be in some cases.

In the meantime, let's hope that the relationship Obama is attempting to build with Warren and other conservative Christian evangelicals will provide the means for the transformation we are seeking.