

So Help Us, God

Answering the Anti-Pentecostal Bias



When Sarah Palin became the Republican nominee for vice president in 2008, reports quickly surfaced saying she had long been a member of a Pentecostal church. With that news, any grand American tradition of religious tolerance for her vanished. More than simply being disrespected for her Pentecostal beliefs, Palin was derided for them with smears that were close to bizarre in their misuse of the facts.

She was a heretic, bloggers claimed, and under the hypnotic sway of modern Elmer Ganttrys. She was robotically devoted to the cult of a witch hunter. She attended a church in which people ranted in tongues, raised Nazi salutes and trained their children to be Christian versions of suicide bombers.

The truth was, Palin was a member of one of the fastest-growing movements in Christian history, one that must be considered mainstream today by any standard. From a handful of adherents when modern Pentecostalism began in the early 1900s, Pentecostals now number more than 580 million worldwide. They are growing by more than 19 million a year, some 54,000 per day, and researchers predict by 2025 there will be more than 1 billion Pentecostals and charismatics in the world, most located in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Moreover, Palin represented nothing out of the ordinary on the U.S. political stage. That a candidate for the Executive branch should hold firmly to religious beliefs isn't anything new in American politics, as the campaigns of John F. Kennedy (the "Roman Catholic" candidate, 1960), Jimmy Carter (the "born-again" candidate, 1976) and Ronald Reagan (the "evangelical" candidate, 1980) can attest.

That's why there is a larger issue here than the one campaign of Palin. It is that her presence on our national stage pressed the question of Pentecostalism's acceptance in American society; and this is a question deserves an answer is long overdue.

This political resistance to Pentecostal/charismatic faith reared its head again during the recent media coverage of The Response, a prayer gathering for the nation organized by Texas Gov. Rick Perry. Some 30,000 Christians gathered in Houston's Reliant Stadium in August and waited on God with repentance, weeping, mourning, worshipping and fervent prayer—all classic markers of a Pentecostal approach to faith. Joining Perry were charismatic leaders such as Luis and Jill Cataldo of International House of Prayer-Kansas City, Doug Stringer of Somebody Cares America and Jim Garlow of Skyline Church in San Diego.

Opposing Prayer

The push-back to Perry's gathering was fierce. Perry made it clear that he would attend the event as a private citizen and not in his official capacity as governor, so the problem wasn't one of separation of church and state. It stemmed primarily from the company he was keeping—with such charismatic leaders as C. Peter Wagner, Mike Bickle, John Hagee, Cindy Jacobs, Doug Stringer and others, all supporters of the New Apostolic Reformation (see our article about NAR on p. 40).

Writing about NAR for the *Texas Observer*, columnist Forrest Wilder described the group as if they were deranged cultists: "The movement's top prophets and apostles believe they have a direct line to God. ... They believe ... their God-given decrees have ended mad cow disease in Germany and produced rain in drought-stricken Texas. In Texas, they engage in elaborate ceremonies involving branding irons, plumb lines and stakes inscribed with biblical passages driven into the earth of

every Texas county.”

Frank Bruni of the *New York Times* critiqued The Response by writing that when it comes to fixing our country’s problems, “faith and prayer just won’t cut it. In fact, they’ll get in the way.”

Paula Kirby, a consultant to secular organizations, moved Bruni’s point a giant step forward in her column for the *Washington Post*, writing that Perry’s attempt to establish political change through faith was futile, even ignorant:

“On a purely emotional level it is an understandable response to the reality of a world which can be frightening, unpredictable, even overwhelming. Understandable—but completely, utterly, definitively futile. No person who dares to think of himself as educated or civilized—let alone as worthy to be the potential leader of the developed world—has any business surrendering himself to a fictional fairy godfather. No amount of wailing to an empty sky ... is going to solve a thing.”

This depth of intolerance of one’s beliefs contrasts the lack of concern over religion shown to Vice President Al Gore in 1996. That year, he attended an event at the Hsi Lai Buddhist Temple in Los Angeles to raise money for the Democratic National Committee. Any faith connection he had made with Buddhism was ignored.

It is ironic that charismatics and Pentecostals receive such approbation from the political left. They would seem to be instead the dream religious movement of a social-justice-oriented Democrat.

Pentecostals are more urban than rural, more female than male, more globally non-Western than Western. Their ranks are drawn from the poor (87 percent) more than the rich (13 percent). And they come from 9,000 ethnolinguistic cultures and speak more than 8,000 languages.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous "Mountaintop" speech, delivered the day before he was assassinated, took place at a Pentecostal church—Mason Temple Church of God in Christ, named for Bishop C.H. Mason, founder of America's largest black Pentecostal body.

This is no uniquely Republican faith, despite the political backlash against candidates such as Palin and Perry.

The Real Pentecostal

Indeed, the famed event from which most Pentecostals mark their birth—the 1906 Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles—was guided by a legally blind, black preacher named William Joseph Seymour, the son of former slaves from Louisiana. In the book *The Pentecostals*, author John Thomas Nichol noted that the *Los Angeles Times* quoted a witness at the time of the revival saying Seymour was "meek and plain-spoken and no orator. He spoke the common language of the uneducated class. He might preach for three-quarters of an hour with no more emotionalism than that there post. He was no arm-waving thunderer, by any stretch of the imagination."

Nonetheless, the abhorrence of Pentecostal faith has become so evident in American society that it is a mainstay of pop culture. How many times in a movie or a novel is the Pentecostal figure the murderer or thief or child molester? It is hard to forget the final scene in the 1991 movie *Cape Fear*, in which the Scripture-spouting murderer and sexual deviant Max Cady, played by Robert De Niro, finally dies while shouting in tongues and spewing Bible verses as threats to characters played by Nick Nolte and Jessica Lange. Such scenes define Pentecostalism for many Americans.

Had such culturewide suspicion of all things Pentecostal not shaped the public's view of Palin's faith, what might Americans truthfully have learned about the Pentecostal/charismatic movement?

They could have heard that:

- Being Pentecostal does not automatically move one to the political right. Joshua Dubois, President Obama's head of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, is a Pentecostal. He usually appears clothed and in his right mind.
- Pentecostalism is no longer a movement of storefront churches and brush-arbor revival meetings.
- Along with its spiritual child, the charismatic movement, Pentecostals are to be found in nearly every kind of church and denomination in the world. The iconic Pentecostal is hard to spot. He looks more like a passionate Baptist, an inspired Presbyterian or perhaps an Anglican aflame.

Compare these facts with some of the beliefs held by other world faiths, and it's evident there is nothing Pentecostals believe that's any stranger than the beliefs of Mormons, Muslims or Roman Catholics, many of whom populate American government on both sides of the political divide.

Faith Can Be Odd (Period)

For example, if you are one of the many Muslims spread throughout the U.S. government—such as Congressman Keith Ellison—and you are orthodox, then you believe Islam began in the sixth century when a spirit named Gabriel commanded Muhammad to become his apostle, that man was created from a clot of blood and that one day you'll drink wine from jeweled goblets on soft couches in paradise.

If you are one of the dozen or more Mormons in the U.S. Congress, such as Mitt Romney, and you are orthodox, then you believe that in the early 1800s God the Father appeared with Jesus to a teenage American boy, telling him all religions are in error and that one day good Mormons will become gods over their own planets, making spirit babies with spirit brides.

If you are one of the dozens of U.S. congressmen and six Supreme Court justices who are Roman Catholic and you are orthodox, then you believe the wine and bread used for communion in a Catholic mass literally changes into the body and blood of Christ and that the pope can speak words the faithful are to take as the inspired truth of God.

Each of these religions is among the historic faiths of humanity. Each is embraced by eminent members of the U.S. government. Each sounds far-fetched and odd to outsiders, and each is to be treated with respect. This is as it should be in our *e pluribus unum* nation.

But what “should be” isn’t always applied to a faith that is charismatic or Pentecostal, as we’ve seen with Palin.

At her Pentecostal church in Alaska, Wasilla Assembly of God, did she sit next to people who spoke in tongues? Certainly. Did she hear people offer aloud what they thought were prophecies? Undoubtedly. Did she see attempts to cast out demons and did she pray with her fellow believers for some miracle in their town? Yes.

She was also told she had a destiny, that there was some role of service for which she had been made. It might be as a doctor or as a teacher or as a missionary or as a politician, but she was made for a purpose.

By the time she was running for the vice presidency, all this sweetness and nobility was shoved aside by the press. In an incredibly unwise move, the new pastor of Wasilla Assembly of God chose to put videos of Palin speaking at the church or receiving prayer on YouTube. It took the inner life of the church and put it on display, and it left Palin looking like the pawn of preachers.

Then it grew worse. An African pastor named Bishop Thomas Muthee who often visited Wasilla Assembly—a valiant man of

faith and compassion—had been depicted in a film called *Transformations* leading a move to pray a witch out of an African village. Yet, as seriously as Africans take the subject of witches, American journalists find it a misguided belief from a misguided time. Muthee became “the witch hunter” and Palin his deceived disciple. The film of his prayer for her, which included him praying in tongues, made the rounds on the Internet and was used to discredit the Pentecostal community.

The press did not report the fact that the unwise pastor at Wasilla Assembly of God was urged by his superiors to remove the film clips from the church’s website, did so and apologized.

Pentecostalism’s Day?

Was Palin really a robot of a drone-like band of dangerous religious freaks? Of course not. But the imagery was indicative not only of the animosity that greeted her from some quarters but also of the suspicion and hatred that have long been poured out on Pentecostals.

Yet, since Pentecostalism is the preferred religious expression of a quarter of the world’s 2 billion Christians and the most successful social movement of the past century, according to researcher and missiologist David Barrett, then perhaps Pentecostalism’s day has come. Perhaps it is time to end the attacks on this widely held faith, much as our culture has insisted on ending bigoted portrayals of blacks and one-dimensional portrayals of women.

And when that day of acceptance comes, perhaps Palin, along with such unlikely fellows as former Attorney General John Ashcroft and Obama administration official Joshua Dubois, may be seen as pioneers of Pentecostalism in American public life—and no longer numbered among the deceived and the extreme.

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