



Written by on January 20, 2009

Controversial Clergy at Obama Inaugural

Of several clergymen selected to deliver inaugural prayers that have provoked varying degrees of critical commentary, the most well known is the Rev. Rick Warren, pastor and founder of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California. The objections arose not because the Orange County megachurch's Southern Baptist affiliation and teaching is considered out of the mainstream. Indeed, the August 16, 2008 meeting that Warren arranged at Saddleback between presidential candidates John McCain and Barack Obama — billed as the Civil Forum on The Presidency — cast the pastor in the role of a civic-minded religious leader willing to facilitate dialogue among Americans of various viewpoints.



The most vocal criticism of Warren has originated from so-called gay rights advocates, who became miffed because of the pastor's support of Proposition 8, California's Protect Marriage Act, that banned same-sex marriage. However, as AP's Religion Writer Rachel Zoll noted in her December 22, 2008 article "Rick Warren's biggest critics: other evangelicals":

[Warren supported Proposition 8] belatedly, with none of the enthusiasm he brings to fighting AIDS and illiteracy.

When other conservative Christians held stadium rallies and raised tens of millions of dollars for the [Proposition 8] ballot effort, there was no sign of Warren. Neither he nor his wife, Kay, donated any of their considerable fortune to the campaign, according to public records and the Warrens' spokesman.

In fact, his endorsement seemed calculated for minimal impact. It was announced late on a Friday, just 10 days before Election Day, on a Web site geared for members of his Saddleback Community Church, not the general public.

As limited as Rev. Warren's support for Proposition 8 may have been, it was apparently too much for Obama's gay-rights supporters, who protested that the new president had accepted their support and then betrayed them. The Human Rights Campaign, the nation's largest gay-rights organization, issued a statement in response to Warren's choice as an inaugural participant: "We feel a deep level of disrespect when one of the architects and promoters of an anti-gay agenda is given the prominence and the pulpit of your historic nomination."

While criticism from the gay community has received widespread press coverage, exposure of Warren's dalliance with internationalist organizations usually shunned by evangelicals has been largely ignored. Foremost among these connections is Warren's membership in the New York-based Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), an influential "one-world" promoting body to which Warren was elected in 2006.



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When conservative commentator Joseph Farah criticized Warren in a 2006 column for allowing himself to be used as a propaganda tool by the terrorist-sponsoring Syrian government while paying a "courtesy call" in Damascus, the pastor called Farah to protest what he perceived as an unfair portrayal by the journalist. Warren told Farah that he had been counseled by the National Security Council and the White House, as well as the State Department, before his so-called courtesy call. "In fact," Warren told Farah, "as a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and Oxford Analytica, I might know as much about the Middle East as you."

Farah wrote of the incident: "No sooner had I received this surprising response from Warren, I also got an e-mail providing a link to a YouTube video of Rick Warren in Syria explaining how great the Assad regime treats Christians and Jews and how Damascus 'does not permit extremism of any kind.'" The Syrian government was accused of engaging in state-sponsored terrorism by former President George W. Bush and by the U.S. State Department.

This preference for internationalism (what some have termed a "one-world" outlook) makes Rick Warren a natural ally of Barack Obama, at least when it comes to foreign policy. While we have been unable to confirm reports that Obama has been invited to join the CFR, he has certainly packed his incoming administration with CFR members, including Janet Napolitano as secretary of homeland security, Tom Daschle as Health and Human Services secretary, and Timothy Geithner as Treasury secretary. While Hillary Clinton, Obama's pick for secretary of state, is not a CFR member, former president Bill Clinton is. The outgoing Bush administration's Defense secretary, Robert Gates, who is staying on in that position under Obama, is also CFR.

Michelle Obama, our new first lady, is a member of the Board of Directors of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, a similarly oriented organization founded in 1922 (the year after the New York CFR) as the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, for the purpose of opposing what its founders viewed as U.S. isolationism during the first World War.

Another controversial clergyman who delivered a prayer at one of the inaugural events was Rev. Gene Robinson, the first openly gay bishop in the Episcopal Church. The selection of Robinson as the church's bishop for New Hampshire has divided the Episcopal church, with entire congregations withdrawing from the U.S. Episcopal Church and realigning themselves with the more traditional Anglican Province of Uganda. Robinson delivered the invocation on January 18 on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Some observers speculated whether the Robinson pick was an attempt by the Obama team to pacify homosexuals alienated by the Warren selection.

Whether that mollified the homosexual lobby or not, giving Robinson such a prominent role certainly outraged conservative Christians. Christian Newswire reported that Association for Church Renewal President Rev. David Runnion-Bareford lashed out at the president-elect in a January 14 letter that said, in part: "Your decision to invite Bishop Gene Robinson to provide public leadership at the Sunday celebration of your inauguration is offensive and disappointing to many of us in Christian leadership who seek to be supportive of your presidency. In contrast to your other choices for religious leadership during this historic occasion, Robinson is a schismatic figure who has intentionally caused deep hurt and division in the Christian church."

Robinson's prayer included the phrase: "Bless us with anger — at discrimination, at home and abroad, against refugees and immigrants, women, people of color, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people."



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Christian Newswire quoted from a statement issued by Peter LaBarbera, president of Americans For Truth about Homosexuality (AFTAH), which said, in part:

President-elect Obama has signaled a tragic departure from America's godly, Judeo-Christian heritage with his choice of a defiant homosexual activist, (Vicki) Gene Robinson, to recite a prayer at an official Inaugural event Sunday. Choosing Robinson — who supports homosexual "marriage" and compares his agenda to mainstream sinful and changeable homosexual behavior to the noble Black civil rights struggle — is a sop to "gay" activists who blasted Obama for picking evangelical pastor Rick Warren to say an Inauguration Day prayer.

There were complaints from some quarters, however, that the Obama team did not want to publicize the Robinson prayer as widely as some other inaugural events. An article in the self-styled "gay" newspaper, the *Advocate*, reported that "Robinson's invocation never aired on television — he was cut from the telecast of the Lincoln Memorial event."

The *Advocate* quoted Obama's Presidential Inaugural Committee (PIC) communications director Josh Earnest, who said: "We had always intended and planned for Rt. Rev. Robinson's invocation to be included in the televised portion of yesterday's program, We regret the error in executing this plan — but are gratified that hundreds of thousands of people who gathered on the mall heard his eloquent prayer for our nation that was a fitting start to our event."

No one has ever accused Obama of employing politically inept staff members.

When asked about his take on the prominent inclusion of the openly homosexual clergyman in the inaugural celebrations, Rev. Rick Warren's response was not what one might expect from an evangelical, Southern Baptist pastor. In a statement quoted in the *Christian Post*, Warren said: "President-elect Obama has again demonstrated his genuine commitment to bringing all Americans of goodwill together in search of common ground. I applaud his desire to be the president of every citizen."

Bishop Robinson, for his part, had not been so "Christian" with regard to Warren's selection, calling the choice a "slap in the face," according to the *Washington Post*.

With the election safely behind him, it is a safe bet that President Obama will steer a pragmatic political course sure to deliver a sobering dose of reality to his supporters who were motivated primarily by idealism.

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