

A Tale of Two Presidents

Michael Sean Winters

Is Barack Obama the High Priest to George Bush's preacher? Michael Sean Winters looks at the leadership styles of the outgoing and incoming Presidents of the United States.

One of the great distinctions in American religious life is between those churches which have priests and follow the common lectionary – Catholics, Episcopalians (Anglicans) and Lutherans – and the evangelical churches where the preacher chooses his texts, usually Pauline epistles or readings from the Hebrew Scriptures. For the first group of Christians, there is exposure to a wide variety of texts with a special focus on the Gospels, and the priest must tailor his sermon accordingly. For the second group, the agenda of the preacher (evangelicals do not have priests) determines what the congregation will hear. Additionally while there are significant differences between the mainstream Christian churches, none of them hold to the kind of strict Calvinism, with its heavy emphasis on human depravity and the sovereign will of God, that is the mainstay of the evangelical theological tradition.

One Sunday I attended services at the McLean Bible Church, the largest megachurch in suburban Washington, D.C. The church proclaims a strict Calvinism: its “What We Believe” statement, found on its website and in literature in the lobby of the church, could have been written during the Reformation in its fierce denunciation of works! The day I visited, the pastor, Rev. Lon Solomon, was addressing the question of whether or not one could be saved outside the Christian Church. He answered in the negative because, of course, ‘it’s right here in the Bible’ and he ran through a series of proof-texts, all of them open to alternative interpretations but he himself offering no such alternatives. If this seemed cruel to those who had never heard of Jesus Christ, it was not our place to question the Will of God as expressed in His inerrant Word. We must be humble before the Will of God,



humble enough to pronounce others damned and ourselves among the redeemed. There was certainty in the man’s voice, and certainty in the nods of his listeners, and they were certain of two things: Jesus is the Way, and only their way of interpreting the import of Jesus’ life and teachings could save one from eternal hellfire.

George W. Bush has the style of an evangelical preacher. In his speech to the 2004 Republican

National Convention, Bush began with a series of statements that repeated the mantra ‘I believe’, the last of which acknowledged his desire explicitly: ‘I believe the most solemn duty of the American President is to protect the American people. If America shows uncertainty or weakness in this decade, the world will drift toward tragedy. This will not happen on my watch.’

In his second inaugural address, Bush used biblical imagery to describe the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001. ‘For a half century, America defended our own freedom by standing watch on distant borders. After the shipwreck of communism came years of relative quiet, years of repose, years of sabbatical – and then there came a day of fire.’ Here was the spectre of judgment, the ‘day of fire’ that interrupted the ‘sabbatical.’ He also announced a goal worthy of such an apocalyptic vision: ‘So it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world.’

Bush, like Pastor Solomon, sees the world through Manichean eyes. His way is the only way. In his farewell address to the nation, Bush said, ‘As we address these challenges – and others we cannot

foresee tonight – America must maintain our moral clarity. I have often spoken to you about good and evil. This has made some uncomfortable. But good and evil are present in this world, and between the two there can be no compromise. Murdering the innocent to advance an ideology is wrong every time, everywhere. Freeing people from oppression and despair is eternally right.’ But, governance always requires compromise, and the world is filled with moral grey. And, as often as not, the scariest moral agents are those who are so convinced of the rightness of their cause that they become indifferent to questioning their own motives and methods.

Critics of George W. Bush’s policies are many but, unfortunately, none of them seem to have been working for him. He has been surrounded by acolytes, not advisors. And, as is common among religious extremists, he sees himself as part of the faithful remnant. ‘Division among free nations is a primary goal of freedom’s enemies,’ Bush said in his second inaugural address, although in fact, defeating the West, or removing Western influences from the Middle East, or the elimination of Israel: these were the primary goals of freedom’s enemies. His concern to avoid ‘division’ was the concern of a witch-hunter, a fear of betrayal, an impulse appropriate to a sixteenth century Spanish Inquisitor ferreting out those who might damage the *limpieza de sangre*. You could almost picture him at a NATO meeting, saying, ‘One of you shall betray me’ and scowling towards the President of France.

In pursuit of his goals, President Bush had the hearty lack of concern for method we associate with zealotry. America, which once led the way in the prosecution of war criminals at Nuremberg, created extra-constitutional detention centres and employed interrogation techniques that can only be described as torture, for those deemed unworthy of the protections of the Vienna Convention. Democratic Senator Max Cleland, concerned to extend those labour protections that most government employees enjoy to the staff at the newly formed Department of Homeland Security, found himself the subject of a Republican campaign advertisement that accused him of aiding and abetting Osama bin Laden, despite the fact that Mr. Cleland had lost both legs and one arm as a soldier in Vietnam.

In his unwillingness to admit a mistake, Bush remains, even as he leaves office, unwilling to take responsibility for the destruction of New Orleans that occurred when the federally built levees broke after Hurricane Katrina and flooded that city. The indelible image of the Bush years is the chaos, the suffering, the lack of food and of law, at the Superdome days after the hurricane hit, while Bush continued to defend the efforts of his obviously incompetent director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. He lived in a parallel universe, like the early Christian martyrs who sang psalms as they went to their deaths, except that Bush was not a martyr. He sacrificed America’s finest traditions, but he demanded little of himself. Whatever else was going on in America and in the world, almost every day I saw Mr. Bush’s helicopter fly over my house in the middle of the day. The president was en route to the Beltsville Agricultural Centre where he took his daily mountain bike ride.

If Bush mimicked the style of an evangelical Calvinistic preacher, Barack Obama is nothing if not ecclesiastical. *Qohelet* is the Hebrew title for the Book of Ecclesiastes, and it means one who convokes or teaches an assembly. The Greek and Latin roots of the word have a slightly different meaning: one who presides over an assembly. All three verbs – to convoke, to teach and to preside – constitute a fair picture of Obama’s style.

During the 2008 election campaign, Obama repeatedly said that the change he sought to bring to Washington was not merely a partisan change, but a transcendence of the partisan bitterness that has infected American political life recently; that it was not enough to have Democratic Party replace Republican Party but that both parties needed to stop aiming primarily at the destruction of the other and, instead, seek common ground to pursue important national goals. This indictment of current political practice was not mere high-mindedness on Obama’s part. It fit nicely with the difficulty he faced during the primary nomination fight with Hillary Clinton. She had a lock on the Democratic Party brand name, but her husband’s tenure had been eight long years of partisan strife. It was, after all, Hillary herself, not Karl Rove, who coined the phrase ‘war room’ to describe the strategy sessions of her husband’s campaign. The change

Obama promised was not merely a change from the ways of George W. Bush, but a change from the slash-and-burn politics of the past twenty years. Obama, in short, defined political leadership, especially as the economy worsened, as requiring a national convocation of all parties and all ideologies to get the nation back on track.

Since the election, Obama has started the convoking. He has enlisted former rivals to join his Cabinet. He had dinner the other night with prominent conservative journalists at the home of George Will. Obama retained Bush's Secretary of Defence and named another Republican to his Cabinet. Prayers at different inaugural events were to be offered by ministers of no less than four Christian traditions: a black, liberal Baptist; a conservative, white evangelical; a Congregationalist female minister; and an openly gay Episcopalian Bishop. On Monday night, the eve of his inauguration, Obama hosted a dinner honouring his election opponent, Senator John McCain, a gesture as unprecedented as it is classy. In his inaugural address, Obama stressed themes of national solidarity, of shared values, of inclusiveness, and of the common good. The assembly he is convoking is to be national in scope and national in focus, the American equivalent of a Coalition Government.

The second component of the ecclesiastical function, teaching, is more complicated but given Obama's rhetorical skills, it is a task for which the man's gifts are ideally suited. Like all good teachers, he is reputedly a good listener. And, his range of intellectual interests is broad. He would not have difficulty preaching on any text and could find a lesson in any of the lectionary's offerings. And, like all great teachers, he delivers a speech to be reckoned with.

In fact, Obama is a master of a specific kind of speech. American political rhetoric is a combination of Enlightenment liberalism with mainstream Christianity. Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence invoked rights that were 'endowed by the Creator.' Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural speech is as thoughtful a theological treatise on the inscrutable ways of Providence as any penned by the theologians of his day, or since. Franklin Delano Roosevelt used biblical imagery in his first inaugural address when he proclaimed: 'The money changers have fled from their high seats in the temple of our civilisation. We may

now restore that temple to ancient truths.' Part of Obama's rhetorical genius was that underneath all the talk about 'change', his rhetoric mastered this traditional form of discourse. The presidency has been described as a 'bully pulpit' not a 'bully lectern' for a reason and when Obama says, as he said in the 2004 speech that catapulted him to national attention, 'It is that fundamental belief: I am my brother's keeper, I am my sister's keeper, that makes this country work,' he is demonstrating that he understands the need to keep the 'pulpit' in 'bully pulpit.'

Finally, it is not difficult to imagine Obama doing exceedingly well at the task of presiding over the nation. In the American constitutional system, the president is both head of state and head of government. If Britain turns to the monarch to represent the nation at great moments of hope and of despair, America can only turn to their president. And, every president faces a crisis where he must speak not for party or for self but for the nation. For Ronald Reagan, it was the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger. For Bill Clinton, it was the memorial service for the victims of the Oklahoma City bombing. These are the moments when the president presides over civic rituals that must be deeply religious because the tragedies involve ultimate meanings, questions that go deeper in the human soul and psyche than questions about out-year deficit predictions or lowering the unemployment rate. He must give voice to people's complicated emotions and point the way forward.

Bush and Obama are both moved by deeply religious impulses but their manner of understanding the possibilities that faith affords them are vastly different. Bush, despite his lack of verbal gifts, has been a preacher. Obama, who can preach with the best of preachers, will more likely govern as America's High Priest. After years of division and drift, facing enormous challenges at home and abroad, Obama will need more prayers than his own to move the nation, and he has already set about convoking the nation around his presidency. He has become and is now America's *Qohelet*.

Michael Sean Winters writes a daily political blog for the Jesuit weekly America. His book, Left at the Altar: How the Democrats Lost the Catholics and How the Catholics Can Save the Democrats, was published last year by Basic Books.