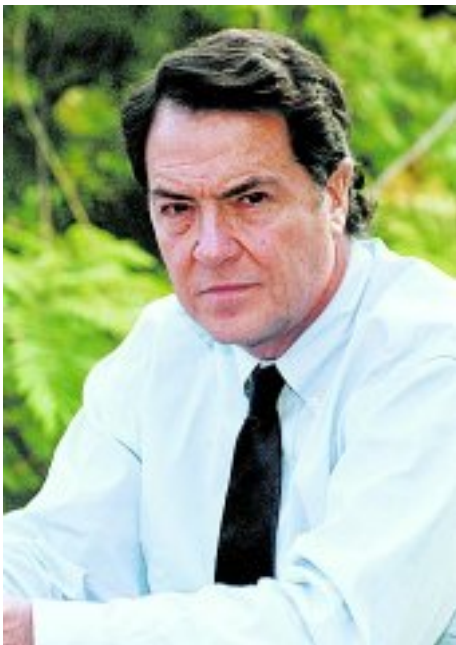


Branding Christianity

Written by John W. Whitehead
Wednesday, 27 August 2008 02:19

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The recent Saddleback Civil Forum on the Presidency was a wash. Both candidates, who claim to be Christians, spent much of their time pandering to the nearly 3 million television viewers who tuned in. But in terms of what presidential candidates John McCain and Barack Obama had to say, their responses were largely lacking in content.

However, the Saddleback Forum wasn't insignificant. Its significance has less to do with what the two candidates had to say than in what the person asking the questions, Pastor Rick Warren, signifies for the future of Christianity in America.

The fact that it was Warren and not James Dobson, the Christian Right's *de facto* Godfather, is particularly telling. It speaks of a decided shift away from the rigid, right-wing mindset that

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has dominated evangelical Christianity in America over the past three decades. Warren, pastor of the 23,000-member Saddleback Church in California and the best-selling author of *The Purpose-Driven Life*, seems to be about as far as you can get from the stigma of the Christian Right while still calling himself an evangelical Christian.

The Christian Right, represented by such prominent figures as Dobson, Pat Robertson, and the late Jerry Falwell, has long stood for the erection of a Christian State. As David Kuo, who served as special assistant to President George W. Bush, documents in his book *Tempting Faith*, these Christian leaders worked hard to maintain ties to the Bush White House, complete with weekly conference calls to keep them updated on every facet of the president's policy and political agenda.

However, the dismal failure of the George W. Bush presidency has led inevitably to the decline of the Christian Right - and can be credited with contributing to Warren's rise to prominence. According to a 2005 *Nation* article, Warren "disassociates himself from the religious right, noting that he shares its position on social issues but doesn't want to focus on them. He focuses on poverty, disease, and aid to Africa."

It's not difficult to see why Warren, a mainline evangelical in the Billy Graham mold, is enjoying such popularity. Disillusioned by the power-hawking, war-mongering of the Christian Right, the nation's 80 million evangelical Christians would have little trouble with the feel-good Christianity that Warren sells - nonconfrontational, congenial, and polite. That isn't to say that it lacks substance, merely controversy.

As a recent *Time* article observed, like Graham, Warren "projects an authenticity that has helped him forge an exquisite set of political connections - in the White House, on both sides of the legislative aisle, and abroad. And he is both leading and riding the newest wave of change in the Evangelical community: an expansion beyond social conservatism to causes such as battling poverty, opposing torture, and combating global warming. The movement has loosened the hold of religious-right leaders on ordinary Evangelicals and created an opportunity for Warren, who has lent his prominent voice to many of the new concerns."

Warren has avoided much that is controversial, such as abortion and gay marriage (what he refers to as "sin issues"). Instead, Warren focuses on issues that "unite,"

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such as poverty, HIV/AIDS, climate change, and human rights. Warren is, whether consciously or subconsciously, shifting the national faith dialogue back to a pre-Reagan era, before the small group of leaders that have come to dominate the Christian Right turned Christianity into a synonym for right-wing theocracy.

Sidestepping the siren call of politics, Warren has taken aim at what he calls the "five global giants": spiritual emptiness, selfish leadership, hunger, sickness, and illiteracy. Empowered by his publishing success and with the support of his megachurch, he launched his PEACE initiative - an acronym for Promote reconciliation; Equip servant leaders; Assist the poor; Care for the sick; Educate the next generation. Since coming up with the idea, he has taken his PEACE plan global, with Rwanda as his testing ground.

Warren is now being looked upon as America's pastor. Suddenly, Christianity appears somewhat appealing again. Yet while there is much to commend this so-called New Evangelicalism, with its rejection of politics as the answer and its emphasis on carrying out Jesus' mandate to care for the poor and helpless, there is also an important lesson to be learned. The rise of the Christian Right came about at a time when the evangelical church in America was doing its best to be noncontroversial and inoffensive. The evangelical church's subsequent failure to morally impact the culture and the legalizing of abortion can be directly attributed to the emergence of the Christian Right.

The Christian Right was, without a doubt, a semi-militant reaction to a society that seemed to be lacking a moral compass. And as journalist Chris Hedges points out in his book *American Fascists*, if a real crisis again arose in this country (such as another terrorist attack), it would not take much for the country to revert back to such a militant fundamentalism.

This brings us to the current presidential election. No matter who ascends to the White House, it's clear that Christians will not enjoy the kind of access they laid claim to during the Bush administration - whatever good it did them. For example, abortions didn't decline under Bush, and it's doubtful whether they would under either Obama or McCain.

The lesson to be learned is this: What is needed now is not a return to the overly polite Christianity of the pre-Reagan era. Nor is it the politically charged Christianity of the Religious Right, but a brand of Christianity that does not shy away from speaking truth to power. In other words, the type of Christianity Jesus practiced.

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