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Obama values draw one time Reaganite to Democratic ranks

by Mary Barron



Denver

Once candidate Ronald Reagan was so effective in persuading voters to cross party lines that presidential candidates today still fight over the "Reagan Democrats."

As Sen. Barack Obama strives to reverse the process, turning Republicans into what he calls "Obamacans," he has an influential Reagan Republican at his side.

Not only that, but this Republican quotes St. Thomas Aquinas and follows the example of Catholic Worker founder Dorothy Day.

Douglas W. Kmiec, professor of constitutional law at Pepperdine University, was a former constitutional lawyer for Presidents Reagan and George H.W. Bush. He also served as dean of the law school at Catholic University where he personally taught all nine sections of the course on Catholic social justice teachings because students were required to take it and no one else wanted to teach it.

As he began to look into Obama's candidacy over the last year, Kmiec said, he realized, "If he were in my class on Catholic social teaching, he'd be getting an A."

Obama, who'll become the official presidential nominee of the Democratic Party Thursday, graduated from Harvard Law School and joined the United Church of Christ. But his thoughtful discussions of faith and public policy strongly resonate with Catholic philosophies upholding the dignity of each person and the need to care for Planet Earth as good stewards of creation, Kmiec said.

The professor's journey across the partisan political divide hasn't been without repercussions. He said he got a lot of hateful reactions after endorsing Obama in February in a column at Slate.com -- even from people who had known him and his wife for decades as pro-life activists.

He was even criticized from the pulpit and denied Communion at a Mass shortly after his endorsement; an event that he says still haunts him. He doesn't want to embarrass the priest by naming him publicly, but he did take the matter up with Cardinal Roger Mahoney of Los Angeles and received an apology from the priest.

As Kmiec made the transition from Reagan Republican to volunteer adviser to Obama, he assembled a substantial list of Obama's graces and Republican disgraces. At this point, he said, he is taking the Dorothy Day approach -- doing everything he can as an individual to create the change he wants to see.

He has written a book, to be published soon, called *Can Catholics Support Him? The Big Question for Barack Obama*. He is attending the Democratic National Convention, where he will make a presentation Thursday to a group that will be caucusing on issues of faith. And he engages Obama and his faith outreach staff in Socratic dialogue, particularly when he thinks the candidate may have made a misstep.

Kmiec isn't the sort of person who dismisses other religions. He began this election cycle working for Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney, and he felt ashamed for his country when Romney seemed to be pushed out of the running because of voter distrust of his Mormon faith. Kmiec faults presumptive Republican nominee Sen. John McCain for trying to use Romney's religion to embarrass him.

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Originally a supporter of President Bush's decision to go to war in Iraq, Kmiec became disillusioned not only because, as it turned out, Saddam didn't have the weapons of mass destruction that Bush said he had, but also because the president showed "lack of understanding of the faith culture" in Iraq, didn't know a Sunni from a Shi'ite, and made bad decisions based on cultural ignorance.

"We need to understand the faiths of others," Kmiec said. Otherwise, we make mistakes and can worsen things internationally.

Obama's concern that religion shouldn't be used as a wedge to divide people was one of the first things that drew Kmiec's interest when he began to consider candidates other than Romney. He was intrigued at the discussion of religion in Obama's Call to Renewal speech, given to a convention of the United Church of Christ in 2006. Kmiec saw in it "the words of a thoughtful, reflective Christian, sincerely stated, with all the earmarks of an intellectual mind and a believing soul."

Both political parties have used religion to divide instead of to unite, Kmiec said. On the Democratic side, people from conservative faith traditions have been painted as zealots with whom reasonable people can't find common ground. And on the Republican side, "Karl Rove and company have gone out of their way to say 'The Democrats hate you because of your faith.'"

Republicans have won elections that way, Kmiec said. "The real question in 2008 is whether the Republicans will be able to do it again."

Obama's support for a living wage, his understanding of the cruel circumstances that lead women to choose to have abortions, and his emphasis on developing renewable energy technologies as a way to preserve the environment while enhancing national security and creating jobs are all elements that drew Kmiec to Obama.

Obama's skills and values are becoming evident in the new Democratic Party platform and in Obama's plans for an administration that Kmiec believes could reflect Aquinas' thought that government is not just a necessary evil, but can be a force for good.

Above all, Kmiec said, Obama is inspirational. "Not many people can inspire others," he said. "It takes real honesty to do so."

(Mary Barron is a freelance writer from Colorado who is covering the Democratic Party for NCR during this year's presidential race.)

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