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McCain's VP choice a woman - and a post-denominationalist

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News Analysis

When news broke yesterday that Republican presidential candidate John McCain had named little-known Governor Sarah Palin of Alaska as his running mate, religion writers across the country and the curious in the blogosphere scrambled to figure out her denominational affiliation.

Palin was briefly touted as the first Pentecostal to run on a major party ticket. A spokesperson, however, told the Associated Press yesterday that although the 44-year-old mother of five grew up in the Assemblies of God, the largest organized Pentecostal denomination in the world with an estimated 57 million members, she does not consider herself a "Pentecostal."

Her primary place of worship in Juneau, Alaska's capital, is said to be the "Church on the Rock," an independent congregation founded in January 2000. Palin's spokesperson, however, said the governor also attends different churches.

The initial confusion surrounding Palin's denominational identity, therefore, has a simple explanation: She doesn't have one.

Instead, Palin appears to be part of that rapidly expanding galaxy of "post-denominational" Christianity, where elements of Evangelical and Pentecostal styles of faith and worship fuse into a myriad of unique local combinations, and where old denominational loyalties are essentially dead.

Though post-denominationalists are, by definition, difficult to catalog and index, they're unquestionably numerous. A 2007 survey conducted by LifeWay found that fully one-third of American Protestants were contemplating attending a different church in the future, and of that group, only one in four said it would be important that their future church belong to the same denomination as the one they currently attend.

Globally, the World Christian Encyclopedia estimates that roughly 20 percent of the world's 2.2 billion Christians today are part of what it calls "independent Christianity," defined as forms of faith and worship "separated from, uninterested in, and independent of historic, denominationalist Christianity." Typically, these folks eschew any label other than "Christian" for their religious identity.

Religious sociologists and theologians point to any number of explanations for the rise of post-denominationalism: the spread of a consumerist ethos and "comparison shopping" within Christianity; disillusionment with what are seen as petty denominational differences; the increasing liberalism of some mainline Protestant denominations, leading more conservative church-goers to seek alternatives; even the category-blurring character of post-modernity itself.

To be sure, not all post-denominationalists are conservative Evangelicals. The "emergent church" movement, for example, is often considered an expression of independent Christianity, and the relatively loose and flexible approach to creedal matters of some emerging churches "sometimes called "generous orthodoxy" " is regarded as unacceptably fuzzy by many Evangelicals. Globally, however, the largest share of the post-denominational universe is occupied by various forms of Evangelical and Pentecostal spirituality, with a strong emphasis on Biblical literalism and a lively sense of the supernatural.

Some of these independent Christians are even hesitant to adopt descriptive labels such as "Evangelical" or "Pentecostal," for fear that such terminology could breed a new form of denominationalism. This is part of what makes estimating the total Evangelical or Pentecostal population in America, or the world, such a maddening exercise, because depending upon the day of the week and what mood they're in, many believers these days (including, perhaps, Palin) might consider themselves both, or neither.

Although independent Christians spurn membership cards, they typically have little difficulty recognizing one other "in part, because there's a shared culture formed by music, conventions in praise and worship, and spiritual language, which different congregations dip in and out of to varying degrees.

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For example, those who watched Palin's announcement speech yesterday in Dayton, Ohio, might have noticed a throaty roar from the crowd when she said, "We are expected to govern with integrity and goodwill and clear convictions and a servant's heart."

That reaction wasn't simply about approval of good government; the phrase "servant's heart" is a popular bit of Evangelical terminology, used as a shorthand for Christian humility. A quick Web search reveals thousands of churches, ministries, and bands that use some variation of "servant's heart" in the title; there's even a residential cleaning service in Calgary called "Servant's Heart."

The term is so common, in fact, that Christian comedian Tim Hawkins has poked fun at it. "I hate it when somebody tells me I've got a servant's heart," Hawkins says. "It means they want me to start stacking chairs."

When Palin pledged to govern with a "servant's heart," Christians, especially those with an Evangelical background, had no trouble recognizing one of their own, even without the convenience of a denominational label on Palin's résumé. (It's akin to a public figure making reference to a "near occasion of sin" or a "state of grace"; even without an official bio, Catholics would recognize a fellow member of the tribe.)

Palin's nomination, therefore, does not simply mark a breakthrough for women, or for western states. She also puts a face on the fastest-growing and most dynamic segment of global Christianity these days — even if it's proving difficult for journalists and political handicappers to get their minds around.

Finally, there's a bit of political irony for Catholics. Given Palin's strong pro-life credentials, it's likely she will appeal to the most strongly "denominational" Catholics, those most devoted to traditional Catholic identity and teaching. Meanwhile, what one might call "post-denominational Catholics," meaning those for whom religious branding carries less theological significance, may embrace Palin's Democratic rival, Delaware Senator Joseph Biden, the lone Roman Catholic on either ticket, because of his progressive stands on social and political matters.

In other words, the denominationalists on the Catholic side will back the post-denominationalist, while the Catholic post-denominationalists will probably pick the candidate who bears the Catholic denominational label.

No wonder it's all so confusing.

(Allen is NCR senior correspondent.)

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