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# The Idol of Our Many Understandings — Bishop Robinson at Prayer

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President-elect Barack Obama promised to make his inaugural events the most inclusive ever — and he is making good on his promise. Just over two weeks after gay rights activists condemned his choice of Saddleback pastor Rick Warren to deliver the invocation at the ceremony itself, the President-elect and his inaugural committee announced the choice of Bishop Gene Robinson, the openly-homosexual Episcopal Bishop of New Hampshire, to open the mass event at the Lincoln Memorial with prayer.

Predictably, the committee insisted that the invitation has nothing to do with the furor over naming Warren, who angered homosexual activists and their allies by supporting Proposition 8 in California. “They called up and said this has actually been in the works for a long time,” the bishop told *The New York Times*. He added that the committee also expressed, “and at the same time, we understand that people in the [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender] community have been somewhat wounded by this choice, and it’s our hope that your selection will go a long way to heal these divides.”



The event Bishop Robinson will open with prayer will be a huge opening rally featuring major entertainment figures and a mass gathering on the mall. Artists invited to perform at the event include Bono, Stevie Wonder, and Bruce Springsteen, along with the [Gay Men’s Chorus of Washington](#).

The choice of Bishop Robinson is not a complete surprise, since the President-elect had met with the bishop during the campaign. Of course, Bishop Robinson is one of the most controversial figures in the entire history of the Episcopal Church. Controversy over his election has led to a schism in his church and a rupture that threatens to unravel the world-wide Anglican Communion.

One interesting facet of the controversies over Warren and Robinson is the fact that the inclusion of the one does not placate the critics of the other. Homosexual activists are still angry over the choice of Warren to deliver the invocation on January 20. A host of others will be offended by the choice of Bishop Robinson. These two responses illustrate the depth of the divide over the issue of homosexuality. The question cuts to the heart of issues including biblical authority and the very nature of humanity. Representation is undoubtedly symbolic, but Rick Warren and Gene Robinson represent radically divergent worldviews and incommensurate goals. They are not two very different representatives of one religion. They are instead two very symbolic representatives of two very different religions.

That point is made clear courtesy of Bishop Robinson. Consider this section of the report in *The New York Times*:

*Bishop Robinson said he had been reading inaugural prayers through history and was “horrified” at how “specifically and aggressively Christian they were.”*

*“I am very clear,” he said, “that this will not be a Christian prayer, and I won’t be quoting Scripture or anything like that. The texts that I hold as sacred are not sacred texts for all Americans, and I want all people to feel that this is their prayer.”*

*Bishop Robinson said he might address the prayer to “the God of our many understandings,” language that he said he learned from the 12-step program he attended for his alcohol addiction.*

Keep in mind that this man is the Bishop of New Hampshire for the Episcopal Church. He is “horrified” by the character of previous inaugural prayers as “specifically and aggressively Christian.”

We can be fairly sure that, for Bishop Robinson, “specifically” and “aggressively” mean more or less the same thing. A review of most recent inaugural prayers reveals virtually nothing that could be fairly described as “aggressive” and remarkably little that can be described as “specific.” The last two inaugurations have included prayers with greater specificity, to be sure.

The bishop’s comments reveal just about everything one needs to know about his theology. He pledges that “this will not be a Christian prayer” and he “won’t be quoting Scripture or anything like that.” No, nothing like that.

Recent controversies over praying in the name of Jesus Christ will not be a factor here. Instead, the bishop said he might address his prayer to “the God of our many understandings” — an expression calculated to be vague. Bishop Robinson says that he learned the language in a 12-step program he attended after developing an alcohol addiction.

“The crisis in the Church of England,” wrote Clive James in *The Dreaming Swimmer*, “is that too many of its bishops, and some would say of its archbishops, don’t quite realize that they are atheists, but have begun to suspect it.”

The “God of our many understandings” is a confused composite — a very postmodern idol. Clive James is quite right about the theological crisis of unbelieving bishops - but you need go no farther than New Hampshire to find an example.

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Listen to an [interview](#) with Bishop Robinson on National Public Radio [NPR] [here](#).

