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Muslim woman, rabbis to pray at inaugural service

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-- At past inaugurations, ceremonial prayers uttered on behalf of the incoming president drew about as much attention as the flags on the podium.

Not this year.

Barack Obama's choice of clergy is under scrutiny like no other president-elect before him, alternately outraging Americans on the left and the right as he navigates the minefield of U.S. religion.

"I can't recall any prayers drawing so much attention," said Charles Haynes, senior scholar at the First Amendment Center who specializes in religion in public life.

Gay advocates assailed Obama, while many conservative Christians were heartened, when he invited the Rev. Rick Warren, a Southern Baptist who opposes gay marriage, to deliver the inaugural invocation on Tuesday.

The tables turned when Obama asked V. Gene Robinson, the first openly gay Episcopal bishop, to lead prayers at Sunday's kickoff for the inauguration at the Lincoln Memorial. Gay rights groups rejoiced, while some conservative Christians wrung their hands.

The Inauguration Committee has only released one clergy name so far for the Jan. 21 National Prayer Service that caps the inauguration. The Rev. Sharon Watkins, the first woman president of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), a Protestant group, will deliver the sermon.

The Associated Press has learned additional details.

A prayer will be offered at the National Cathedral by Ingrid Mattson, the first woman president of the Islamic Society of North America, according to an official who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to release the information. The Islamic Society, based in Indiana, is the nation's largest Muslim group.

Three rabbis, representing the three major branches of American Judaism, will

also say a prayer at the service, according to officials familiar with the plans. The Jewish clergy are Reform Rabbi David Saperstein, Conservative Rabbi Jerome Epstein and Orthodox Rabbi Haskel Lookstein, sources said.

It is also traditional for the incoming administration to ask the Roman Catholic archbishop of Washington to lead a prayer. The Most Rev. Donald Wuerl leads the archdiocese.

And like many incoming presidents before him, Obama will attend a service at St. John's Church, dubbed the "Church of the Presidents," before his swearing-in.

Religion has been a lightning rod for Obama since the presidential campaign _ from false rumors that he is Muslim to uproar over sermons by his former pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright.

And interest in the inauguration is higher overall, partly because of its historic nature, the swearing-in of the first African-American president. The Rev. Joseph Lowery, a Methodist considered the dean of the civil rights movement, will give the inaugural benediction.

But Obama's choice of clergy is also of greater interest because of the changing landscape of American religion.

The United States is more diverse than ever before, and members of minority faiths yearn to be recognized as fully American.

"In the past, minority groups within Christianity and minority religions on the American scene were not as vocal or as sure-footed and therefore didn't pay as much attention to the inauguration event itself or didn't feel the need to. That's no longer true," said Rabbi James Rudin, who spent three decades leading interreligious outreach for the American Jewish Committee.

Even atheists are newly energized, suing to prevent prayer and mention of God at the swearing-in.

An attorney for Chief Justice John Roberts, who will administer the oath, says the president-elect prefers to conclude with the phrase, "so help me God," as presidents before him have done.

Obama's preference was filed last week by Jeffrey Minear, an attorney and administrative assistant to Roberts, as part of a lawsuit by atheists and non-religious groups who sought for years to keep mention of God out of publicly administered oaths.

The Constitution mandates the exact language to be used in the oath: "I do

solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the office of president of the United States and will to the best of my ability preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States." Some presidents have added "so help me God."

Most past presidents only had to choose from clergy of the American Protestant establishment. Eventually, inaugural organizers added a priest or bishop to the ceremonies as the Catholic Church in the U.S. grew stronger. Rabbis were sometimes included.

But Protestants are now losing their majority status in the country. The go-to Protestant for inaugural prayer, evangelist Billy Graham, is 90 and off the public stage. No one has, or likely could, take his place as "America's pastor."

The Obama campaign is also partly responsible for the religious focus.

The Democrat spoke openly of his faith during the election, more so than his opponent, Republican Sen. John McCain, and reached out to believers, hoping to counter the perception that the GOP had cornered the market on God.

"This inaugural is a coming-out party for the Democrats in terms of their religious voice," said Stephen Prothero, a religion professor at Boston University. "Democrats found their religious voice in the last election and I think there's interest in seeing how that voice is going to sound."

Haynes said Obama is also carrying the hopes of the many Americans frustrated by the prominence of the Christian right in recent decades, especially in the administration of President George W. Bush. That partly explains the backlash against Warren, he said.

"The sense is it's time to balance that out and to have other voices heard. He's supposed to represent change," Haynes said. "There are many people looking for a symbolic change in tone, especially when it comes to issues of religion and public life."

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