

# GOD WILLS IT

Presidents and the Political Use of Religion



DAVID O'CONNELL

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DAVID O'CONNELL

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To Mom and Dad

In all toil there is profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty.  
—Proverbs 14:23

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# Preface

How have American presidents used religious rhetoric? Has it helped them achieve their goals? Why or why not? These are the main questions this book tries to answer.

I argue that there are two basic types of presidential religious rhetoric, each of which represents a fundamental property of religion itself. Communitarian religious rhetoric draws on religion's integrative function. By making use of broad, nondescript spiritual language, a president can help bring the American people closer together.

Coalitional religious rhetoric speaks instead to religion's power to divide. It is often sectarian, and is always tied to a strategic goal. When a president embraces coalitional religious rhetoric, he is hoping to persuade just enough people with his words in order to achieve his political objective.

I focus my study on the latter type. I propose a strict set of rules to identify when coalitional religious rhetoric has appeared and to gauge its possible impact. I find that presidents limit their use of such language to those areas where it seems natural—foreign policy, environmental policy, civil rights, and scandals. The case study chapters explore the religious rhetoric presidents have used in each of these areas.

The limited number of cases yields an interesting finding: presidents do not often make religious arguments for their goals. Two presidents, Truman and Nixon, never used a religious rhetorical strategy. It appears that whether due to personal taste or political complications, absent a crisis, almost all presidents are uncomfortable using religious rhetoric.

The main finding of this book is that religious rhetoric is not helpful to a goal-oriented president. Consistently, public opinion does not respond to the president's religious pleas, the media reacts critically to his ideas and his language, and the reception of his proposals in Congress disappoints.

An experimental chapter explores the causal dynamics behind this finding. Treatments were designed to mimic how religious rhetoric has

historically been used. The results of the experiment call into question the persuasiveness of religious rhetoric. Exposure to a religious argument has no effect on an individual's opinion.

The religious dimensions of presidential leadership have been a constant throughout history. This book furthers our understanding of an important subject. It displaces the results of an earlier study of presidential religious rhetoric that claimed such language had a powerful strategic force to it. It also builds upon a growing body of research that questions the impact of any type of presidential speech. It is valuable for anyone interested in either the challenges of presidential power or the role that religion plays in contemporary American politics.

I owe debts of gratitude to many individuals who played important roles in the development of this book. I greatly appreciate having had the opportunity to work with Transaction Publishers. Tom Langston was an enthusiastic early supporter. He understood what I was trying to accomplish, and his feedback was immensely helpful as I began to restructure the manuscript. The comments of the anonymous reviewer were most appreciated as well. He or she thankfully pushed me to improve the quality of my writing, in addition to forcing me to take more seriously the theoretical underpinnings of the study.

This project began with my graduate work at Columbia University. As such, special thanks is due to Ira Katznelson. Ira has been a fantastic mentor. I have never once disagreed with any criticism he has made of my work. Not a single one. It is humbling to know that, fifty years from now, I still won't be half the scholar that Ira is. But I do know that I am certainly a better researcher than I ever could have been without his guidance.

A series of other individuals at Columbia deserve to be mentioned. Fred Harris's understanding of religion helped develop my own. Shigeo Hirano first encouraged me to explore the subject of presidential religious rhetoric, and our conversations helped to crystallize the ultimate methods I chose to use in doing so. Bob Shapiro was kind enough to provide some feedback on the questionnaire design, in addition to some broader reactions he had, which, I believe, substantially improved the case studies. Alissa Stollwerk and Stephen Thompson provided much needed assistance with the statistical work found in the experimental chapter.

Four Columbia students—Robyn Silverman, Yael Munishor, Shane Strumwasser, and Jon Weibel—helped by pretesting the questionnaires. Finally, Justin Phillips, Bernard Tamas, and Dorian Warren graciously

gave up class time to allow me to administer the experiment. I owe an even further debt of gratitude to Justin for his professional guidance as I began the publication process.

Jamie Druckman was also an important part of the project. Jamie took time out of his many responsibilities to offer detailed and sincere advice to a stranger working halfway across the country. The final design of the experiment is greatly informed by Jamie's input. Jamie represents the ideal of what we mean when we talk about a community of scholars.

On a personal note, I'd like to offer a special word of thanks to my best friend, Charles Wolf. I've talked more with Charles about this project than I have with anyone else. I trust Charles's opinion—on pretty much everything—more than the opinion of anyone else in the world. I couldn't have written this book without his friendship.

My biggest thanks goes to my parents, Dan and Kathy. My parents have taken a sincere interest in the course of my research. They have encouraged me at every step of the way. They understood when I needed to write over vacations and over holidays. The easiest decision I've made about this project was to dedicate it to them.

And, finally, I thank John Miller, who asked why I wanted to go to law school in the first place.





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# Introduction

By September 20, 2001 the American people had heard from President Bush on a number of occasions since the September 11 terrorist attacks. All of those earlier speeches had aimed to provide comfort, not to outline the Administration's foreign policy response. This evening, in an address before a joint session of Congress, Bush would begin the transition.

While waiting for British Prime Minister Tony Blair to arrive at the White House, Bush took a brief nap. Blair and Bush then met alone in the Blue Room for around twenty minutes as the president reviewed the country's developing military plans. Knowing the importance of the address Bush would shortly deliver, Blair was stunned by his counterpart's preternatural calm. "You don't seem the least bit concerned or nervous. Don't you need some time alone?" Blair asked. Bush answered, "I know exactly what I need to say, and how to say it, and what to do" (Woodward 2002, 107).

Before an audience of over 80 million Americans, on this night, Bush gave one of the best speeches of his presidency (Bush 2001a). He began the heart of his address by identifying the enemy, Al-Qaeda, "a collection of loosely affiliated terrorist organizations" that "practice a fringe form of Islamic extremism that has been rejected by Muslim scholars and the vast majority of Muslim clerics." He demanded that Afghanistan's ruling Taliban regime surrender all Al-Qaeda members living in their country and that the government forcibly close their training camps. He preached tolerance for members of the Muslim faith. He pleaded with Americans to grant him their patience for a prolonged struggle. Yet, it was Bush's closing lines that were most exceptional:

Great harm has been done to us. We have suffered great loss. And in our grief and anger, we have found our mission and our moment. Freedom and fear are at war. The advance of human freedom, the great achievement of our time and the great hope of every time, now

depends on us. Our Nation—this generation—will lift a dark threat of violence from our people and our future . . .

The course of this conflict is not known, yet its outcome is certain. Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them.

Fellow citizens, we'll meet violence with patient justice, assured of the rightness of our cause and confident of the victories to come. In all that lies before us, may God grant us wisdom, and may He watch over the United States of America.

These last lines, combining overt invocations of God with a more subtly charged religious vocabulary (i.e., “mission,” “patient justice”), were not the only spiritual references to be found in the body of the text. Bush claimed that the terrorists’ main goal was “to kill Christians and Jews.” He explicitly told the public that they should pray because “Prayer has comforted us in sorrow and will help strengthen us for the journey ahead.” The president even went to some lengths to integrate the concepts of patriotism and faith, visible in lines such as: “We’ve seen the unfurling of flags, the lighting of candles, the giving of blood, the saying of prayers in English, Hebrew, and Arabic” (Riswold 2004, 41). Perhaps, it is more than a coincidence that the military operation announced shortly afterward was originally code-named “Infinite Justice,” a phrase with strong religious connotations for Christians who believe that God will ultimately judge both the living and the dead (see, for instance, Matthew 25:31–33).

Whether because of its religious tenor or in spite of it, the reaction to Bush’s address was overwhelmingly positive. The *New York Times* reported that “tremendous public support for the president was reflected in the warmth of the reception he received on Capitol Hill.” The paper admired how “Mr. Bush rose to the occasion, finding at times the eloquence that has eluded him so often in the past” (Apple 2001). In a surreal scene in Philadelphia, fans at a Flyers-Rangers exhibition game demanded that play be stopped so that they could watch the speech on the arena’s Jumbotron. The third period was delayed for over thirty-three minutes as players and fans viewed the broadcast from their seats. When the president finished, the teams engaged in an impromptu handshake line and then cancelled the rest of the game, declaring it a tie (Diamos 2001). From a boisterous restaurant in Longmont, Colorado, Cyndi Morris captured the feelings of many of her fellow citizens when she told a newspaper, “I believe God has sent us an ark in Bush. We’re

all going to get through this together, side by side. I feel a lot better after hearing him" (McFadden 2001).

*God is not neutral.* Those are stunning words. And yet, it was with this coda that Bush introduced a line of argument he would repeatedly return to over the course of his two terms: God supported America's mission in the world. God is not neutral.

This style of religious rhetoric became more controversial as time passed. Just consider some of the angry reactions Bush's language provoked from writers, scholars, and ordinary citizens alike:

It is remarkable how closely Bush's discourse coincides with that of the false prophets of the Old Testament. While the true prophets proclaimed the sovereignty of Yahweh, the God of justice and love who judges nations and persons, the false prophets served Baal, who could be manipulated by the power. Karl Marx concluded that religion is "the opium of the people" . . . How paradoxical, and how sad, that the President of the United States, with his heretical manipulation of religious language, insists on proving Karl Marx right. (Juan Stam, *The Nation*, December 22, 2003)

Many parishioners at my small, inside-the-Beltway church, by contrast, do not view themselves or the nation in such a saintly light . . . And Bush's increasingly religious justification for the war with Iraq is disturbing, even frightening, to many. "It bothers me that he wraps himself in a cloak of Christianity," said Lois Elieff. "It's not my idea of Christianity." To them, Bush's use of religious language sounds shallow and far more self-justifying than that of other recent political leaders—including Bush's father. (Rev. Fritz Ritsch, *Washington Post*, March 2, 2003)

That a president invokes the Almighty should no longer surprise us. But the danger of invoking God for any political or military purpose is the presumption that he is on our side. The lesson of history is that no individual or nation is exempt from Divine judgment. (Kenneth Woodward, *Newsweek*, March 10, 2003)

Dubious at the time, the God's-on-our-side rhetoric is looking even less credible now, after more than a year of frequently bad news for the president and his administration. Therein lies a lesson our political leaders would do well to remember the next time they're tempted to invoke God for partisan politics, whether the cause is liberal or conservative, Democratic or Republican. Be careful, lest unfolding events make you and your pious claims look downright foolish. (Tom Krattenmaker, *USA Today*, January 29, 2006)

When we do look closely at Bush's religious rhetoric, we discern anti-democratic features discouraging deliberation and dissent, as

well as persistent opacity in its religious claims . . . these overlapping objections provide good grounds to conclude that Bush's particular type of religious discourse is ethically dubious in ways that many other forms of public religious expression are not. (Rogers Smith, *Political Theory*, April 2008)

Let me be clear, the inclusion of this commentary is not meant to imply any type condemnation of Bush's rhetoric. I wish to avoid making such normative judgments. What this section is meant to illustrate is the importance of studying presidential religious rhetoric in the first place. All of the individuals above are concerned because they presume that religious rhetoric *matters*, that it has some type of powerful credibility with the public. But that question has not been definitively answered yet.

It is essential to recognize, though, that there was nothing unique about Bush's religious rhetoric or the handwringing that accompanied it. History is littered with presidents who claimed divine sanction for their agendas. In fact, the country's first president, George Washington, voiced sentiments similar to those offered over two centuries later by Bush.

One of Washington's major projects was to construct a virtuous national character. Like many of the prominent thinkers of his time, Washington believed that a good government first required good self-governance. The experience of the states under the Articles of Confederation had convinced him that a political system could be undermined by individual selfishness. No matter how much the structural condition of the country would be improved by the Constitution, Washington believed the need for sound morals remained (Spalding 1999).

One of the ways Washington tried to incubate these values was by the use of religious rhetoric. In his inaugural address, Washington reminded his countrymen that "No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the Invisible Hand which conducts the affairs of men more than those of the United States. Every step by which they have advanced to the character of an independent nation seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency." As such, Washington warned that "we ought to be no less persuaded that the propitious smiles of Heaven can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right which Heaven itself has ordained" (Washington 1789).

The first president acted as if he believed this to be true. As Commander-in-Chief, Washington required his soldiers to attend Sunday services and he ordered that ceremonies be held on a variety of days of prayer and thanksgiving. Washington said that, by their proper observances, the army might “incline the Lord and Giver of Victory, to prosper our arms” (Smith 2006, 45). In his farewell address, remembered more for its admonition against entangling foreign alliances, Washington made a final plea for the importance of good behavior to America’s future: “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness—these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens. The mere politician, equally with the pious man, ought to respect and to cherish them” (Washington 1796). The old general was trying to encourage moral responsibility. Religious rhetoric, talk of “the propitious smiles of Heaven” and the “Giver of Victory,” was his means of doing so.

Another of America’s most revered leaders, Abraham Lincoln, turned to religious rhetoric in support of his civil war goals. The war had not gone well for the Union in 1864. Confederate troops once more threatened Washington in July. Morale sagged to its lowest point in the entire conflict as many influential Northerners began to speak of a settlement, even if it meant the Confederacy remained independent (McPherson 2008, 209–63).

Sherman’s capture of Atlanta and Sheridan’s victories in the Shenandoah Valley secured the president’s re-election, but they did not end the war. Lincoln’s second inaugural, the third shortest and most tragically beautiful on record, sought to explain to the public why the war still had to continue—because it was all part of God’s plan:

The Almighty has His own purposes. “Woe unto the world because of offenses; for it must needs be that offenses come, but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh.” If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until

all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations. (Lincoln 1865)

Over the course of his address, Lincoln quoted or paraphrased no less than four separate Biblical verses. His rhetoric was well-chosen. The Civil War armies were the most religious armies in all of American history. Many soldiers carried pocket Bibles with them into battle. So many, in fact, that legends grew about soldiers who were saved from an incoming bullet by their well-placed Bible, their "holy shield" of protection (White 2002).

Lincoln's rhetoric was also strategic, though. In-depth research on the development of the Second Inaugural provides ample evidence that political considerations influenced Lincoln's words and actions (Tackach 2002). At heart, the speech was an appeal to the North to practice what they preach and to forgive their Southern brothers. Christian ethics were being used to accomplish a secular end (Morel 2000, 163–210).

It may surprise some that Jefferson also was not above, in the words of Garry Wills (1990, 372), using "religion as a political weapon." Jefferson was a problematic religious spokesman. The third president rejected Christ's divinity, virgin birth, and resurrection. He thought Christ was a good man who had merely been caught up in the enthusiasm that surrounded him. Jefferson wrote in 1787 that Jesus was "a man of illegitimate birth, of a benevolent heart, enthusiastic mind, who set out without pretensions to divinity, ended in believing them, and was punished capitally for sedition" (357). Jefferson drafted his own version of the Bible by excising all the supernatural and prophetic verses, keeping only those he considered the best expressions of Christ's moral teachings. The remainder of the Good Book was filled, Jefferson said, with "gross effects and palpable falsehoods" (Smith 2006, 55–69).

But despite accusations of atheism, Jefferson would from time to time employ religious rhetoric as he advocated for the separation

of church and state. In Virginia, Jefferson was known to refer to one Biblical verse, in particular, Matthew 16:18: “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it” (Wills 1990, 368). To those that felt religion would fail without state support, Jefferson responded that Christ had already precluded that possibility.

Washington, Lincoln, and Jefferson are titans of presidential history. Each is considered among the country’s most skilled and effective leaders. All of them used religious rhetoric because it served their political needs, whether that meant strengthening the moral character of the American people, encouraging reconciliation between Civil War combatants, or convincing people of the merits of a separation of church and state. The continuity of religious rhetoric in presidential governance, when combined with its inherently controversial nature, makes it imperative that we fully understand the role it plays in US politics.

Franklin Roosevelt once said the presidency was “preeminently a place for moral leadership.” And over three decades ago, James David Fairbanks (1981) called upon researchers to consider the implications of the president’s “priestly functions” on his leadership possibilities. This call has gone mostly unanswered. I hope to help change that.

### **What This Book Can Offer**

These tales are just the tip of the iceberg. In this book, the reader will encounter countless examples of presidents delivering jeremiads, quoting Scripture, reciting the Golden Rule, creating martyrs for their causes, capitalizing on the proximity of religious holidays, referring to just war theory, calling for days of prayer, and discussing the importance of mercy, forgiveness, brotherhood, and more.

Hence, one of the reasons this book is of interest is for the intrinsic value of being made aware of the myriad ways that presidents have used religious talk for their own gain. Clinton’s famous “I Have Sinned” speech takes on a new dimension when one learns that the Psalm Clinton chose to cite fittingly laments King David’s affair with the wife of Uriah (2 Samuel 11–12). One gains a greater appreciation for George W. Bush’s religious language when one sees the extraordinary discipline that marked his speech. Bush voiced the same two religious themes about the War on Terror until the last day of his presidency. And there’s a certain shock to be had when one encounters a president like Ronald Reagan saying “the Scriptures are on our side in this”; or a president such as Lyndon Johnson warning “Believe me, God is not mocked.”



But this book offers more than this benefit alone. I also introduce a new framework for understanding presidential religious rhetoric. This framework is based on the simple premise that religion can both unite and divide, it can both integrate and alienate. If religion is capable of producing each type of effect—of bringing people together or drawing them apart—then our understanding of religious rhetoric must reflect this truth.

One form of religious rhetoric I label communitarian. This term is meant to capture those bland, nondescript religious phrases employed by all presidents as a means of binding the American people together.

The other form of religious rhetoric is far more interesting. Coalitional religious rhetoric is used by goal-oriented presidents trying to strategically accomplish their agendas. It is overt and sectarian. Although there are a lot of potential reasons why presidents choose to talk the way they do (Hart 2002), coalitional religious rhetoric is about winning—nothing more, and nothing less. Ultimately, Jimmy Carter did not use religious rhetoric because he taught Sunday school. He used religious rhetoric because his pollster told him that spiritual words would be a persuasive way of selling his energy policies to the country.

Thus, the perspective of this book is that, when a president uses religious language as a means of shaping the discussion about a particular policy, he is making a strategic choice. He has calculated that this particular kind of claim can improve his odds of getting what he wants. When has this choice been made? Has it worked? Why? These are the questions that I attempt to answer.

These are important questions. It seems clear that religious rhetoric is effective as an electoral strategy (Domke and Coe 2008; Chapp 2012). GOP candidates, in particular, have been shown to have success using coded religious language as a way to signal their affiliation with white evangelical voters. These rhetorical cues are meant to go undetected by the wider public, thus allowing Republican politicians to avoid antagonizing other group members. An example would be a reference to a Biblical parable involving a stray lamb (Matthew 18:12–13). This style of communication can influence the political behavior of evangelicals who catch the meaning (Calfano and Djupe 2009).

Nevertheless, I am not interested in the *electoral* role of religious rhetoric. I am interested in the *executive* role of religious rhetoric—how religious rhetoric can help a president carry out his political objectives.

Or not. This is a study of the challenges of presidential power (Neustadt 1960). This may be the more important question, too, given the literature that questions the impact of campaigns on election outcomes (see, i.e., Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944; Campbell et al. 1960; Key and Cummings 1966; Fiorina 1981; Finkel 1993).

I use an approach that I contend melds together the positive attributes of the two main schools of research on presidential rhetoric. On the one hand, many scholars have embraced the descriptive tasks involved in explaining the communication strategies different presidents use (i.e., Medhurst 1993, 2006; Kiewe 1994; Peterson 2004; Aune and Rigsby 2005; Chernus 2008).

On the other hand, another side of presidential rhetoric research has been more quantitative and abstract. Such works focus more on assessing the consequences of presidential language (i.e., Cohen 1995, 2010; Hill 1998; Lim 2008).

I try to do both. Thoughtful and insightful dissections of presidential speech are matched with an original experimental test of religious rhetoric. The case list I generate is comprehensive; it includes every use of a religious rhetorical strategy that can be identified in the postwar period. Every case that is included is included for one simple reason—that it met the requirements of a theoretically driven set of criteria that had been spelled out in advance. Likewise, I determine effectiveness on the basis of another set of carefully considered rules. These procedures are spelled out in detail in the following chapter.

Even more than that, the case studies are then used to design the experiment so that it mirrors how religious rhetoric has been employed throughout history. The issues where religious rhetoric is tested are the issues on which presidents have actually made religious appeals. My approach provides greater leverage than either method could on its own.

A final strength of this book is that I pay an unusual amount of attention to what the president says in minor speeches. Most work on presidential rhetoric, whether qualitative or quantitative, concentrates on major speeches. I focus on major speeches, too. But I do not ignore what the president says to smaller audiences. We know that these day-to-day communications have become a fundamental part of every president's leadership strategy (Kernell 1997). Minor speeches merit more attention than they have been given.

By means of the case studies and the experiment, I will document four major findings about presidential religious rhetoric.

### **Presidents Use Religious Rhetoric Less Than You Might Think**

It is likely safe to say that *a priori* most readers would expect Richard Nixon to be one of the foremost practitioners of the strategic use of religious rhetoric. Despite his extensive and even moderately successful efforts at image rehabilitation post presidency, Nixon is still, by and large, viewed as a master of the dark arts of politics.

However, Nixon did not try to divide Americans through the use of religious rhetoric. On the basis of the rules presented in Chapter 1, Nixon undertook eleven major policy initiatives during his six years in office. This is a reasonable amount of domestic activity for a president who admittedly preferred to devote his time to foreign affairs (Small 1999, 156). Yet, on not one of these policies did Nixon ever use what we would classify as a religious rhetorical strategy.

In a different way, Harry Truman is an equal surprise. Truman had a large agenda (eighteen initiatives) and was additionally a Godly man. Yet, he, too, did not make concerted use of coalitional religious rhetoric.

Although every postwar president besides Nixon and Truman has at one time or another adopted a religious rhetorical strategy, no president has done so more than once. By this study's count, the postwar presidents, collectively, had 144 major objectives that they tried to achieve. But religious rhetoric was the chosen means of argument in just nine of these cases. This is a surprisingly small amount of religious talk.

The answer to this puzzle is that most presidents are reluctant to exploit religion. Before an audience of magazine publishers in July 1990, George H. W. Bush admitted his discomfort when it came to religious discussions: "I'll make you a slight confession: I still am trying to find the appropriate way to discuss, using the bully pulpit of the White House, these matters you talk about—talking about religious values, family values, or whatever. I think there is a danger that one can overdo it . . ." (Bush 1990a). Carter denied that he was the country's spiritual leader: "Well, my own religious faith is one that's much more personal . . . I don't consider myself to be the spiritual leader of this country. I'm the political leader" (Carter 1978b). As the first Catholic president in a country that still was marked by substantial anti-Catholic bigotry, John F. Kennedy, too, was better served downplaying his faith. Even other presidents with more comfortable religious identities have had reason to be cautious. A president like Bush, widely recognized and even admired for his faith, had to be careful to not abuse that image.

At the same time, presidents are likely reacting to what Stephen Carter (1993) has called America's "culture of disbelief." American political society treats religion suspiciously. It is acceptable to participate in religious activities as a hobby, but those who turn to religion to guide or justify their behavior are often treated as irrational. Only zealots do such things. So, when a president claims God's support, it is an inherently risky move.

### **Religious Rhetoric Is a "Hail Mary" Strategy**

Not coincidentally, an additional pattern that emerges from the historical case studies is that religious rhetoric is a tool of the desperate. The existence of a crisis appears to be enough to force many a president to overcome his reluctance to use religious rhetorical themes. In a number of the cases, including Carter's campaign for energy legislation and Clinton's appeals to retire the Monica Lewinsky scandal, religious rhetoric marks a change in approach, turned to after other arguments have failed and the president's position has deteriorated. In another group, such as George H. W. Bush's mobilization of the country prior to the Gulf War, religion is embraced only when the president's drive has stalled and his goals are in unexpected jeopardy. In others, such as Gerald Ford's defense of the Nixon pardon and Johnson's campaign for the Civil Rights Act, an untested new president immediately finds himself backed against a wall and turns to religion as a way out of a threatening situation. And, in others, such as Kennedy's turn to a religious frame for civil rights following the violence in Birmingham, scary conditions on the ground added new urgency to the president's agenda. The common thread for all of these cases is crisis. It is when opinion is falling, when a presidency is threatened, when the country's fate seems to rest on the resolution of a problem that we see religious rhetoric appear.

### **Religious Rhetoric Is Used on a Narrow Set of Issues**

Using religious rhetoric to push a tax cut might be misguided. Similarly, how is religion relevant to free trade or education or highway construction? It is conceivable that it is too big a leap for a president to try to make such a connection. So they do not. Another finding of this study is that presidents are not very creative when it comes to constructing religious rationales. In fact, they use religious rhetoric only on objectives that fall in four broad issue areas: foreign policy, environmental policy, civil rights, and presidential scandals.

The linkage between religious rhetoric and foreign policy intuitively makes sense. Americans have long believed that America has a special role in the world. Dating to the Puritans, Americans have thought they are a chosen people with whom God has made a binding covenant, just as he had done with Israel, Noah, or Abraham (Morone 2003, 34–54). These beliefs have not waned over time; in a recent national survey, 58 percent of Americans either “mostly” or “completely” agreed with the statement “God has granted America a special role in human history” (Public Religion Research Institute 2010).

The connection between religion and the environment can also be easily understood. For many, it is common to see the wonders of nature as gifts from God (Fowler 1995).

Religious rhetoric is equally appropriate when it comes to civil rights. A good number of religious tenets deal with how individuals are meant to treat one another. Most famous of all, is the Golden Rule: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (Matthew 7:12). It is not much of a stretch when Lyndon Johnson uses this demand as part of his case for civil rights.

Finally, the language of religion, involving themes of sin, forgiveness, and mercy, also seems natural for presidential scandals. Religion can be the ready toolkit for an apology.

### **Religious Rhetoric Doesn't Work**

The most important takeaway from this research is that religious rhetoric does not seem to help a president much, if at all. Opinion does not respond to the president's pleas, the media does not go any easier on him, and the reception of his ideas in Congress disappoints. The experimental chapter will show that exposure to a religious policy argument has no effect on an individual's views. Evidence is also presented that suggests secular rhetoric is a stronger type of argument.

This conclusion might come as a surprise. To date, only one book length treatment of presidential religious rhetoric as a tool of presidential power has been published, Colleen Shogan's (2006) *The Moral Rhetoric of American Presidents*. Shogan argues that under certain circumstances—when the president must quickly rally the public around a cause the nation is conflicted about, when the president is dealing with complex legislation that cannot be easily explained, when the president was elected on a platform that promised moral leadership, and when the president is threatened by the prospect of Congress taking the lead

on a given issue—the use of religious and moral rhetoric does enhance a president’s authority.

In addition to this academic evidence, the idea that religious rhetoric can be a tool of presidential power seems to represent the conventional wisdom. Indeed, religious rhetoric arguably *should* be persuasive given that America is an unusually religious country. A majority of people claim to read the Bible at least two times every month, 54 percent of Americans pray daily, and 91 percent of Americans say they believe in God (Prothero 2007, 38; Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2010; Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2011, 31). The possibility certainly exists that religious rhetoric is of special power because of the unusual importance of the American people’s spiritual beliefs.

At the same time, the finding that religious rhetoric has little value for a goal-oriented president should *not* come as surprise. More and more scholars are coming to accept that the power of presidential speech has been overstated, both by the public and the academy.

For instance, we now know that a president cannot push unpopular initiatives. Rather, presidents choose to appeal to the public on issues that are already popular (Canes-Wrone 2006). When they overlook opposition and try to use opinion data to identify themes to persuade the public to come around, like Clinton did for healthcare reform, they tend to stumble into disaster (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000).

We also know that presidential rhetoric is actually more likely to push the public in the opposite direction. Sophisticated statistical analysis shows that conservative rhetoric by a president produces a liberal public mood, and vice versa (Wood 2009).

And we recognize that the president is operating in a constitutional system that is designed to frustrate presidential rhetoric (Tulis 1987). The Constitution was designed in a time when it was not seen as proper for a president to engage the public. The framers believed the experience of the ancient democracies was a testament to the dangerous consequences of an over-reliance on popular opinion. Early presidents avoided discussing policy in their speeches, and addressed any programmatic suggestions to Congress alone.

What has changed since then is our interpretation of the president’s role in that system. This creates problems for presidents who are now expected to lead the public in a government that was not created with that type of leadership in mind.

Take Woodrow Wilson’s failed rhetorical campaign for the League of Nations as an illustration of this problem. Wilson failed because he

had to lobby two different audiences—the Senate, who needed to ratify the treaty, and the public. What would persuade the Senate would not persuade the public, and vice versa. This dilemma forced him to speak in contradictory ways, undermining his credibility in the process.

Perhaps, no scholar has done more to change the perception of the power of presidential rhetoric than George Edwards. *God Wills It* is heavily influenced by Edwards's work in *On Deaf Ears* (2003). Edwards conclusively shows that presidents fail most of the time in their persuasive campaigns. Statistically significant changes in opinion rarely follow televised addresses, a problem compounded by the steady decrease in average audience size. In compelling chapters, Edwards looks at the record of two of the most gifted presidential orators, Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton. Edwards shows how, on issue after issue, both men were mostly unable to move public opinion in their preferred direction. The president was lucky if a bare majority of the country wound up on his side. Even more troubling for the president, few of those who watch a president speak are able to recall anything he said afterward.

I hope the reader will consider this book the equivalent study of religious rhetoric. The major conclusion being that religious rhetoric is as equally likely to fall “on deaf ears” as any other type of presidential speech, previous research and conventional wisdom to the contrary.

### **What This Book Is, and What This Book Is Not**

What this book *is* is a simple book. I have tried to accomplish two things in writing. First, I have attempted to identify the religious themes that presidents have historically used. Second, I have attempted to assess whether these arguments helped a president achieve his goals or not. I base my answer on my analysis of the available data, as well as on the results of my own experimental test of religious rhetoric. Although I do offer a useful way of thinking about religious rhetoric, that is not my main contribution. My main contributions are these empirical findings. Like most political scientists, I have only chosen to study political communication because of my more general interest in the workings of power in society (Bell, Conners, and Sheckels 2008).

What this book *is not* is rhetorical criticism. One of the defining features of work on political communication is its tendency to cross disciplinary boundaries (Stuckey 1996). It is common in many studies of presidential rhetoric to find concepts borrowed from philosophy and literature. In these essays and books, authors pay close attention to the context of a speech, to the speaker's delivery style, and to the visuals

that accompany the message. This is important work, and in the next chapter, I will draw on some of it.

However, ultimately, I share with others the concern that too much of the discussion about presidential rhetoric is done without regard to a practical consideration of its consequence (Edwards 2003, 6). So, I do not examine any individual speech with the attention to detail that is required to consider the types of issues listed above myself. I have conducted a much broader survey of presidential rhetoric. I consider a lot of speeches, but from a further remove. The payoff—a clear answer to a big question—hopefully justifies my decision for the reader.

### Overview

In Chapter 1, I further explore the differences between communitarian and coalitional religious rhetoric while also explaining how cases were identified and analyzed.

Chapters 2 and 3 deal with the religious rhetoric of foreign policy. Chapter 2 traces Dwight Eisenhower's four-year push for mutual security funding, as well as Ronald Reagan's religious claims for increased defense spending. Chapter 3 deals with George H. W. Bush's arguments in the run-up to the Persian Gulf War, plus the religious rhetoric Bush's son used to mobilize the country behind the War on Terror.

In Chapter 4, I detail Jimmy Carter's religious rhetoric on energy policy. Chapter 5 covers the religious arguments Presidents Kennedy and Johnson used in their attempts to secure passage of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964. Chapter 6, focusing on Gerald Ford and Bill Clinton, discusses the religious rhetoric of scandal.

Chapter 7 is the experimental chapter. Finally, a conclusion reviews the work and addresses its implications.





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# Conceptualizing Presidential Religious Rhetoric

This chapter is broken into two sections. First, I introduce two different types of presidential religious rhetoric and illustrate the differences between them. The second half of the chapter explains the methods I use to identify and evaluate rhetorical strategies based on religion.

## **Communitarian and Coalitional Religious Rhetoric**

Following Kenneth Burke (1989, 188), I define rhetoric as “the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols.” Language is inherently a catalyst for action. Different words are linked to specific symbols and these symbols can trigger predictable emotional responses (Edelman 1964).

For instance, a doctor who heard John F. Kennedy or Lyndon Johnson use the phrase “compulsory health insurance” in the 1960s would not have reacted to the dictionary definitions of these words. Rather, that doctor would have responded to the economic and social anxieties those words symbolized, given that they were connected to a series of policy ideas that were thought to threaten the privileged position of America’s physicians.

According to this logic, rhetoric fundamentally operates through the use of significant symbols. Phrases only become meaningful when words trigger the same response in both the speaker and the individual to whom the speech is addressed. I might ask someone to bring me a chair. If they take too long, I might get the chair myself. Either way, my response and the response of the other person to the vocal gesture is the same—an impulse to pick up a chair (Mead 1934, 47, 67).

Indeed, the connection between words, what they symbolize, and their emotional cues can be so strong that it can discourage thought. When a politician launches into a screed about high taxes and wasteful spending, the audience is unlikely to consider whether these complaints

are actually true or not. The disgust and contempt they feel will be a ritualistic response not much different from an appropriately timed “Amen” said during church prayers.

Religious rhetoric has special symbolic potential because of its ability to either intensify or ease the anxiety people feel, knowing that so much of what happens to them is beyond their control (Edelman 1977, 4). One of the basic contentions of this book, however, is that the symbolism of a president’s religious words does not always serve the same purpose. In fact, I argue that there are two basic forms of presidential religious rhetoric, and each stems from a fundamental property of religion itself.

Scholars have long debated how best to define a “religion” (Arnal and McCutcheon 2013). And while the structural functionalist interpretation certainly has its critics (see Gellner 1999), there is much to say for the idea that religion can be a glue or cement that binds a community together.

David Émile Durkheim (1971, 47) was one of the first to adopt this perspective, defining a religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which united into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.” Durkheim believed that the creation of community of laymen and priests is at the heart of the difference between religion and magic. Magic surely has its own beliefs and practices, but, as he observed, there is no church of magic.

Durkheim’s study of aboriginal religion in Australia revealed that clans were not united by blood, but instead thought of themselves as families owing to their connection to a totem, typically an animal or vegetable. He held that the attachment of tribe members to these totems is what creates their society.

Durkheim paid particular attention to the rite of Intichiuma, a complex ceremony involving stones that was performed to ensure the healthy reproduction of a clan’s totem (326–50). His argument was that ceremonies like this help to reinvigorate a community by bringing people together and reminding them of their shared beliefs and ancestors. Religion can be seen as a symbolic expression of the bonds between them.

Perhaps, an example closer to home will help. Consider funeral rites. The death of an individual is a destabilizing event, and it can lead to destructive impulses in those left behind. People may want to run away from their pain, or dispose of everything that reminds them of

the deceased. Yet, religion makes the experience of death sacred and, by doing so, counteracts the fear and hopelessness that people feel. Religion re-establishes a group's morale (Malinowski 1948, 52–53).

As the examples above illustrate, religion also confers a sense of identity on its adherents. It answers the questions “who am I?” and “who are we?” When Catholics attend Mass, they can easily understand the difference between those in the pews, and those not in the pews (Wilson 1982, 34).

And so it is that Durkheim (1971, 427) concluded that religion—or something approximating religion—is indispensable to the successful operation of a community: “There can be no society which does not feel the need of upholding and reaffirming at regular intervals the collective sentiments and the collective ideas which make its unity and its personality . . . hence come ceremonies which do not differ from regular religious ceremonies, either in their object, the results which they produce, or the processes employed to attain these results . . . What essential difference is there between an assembly of Christians celebrating the principal dates of the life of Christ . . . and a reunion of citizens commemorating the promulgation of a new moral or legal system or some great event in the national life?”

Of course, it is well known that presidents also play a constitutive role in the creation of the American community (Stuckey 2004; see also Gerstle 2001). Through their rhetorical choices to include or exclude groups as American, they define the boundaries of the nation. The president, more than any other individual, explains who “we” are. When Andrew Jackson depicted Native Americans as outsiders, he thereby justified the country's westward expansion. Tribal lands could be confiscated because Native Americans were not part of “the people.”

Given religion's capability to provide social cohesion, and when combined with the ability of presidential rhetoric to define the American nation, it makes sense that one variant of presidential religious rhetoric be labeled as “communitarian.” This style of religious language serves the underlying purpose of uniting the American people.

Some might be tempted to call such language civil religious instead. The idea of a civil religion originally dates to Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1893), who recommended cultivating a civil religion as a means of strengthening the state. Rousseau argued that such a religion should be based on simple dogmas, like the belief in a powerful and intelligent God (219). A civil religion would function to the state's advantage by