

6. American Civil Religion Explains George W. Bush's "God Talk"

I began this study by arguing that complaints about George W. Bush using overly religious language and spreading his evangelical faith in his post-9/11 rhetoric are based on misinterpretation. Rather, Bush incorporates into his speeches several elements of a concept that is a most valuable key to explaining his rhetoric and that of earlier presidents: American civil religion. In order to examine this argument, I asked to what extent George W. Bush uses themes of American civil religion in his speeches after 9/11, and what purposes such terminology might serve. Another question was how far he differs from his predecessors.

The analysis of speeches of George W. Bush shows that he employs the full repertoire of civil religious elements as defined by sociologist Robert N. Bellah. In virtually none of his speeches does Bush fail to refer to the themes of God, the idea of a godly mission, freedom, sacrifice and rebirth in order to sustain feelings of a national shared heritage. He stresses that God, even after 9/11, is on America's side, and that it is the Americans' responsibility to fight the war against terror. In this picture, God legitimizes military attacks against Afghanistan and Iraq. Moreover, freedom is Bush's leitmotif. From the day of the attacks on the U.S. until the beginning of the Iraq war, Bush uses the treasured concept of freedom to claim that as long as America stands up for its freedoms and liberties, it will be in danger. Self-defense therefore becomes the first justification for the War on Terror, and for the new doctrine of conducting a pre-emptive war in general. The second justification is that part of America's responsibility in the world is to spread freedom, particularly to liberate the Afghans and Iraqis. Hence the war becomes a noble mission for all Americans to share. The theme of sacrifice unites the nation through another argument: Bush's claims that the victims of the attacks of 9/11 died as heroes are designed to bring Americans closer together in their grief. Once united, Bush probably reckons, further sacrifices can be accepted. The last element of American civil religion, rebirth, is also re-

peatedly mentioned by Bush. His main argument, which becomes his mantra, is that because the values of America are so exceptional, the evil of the attacks can be turned into something good: a renewed compassion and patriotism are the results.

The aims of George W. Bush that become apparent throughout my analysis very much resemble Bellah's assumptions about the functions of American civil religion in general: it is used to create unity, and thereby to pursue national goals. George W. Bush's employment of civil religious rhetoric fits this description perfectly. When 9/11 shattered America's illusion that the homeland was safe (Taylor 2005), Bush provided consolation, guidance and direction. Unity is a "great weapon," as Bush himself admitted, and his national goal behind creating such unity was to foster support for his War on Terror. Congressional support for military attacks – including the power of the purse – is only possible when the majority of Americans rallies behind the president.

This is exactly what Robert N. Bellah feared in the 1960s. He explicitly warned that presidents might use such language "as a cloak for petty interests and ugly passions" (Bellah 1968, 20). Even in 2001, Bellah spoke out against Bush's rhetoric. He claimed in *The Washington Post* that Bush's reference to America as a chosen nation is dangerous because it implies that the Americans "are the children of light" and other peoples become the "children of darkness" (Broadway 2001).

However, judging Bush's goals from a normative perspective is not the point of this study. From the rhetorical perspective, Bush is clearly not the first president to use civil religious rhetoric in order to pursue his aims. This study shows, by giving an overview of the rhetoric of his predecessors, that the themes of God, mission, freedom, sacrifice and rebirth can be found in speeches dating back to the very first U.S. president. Bush's predecessors used civil religious language not only to keep up American self-esteem and to remind the people of their identity, but also to manage crises like the Great Depression, the Cold War, the two World Wars, the first Gulf War and interventions such as in Grenada or Kosovo. Even though every president is individual in his reference to American civil religion (Pierard and Linder 1988), all times of crisis demand an

intense rhetoric that relies on the myths and shared beliefs of Americans in general.

George W. Bush might have reached the limit of that given frame, but he never moves beyond it. He reinforces a belief system which Americans have shared since the beginning of the nation. He appeals to myths and historical facts about the origins of the nation, and fulfills his role as the main upholder of American civil religion as his predecessors have done for centuries.

The validity of the common assumption by the media that Bush is promoting his personal agenda as a born again Christian through his rhetoric after 9/11 cannot be confirmed by my analysis of his speeches. First, American civil religion already fully explains Bush's "God talk." Second, direct hints at evangelical beliefs are almost non-existent. Single incidents in which Jesus is mentioned, or the fact that an evangelical hymn is cited once, are no basis for such arguments. George W. Bush might have been a president who claims that a conversion experience made him a better person, and he may have surrounded himself with evangelical leaders, supported faith-based initiatives, or hosted bible readings in the White House (Taylor 2005, 55-56); but never through his language did Bush try to spread his faith. The fact that he was supported by so many evangelicals, independently of agreement on political content or otherwise, can be explained by the obvious overlaps between American civil religion and specifically Christian beliefs, due to the roots of the concept of American civil religion.

Although Bush's behavior has led to many transatlantic misunderstandings, one significant "good" came out of this: new attention to Bush's rhetoric has suddenly reminded us of how different the American value system has always been compared to that of Europe, and how old myths still make up the American identity. Only by understanding this significant feature of U.S. political culture will the international community be able to engage in diplomatic relations with America without misunderstandings: no president, not a Catholic John F. Kennedy, nor born again Christians like Jimmy Carter or George W. Bush, can depart from the given standard. Only when feelings of common belief are stimulated

among the majority of Americans can they be mobilized to support the national goals of their administration. Americans must believe that the light of their country will always be shining. Thus, U.S. presidents cannot cross the limits of this frame, extremes are barred: they can neither spread their own faith, nor position themselves as agnostic. In order to maintain support through rhetoric, every president must follow the path of American civil religion – including George W. Bush.