EYES RIGHT:
RELIGIOUS RHETORIC IN THE SPEECHES OF PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH AFTER 9/11

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When the terrorists struck the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001, it was the opening act of a drama that has since unfolded around the world. If we were to believe the rhetoric that some people have used to talk about it, we are now involved in either a war on terror, or a crusade against Islam. When we hear the language of good versus evil in casual conversation, or when media outlets provide the juiciest sound bites possible to inflame public opinion in support of some cause or another, we tend to discount what is being said. When similar language is used by the President of the United States, however, it is cause for concern. Even a cursory examination of the speeches of President George W. Bush in the time after the attacks of 9/11 makes one wonder how much the rhetoric reflects his own personal religious convictions, and how much those convictions, in turn, might have determined the course of the American ship of state.

For all the legislative and administrative checks and balances in the American political system and despite the constitutional separation of the institutions of church and state, there is nothing in place that deals with how the personal religious convictions of the American President might affect the decisions taken by his administration. In the United States, supreme political authority – whatever qualifications the constitutionalists might make to this statement – is effectively invested in a single person. What the President believes is his business – personal religious freedom surely should apply in the White House as it does in any other American house – but this freedom assumes that personal religious convictions remain personal, rather than serving as the basis for policy decisions by the American President, through the American government, and on behalf of the American people. In any senior government appointment, the candidates presented are grilled on their personal and professional conduct, and no doubt questions of what they believe in religious terms are likely to be interwoven with the questions of fact. Apart from the incessant media frenzy surrounding Presidential campaigns, however, in which noise quickly drowns out content, there is no such examination of the religious beliefs of the would-be President, nor, in the end, do these beliefs seem acceptable fodder for serious campaign altercations.

Religion has always been important to American Presidents. For example, Ronald Reagan referred to "the Soviet Union as an 'evil empire'... [which reference], for some, was a direct

allusion to the Biblical foreboding in which a great, but evil army comes from the North to destroy Israel and to inaugurate the coming battle between the Antichrist and Jesus at the Battle of Armageddon."[1] Few Presidents have relied upon religion, or facilitated a religious agenda, however, more than George W. Bush, although, interestingly enough, there has not been any sustained or investigative interview in which George W. Bush was asked perceptive and informed questions about his religious beliefs. As a result, we know little about his Christian faith that is not handicapped by speculation and innuendo. What is known is that President Bush was "born again" when he surrendered to Jesus Christ, but despite his conversion, he refrained from referring to himself as an evangelical. Yet out of his personal and political associations and out of the religious rhetoric in many of his public speeches, it is possible to build a circumstantial case in support of the argument that President Bush facilitated a fundamentalist Christian agenda that not only labelled, but defined and perpetuated, the war on terror. While there are many reputable observers who maintain this is what happened, in this chapter, my aim is much more modest: in a country that holds to the separation of church and state, how can the average American citizen be sure that life-and-death policy decisions are not being made on the basis of personal religious convictions, when the President uses right-wing Christian religious rhetoric to illustrate his understanding of world events and what the United States must do in response? Is it realistic (or perhaps even fair) to expect that personal religious convictions can be excluded from the political arena, and if not, how do we find the necessary checks and balances to ensure that these life-and-death decisions (perhaps for more than the American people) reflect the necessary political discernment, sober judgment and wisdom they require?

Fundamentally about Good and Evil

In order to appreciate how intertwined religion and politics were during the Presidency of George W. Bush, it is important to understand and clarify the various religions that may have influenced him and, accordingly, the American political process. The religions to be discussed, and very broadly, are Christian evangelicalism and Christian fundamentalism, together comprising the Christian Right. There are many varieties of each, but all generally believe that there is a battle between good and evil throughout the world. Further, this battle is fought daily within Christian individuals, as well as in the world, in order to defeat Satan, realize redemption from sin and experience eternal life with Jesus Christ.

Christian evangelicals, especially those considered to be more fundamentalist than others, cherish many such beliefs, including the idea that "the [American] government should protect religious heritage; the United States was founded as a Christian nation; [and that] democracy should be promoted throughout the world."[2] Their numbers within the United States are not insignificant as "around 40 percent of Americans describe themselves as evangelical Christians, and opinion polls regularly indicate that a quarter of all Americans believe that they

are living in the end times."[3] With regard to George W. Bush, in his first election, "roughly fifty-five percent of Bush voters were Armageddon believers."[4] These Christian evangelicals supported George W. Bush, and later the war on terror, as "they support state violence that deters what they label as 'evil.'"[5] More accurately, "state conflict that deters evil and spreads freedom is morally necessary."[6] None of this conflict is aimed toward the realization of peace, whether personal, regional or world, however, because "only Jesus in his Second Coming can bring true and permanent peace."[7]

To note some of the vocabulary that is being used to depict the issues, there are two major brands of end-time Christians: the "dispensationalists" and the "dominionists."[8] The dispensationalists "hold that true believers will be "raptured" into heaven just before the cataclysmic war fought between "left behind" believers and the forces of the anti-Christ,"[9] while the dominionists believe that the United States, as a Christian nation, "will play a special role representing God in the final battles."[10] Further, dominionists "work towards the construction (or 'reconstruction') of an American theocracy to fulfill God's end-time plan."[11] The difficulty is that the beliefs of each significantly overlap. Further complications are created when the media wrongly labels the apocalyptic or theocratic ideas as "evangelical" as not all evangelicals are end-time Christians. Not all evangelicals believe in the radical interpretation of scripture, nor do all evangelicals advocate the use of military force to realize God's word. "Dominionism" captures a number of doctrines, such as dominion theology, "kingdom now" and reconstructionism. Each doctrine is a form of fundamentalism and may, with justification, be labelled as falling within the territory of Christian extremism.

Christian fundamentalists such as dominionists or reconstructionists believe that Jesus is the only way to salvation, the devil actually exists, the Bible is God's word, and rapture, as prophesied, will be take place.[12] Further, religious fundamentalists have "cultivated theologies of rage, resentment and revenge" and, ultimately, "fight and kill ... [in order to] bring the sacred into the realm of political struggle."[13] In essence, fundamentalists "display religious militance by which self-styled 'true believers' attempt to arrest the erosion of religious identity, fortify the borders of religious community, and create viable alternatives to secular behaviours."[14]

Dominion theology is derived from the Bible's Genesis 1:26-31 in which God grants humans dominion over all creation, and as such, dominionists seek to politicize faith through the realization of political power. With regard to realizing power through the exertion of influence, there are few communications media more aggressively effective than television or radio. Consequently, "dominionists control at least six national television networks ... and virtually all of [the United States' total of] more than two thousand religious radio stations."[15] The ultimate goal of these believers is ostensibly a repressive, theocratic Christian society in which all enemies of God

are destroyed.[16] More specifically, the movement is marked by its infatuation with apocalyptic violence and military force, with dominionist leaders fostering a belief in a holy war throughout the world.[17] This ecstatic belief in the cleansing power of apocalyptic violence blinds believers to the horrors of war and suffering, perhaps even the annihilation of the human race, because their beliefs suggest that God protects faithful Christians as they eradicate the enemies of God.[18]

If possible, Christian reconstructionism, the other most influential form of dominionism, is even more extreme. For example, while dominion theology seeks the realization of fundamentalist Christians throughout the American government, reconstructionists "look forward to nothing short of a complete remaking of society, one based on Old Testament law in all its minute detail and modeled on ancient Israel as the blue-print for a God-centered nation."[19] Reconstructionists are the most fundamental of the fundamentalists, demanding "that every aspect of human life submit to God's law and that every non-Christian be eradicated as evil."[20] With regard to the war on terror, reconstructionists believe that "the [American government's] function is to do little more than 'punish and restrain evil.'"[21]

The significance of the dominionist movement after 9/11, especially the reconstructionist variant, was not in its numbers, but in the power of its ideas and their surprisingly rapid public acceptance.[22] Many evangelicals and others on the Christian Right, including George W. Bush, however, were likely unaware that they were perpetuating dominionist beliefs in their public responses to the events of 9/11 and its aftermath. Yet we are left with the troubling problem that any assumption that Bush and others did not understand or mean what they said requires us to believe that something that looks like a duck, and talks like a duck, is in fact anything but a duck.

Birds of a Feather Flock Together?

In order to understand George W. Bush as a man of faith, how his faith was expressed in his speeches and the influence that his faith might have had on the war on terror, it is useful to identify those people who influenced him throughout his presidency – more precisely, those people, including his inner circle at the White House, who were deeply religious or tied to the religious right. Further, George W. Bush's political appointments and his involvement with leaders within the Christian Right might be seen as allowing dominionists to infiltrate the American government. This has been called consistent with the reconstructionist agenda to operate strategically and with stealth in order to convert the whole of government and society into a Christian nation.[23]

The television evangelist Billy Graham brought the Bible's message to George W. Bush in 1985 and was instrumental in leading him down the road to salvation. President Bush stated that "Reverend Graham planted a mustard seed in my soul ... He led me to the path and I began

walking ... a new walk where I would recommit my heart to Jesus Christ."[24] As a "born again" politician, George W. Bush cultivated relationships with key ministers within the evangelical broadcasting community, like Pat Robertson and other activists on the Christian Right and "refused to condemn the growing demonization of Islam by the Christian Right leadership, ... [such that] Mr Bush's silence [was] deafening."[25]

George W. Bush did not hold a press conference or conduct an interview to address the extremist comments of prominent evangelicals from whom he may have sought guidance, nor did he publically discuss Armageddon, prophecy and the relationship of these concepts to his political agenda. He did select Reverend Jack Hayford, a supporter of reconstructionism or dominionism, however, to provide the benediction to the fifty-fourth inaugural prayer service.[26] As well, Reverend Anthony Evans, "a friend and confidant from whom Bush often sought spiritual guidance" and who writes books on prophecy as a dominion theologian, was a key speaker at President Bush's 2001 Washington Prayer Luncheon.[27] We are left to wonder whether the influence of any of these people lay behind President Bush's comment (later withdrawn) that the war on terror was a "crusade."[28] In fact, "so close did [George W. Bush] draw to evangelical and fundamentalist Protestant leaders from 2000-2002 ... it was suggested that [he] had virtually replaced evangelist Pat Robertson as the leader of the U.S. Religious Right."[29]

We continue to wonder what was being said behind closed doors in the Bush Administration when members like his former Attorney General, John Ashcroft, commented that "civilized people – Muslims, Christians and Jews – all understand that the source of freedom and human dignity is the Creator" and that [the United States] "will defend His creation."[30] Echoing the ideology of the dominionists, deputy undersecretary of defense for intelligence, Lieutenant General William Boykin, stated, "the enemy is not a physical enemy. The enemy is a spiritual enemy. It's called the principality of darkness. We ... are in a spiritual battle, not a physical one."[31] While it may be nothing more than the choices of words involved, in presidential speeches drafted by speechwriter Mark Gerson (an evangelical Christian), words such as "whirlwind" mirror the voice of God as expressed in the *Books of Job* and *Ezekiel*; a "work of mercy" references Catholicism's seven works of mercy; and phrases like "safely home" and "wonder-working power" are derived from gospel hymns.[32] President Bush's famous reference to an "axis of evil"[33] is a powerful use of language guaranteed to inflame the American people: "The words associated Saddam Hussein with both Nazism (*axis*), the modern embodiment of horror for Jews, and Satan (*evil*), the ancient embodiment of horror for Christians."[34]

Onward Christian Soldiers: America Confronts Evil

In his Inaugural Address in January 2001, George W. Bush articulated his belief in his own and America's divine calling to lead the world in an apocalyptic struggle between the forces of good

and evil.[35] He did not shy away from referring to the "sacred origins" or the "sacred calling" of the United States. Similarly, many of President Bush's speeches end with "God Bless America," but on 7 October 2001, his Address to the Nation ended with "May God Continue to Bless America" which suggests that President Bush and his speech-writers "gave serious thought to the phrase and decided to emphatically reaffirm the notion that the United States has enjoyed divine favour throughout its history. [The words] provide sufficient reassurance that American policy is rooted in a faith so profound it need not be trumpeted."[36] Together with the idea that America had been mandated by God to bring the celestial gifts of freedom to everyone in the world,[37] it is not hard to argue that President Bush believed that the United States government was the instrument of God, and charged with the responsibility to spread freedom and democracy throughout the world. In his first Inaugural Address, George W. Bush said:

> We will confront weapons of mass destruction so that a new century is spared new horrors. The enemies of liberty and our country should make no mistake: America remains engaged in the world by history and by choice, shaping a balance of power that favours freedom**.**

President Bush went on to say "and to all nations, we will speak for the values that gave our nation birth." Regardless of the struggle, for President Bush, the United States would flourish, because "it is the angel of God who directs the storm."[38] The former President "believe[ed] that Providence had assigned him the arduous task of rescuing America from the satanic forces of evil, as if he, himself, were the embodiment of the generalized will and the unalloyed spirit of the American people."[39]

There is no room for compromise in the cataclysmic battle between good and evil; George W. Bush reminded the world of this reality on 7 October 2001 when he stated that "there is no neutral ground ... and every nation has a choice to make in this conflict."[40] President Bush believed he was fighting for goodness in the conflict, but his primary opponent at the time had similar thoughts. Osama bin Laden told the world after the attacks on 11 September 2001, that "these events have divided the world into two camps, the camp of the faithful and the camp of the infidels. May God shield us ... from [the infidels]."[41] The language used by bin Laden to justify violence reveals significant similarities with the language used by George W. Bush. Both men preached about the concept of a tragic conflict in which "the sons of light confront the sons of darkness."[42] In order to accelerate the supremacy of God and eradicate evil from the world, the conflict demands that the faithful within the Christian fundamentalist movement create the conditions for the second coming of Jesus Christ. President Bush was alleged to have stated, "God told me to strike at al Qaeda and I struck them, and then he instructed me to strike at Saddam [Hussein], which I did, and now I am determined to solve the problem in the Middle

East."[43] Despite international publicity of this comment allegedly made by George W. Bush, he never qualified or denied the remark. The remark raises the troubling idea that George W. Bush committed his country to two wars, which are still costing American soldiers their lives and the country billions of dollars, at the specific urging of a transcendental being.

George W. Bush repeatedly reminded the American people and the world of God's involvement in the war on terror. For example, on 11 September 2002, he stated that "the ideal of America is the hope of all mankind" and "that hope still lights our way. And the light shines in the darkness. And the darkness has not overcome it."[44] The concept of "America" may have replaced the concept of "God," but the words are Biblical in character.[45] When George W. Bush declared an end to combat in the war in Iraq, he honoured the American dead who "died fighting a great evil"[46] and reminded those still living and fighting to spread God's word. He identified the word of God with democracy when he said to American military personnel, "and wherever you go, you carry a message of hope ...In the words of the prophet Isaiah, 'to the captives come out, and to those in darkness be free.'"[47] Although George W. Bush was Commander-in-Chief of the American military and, as President, the head of a secular institution, his words were suggestive of a minister preaching from the pulpit, an association strengthened by his continual references to prayer.

George W. Bush believed in the power of prayer, and started each day, regardless of his location, with a prayer session. With regard to the war on terror, and following the 9/11 attack, it is interesting to note that President Bush attended a church service at Washington's National Cathedral in which he clarified that he would rid the world of evil. At the service, George W. Bush said:

> I would like America ... to pray for God's protection for our land and for our people ... to pray that there's a shield of protection, so that if the evil ones try to hit us again, that we've done everything we can physically, and that there is a spiritual shield that protects the country.[48]

He considered his words more of an expression of his spirituality than a war cry, however, when he stated that he "looked at [his speech] from a spiritual perspective, that it was important for the nation to pray. [Further, the speech was] really a prayer. I believed that the nation needed to be in prayer."[49] This belief in the power of prayer, together with the reality that George W. Bush read the Bible every day, sought and received God's guidance as President and had some sympathies for apocalyptic theology, lends troubling credence to the accusation that President Bush and his administration were an "evangelical menace."[50]

God Bless America?

It is hard not to see why people have concluded that George W. Bush saw himself as an agent of God, leading God's chosen people as he rescued the world from evil. Given his repeated use

of "biblically inflected language about good and evil, one can almost hear the words of Daniel and Jeremiah."[51] His desire to rid the world of evil through the "export of death and violence to the four corners of the earth in defense of this great nation" has been called a grandiose dream comparable to God's Master Plan.[52] This is not surprising as "it's pretty clear that Bush's role as a politician, president and commander-in-chief was driven by ... faith."[53] If George W. Bush had been an average American citizen exercising his right to freedom of religion and expression, the world would not have been at risk, but as the leader of the most powerful country on the planet, the personal belief that he was chosen by God to battle evil without compromise leads to the more frightening possibility of plans to bring about an Armageddon on other terms than those intended by the God whom more reasonable Christians might recognize.

While religious rhetoric is nothing new in the realm of American politics, whether or not George W. Bush intended to represent right-wing Christian, evangelical – even dominionist – ideas is in a sense irrelevant to the larger problems such religious language posed for global peace and security. As President, he tried to persuade the American people that the United States' military enjoyed divine favour, that their actions in the world had divine sanction, and at the very least associated American foreign policy with Christian concepts and ideas. Whether or not he stoked the fires of a crusade in America against Islam, he at least provided in his language ammunition for those opposed to the United States to use in support of their own versions of jihad in response. Claiming to be the instrument of divine wrath against the evildoers of the world, to be charged with building up the kingdom of heaven upon earth, or to be seen preparing for the final Apocalyptic battle, is to place a cosmic interpretation on current events that quite literally blows them out of proportion and renders a volatile situation that more dangerous for everyone involved. Perhaps it goes to show that no President is ever "just" a private person when he steps up to the microphone, and he (and his speech writers) should consider that carefully before it is too late to call the words back.

Suggested Reading

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Notes

1   James K. Wellman, "Is War Normal for American Evangelical Religion?" In James K.Wellman, ed. *Belief and Bloodshed: Religion and Violence across Time and Tradition* (New York, Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 200.

2   Wellman,197.

3   Michael Northcott, *An Angel Directs the Storm: Apocalyptic Religion & American Empire* (London: SCM Press, 2007), 9.

4   Kevin Phillips, *American Dynasty: Aristocracy, Fortune, and the Politics of Deceit in the House of Bush* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 242.

5   Wellman,197.

6   Ibid., 206.

7   Ibid.

8   J. P. Briggs and Thomas D. Williams, *Bush, Mideast Wars and End-Time Prophecy*, Truthout, 29 June 2007, available at <http://www.truthout.org>.

9   Ibid.

10   Ibid.

11   Ibid.

12   Phillips, 217; 221.

13   Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God: A History of Fundamentalism* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001), xi; 366.

14   Phillips, 212.

15   Chris Hedges, *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 10.

16   Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Denver: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1973). This publication is the dominionists' indispensable reference when considering the word of God.

17   Hedges, 28-29.

18   Ibid., 35-36.

19   Hugh B. Urban, *The Secrets of the Kingdom: Religion and Concealment in the Bush Administration* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 36.

20   Rushdoony, 725.

21   Urban, 39. Urban was quoting Rushdoony, R.J., *supra*.

22   J. Beard, *Notes on Reconstructionism: Roots of a New "Christian" Inquisition?*, available at <http://www.rapidnet.com>.

23   Urban, 40.

24   George W. Bush, *A Charge to Keep* (New York: Morrow Publishers, 1999), 36.

25   Esther Kaplan, *With God On Their Side: How Christian Fundamentalists Trampled Science, Policy, and Democracy in George W. Bush's White House* (New York: The New Press, 2004), 16-17.

26   Phillips, 232.

27   Ibid.

28   Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 94.

29   Phillips, 224. In December 2001, Pat Robertson had resigned as President of the Christian Coalition.

30   Remarks delivered to Christian Broadcasters in 2002 and found in Peter McLaren, "George Bush, Apocalypse Sometime Soon, and the American Imperium." *Cultural Studies - Critical Methodologies*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (2002), 331.

31   Quoted in Kaplan, 21.

32   Phillips, 225.

33   George W. Bush, State of the Union Address, Washington, D.C., 29 January 2002.

34   Kaplan, 12-13.

35   Northcott, 3.

36   Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion after September 11* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 30.

37   George W. Bush, Remarks by the President at the Prayer Breakfast for National Religious Broadcasters Convention, Nashville, Tennessee, 10 February 2003.

38   Northcott, 177-179.

39   McLaren, 327.

40   George W. Bush, Address to the Nation, Washington, D.C., 7 October 2001.

41   Lincoln, 20.

42   Ibid., 20.

43   Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Abu Mazen quoting President George W. Bush after their meeting in Aqaba, reported in *The Haaretz Reporter* and found in *George W. Bush Said What?!*, Humanist Society of Gainsville, 2002, available at <http://www.gainsvillehumanist.org>.

44   Quoted in Kaplan, 18.

45   Ibid., 18. Specifically, the Bible's Gospel of John.

46   George W. Bush, Remarks Announcing that Major Combat Operations in Iraq Have Ended, U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln, 1 May 2003.

47   Kaplan, 19.

48   *Bush at War*, 66-68

49   Ibid. Mr. Woodward, who was at the church service with a broad range of religious leaders and politicians, including former Presidents Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter, observed that at the end of the service, everyone stood and sang *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*. The symbolism of the song and the location in which it was sung are obvious.

50   Leo P. Ribuffo, "George W. Bush and the Latest Evangelical Menace," *Dissent*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (2006), 42-49.

51   Phillips, 5.

52   Woodward, 67; 330.

53   Ibid., 342.