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Radical Religion and the 2008 Presidential Election : why "God Talk" Declined

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Clyde Wilcox*

RADICAL RELIGION AND THE 2008 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION: WHY “GOD TALK” DECLINED

Abstract

In recent years, American elections have attracted worldwide attention for the salience of „God talk” by candidates. In 2008, however, there was markedly less God talk. In this paper I discuss why American campaigns use religious language and why the 2008 campaign reversed recent trends. I speculate about the future of „God talk” in American elections.

Keywords

American elections, religious language, Christian Right, George Bush, Barack Obama, political parties.



During the US presidential elections of 2000 and 2004, Republican candidate George W. Bush used explicit and subtle religious language to appeal to conservative evangelical and Catholic voters (Wilcox and Robinson 2007). Bush proclaimed during the Republican primaries of 2000 that Jesus was his favorite philosopher, who had rescued him from a life of alcoholism and despair (Rozell 2002; Albertson 2006). In contrast, Democratic candidates found it difficult to talk about religion although both Al Gore and John Kerry were religious men. Pundits proclaimed a “God gap” with more observant Christians and Jews supporting Republican candidates.

Many past presidents had used some religious language in their governance. Abraham Lincoln’s 2nd Inaugural Address is full of powerful religious language. In the midst of America’s Civil War which resulted

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in freedom for slaves, Lincoln proclaimed that “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’.”

But religious language had been less common in presidential campaigns. John Kennedy had famously proclaimed that his Catholic faith would not interfere with his duty to lead America. Jimmy Carter had talked about his faith during the campaign, but hastened to add that he had “lusted after women in his heart” – a remark that helped to make his religion seem more innocuous to secular Americans. Ronald Reagan quoted Scripture on occasion during his campaigns in 1980 and 1984, but he did not attend services as president.

Many observers believed that George Bush’s 2000 and 2004 campaigns marked the beginning of a religious realignment, in which deeply religious Americans of all faiths would congregate to the GOP, and secular Americans would be Democrats. They expected the 2008 campaign to also be full of “God talk.” Democratic strategists worked on ways to talk about religion without alienating secular and Jewish voters.

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But the 2008 U.S. presidential election ultimately had less “God talk” than the 2000 and 2004 campaigns. In part this was because voters were concerned with an economic crisis that affected religious and secular Americans – it rains on the just and the unjust.¹ In part this was because George W. Bush was the most unpopular incumbent president in American history, and some Republicans feared that religious rhetoric would remind voters that he was a Republican. But in part it was because both presidential and both vice-presidential candidates had specific issues that made them nervous about the possibility that any attempt to discuss religion might remind voters of religious associations and practices judged by many to be radical.

“God talk” occurs in American elections far more than in Europe, for two key reasons. First, the U.S. is a very religious nation, with overall rates of religious commitment slightly higher than Poland and far higher than most Western European countries. Surveys show that more than 90% of Americans believe in God, around 40% claim to attend church weekly, and nearly 60% say religion is very important in their lives.

Second, American political parties are weak, and candidates within the same party can have very different political positions. This means

¹ Matthew 5:45.

that candidates cannot simply campaign on their party, they must convey their own issue positions to voters. And since world events are unpredictable, they must also tell voters how they will decide on new issues. Candidates use a variety of techniques to try to convince voters of their moral values, including campaigning with their families and talking about their past experience in business or in the military. God talk is an especially important way to signal core values since America has no tradition of atheist public intellectuals, so most voters associate religion directly with moral values.

But unlike Poland, America's religious citizens are scattered across hundreds of Christian denominations and many non-Christian faiths. God talk can divide citizens when it emphasizes doctrinal issues where religious traditions differ, or it can serve to unite citizens when it emphasizes points of common faith. In the 2000 and 2004 campaigns, George W. Bush used inclusive religious language to build his support. But in the 2004 primaries, it was more divisive religious language that was evident, and because of this, all of the candidates were more restrained in their religious rhetoric.

The Republican Primaries

The Republican nomination process showed the complexity of radical religion and politics. Since the 1980s, Republican candidates have targeted fundamentalist, evangelical, and Pentecostal Christians as a core constituency. In the late 1970s, partisan strategists recruited fundamentalist pastors to head up organizations designed to help Ronald Reagan win the presidency (Martin 1996). A decade later, Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition distributed tens of millions of voter guides in fundamentalist and Pentecostal churches, and James Dobson's Focus on the Family mailed materials to its members that sought to spur them to Republican voting (Wilcox and Larson 2006).

Some Christian Right groups sought to teach their members democratic norms, but all of them used extreme rhetoric to frighten conservative religious voters into action (Wilcox 2008; Shields 2007). The Moral Majority warned its members that liberals wanted to allow smut peddlers "so that they can openly sell pornographic materials *to your children*," and Christian Coalition voter guides accused Democratic candidates of voting to fund pornography (Rozell and Wilcox

1996).² Concerned Women for America warned its members that if liberals won they would ban the Bible as hate speech.

But many Christian Right leaders became unpopular among even conservative white evangelicals. Surveys in the 1980s showed that Jerry Falwell was the most unpopular man in America, and Pat Robertson's claim to have prayed away a hurricane from his Virginia Beach headquarters (that later hit New York) exposed the most radical Christian Right leaders to public ridicule. In many states, Democrats won elections by "morphing" pictures of Republican candidates into Falwell or Robertson.

In recent years this has meant that GOP candidates have sought to send subtle signals to orthodox Protestant voters, while using more moderate rhetoric in public. In this way Christian conservatives are mobilized, without a backlash among more moderate or secular voters. Republican strategist Karl Rove had identified these orthodox Protestants as the key factor in George Bush's 2000 and 2004 campaigns, but he kept Falwell, Robertson, and Dobson offstage and instead created targeted mailings to reach those voters most supportive of the Christian Right.

Bush managed to signal conservative Christians that he supported their goals while reassuring moderates that he was not radical. Bush often used language that covertly signaled evangelicals without alarming others; he referred to the "wonder working power of private charity," a phrase from a powerful evangelical hymn (Albertson 2006). But in office Bush did little to advance the Christian Right agenda. Over time, Christian Right leaders came to conclude that Bush had given them few policy victories, only symbolic reassurances (Wilcox and Robinson 2007).

Against this backdrop, all of the candidates for the Republican presidential nomination attended the 2007 Value Voters Summit, a meeting of conservative Christian leaders in Washington D.C. Some hoped to be the favored candidate of Christian conservatives, others merely hoped that the Christian Right would not mobilize against them.

Republican presidential nominations begin in Iowa, where voting rules favor the best organized blocs of voters. Iowa Republicans are dominated by evangelical and fundamentalist Christians, in churches that were originally mobilized by Pat Robertson's 2008 presidential campaign. Most political observers expected former Massachusetts

² Overall, Christian Coalition voter guides accurately informed voters which candidates were the most conservative, but they frequently exaggerated the liberalism of Democratic candidates.

Governor Mitt Romney to win in Iowa, and his campaign spent 30 times more money than the next leading candidate.

But Romney lost in Iowa and thus the nomination, because his Mormon faith was perceived as radical by evangelicals and fundamentalists. Although Mormons consider themselves to be part of the Christian tradition, evangelicals do not share this assessment. Richard Land, a lobbyist for the Southern Baptist Convention and a supporter of Romney, argued that evangelicals could support Romney because although Mormons may not be Christians, they were at least “people of the book” – that is, no more distant from Christianity than Jews. But prominent fundamentalists in Iowa responded that the Book of Mormon was a very different book than the Christian Bible.

In order to reassure evangelicals that he shared their moral values, Romney delivered a major speech on his faith before the caucuses. Many Mormons were uneasy with the speech, which arguably exaggerated the role of Jesus Christ in the church’s theology. But many national religious conservative leaders praised the speech for proclaiming that Romney’s faith would influence his policies, in contrast to a speech by John Kennedy in 1960 which promised that his faith would not influence him as president.

Romney might have won in Iowa despite his Mormon faith, but among his competitors was Mike Huckabee, a former governor who was also a former Baptist preacher. Huckabee campaigned tirelessly in Iowa’s churches, repeatedly emphasizing the importance of having a “Christian president.” When publicly asked if he thought that Mormons were Christians Huckabee refused to answer, clearly inviting voters to conclude that Romney did not fit that category. Huckabee won in Iowa by 1% of the vote, primarily because he won the white evangelical vote by a 60%-20% margin. Huckabee won among voters who said that religion was an important source of their vote decision, by 55% to 11%.

The Iowa Republican caucuses remind us that religion can unite or divide, and that particularistic religious divisions can be symbolically activated by relatively subtle rhetoric. And they remind us that even among those who may agree on abortion or same-sex marriage, differences in religious beliefs are often profoundly important.

Republicans in the General Election

The eventual winner of the GOP nomination process was John McCain, who had called Christian Right leaders “agents of intolerance”

during the 2000 nomination process. Although McCain had since 2000 sought to woo the Christian Right and even embraced and praised Jerry Falwell, many movement leaders were hostile to his candidacy. Focus on the Family president James Dobson publicly proclaimed that he could not vote for McCain.

McCain sought to win evangelical votes by soliciting endorsements from other fundamentalist pastors outside the movement, but in 2008 the public was less supportive of radical rhetoric from preachers in politics. After embracing Rev. James Hagee at a press conference and welcoming his endorsement, McCain encountered a firestorm of protest when journalists publicized some of the pastors more radical pronouncements, including the statement that Hitler was fulfilling God's will, and that in Hitler God had "sent a hunter." McCain soon had to publicly repudiate Hagee and other fundamentalist pastors who had endorsed him.

Facing a hostile Christian Right leadership and having been badly burned by endorsements from radical fundamentalist pastors, McCain considered structuring his campaign to win moderates and independents instead of mobilizing conservative Christians. The Senator considered choosing former Democratic vice-presidential nominee Joe Lieberman as a running mate, or Tom Ridge, former governor of Pennsylvania. Both men are conservative but pro-choice on abortion, and their selection would have increased the anger of Christian Right leaders but been attractive to moderates. McCain's campaign considered the notion that a pro-choice running mate would highlight McCain's bipartisan history, and show in a large symbolic gesture how he was different from George W. Bush. It was thought that McCain's strong pro-life voting record in the Senate might be enough to win most religious conservative votes against pro-choice Obama.

But Christian Right leaders threatened an open revolt at the Republican convention, which was McCain's one chance to use four days of free television to connect with the American people. So instead, he chose Alaska governor Sarah Palin to be his vice presidential running mate. Palin was initially greeted with rousing enthusiasm at the Republican convention but soon became a serious liability for McCain. She generated enthusiasm among Christian Right voters but worried moderates and even some conservatives even more.

Palin's most obvious attraction to the Christian Right was the fact that she had recently given birth to a child with Down's Syndrome, a condition that is usually flagged by medical tests early in pregnancy. Palin had obviously chosen to have the baby rather than seek an abortion, and during the convention cameras lingered on her youngest daugh-

ter slicking back the boy's hair. Soon after her selection the public learned that Palin's teenaged daughter was pregnant – something that would have outraged the Christian Right in the 1980s. But when the governor promised that her daughter would marry the boy who impregnated her and give birth rather than have an abortion, religious conservatives were even more enthusiastic.³ Palin gave interviews to conservative religious radio and television stations, to positive reviews.

Palin's interviews with mainstream media were far less successful. Her main liabilities in the campaign came not from her religion but from her inexperience and seeming lack of understanding of key policy issues. But Sarah Palin's faith was a minor issue in print and broadcast media, and widely discussed on the internet. Had the campaign been closer, it is likely that her religious views would have been the center of much greater controversy.

Palin had regularly attended an Assemblies of God church for many years, the largest Pentecostal denomination in the U.S. Although Pentecostals are a much larger group than Mormons, their exuberant worship style seems odd to more ritualistic or sedate faith traditions. Moreover, fundamentalist Christians have traditionally been hostile to Pentecostals. Jerry Falwell once proclaimed that worshippers who spoke in tongues in worship service had simply had too much pizza the night before. Earlier in the 20th century, a leading fundamentalist pastor had denounced Pentecostalism as the "last vomit of Satan." Palin's faith might have been a barrier to fundamentalist votes had the election been closer.

Palin's pastor's pronouncements were controversial, but it was two video clips widely distributed on YouTube that would have caused Palin more trouble had she been taken seriously as a candidate. One clip showed Palin addressing the congregation, calling a proposed oil pipeline that she was promoting "God's project."⁴ The second showed a visiting Kenyan pastor praying a protection spell for Palin against witchcraft in the state legislature.⁵ Although America does have a small Wiccan community, none served at the time in the Alaska state legislature.

Palin was less cautious in her use of religious language, using phrases such as "prayer warrior" that were far more combative in tone than that used by Bush. But although she signaled what many would consider a radical religious doctrine, she also symbolized the accommodation that orthodox Protestantism has made to modernity. Early

³ After the election, Palin's daughter and the father of her child separated.

⁴ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Q9MMJESyWA>, accessed 5/2/2009

⁵ <http://cbs2chicago.com/politics/palin.witchcraft.prayer.2.825153.html>

fundamentalist activists in the Moral Majority occasionally argued that women should play a limited role in the public sphere, and frequently argued mothers had a responsibility to stay home with small children, but Palin was a mother of several children who was also a governor. She delivered her last baby at the end of a political trip, and was back at work in a few days. And despite her child's special needs, she eagerly accepted the invitation to run for a job that demands long hours and much international travel.

Palin staked a strong pro-life position on abortion but said she had not thought seriously about who should be punished if abortion were illegal. More remarkably she spent time during the vice presidential debate defending her tolerance of gays and lesbians, announcing that she had a lesbian friend, and defended Alaska's laws that grant benefits to same-sex couples. Christian Right activists in the 1980s denounced homosexuality and in some cases called for criminal punishment of gays and lesbians. Palin's endorsement of partnership benefits reflects a broader societal change that has affected evangelicals and non-evangelicals alike.

40 In the end, the Christian Right did work for McCain-Palin although without enthusiasm. Focus on the Family produced and distributed a fictional letter from the future, purporting to be from a Christian in 2012 warning young Christians of the dangers of an Obama presidency. The letter claimed that a liberal supreme court had driven Christians from teaching in the public schools, forced the closing of the Boy Scouts of America, and ordered churches to perform same-sex marriages. Obama had stood by silently as Iran had obliterated Israel, and as Russia had overrun Georgia, the Ukraine, and occupied Poland.⁶ But the letter appeared to have little effect on younger evangelicals, who in critical states gave Obama more votes than any recent Democratic presidential candidate.

Thus, in the 2008 presidential campaign the Republican ticket used less religious rhetoric than Bush had done in 2000 and 2004. McCain was not a deeply religious man and resented the intolerance of the Christian Right. They were unhappy with his selection, but warmer toward Sarah Palin. But Palin was on the defensive most of the campaign because of her lack of knowledge and experience. Had the election been closer, she would have been forced to defend the YouTube videos of her religious practice as well.

⁶ http://focusfamaction.edgeboss.net/download/focusfamaction/pdfs/10-22-08_2012letter.pdf

The Democratic Ticket

Throughout his political career, Barack Obama has spoken strongly of his religious faith. The son of a Muslim from Kenya and an atheist from Kansas, Obama had attended a madras in Indonesia with his stepfather. In Chicago, Obama began attending the Trinity United Church of Christ, a large African American congregation. In a powerful speech to the Democratic National Convention in 2004, Obama proclaimed that “we worship an awesome God in the red states and the blue states.”⁷ In his autobiography Obama discussed his religious awakening at Trinity under the fiery pastor Rev. Jeremiah Wright.

Obama worked hard to reach various religious constituencies and built networks in Catholic parishes and evangelical communities. But although he had planned to use religious rhetoric boldly in the campaign, he soon found himself defending Trinity’s controversial pastor. Wright lived up to his name, frequently delivering jeremiads and prophetic critiques of American politics and society. These sermons were widely available, and some of his fiery rhetoric was captured on YouTube. Wright damned America for its bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and other past deeds – a rhetorical style that was common in African American churches but seemed alien to white Christians. Obama defended Wright at first, but after Wright appeared on a series of television talk shows spouting even more controversial comments, Obama distanced himself from the pastor, who was subsequently fired from his church.

Some of McCain’s campaign managers wanted to use clips of Wright’s sermons, which circulated widely on YouTube, as campaign advertisements, but McCain personally vetoed this idea. Later a political group that supported McCain ran ads featuring the sermons in Pennsylvania without McCain’s permission, but they did little to move voters.

Obama’s choice for Vice President, Senator Joe Biden, had his own reasons for not using religious language in the campaign. A devout Catholic, Biden had begun his career opposed to legal abortion but had moved with his party to support allowing women to choose abortions. Biden’s position – that he is personally opposed to abortion but would not impose his views on the public because a majority does not favor a ban on abortions – is common among Democratic Catholic

⁷ By convention, national television newscasters refer to states that vote Democratic as blue states and Republican states as red. In fact, there are many voters of both parties in all states, so states might better be described as different shades of purple.

politicians. But many conservative Bishops denounce pro-choice politicians, and in 2004 some announced that they would deny John Kerry communion were he to attend in their parish.

The 2008 Campaign In Context

The 2008 campaign may mark a period of more private religion among presidential candidates. Although a majority of Americans tell pollsters that they want their president to have religious faith and to talk about religion on occasion, by 2008 a majority believed that George Bush had done so too often, and perhaps insincerely. Some Americans wanted to tone down religious rhetoric in elections and return churches to the business of saving and nurturing souls. Others objected more to George Bush's personal brand of public religion, in which he frequently talked about praying for strength but never for guidance – something that many Democrats and Independents thought lacked humility.

42 But one election does not constitute a trend, and if Republicans nominate a strong religious conservative in 2012 such as Mike Huckabee or Sarah Palin, it is likely that the GOP ticket would again use public and private religious mobilization. As America becomes more religiously diverse, however, it will only be those candidates who can use religion in an inclusive manner who can do God talk. A majority of Americans are Christian, but the country now has growing numbers of Muslims, Hindu, Buddhists, and secular citizens.

One troubling element of the 2008 campaign was the invasion of church's privacy by political activists who taped sermons and other activities on cell phones and shared them on YouTube. Although voters may have a right to know a bit about the religion of presidential candidates, the candidates also deserve some privacy in their worship. The YouTube clips may force future candidates to choose bland religious services with pastors or priests who never stir controversy, instead of bolder pastors who challenge their congregations but sometimes make pronouncements that would be damaging in a campaign ad. Since assuming the presidency, Obama has not chosen a family church, although he attended regularly in Chicago. This is partially because of the likely high level of scrutiny to pastors and congregations where a president might attend.

The campaign also presented Americans with different views of what might be radical religion. John McCain's endorsement by funda-

mentalist pastors became an issue because of their public pronouncements on Hitler and on Islam. Hagee's comments, and those of other fundamentalist pastors whose endorsement McCain ultimately repudiated, were rooted in their radical religious worldview. George Bush was able to attract these kinds of endorsements with only minimal controversy, which he ignored. McCain did not ignore it, perhaps because the internet spreads these comments more quickly, and perhaps because McCain was personally repulsed by the comments.

Sarah Palin used the radical language of Pentecostal faith warriors, and the video clip of a prayer against witchcraft would have struck most Americans as radical. Even more would have seen Pentecostal worship as strange, for it includes speaking in tongues, and being "slain in the Spirit." These spiritual practices are common worldwide, however.

But ultimately what was most radical was Palin's merging of religion and politics, associating an oil pipeline with God's will. Most Christians believe that some policy is consistent with God's will and some is not, but the notion that God endorsed a particular oil pipeline deal struck most Americans as bizarre. That Palin meant this sincerely makes the statement even more radical.

Obama attended a large church that is part of the African American religious establishment. Jeremiah Wright was ranked as one of the most influential black pastors, and his sermons were not noticeably different from those of many others in countless churches across America. Moreover, his sermons were very much in the tradition of the prophet Jeremiah. But they would have struck most Americans as very radical had they become a more visible part of the campaign.

Joe Biden's Catholic faith is not radical, but radical Catholics in the U.S. would expel pro-choice politicians from the community. They are less concerned about positions on just war, economic justice, the death penalty, and other issues – indeed many of the most conservative Catholic activists disagree with church teachings on this. Nearly all American Catholics are "cafeteria Catholics" – accepting some but not all church teachings.

One very conservative Catholic told me a few years back that no one should call themselves a Catholic if they were unwilling to accept church teachings on abortion, contraception, and homosexuality. But as the conversation progressed, it became clear that she disagreed with Pope John Paul's view on the Iraq war, on taxes and social welfare policies, and on the death penalty. When I asked her to explain, she said that the pope was not an expert on foreign policy, economics, or the death penalty, but he was an expert on abortion and contraception.

This was certainly a radical claim, since John Paul had been in Poland during World War II, had been a key supporter of Solidarity, and had seen his friends disappear into Nazi and Soviet prisons to be executed.

Perhaps in a religiously diverse country such as the U.S., radical religion is really more about radical political consequences of religion than about doctrine or faith. All religion is radical, rooted in belief in one or more powerful beings that cannot be seen except through faith. What makes radical religion problematic is when it becomes fused with a political vision that brooks no compromise.

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Clyde Wilcox jest profesorem Uniwersytetu Georgetown, a w swojej naukowej skupia się na problemie władzy. Jest autorem i współautorem licznych książek oraz artykułów naukowych dotyczących religii, polityki, kampanii wyborczej i zachowania wyborców. Obecnie kończy czwarte wydanie swojej książki *Onward Christian Soldiers: The Christian Right in American Politics (Naprzód Żołnierze Chrześcijańscy: Prawica Chrześcijańska w Polityce Amerykańskiej)*.

Streszczenie

Radykalna religia oraz wybory prezydenckie 2008 roku: dlaczego temat religijny (God Talk) zanikł?

W ostatnich latach, wybory amerykańskie przyciągnęły uwagę całego świata ze względu na wybitną rolę retoryki religijnej w wypowiedziach kandydatów na prezydenta. W 2008 roku było w ich wystąpieniach znacznie mniej mowy o Bogu i religii. Artykuł ten jest analizą przyczyn stosowania retoryki religijnej w kampaniach wyborczych oraz próbą odpowiedzi na pytanie, dlaczego zauważa się znacznie rzadsze użycie języka religijnego podczas ostatnich kampanii. Poruszona w nim będzie także kwestia przyszłości retoryki religijnej w wyborach amerykańskich.

Słowa kluczowe

Wybory amerykańskie, język religijny, prawica chrześcijańska, George Bush, Barack Obama, partie polityczne.