

The Personal is (Not?) the Political: George W. Bush's Vocation and America's

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It is impossible to discuss the presidency of George W. Bush without taking into account the role that his religion plays in it. Pollsters have consistently found a "God gap" in the electorate, with frequent church-goers (who tend to be traditionalist) overwhelmingly approving of him and voting for him and those who rarely if ever darken the door of a sanctuary almost equally overwhelmingly opposed.i [1] There is a perception, in other words, that religious traditionalists have "one of their own" in the White House. Commentators--especially those critical of the President--see untoward religious influence in a wide range of policies, from efforts to limit government support of stem cell research and to involve faith-based organizations in the provision of social services to a "moralistic" and "universalistic" approach to foreign policy that seems to focus a great deal of attention on lands traditionally associated with the Bible.ii [2] Others accuse President Bush of speaking in a sort of "code," using religiously-inflected words and phrases that are intelligible only to the evangelical elect.iii [3]

What I would like to do in the course of this paper is explore the personal and political dimensions of George W. Bush's religiosity, showing both how he manages to distinguish the two and how his faith--so central to his character and self-understanding--cannot help but influence his political speeches and deeds. I do not mean hereby to argue that Bush is a "theocrat" who illegitimately imposes his religious views on an unwilling populace, but rather

only that his presidency cannot be understood without taking into account the spiritual resources upon which he draws.

Bush's Spiritual Journey

Much of Bush's spiritual biography is typical in the contemporary world of evangelical Protestantism. Throughout his life, he was "churched" in a variety of mainline denominations. As biographer Stephen Mansfield puts it:

He was baptized in a New Haven Episcopal church, trained for a decade in the First Presbyterian Church of Midland, and made to feel ♦ "stirrings of faith" in Saint Martin 's Episcopal Church of Houston. During his Andover years, he was required to be in a Congregationalist-style chapel five times a week, which meant he spent as much time in church in those three years as a normal attender does in ten.iv [4]

Once he met Laura, he joined the Methodist church and was a dutiful pillar of First Methodist in Midland . But his faith was not deep and did not give him a direction in life.

What happened over the course of a few years in the mid-80s, however, did. A series of encounters with evangelists, most notably Arthur Blessitt and Billy Graham, together with his serious engagement in one of the ubiquitous "small group" Bible studies, utterly transformed him.v [5] By 1988, he was Bush senior's point man with the evangelical community, "talking to religious leaders in a language they understood."vi [6] Furthermore, over the course of those years he gained enough discipline and direction to eschew "the charms of Bacchus" and be freed to "live out those [Christian] truths far more powerfully than he must originally have imagined possible."vii [7]

This is not to say that Bush's newly deepened faith turned him into a profound theologian. As he told a Houston reporter in 1994, "I'm sure there is some kind of heavy doctrinal difference [between the Episcopal and Methodist churches], which I'm not sophisticated enough to explain to you."viii [8] His "spiritual" biographers are at pains to explain that Bush's faith is particularistic and experiential; it does not come from or result in a systematic engagement in doctrinal, ecclesiological, or theological questions. According to Mansfield , Bush "eschews the theoretical and prefers the simple expressions that lead to action rather than complex theories that he thinks will lead to perpetual debate◆. He has not grown in his faith by pondering theological problems or meditating on mystical abstractions. He has grown by watching his heroes, listening to stories and learning of the heavenly through earthly example."ix [9] David Aikman says that "[i]t is probable that he finds himself far more comfortable with a fluid, generic interpretation of the Christian faith than with a sharply stamped version of it."x [10] Mansfield and Aikman both call him, in effect, a "mere Christian."xi [11] Kengor cites a Texas political

associate who calls him "a New Testament kind of Christian," "a Sermon on the Mount type. He is not fire and brimstone."xii [12]

Of course, as noted above George W. Bush's "mere Christianity" or "self-help Methodism," as one uncharitable critic put itxiii [13] , does not in and of itself distinguish him from perhaps millions of other American evangelicals who talk the talk about walking the walk. Like many of his peers, Bush's newly deepened faith enabled him to focus on the trajectory of his life and find the discipline to live up to his responsibilities; without anything else, it would probably be hard to distinguish him from one of Bill McCarthy's Promise Keepers, whose sense of calling is above all reflected in their approach to their "faith, family, and friends"xiv [14]

Of course, if one happens to be a politician, or if politics happens to be the family business, this approach to one's calling can be highly significant. In A Charge to Keepxv [15] , his 2000 campaign biography, Bush wrote that "[m]y faith frees me. Frees me to put the problem of the moment in proper perspective. Frees me to make decisions that others might not like. Frees me to do the right thing, even though it may not poll well. Frees me to enjoy life and not worry about what comes next."xvi [16] As a (political) man of faith, his principal constituent would seem to be God. In another passage from A Charge to Keep, Bush wrote that "I could not be governor if I did not believe in a divine plan that supersedes all human plans❖. I've certainly never plotted the various steps of my life, certainly never campaigned for one office to try to position myself for the next."xvii [17]

Taken together with the famous story of his sense that he was called to seek the Presidency^{xviii} [18] , this attitude might seem unsettling, indeed downright scary, to some secularists. Here is an officeholder who understands himself as answering above all to God, who seems to have come to believe that he was put on earth to be President, perhaps even during a time of grave crisis. Might not George W. Bush as President be rigid, self-righteously moralistic, and inclined to trust his own intuitions above the advice of experts and the suggestions of allies? Might he not be tempted to use the presidential "bully pulpit" as a literal pulpit from behind which he could bully dissenters?

Religion in the Bush Administration

While some of President Bush's critics display a propensity to attribute virtually every decision of which they disapprove to his (impermissible) religious motives^{xix} [19] , he has been quite careful in his public expressions.^{xx} [20] When speaking about his own faith, for example, he has stressed the way in which it humbles him. As he said in his first address to the Presidential Prayer Breakfast on February 1, 2001 , "Faith teaches humility❖. A recognition that we are small in God's universe yet precious in His sight."^{xxi} [21] On the same occasion the next year, he asserted that "[f]aith teaches humility, and with it, tolerance. Once we have recognized God's image in ourselves, we must recognize it in every human being."^{xxii} [22] Biographer Paul Kengor glosses this statement in the following way: "Because every person is

made in the image of God♦, believer and non-believer alike are all due respect and dignity by those who believe in God."xxiii [23] He also notes the manner in which Bush has been ecumenical in his approach to acknowledging faith in the White House--celebrating Christian, Jewish, and Muslim holidays, among others.xxiv [24]

On yet another occasion (May 1, 2003), he said, "Prayer teaches humility. We find that the plan of the Creator is sometimes very different from our own. Yet, we learn to depend on His loving will, bowing to purposes we don't always understand."xxv [25] "We cannot," he says, "presume to know every design of our Creator, or to assert a special claim on His favor."xxvi [26] President Bush does not regard himself as in control of his own destiny, let alone the destiny of the nation as a whole. He does not simply trust either his reason or his instincts, but reminds himself constantly, through prayerxxvii [27] , of his fallibility and that of all human beings.

President Bush's constant reflection on human weakness and finitude might be taken by some as a counsel of despair, but he quite regularly connects these themes with hope: "The promise of faith is not the absence of suffering; it is the presence of grace. And at every step we are secure in knowing that suffering produces perseverance, and perseverance produces character, and character produces hope--and hope does not disappoint."xxviii [28] On the occasion of the *Challenger* disaster, he said, "We can also be confident of the ways of Providence , even when they are far from our understanding. Events aren't moved by blind change and chance. Behind

all of life and all of history, there's a dedication and purpose, set by the hand of a just and faithful God. And that hope will never be shaken."xxix [29] Divine Providence gives us the hope that, within limits, events and people are intelligible to us and that, within limits, we can act effectively on behalf of the good and the right.xxx [30]

But, one might object, President Bush's speeches reflect an essentially Christian worldview, one that does not resonate with, and perhaps even marginalizes or alienates, non-Christians at home and abroad.xxxi [31] As Mansfield notes, however, Bush's response to the events of 9/11 showed him as "president of a democracy rather than the ♦preacher in chief" his critics thought him to be--and some on the Right wanted him to be."xxxii [32] Throughout his presidency, he has been careful to acknowledge his responsibility as the leader of a religiously pluralistic nation, addressing audiences at home and abroad who do not necessarily share his personal faith. "We welcome," he has said, "all religions in America , all religions. We honor diversity in this country. We respect people's deep convictions."xxxiii [33] While he acknowledges that he has "a fantastic opportunity to let the light shine," he "will do so as a secular politician." His job, he says, "is not to promote a religion but to promote the ability of people to worship as they see fit."xxxiv [34] He has dealt with America 's (and the world's) religious pluralism by emphasizing the practical moral common ground that, he believes, all can share. Human beings can be good without faith, yet faith is a source of goodness for many.xxxv [35] Indeed, "faith without works is dead."xxxvi [36] There is, he says, "a universal call, and that main universal call is to love your neighbor. It extends throughout all faith."xxxvii [37] For Bush, the practical essence of all religion is "peace and love and compassion."xxxviii [38] In another context, a

sermon he preached as Governor of Texas (March 6, 1999), he expressed his ecumenical vision in this way: "We must teach our children bedrock values--not the values of one religious denomination over another, but Judeo-Christian values that have stood the test of time. The importance of family. There are obligations to love your neighbor, give an honest day's work for an honest day's wages. Don't lie, do not cheat, do not steal. Respect others. Respect their opinions, and remember, it's you who is [sic] responsible for the decisions you make in life."^{xxxix} [39] One can call these affirmations an expression of natural law, common grace, or public reason. They are certainly, as he acknowledges, not specific to one cultural or religious tradition.^{xl} [40]

Bush's famous invocation of the distinction between good and evil in the aftermath of 9/11 has, as noted above, also drawn the fire of critics.^{xli} [41] Much of what he has had to say on the subject does not depart substantially from the tenor of Abraham Lincoln's condemnation of slavery: "if slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong."^{xlii} [42] "Some worry," Bush said on June 1, 2002, "that it is somehow undiplomatic or impolite to speak the language of right and wrong. I disagree. Different circumstances require different methods, but not different moralities. Moral truth is the same in every culture, in every time, and in every place. Targeting innocent civilians for murder is always and everywhere wrong. Brutality against women is always and everywhere wrong. There can be no neutrality between justice and cruelty, between the innocent and the guilty. We are in a conflict between good and evil, and America will call evil by its name."^{xliii} [43]

While few other than the most abject and depraved apologists for terrorism can disagree with part of what Bush says here--the evils he identifies are real--some might wonder about the other part of the dualism, which seems to abandon the humility that seems otherwise to characterize Bush's faith. Is America as good as terrorism is evil? Are we not at the very least all sinners in the sight of God, worthy of condemnation and in need of God's grace? Can we not identify and resist evil without calling ourselves unalloyedly good?xliv [44]

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Bush went a step further, speaking of "our responsibility to history," which is "to answer these attacks and *rid the world of evil*." xlv [45] Even if we are (relatively) good, as sinners go, to assert that we can actually rid the world of evil is to assert a superhuman power--the very antithesis of humility. Perhaps we could forgive President Bush and his speechwriters for misspeaking (and miswriting) in the heat of the moment, but he made a similar point in his West Point commencement address (June 1, 2002), where he promised to "lift this dark threat from our country and from the world."xlvi [46] It would seem to have been more in tune with the general tenor of his stance to speak of our responsibility to identify and resist evil wherever it appears, recognizing that it is part and parcel of our fallen human condition. Indeed, even in the September 14, 2001 speech he said that in "every generation, the world has produced enemies of human freedom"xlvii [47] , which suggests that the struggle against evil is on-going.

But perhaps the President's hyperbole is, on one level, defensible. In his post-9/11 speeches, President Bush has developed what could almost be called a theology of history, beginning from the proposition that "[l]iberty is ♦ the plan of Heaven for humanity," "the right and capacity of mankind."xlvi [48] America was attacked because "we are freedom's home and defender."xlix [49] " America has no empire to extend or utopia to establish. We wish for others only what we wish for ourselves--safety from violence, the rewards of liberty, and the hope for a better life."l [50] We will prevail in our battle for freedom because, variously, "[t]he current of history runs strongly toward freedom," "our cause is just," we have the finest military, people the world over "want their liberty pure and whole," and, finally, "the author of freedom is not indifferent to the fate of freedom."li [51] If indeed "the calling of our time" is "the advance of freedom," and if America is "freedom's home and defender," with a "special calling to promote justice and defend the weak and suffering of the world," then it is perhaps easy to understand how President Bush can speak so confidently of a conflict between good and evil.lii [52] But to act on behalf of the good is a burden and responsibility, rather than a description of everything we do.

President Bush's Second Inaugural

President Bush treated these themes comprehensively in his Second Inaugural Address.liii [53] There he identified America 's cause with the cause of freedom:

America 's vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one. From the day of our Founding, we have proclaimed that every man and woman on this earth has rights, and

dignity, and matchless value, because they bear the image of the Maker of Heaven and earth. Across the generations we have proclaimed the imperative of self-government, because no one is fit to be a master, and no one deserves to be a slave. Advancing these ideals is the mission that created our Nation. It is the honorable achievement of our fathers. Now it is the urgent requirement of our nation's security, and the calling of our time.

While he uses "theistic"--though not specifically Christian--language to describe the source of that freedom, he does so in a manner squarely within the tradition initiated by the Declaration of Independence. And while he speaks in terms of "mission" and "calling," both of which obviously have religious resonance, he does not depart much from similar language used by John F.

Kennedy in his Inaugural Address:

And yet the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe--the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God.

We dare not forget today that we are the heirs of that first revolution. Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans--born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage--and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world.

Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty. This much we pledge--and more.liv [54]

Furthermore, President Bush recognizes that the calling is not one that is easily accomplished:

The great objective of ending tyranny is the concentrated work of generations. The difficulty of the task is no excuse for avoiding it. *America 's influence is not unlimited*, but fortunately for the oppressed, America 's influence is considerable, and we will use it confidently in freedom's cause.lv [55]

The confidence to which he refers seems to come from two sources. The first is anthropological: "Eventually," he says, "the call of freedom comes to every mind and every soul." The longing for freedom is sewn into human nature. While it can be repressed or effaced for a time, perhaps even a long time, nature will eventually reassert itself. The second source of confidence is expressed in a passage quoted from Abraham Lincoln:

"Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves; and, under the rule of a just God, cannot long retain it."lvi [56]

Our attachment to freedom is connected with a conception of justice. To adhere to principles of justice is to believe in a world that ultimately upholds these principles. While it is possible to make a claim of "justice" while self-consciously regarding it as absurd and utterly unsupported, there is a certain self-contradiction there. Justice implies mutual obligations, which in turn

implies a capacity on the part of others to recognize and accept those obligations. A claim of justice, in other words, implies a conception of nature receptive to that claim.

Tying justice to God adds another element to this understanding of a nature capable of being transformed by human effort. Rather than, for example, regarding nature as simply capable of receiving the impress of perhaps infinite human power, this line of argument suggests a finite human power cooperating with and working within the bounds of (a divinely created) nature. Justice is not whatever powerful human beings--individually or collectively--happen to say it is. It makes claims upon us because it is woven into the world by the Creator. In other words, a theistic conception of justice is the only conception that can consistently be connected to an understanding of human finitude. George W. Bush's--and Abraham Lincoln's--theism serves as the ground of a concern with justice that is neither absurd nor self-delusional, on the one hand, nor overweening, on the other.

Promoting freedom within a framework of justice requires both self-sacrifice and self-restraint. While the charms of freedom might appeal naturally, as it were, self-sacrifice and self-restraint have to be cultivated.^{lvii} [57] This leads to the domestic element of Bush's Second Inaugural, which continues a focus he has maintained since he was Governor of Texas. He put it this way in a sermon he preached in 1999:

My dream is to usher in what I call the "responsibility era"--an era in which each and every Texan understands that we're responsible for the decisions we make in life; that each of us is responsible for making sure our families come first; that we're responsible for loving our neighbors as we'd like to be loved ourselves; and that we're responsible for the communities in which we live.lviii [58]

He understood then and understands now that presidential leadership and government altogether are limited in what they can do to cultivate the responsible use of liberty. As he said in his Second Inaugural, that task belongs, above all, to a healthy civil society:

In America 's ideal of freedom, the public interest depends on private character--on integrity, and tolerance toward others, and the rule of conscience in our own lives. Self-government relies, in the end, on the governing of the self. That edifice of character is built in families, supported by communities with standards, and sustained in our national life by the truths of Sinai, the Sermon on the Mount, the words of the Koran, and the varied faiths of our people. Americans move forward in every generation by reaffirming all that is good and true that came before--ideals of justice and conduct that are the same yesterday, today, and forever.

The President can celebrate and call our attention to individual sacrifices.lix [59] He can offer praise and support for the institutions that cultivate character.lx [60] And he can single out, as he does quite frequently, those "values" that he believes all decent people, regardless of their religion (or irreligion), share:

[I]n our society that strong values are shared by good people of different faiths, and good people who have no faith at all. These are universal values, values we share in all our diversity: Respect, tolerance, responsibility, honesty, self-restraint, family commitment, civic duty, fairness and compassion. These are the moral landmarks that guide a successful life.lxi [61]

But in his Second Inaugural, President Bush does not leave it at virtues conducive to self-reliance, on the one hand, and mutual toleration, on the other. There are also the virtues that constitute and maintain our community:

In America 's ideal of freedom, the exercise of rights is ennobled by service, and mercy, and a heart for the weak. Liberty for all does not mean independence from one another. Our nation relies on men and women who look after a neighbor and surround the lost with love. Americans, at our best, value the life we see in one another, and must always remember that even the unwanted have worth.

While religious people and religious institutions surely do not have a monopoly on "service," "mercy," having "a heart for the weak," "surround[ing] the lost with love," and "remember[ing] that even the unwanted have worth," these concerns are central to the Judeo-Christian tradition.lxii [62]

Still, rather than explicitly call upon us to study our Bibles and remember what we have been taught in our churches and temples, President Bush simply evokes those lessons in language that is intelligible and accessible to all. He draws upon a heritage that many share

and that all who would be part of our community can (and, I would argue, must) appreciate. His language is not exclusive or marginalizing, but rather inclusive and hospitable.

Conclusion: George W. Bush and Civil Religion

From these considerations, it should be clear, first of all, that George W. Bush understands and presents himself as a flawed, fallible man of faith. This is certainly the source of some part of his attraction to those evangelical Christian voters who voted overwhelmingly for him. But as President, he has been careful not to speak in exclusively Christian terms. He affects, as it were, a "mere religiosity," calling upon principles and understandings that are certainly at home in the Christian tradition, but also arguably common to a wide range of other traditions. He certainly occasionally makes use of Christian language, but not in a devotional or exclusionary way. His purpose is, rather, to call upon cultural references common to a substantial portion of his audience. As speechwriter Michael Gerson explains,

A fourth category [of the President's employment of religious language] are *literary allusions to hymns and scripture*. In our first inaugural, we had "when we see that wounded traveler on the road to Jericho , we will not pass to the other side;" or "there is power, wonder-working power in the goodness and idealism and faith of the American people" in the State of the Union .

I've actually had, in the past, reporters call me up on a variety of speeches and ask me

where are the code words. I try to explain that they're not code words; they're literary references understood by millions of Americans. They're not code words; they're our culture. It's not a code word when I put a reference to T.S. Eliot's *Choruses From the Rock* in our Whitehall speech; it's a literary reference. And just because some don't get it doesn't mean it's a plot or a secret.lxiii [63]

I would argue that the most important function of the President's public theism is its capacity to qualify exclusive devotion to the nation and humble any overweening sense of human or national power. While he has on occasion been accused of apotheosizing the nation and attributing omnipotence to itlxiv [64] , the principal effect of his invocation of a deity is humbly to remind us that we are not simply masters of our own destiny and that we are to be judged by measures of which we are not the authors. The nation and its leaders may be called to a mission and be encouraged to elevated aspirations, but this mission and these aspirations are not presented as matters of arbitrary choice or national fiat. We the people can fall short and be held blameworthy for so doing.

i [1] A characteristic study is John C. Green, Corwin E. Smidt, James L. Guth, and Lyman A. Kellstedt, "The American Religious Landscape and the 2004 Presidential Vote: Increased Polarization," available at <http://pewforum.org/publications/surveys/postelection.pdf>. This study distinguishes between "traditionalist," "centrist," and "modernist" adherents of major Christian faith traditions (evangelical and

mainline Protestants, and Roman Catholics), finding that Bush did extremely well among traditionalists, reasonably well among centrists, and poorly among modernists, not to mention those who are secular.

ii [2] Kevin Phillips' American Theocracy is a case in point here. Other works that take a similar tack are Esther Kaplan, With God On Their Side (New York : The New Press, 2004) and Michelle Goldberg, Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism (New York : W. W. Norton, 2006).

iii [3] See, for example, Bruce Lincoln, "Words Matter: How Bush Speaks in Religious Code," Boston Globe (September 12, 2004), available at http://www.boston.com/news/globe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2004/09/12/words_matter/.

iv [4] Stephen Mansfield, The Faith of George W. Bush (New York : Jeremy Tarcher/Penguin, 2004), pp. 59 ◆ 60.

v [5] Paul Kengor notes that Bush is "uncomfortable using" the expression "born-again." See Paul Kengor, God and George W. Bush: A Spiritual Life (New York : ReganBooks, 2004), p. 23.

vi [6] Mansfield , p. 84.

vii [7] David Aikman, A Man of Faith: The Spiritual Journey of George W. Bush (Nashville , TN : W Publishing Group, 2004), pp. 79, 80. On the effect of his faith on his drinking, see Kengor, p. 25. It would not be misleading to attribute Bush's interest in the faith-based initiative, especially in dealing with matters of personal transformation, as at least in part an outgrowth of his own experience with overcoming his drinking problem.

viii [8] Mansfield , p. 54.

ix [9] Mansfield , pp. 145, 155.

x [10] Aikman, p. 198.

xi [11] Mansfield, p. 155; Aikman, p. 198.

xii [12] Kengor, p. 30. See also p. 35: "It has been said that he mixes a Wesleyan theology of personal transformation and personal relationship with God with a Calvinist understanding of a God who has laid out a ♦divine plan."

xiii [13] This is Jim Wallis's characterization in "Dangerous Religion: George W. Bush's Theology of Empire," Sojourners Magazine (September-October, 2003). For a response to a related argument, see Kengor, pp. 27 ♦ 28.

xiv [14] Aikman (pp. 15 ♦ 16) emphasizes the importance of this threesome for several generations of Bushes. See, for example, George W. Bush, A Charge to Keep: My Journey to the White House (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), p. 6.

xv [15] See note #14 above.

xvi [16] Bush, A Charge to Keep, p. 6.

xvii [17] Bush, A Charge to Keep, p. 6.

xviii [18] See the slightly different accounts in Aikman (pp. 109 ♦ 110) and Mansfield (pp. 107 ♦ 108). Of course, President Bush is not alone in his "vocational" approach to public office, as an account of Rep. Denise Majette's decision in 2004 to seek the Democratic nomination for the U.S. Senate seat from Georgia demonstrates. See Ben Smith, "Majette's Quantum Leap of Faith," Atlanta Journal-Constitution (July 11, 2004).

xix [19] See, for example, University of Chicago Law Professor Geoffrey Stone's characterization of President Bush's veto of stem cell legislation as based upon "simply his own, sectarian religious belief," despite the fact that the President's veto message made no mention of religion. The President's veto message is available at <http://article.nationalreview.com/?q=ODVIZWQwYzViMWVhMTRkODhiOTI4NmU1YzJlNmVINmU=>; Stone's blog comments, entitled "Religious Rights and Wrongs," are posted at http://uchicagolaw.typepad.com/faculty/2006/07/religious_right.html#more.

xx [20] The speechwriter who seems to have exercised the greatest influence over President Bush's public expressions is Michael Gerson, profiled by Carl M. Cannon, "Soul of a Conservative," National Journal (May 14, 2005), posted at http://www.religionandsocialpolicy.org/news/article_print.cfm?id=2753, and Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Believer," The New Yorker (February 13/20, 2006), posted at http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/articles/060213fa_fact1. A transcript of a conversation between Gerson and a number of journalists, at an event hosted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life on December 6, 2004, can be found at <http://pewforum.org/events/index.php?EventID=67>.

xxi [21] Thomas M. Freiling, ed., George W. Bush on God and Country (Fairfax, VA: Allegiance Press, 2004), p. 197.

xxii [22] Freiling, p. 36. Kengor (pp. 62 ◆ 63) quotes a telling passage from a 1999 interview with U.S. News and World Report:

It's really important for someone in my position to live the word, in this case, but also understand that people communicate with God and reach God in different ways. It just doesn't have to be my way. And I think it's really important if you're trying to unite a nation that is as diverse as ours to spend more time living the example I've learned of Christ as opposed to lecturing. And I really mean that◆. And I am mindful of what Billy Graham one time told me: try not to figure out--try to pick and choose who gets into heaven◆. It is very important for people to not be haughty in their religion. And there's all kinds of admonitions in the Bible; haughtiness, rightfulness is a sin in itself◆. Billy Graham said, "Don't play God." I don't get to determine who goes to heaven and who goes to hell.

See also Bush's 2000 Republican National Convention speech, quoted by Kengor (p. 72): "I believe in tolerance, not in spite of my faith, but because of it. I believe in a God who calls us not to judge our neighbors, but to love them."

xxiii [23] Kengor, p. 106.

xxiv [24] Kengor, pp. 108 ◆ 110; cf. also pp. 136 ◆ 145.

xxv [25] Freiling, p. 70.

xxvi [26] Freiling, p. 117.

xxvii [27] On President Bush's prayer and devotional life, see Mansfield, pp. 119 ◆ 121, Aikman, p. 158, and an interview with a number of Christian journalists and intellectuals (May 28, 2004), posted at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/global/printer.html?/ct/2004/121/51.0.html>.

xxviii [28] Freiling, p. 37.

xxix [29] Freiling, p. 77. See also the Pew transcript, where Gerson says: "The first category in which we use [religious language] is *comfort in grief and mourning*, and we've had too many of those opportunities: in the space shuttle disaster, 9/11, other things where people are faced with completely unfair suffering. And in that circumstance, a president generally can't say that death is final, and separation is endless, and the universe is an echoing, empty void."

xxx [30] See James W. Ceaser, " Providence and the President: George W. Bush's Theory of History," The Weekly Standard (March 10, 2003), posted at <http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/002/315mmrvy.asp>:

One of [the] central themes [of Providence] is that the course of history, from a human standpoint, is unfathomable: "The Almighty has His own purposes." One conviction, however, remains supreme: While the path of events before us can never be fully known, and while there will always be difficulty and pain, Providence offers a basis for hope and a ground for avoiding despair. Yet it disclaims any pretension to know the future and offers no assurance of divine reward for our action in this world. At the practical level of human affairs, the focus remains on human responsibility and choice.

In the Pew transcript, Gerson says:

The fifth category is a *reference to providence*, which some of the other examples have touched on. This is actually a longstanding tenet of American civil religion. It is one of the central themes of Lincoln's second inaugural. It's a recurring theme of Martin Luther King - "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice;" "we do not know what the future holds, but we know Who holds the future."

The important theological principle here, I believe, is to avoid identifying the purposes of an individual or a nation with the purposes of God. That seems presumption to me, and we've done our best to avoid the temptation.

xxxi [31] For an example of this criticism, see Jane Eisner, "President Bush's religious language may be heartfelt--but what if it's also exclusionary," Philadelphia Inquirer (February 11, 2003).

xxxii [32] Mansfield , p. 142.

xxxiii [33] Freiling, p. 95.

xxxiv [34] See the interview cited above in note #22, as well as Freiling, p. 131: "Religious freedom is the cornerstone of our Republic, a core principle of our Constitution, and a fundamental human right." In a Beliefnet interview during the 2002 campaign, he characterized his political responsibility in the following way: "[T]he president of the United States 's job is to set an example, to make sound decisions, to respect religion, and, if asked, to herald religion," but "not to try to convert people to religion." Excerpts from this and other campaign 2000 interviews are posted at http://www.beliefnet.com/story/33/story_3345.html.

xxxv [35] See Freiling, pp. 82, 95.

xxxvi [36] Freiling, pp. 82, 96.

xxxvii [37] Quoted in Aikman, p. 166; see also Freiling, p. 121.

xxxviii [38] See the interview cited above in note #22.

xxxix [39] The speech is reprinted in Aikman, pp. 205 ◆ 213; the passage quoted comes from p. 211. In addition, as President, even before 9/11, he included mosques as part of America's religious mix. See Freiling, p. 191.

xl [40] In the Pew transcript, Gerson puts it this way:

We've tried to apply a principled pluralism; we have set out to welcome all religions, not favoring any religions in a sectarian way. I think that the president is the first president to mention mosques and Islam in his inaugural address. The president has consistently urged tolerance and respect for other faiths and traditions, and has received some criticism for it.

We often in our presentations make specific reference to people who are not religious; we've done that right from the beginning. In our first prayer breakfast in February of 2001, we said an American president serves people of every faith and serves some of no faith at all. And there are plenty of other examples.

In Carl M. Cannon's judgment (also recorded in the Pew transcript), "George W. Bush has been by any standard more inclusive and less overtly religious than his predecessors. He is the most ecumenical of presidents - probably the most ecumenical president we've ever had." See also Carl M. Cannon, "Bush and God," National Journal (January 3, 2004), pp. 12 ◆ 18, posted at http://nationaljournal.com/reprints/011504pew_cannon.pdf.

xli [41] See, for example, Peter Singer, The President of Good and Evil: The Ethics of George W. Bush (New York : Dutton, 2004). For an alternative view defending the President's use of moral language, see James W. Ceaser, "Bush vs. Nietzsche: The Politics of Evil," The Weekly Standard (April 1, 2002), available at <http://weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/001/048vhwqw.asp>.

xlii [42] Abraham Lincoln, Letter to A.G. Hodges, April 4, 1864 .

xliii [43] Freiling, p. 263.

xliv [44] To be sure, the President has admitted that "we don't own the ideals of freedom and human dignity, and sometimes we haven't always [sic] lived up to them" (Freiling, p. 76).

xlvi [45] Freiling, p. 112; emphasis mine.

xlvi [46] Freiling, p. 262.

xlvi [47] Freiling, p. 114.

xlvi [48] Freiling, pp. 141, 151.

xlix [49] Freiling, p. 114.

l [50] Freiling, p. 260.

li [51] Freiling, pp. 143, 152, 207, 214.

lii [52] Freiling, pp. 151, 255.

liii [53] Delivered on January 20, 2005 and posted at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/01/20050120-1.html>. I discussed it in "Bush's Second Inaugural Address and Its (Dis)Contents," posted at <http://www.ashbrook.org/publicat/oped/knippenberg/05/inaugural.html>.

liv [54] Posted at <http://comm.tamu.edu/pres/speeches/jfkinaug.html>.

lv [55] Emphasis mine.

lvi [56] Letter to Henry L. Pierce and others, April 6, 1859 . The context of this letter is interesting, as it is written in response to an invitation to celebrate a festival in honor of the birthday of Thomas Jefferson. Lincoln discusses how some seek to deny and overturn "the principles of Jefferson ," which are "the definitions and axioms of a free society." Despotism is a thing of the past, but it can be reestablished. Still, we should be grateful to Jefferson, who" had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so to embalm it there, that to-day, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and oppression."

lvii [57] "The Bush agenda relies on a certain anthropology. It assumes that human flourishing, whether at home or abroad, is possible only when two conditions are met: first, the political and social freedom to choose one's own pursuits; and second, laws and social institutions to encourage individuals to choose *well*, that is, to live responsibly within self-imposed moral limits. Thus, full self-government is not possible under the yoke of a political or religious tyranny. But neither is it possible in a society in which the formation of character is left completely to chance, or when government policies sever the link between a person's actions and their consequences." Wilfred M. McClay, "Bush's Calling," *Commentary* (June, 2005), p. 51. The text of McClay's lecture on "American Culture and the Presidency," on which this article is based, is posted at <http://www.eppc.org/conferences/pubID.2271,eventID.90/transcript.asp>. I discussed the lecture in "George W. Bush's Conservatism," *The American Enterprise Online* (November 2, 2005), posted at http://www.taemag.com/issues/articleID.18813/article_detail.asp.

lviii [58] Aikman, p. 210.

lix [59] See, for example, his speech on Memorial Day this year (2006), given at Arlington National Cemetery , and posted at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/05/20060529-1.html>:

All who are buried here understood their duty. They saw a dark shadow on the horizon, and went to meet it. They understood that tyranny must be met with resolve, and that liberty is always the achievement of courage. Here, in the presence of veterans they fought with and loved ones whose pictures they carried, the fallen give silent witness to the price of our liberty -- and our nation honors them, this day and every day.

lx [60] See, for example, President Bush's remarks to the White House Conference on Character and Community (June 19, 2002), posted at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/character/character-community-conf.pdf>.

lxi [61] President Bush's remarks to the White House Conference on Character and Community, Proceedings, p. 5.

lxii [62] See, for example, Deuteronomy 10:18 (God "executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing."); Psalm 9:18 ("For the needy shall not always be forgotten, and the hope of the poor shall not perish forever."); and James 1:27 ("Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction❖.")

lxiii [63] See the transcript cited at note #20.

lxiv [64] See Wallis, "Dangerous Religion," cited in note #7; for a more measured version of this criticism, see Peggy Noonan, "Way Too Much God, Wall Street Journal (January 21, 2005), posted at <http://www.opinionjournal.com/columnists/pnoonan/?id=110006184>. McClay (p. 53) also sounds a cautionary note: "There is a reason why the Christian tradition distinguishes between hope, which is considered a theological virtue, and optimism, which is not. Conservatism will be like the salt that has lost its savor if it abandons its mission to remind us of what Thomas Sowell has called ❖the constrained vision' of human existence--the vision that sees life as a struggle full of unintended consequences and tragic dilemmas, involving people whose noblest efforts often fail, sometimes miserably so."