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BIBLICAL REFERENCES IN SPEECHES

OF AMERICAN PRESIDENTS

ABSTRACT

The present article analyses some aspects of American political discourse mainly focusing on religious discourse. Sharing the viewpoint of many prominent researchers of the chosen field we assume that religious discourse undoubtedly has always played an important role in the political history of the United States of America. Biblical references in political discourse can be viewed as special indicators of Christian faith and existence of one God although the USA is known as a multireligious country.

It is customary in American political discourse to make use of biblical language, which is an integral part of American public address system. When speaking of American political discourse one can easily associate it with religious belief and bible references. Christianity has always played an important role in the speeches of American politicians in spite of the fact that nearly all the politicians tend to mention that the United States of America is a country of many diverse religions.

Nearly all the speeches of American presidents show that one of their main peculiarities is that they can be easily connected with Christian faith. The references to God, to the Holy Bible, to God's will, God's promises, Bible quotations are exclusively tied to Christianity, but these references are also applicable to various faiths that recognize the existence of only one God.

We do not retreat. We are not content to stand still. As Americans, we go forward, in the service of our country, by the will of God (Franklin D. Roosevelt's Third Inaugural Address Given on Monday, January 20, 1941).

Finally, whether you are citizens of America or citizens of the world, ask of us the same high standards of strength and sacrifice which we ask of you. With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own (4).⁸⁰

One of the examples of fortified positions of Christianity in political speeches is the direct reference to the Holy Bible:

Michelle and I we are both practicing Christians and obviously this position may be considered to put us at odds with the views of others. But, you know, when we think about our faith, the thing at root that we think about is, not only Christ sacrificing himself on our behalf, but it's also the Golden Rule, you know, treat others the way you would want to be treated (3).

However, specified the non-traditional and liberal position of Barack Obama, it is important to investigate Obama's biblical references and try to give possible explanations of the particular choices made by him.

"We remain a young nation," Barack Obama said, "but, in the words of Scripture, the time has come to set aside childish things."

In the given example Barack Obama was quoting the New Testament, Corinthians 13:11 which deals with St. Paul's letter to the church in Corinth.

B. Obama's application of this scrupulous choice of Scripture, particularly in a speech which was also aimed at the Muslim, Jewish, Hindu and atheist Americans is colossal. This love chapter is usually read at weddings which speaks about true love in the following way: "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails." (1 Corinthians, 13:4).

“When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.” (1 Corinthians, 13:11).

St. Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth goes back to the times when the church was undergoing the phase of internal struggles and divisions, and the church was also exposed to wicked influences neighboring the community. Corinth was a young town, the church was filled by young people. St. Paul delivered a letter of criticism and implored the Corinthians to stop the conflict and accept the most essential virtue: love.

Barack Obama’s choice of this special biblical reference can be perceived as an effort to try to broaden the concept and principles of love, and thus “loving thy neighbour” the American people can become devoted to the concept of racial inclusiveness and ideological variety, essential during the periods of economic, global and domestic crises.⁸¹

It must be also mentioned that nearly all American presidents tend to finish their speeches with the following words “God bless America” or “May God’s grace be with you.” This tradition is considered to be established after Richard Nixon’s Resignation Speech given on August 8, 1974:

This, more than anything, is what I hoped to achieve when I sought the Presidency. This, more than anything, is what I hope will be my legacy to you, to our country, as I leave the Presidency. To have served in this office is to have felt a very personal sense of kinship with each and every American. In leaving it, I do so with this prayer: May God’s grace be with you in all the days ahead.

In the face of our common dangers, in this winter of our hardship, let

us remember these timeless words. With hope and virtue, let us brave once more the icy currents, and endure what storms may come. Let it be said by our children's children that when we were tested we refused to let this journey end, that we did not turn back nor did we falter; and with eyes fixed on the horizon and God's grace upon us, we carried forth that great gift of freedom and delivered it safely to future generations.

Thank you. God bless you and God bless the United States of America (13).

"We cannot walk alone," the preacher cried. "And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back." America, we cannot turn back. Not with so much work to be done. Not with so many children to educate, and so many veterans to care for. Not with an economy to fix and cities to rebuild and farms to save. Not with so many families to protect and so many lives to mend. America, we cannot turn back. We cannot walk alone. At this moment, in this election, we must pledge once more to march into the future. Let us keep that promise - that American promise - and in the words of Scripture hold firmly, without wavering, to the hope that we confess.

Thank you, and God Bless the United States of America (9).

Opposing to the widely-known statement, we must mention that United States is not one of the most religious countries in the world, although religion plays a certain role in the political life of the USA. Several researchers such as R. Bellah. (1), Ch. Conrad (2), S. Anthony (3) have highlighted that the United States possesses its own particular type of "civil religion", that is, a religion of the state, separate and distinct from traditional religions such as Judaism and Christianity, but nonetheless relying heavily on these for images, narratives, rituals and rhetoric. As part of this civil religion, the US President assumes the role of both prophet and priest (and,82 occasionally, martyr) of the nation. Their research shows that the US civil

religion contains the following elements:

- “Religious” rituals and memorials, such as national days of remembrance, prayer services, presidential inaugurations and, State of the Union addresses.
- A body of “sacred” national documents, such as the US Constitution, the Declaration of Independence and the Pledge of Allegiance (1).
- The casting of significant figures in US history (particularly, but not solely, presidents) as prophets and martyrs for the nation. Abraham Lincoln, for example, has been portrayed as paying the ultimate price for the unity of the American nation, similar to Christ paying the ultimate price for unity between God and humanity. Other martyrs for the nation have included John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. (2:6,7), (4).

So the research shows that the importance of religion in the USA political affairs is connected to the broader body that is American Civil Religion, with the American president considered as prophet, priest, pastor, minister and occasionally as martyr of the country. This typology has strong responses in both Judaic and Christian traditions.

R. Bellah considers that As the High Priest of the American Civil Religion, the President is held to a higher standard. Just like the High Priests of ancient Israel, who were held to a higher standard than the rest of the population, the US president is also upheld as moral and spiritual guide of the nation, as well as its military and political leader. Jesus is described throughout the New Testament as Prophet, Priest, King and Martyr for the cause of reconciling humanity to God, strengthening the correlations between Judeo-Christian religious rituals and narratives and that of US civil religion. These similarities give us some insight as to why it is so important for presidential candidates to provide evidence of robust faith, or, at the very least, a strong moral and ethical code (1).

American political rhetoric shows a great number of examples of the

American president symbolizing 'capacity' and 'unifying force', especially at times of crisis. For example, Abraham Lincoln's speech delivered at the dedication of the National Cemetery in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania on November 19, 1863. Though the speech was short, yet it is considered as one of the most powerful and memorable speeches of all times:

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war.⁸³ We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us – that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion – that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain – that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom – and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth (6).

Or president Lyndon B. Johnson's speech given on March 15, 1965, when America was shaken by race discrimination, revolts and fights for freedom. Lindon Johnson's call was an attempt to try to unite all the Americans to fight for equal rights for every American. He demonstratively points out the phrase "We shall overcome" widely used by fighters for civil rights. In his request the president wanted to stress the importance of equality for black, white, north and south.

I speak tonight for the dignity of man and the destiny of Democracy. I urge every member of both parties, Americans of all religions and of all colors, from every section of this country, to join me in that cause. At times, history and fate meet at a single time in a single place to shape a turning point in man's unending search for freedom. So it was last week in Selma, Alabama. There, long suffering men and women peacefully protested the denial of their rights as Americans. Many of them were brutally assaulted. One good man – a man of God – was killed. There is no cause for pride in what has happened in Selma. Our mission is at once the oldest and the most basic of this country – to right wrong, to do justice, to serve man. In our time, we have come to live with the moments of great crises. Our lives have been marked with debate about great issues, issues of war and peace, issues of prosperity and depression. There is no Negro problem. There is no Southern problem. There is no Northern problem. There is only an American problem. The great phrases of that purpose still sound in every American heart, North and South: "All men are created equal." "Government by consent of the governed." "Give me liberty or give me death. It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life. Their cause must be our cause, too. Because it's not just Negroes, but really it's all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome (12).⁸⁴

As the examples show both statements are rich with religious imagery and use of rhetoric devices. Especially the idea of being tested and being called to serve to the highest purpose of unification and overcoming the crisis is mentioned notably.

Probably it is in the concluding remarks of the State of the Union messages that the likeness of the US president to a priest becomes most evident:

Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of

war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's 250 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 3,000 years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether." With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations (8).

This speech was delivered after the Union's victory when Abraham Lincoln began his second term presidency of the resentfully divided USA. In his speech Lincoln expresses his wish to put an end to hostilities and try to make attempts to reunify all the Americans.

These are the boys of Pointe du Hoc. These are the men who took the cliffs. These are the champions who helped free a continent. These are the heroes who helped end a war. Gentlemen, I look at you and I think of the words of Stephen Spender's poem. You are men who in your 'lives fought for life...and left the vivid air signed with your honor'... The men of Normandy had faith that what they were doing was right, faith that they fought for all humanity, faith that a just God would grant them mercy on this beachhead or on the next. It was the deep knowledge — and pray God we have not lost it — that there is a profound moral difference between the use of force for liberation and the use of force for conquest. You were here to liberate, not to conquer, and so you and those others did not doubt your cause. And you were right not to doubt (14).

Ronald Reagan is considered to be one of the most influential orators. On June 6, 1984 in his speech he tried to give an impressive acknowledgement to a group of American Army Rangers who had attacked

an impossible Nazi stronghold – Pointe du Hoc.

The church service in USA closes with the priest's call of each member of the church to go out into the world and get ready to serve God. The priest⁸⁵ also explains the great importance and meaning of the faith. The priest prays and ask God to bless the congregation's activities. The above mentioned concluding sentences from various States of the Union presidential messages include different similarities with this type of religious ritual.

When we think of religious commitments as an important aspect of individual American citizen's life we also remember how extensively religion influences the politics of the USA. United States is an example of a country where religion can be viewed as one of the most inseparable constituents of American political discourse in spite of the fact that the USA is a multireligious country.