



## ORIGINAL PAPER

# Religious Resources in the Formulation of Political Discourse

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**Abstract:**

Religion has always been a powerful force in politics, and the use of religious discourse in political speeches has been a common practice throughout history. Religious language can be used to rally support for a political cause, to appeal to shared values and beliefs, and to establish a sense of moral authority. However, the use of religious discourse in political speeches can also be controversial, as it raises questions about the appropriate role of religion in the public sphere, and the potential for religious language to be used to justify discriminatory or exclusionary policies. Religious language can be used to tap into the deep-seated values and beliefs of a particular audience, and to create a sense of unity and shared purpose. In this article, we will examine the use of religious discourse in political speeches, drawing on the perspectives of several scholars and political leaders.

**Keywords:** *religion, politics, discourse, speeches.*

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## Religious Resources in the Formulation of Political Discourse

### Introduction

The use of religious discourse in political speeches has a long and complex history. Throughout the centuries, politicians have used religious language and imagery to inspire and mobilize their audiences, to establish moral authority, and to appeal to shared values and beliefs. However, the use of religious language in political speeches is also a controversial and potentially risky practice, with both benefits and limitations. One of the main benefits of using religious discourse in political speeches is its power to inspire and mobilize people. Religious language and imagery can evoke powerful emotions, such as hope, compassion, and solidarity, and can create a sense of shared purpose and commitment among the audience. For the scope of this paper, the focus will be specifically on American presidents and how they have utilized religious discourse to connect with their constituencies and influence public opinion, thereby “providing insight into their legacies as political leaders” (Lăpădat, 2023:17), enabling a more comprehensive understanding of their governance styles, their moral and ethical frameworks, and how they have shaped the nation's collective consciousness and values over time.

### **Martin Luther King Jr.'s 'I Have a Dream' Speech: Mobilizing a Movement Through Sacred Rhetoric**

One of the most famous examples of this is the “I Have a Dream” famous speech delivered during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom by civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. in 1963 was a rallying cry against racial segregation and inequality, aiming to unite people in the struggle for civil rights. He used religious language to inspire and to amplify the moral imperative of his audience to fight for racial equality, stating that “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.'...I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.” He further continues with “we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream” (King, 1963). He begins by referencing the “creed” of the United States, alluding to the foundational ideals as though they were sacred texts. His use of the word “creed” is a religious term often associated with faith-based doctrines, suggesting that the American ideals should hold an almost religious significance in the lives of its citizens. The phrase “all men are created equal” itself echoes the language found in both religious and foundational political texts, reinforcing the inherent dignity and worth assigned to each human being by virtue of their creation. By framing the struggle for civil rights as not just a political and social issue, but also a religious and moral one, King appeals to a broader sense of shared values and universal justice.

When King speaks of “the red hills of Georgia,” and the “sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners” sitting down “at the table of brotherhood,” he uses language that invokes Biblical themes of reconciliation and fellowship. The “table of brotherhood” serves as a metaphorical communion table where past wrongs are redeemed through a newfound unity, resonating with religious audiences familiar with the concept of a shared meal as a sign of community and covenant.

Finally, the phrase “we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream” from Martin Luther King Jr.'s “I Have a Dream”

## Maria-Magdalena Lăpădat

speech is a direct allusion to Amos 5:24, which reads: “But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” (The Holy Bible, 2011). This Biblical verse comes from the Book of Amos, one of the Twelve Minor Prophets in the Old Testament. This prophetic text speaks to the need for justice and righteousness, encapsulating the entire civil rights movement’s aims in deeply spiritual terms. King used religious language to appeal to the deep-seated values of equality and justice, invoking the biblical imagery of Moses leading the Israelites out of slavery. This use of religious language helped to mobilize millions of Americans in the struggle for civil rights, and continues to inspire people today.

Amos criticizes not just the society he's part of for its moral and judicial failures, but he also critiques religious rituals that are performed without sincerity or ethical commitment. In this context, the rolling waters and the mighty stream serve as metaphors for a constant, unceasing justice and righteousness that should permeate society. When Martin Luther King Jr. uses this verse, he is tapping into this rich tradition of prophetic social justice to lend weight to his own argument for civil rights and racial equality. The language amplifies his message by tying it to a broader, transcendent moral framework that both religious and non-religious individuals can appreciate. King is also placing the civil rights struggle within the larger historical and ethical context, presenting it as a timeless struggle for justice and righteousness, akin to the prophetic struggles outlined in religious texts.

By invoking Amos, King signals that the fight for civil rights is not merely a political issue of the 1960s but rather is a fundamental, ongoing struggle that engages the deepest questions of ethics and justice. It suggests that these values are not just social niceties, but moral imperatives that flow from a divine source and have been articulated throughout history. Moreover, by employing a scriptural reference familiar to his predominantly Christian audience, King was able to appeal to their religious sentiments and moral convictions, thereby galvanizing a broader range of people into action. It made the quest for racial equality a spiritual quest that transcends the particulars of time and space, linking it to an eternal struggle for justice and righteousness.

### **Lincoln's Theological Framing of the Civil War**

If we go even further back in time and history, in his Second Inaugural Address, delivered during the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln deftly employs religious resources to reflect on the devastating conflict and the need for national healing. He said: “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 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” (Lincoln, 1865). Here, Lincoln is invoking the Bible and the idea of divine judgment to reflect on the meaning of the war and the need for reconciliation. By beginning with the phrases "Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray," Lincoln immediately establishes a theological context for understanding the conflict. This invocation not only reflects the fervent wishes of a war-torn nation but also serves to link political aims with higher spiritual aspirations.

Lincoln goes further by invoking divine will in considering the continuation of the war, positing that if God wishes for the conflict to continue until justice is achieved for the "two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil" endured by slaves, then humanity

## Religious Resources in the Formulation of Political Discourse

must defer to this higher judgment. In this way, Lincoln shifts the conversation from a solely human-centered political dilemma to one that resides also in the realm of divine justice. He introduces the idea that the suffering and sacrifices may be part of a larger, divinely-ordained scheme of retribution and justice, giving a theological weight to the political and social issues at hand.

Lincoln's use of religious language allows him to tap into a shared set of values and beliefs. It creates a bridge between earthly concerns like war and inequality and the transcendent notions of justice and righteousness, broadening the emotional and moral scope of the issues. By grounding the highly contentious and painful issues of war and slavery in the language of faith, Lincoln aims to elevate the nation's collective consciousness and prompt a more profound understanding of the war's significance.

He closes the passage by quoting an ancient religious principle that "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether," a direct reference to the Bible's Book of Psalms. This serves to further underline his point that the war, devastating though it is, might also serve as a vehicle for divine justice, a concept that transcends any political or human argument. Thus, Lincoln's sophisticated use of religious language and concepts lends multiple layers of meaning to his political message, inviting Americans to view their national crisis not just as a political struggle but also as a moral and spiritual one.

### **In God We Trust: Roosevelt's Call to Divine Arms on D-Day**

On June 6, 1944, President Franklin D. Roosevelt delivered a radio address to the nation in which he asked for prayers for the success of the Allied forces invading Normandy on D-Day. He said: "Almighty God: Our sons, pride of our Nation, this day have set upon a mighty endeavor, a struggle to preserve our Republic, our religion, and our civilization, and to set free a suffering humanity" (Roosevelt, 1944). In this historical context, Roosevelt is invoking religious language to emphasize the importance of the war effort and the values that the U.S. was fighting to defend.

Starting with "Almighty God," Roosevelt immediately establishes a dialogue with a higher power, implicating that what follows is not just a military mission but a divinely sanctioned endeavour. By saying "Our sons, pride of our Nation," he uses familial and patriotic terms to deepen the emotional impact, making it relatable to every family with a loved one in the military and every citizen who takes pride in their nation. The phrase "this day have set upon a mighty endeavour" fuses religious undertones with the military operation, underscoring the enormity of the task and its significance. Roosevelt is aware that the success or failure of the mission will have implications not just for the "Republic," which points to the political entity of the United States, but also for "our religion" and "our civilization." Here, "our religion" is invoked as a synecdoche for shared values and ethical commitments, and "our civilization" represents a broader cultural and social heritage. These aren't just American values; they represent a larger collective identity that transcends national borders, resonating with a shared sense of what is considered morally right and just. Additionally, the phrase "and to set free a suffering humanity" broadens the scope from national interests to global ethics. By saying this, Roosevelt argues that the mission is not merely an act of self-preservation but also a moral obligation to alleviate global suffering, thus connecting the immediate military actions with a universal moral cause.

Roosevelt's prayer on D-Day is an eloquent example of how religious resources can be leveraged in political discourse. He marries the temporal and the eternal, the

political and the spiritual, thereby lending a multi-dimensional gravitas to a crucial moment in history. This approach allowed Roosevelt to frame the D-Day landings as a conflict involving not just military and national objectives, but also as a struggle that implicates the deepest moral and spiritual values shared by people.

### **Kennedy's Moral Universe: Religious Language in the Pursuit of American Ideals**

John F. Kennedy was known for his speeches that appealed to the American people's values and sense of patriotism. He often drew on religious themes and biblical references to inspire and unite the nation. One of his most famous speeches, delivered on January 20, 1961, at his inauguration as President, contains several examples of religious language used to inspire the American people. In his inauguration speech, Kennedy speaks of the importance of freedom, justice, and equality, and evokes biblical imagery to emphasize the gravity of the moment: "The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life. 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" (Kennedy, 1961). In this regard, Kennedy is emphasizing the importance of freedom and human rights, and he uses religious language to underscore the significance of these values. First, it adds moral gravitas and a sense of universal significance to the political issues being discussed. The mention of "the hand of God" suggests that the "rights of man" are not mere legal or social constructs but are divinely ordained, timeless, and universal. Second, the use of religious language aims to create common ground among a diverse audience, appealing to those who identify with or respect religious sentiment. Even if one's religious beliefs differ, the invocation of divine authority often commands attention and respect.

Lăpădat's observation underscores Kennedy's ability to navigate the complexities of American religious diversity and secular governance: "Despite the fact that America is a deeply secular state, where state and religion are clearly defined, the young president, of Irish descent and Catholic religion, exploits with great conviction and wisdom the vast electoral pool that believes in God's power and guidance" (Lăpădat, 2022:10-11). His adept use of religious language could tap into a broad range of beliefs and traditions, thereby consolidating support for his vision of American society and its role in the world. Lastly, the incorporation of religious language can serve as a rhetorical strategy to win support for political objectives. By framing political issues as not just matters of policy but as battles in a broader cosmic struggle between good and evil, politicians can galvanize people into action in a way that mere political rhetoric often cannot.

### **Obama and the Politics of Religious Inclusivity**

Coming up to the present day, at the Islamic Society of Baltimore, Barack Obama used religious language to appeal to the values of inclusivity and community, stating that "at a time when others are trying to divide us along lines of religion or sect, we have to reaffirm that most fundamental of truths: We are all God's children. We're all born equal, with inherent dignity" (Obama, 2016). In the same vein, in one of his other speeches, he notes that "we are one people, all of us pledging allegiance to the stars and stripes, all of us defending the United States of America" (Obama, 2004). This

## **Religious Resources in the Formulation of Political Discourse**

use of religious language helped to establish Obama as a leader with strong moral convictions and a commitment to inclusivity and community.

Both Obama and Martin Luther King emphasized the idea that all people, regardless of their background, are deserving of equal treatment and opportunities. King dreamed of a day when people would be judged by their character rather than the colour of their skin, and Obama echoed this sentiment, focusing on religious inclusivity and stating that "we are all God's children" and therefore inherently equal. They both effectively used religious language to champion their causes - King for racial equality and Obama for religious and national unity. Although they were speaking in different contexts and to different challenges, their usage of religious language served to underscore their commitment to inclusivity, community, and the moral convictions that guide them. In this sense, the use of religious language serves as a tool to connect with the audience on an emotional and spiritual level, offering a sense of shared values and shared humanity.

However, the use of religious discourse in political speeches is also a controversial and potentially risky practice. One of the main risks of using religious language in political speeches is its potential to be exclusionary and divisive. Religious language can be seen as a way of establishing 'us vs. them' divisions, where those who share the dominant religious views are seen as morally superior to those who do not. This can lead to a sense of exclusion and marginalization among those who do not share the dominant religious views, and can create an atmosphere of intolerance and hostility. As Richard Rorty argues, "the use of religious language in political speeches can be seen as a form of manipulation, designed to elicit emotional responses rather than rational deliberation" (Rorty, 1989:193). In other words, the use of religious language can be seen as an attempt to bypass reasoned argument and appeal directly to the emotions of the audience, in order to sway their opinions in a particular direction. When politicians rely too heavily on religious language to make their arguments, they run the risk of manipulating the emotions of their audience rather than engaging in reasoned debate.

### **The Ethical Implications of Religious Language in Political Oratory**

In some cases, the use of religious language in political speeches can also be used to justify discriminatory or exclusionary policies. For example, in 2002, George W. Bush used religious language to justify going to war (in Iraq), stating that "And Americans know we must act now. We must be strong, and we must be decisive. We must stop the evil ones, so our children and grandchildren can know peace and security and freedom in the greatest nation on the face of the Earth." (Bush, 2002). This use of religious language to justify military action has been criticized by many, who argue that it represents an attempt to cloak geopolitical goals in the language of moral righteousness. Furthermore, in the 2004 presidential elections, President George W. Bush relied heavily on religious discourse in his speeches. He portrayed himself as a godly man who was on a mission to fight evil and uphold Christian values. His speeches were laced with biblical references and he used religious language to emphasize his moral values.

This morally weighted language could grant a kind of "moral license," essentially suggesting that the actions taken under this banner are justified because they aim to counteract a great evil. The moral high ground is implied, possibly minimizing critical scrutiny from the public and policymakers about the ethical complexities involved in military action.

So, the notion of "moral licensing" is relevant here because the use of morally and religiously charged language like "evil ones" might serve to insulate the decision to go to war from the kind of rigorous ethical examination that it would otherwise undergo. It could make it easier for the administration and the public to overlook or dismiss the ethical ambiguities or unintended negative consequences of the conflict.

In his 2008 Democratic National Convention speech, Barack Obama used religious language to appeal to the values of patriotism and national unity, stating that "we are one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all" (Obama, 2011). While this use of religious language was intended to inspire a sense of unity and patriotism among the audience, it also potentially excluded those who do not believe in God, or who do not share the dominant religious views of the audience. As the political philosopher John Rawls argues, political discourse should be conducted in a "public language" that is accessible and respectful to all members of society, regardless of their religious or philosophical beliefs (Rawls, 1993). This means that politicians must be mindful of the potential for religious language to be exclusionary and divisive, and must strive to use it in ways that promote inclusivity and respect for diversity.

### **Unpacking Religious Elements in Donald Trump's Oratory"**

Donald Trump also used religious language to persuade religious voters, making numerous references to religion in his speeches, particularly during his presidential campaign and presidency. In his inaugural address, President Trump outlined his vision of America and made promises concerning the goals he hoped to accomplish during his tenure. He alluded to the strength of the country through its military and law enforcement, aptly infusing his piece of rhetoric with religious language: "There should be no fear. We are protected, and we will always be protected [...] And most importantly, we will be protected by God" (Trump, 2017). Similarly, Trump's most explicitly religious mention came in the middle of the speech when he made a Bible reference to Psalm 133, saying: "The Bible tells us how good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity"(Trump, 2017). Trump's quote, "We will be protected by God" and his reference to the Bible in his inaugural address can be seen as an attempt to use religious language in a positive way to inspire and unite the American people. By invoking God's protection, Trump was expressing his faith in a higher power and his belief that the country would be safe and prosperous under divine guidance. Moreover, Trump's reference to the Bible's message of unity can be seen as a way to encourage the American people to come together and work towards a common goal, regardless of their political or religious differences. By appealing to the shared values and beliefs of the American people, Trump was attempting to create a sense of solidarity and cooperation that could transcend partisan divisions.

On the opposite spectrum, however, in his 2016, during the Republican National Convention speech, as part of his presidential campaign, Donald Trump used religious language to appeal to the fears and emotions of his audience, stating that "I alone can fix it" (Trump, 2016) and painting a bleak picture of a country in decline. This use of religious language played into the emotions of his supporters and may have undermined reasoned debate about the issues facing the country. The statement "I alone can fix it" made by Donald Trump during his presidential campaign can be related to the use of religious language in political speeches in the sense that it conveys a messianic message of a single person who is able to save and lead the people towards a better future. This kind of message resonates with the religious concept of a saviour or a

## **Religious Resources in the Formulation of Political Discourse**

messiah who is expected to come and rescue the people in times of crisis. Equally, the use of religious language in political speeches often invokes the idea of a higher power or divine intervention that can guide and protect the people. Religious language can be used to inspire hope and rally people behind a cause or a leader by creating a sense of shared purpose and collective identity.

However, the use of messianic or religious language in political speeches can also be problematic as it can lead to the creation of a cult of personality around a leader or a political party, which can undermine democratic values and institutions. It can also be exclusionary, as it may exclude those who do not share the same religious beliefs or who do not believe in the idea of a single saviour or messiah.

During his presidential campaign, Trump repeatedly referred to himself as a “Christian” and talked about his faith. He also criticized his opponent, Hillary Clinton, for her support of abortion rights, saying that it was “wrong and it has to change” (Trump, n.d.) because it went against Christian values. These are just a few examples of the references to religion that Trump made in his speeches. They demonstrate how Trump used religious language and ideas to appeal to conservative Christians and to position himself as a defender of traditional values and morals.

In the US, politicians use religious discourse to tap into the large religious voter base. This has been evident in several elections where candidates used religious language to win votes. Undoubtedly, the use of religious discourse in political speeches is a widely-used strategy across the globe. It has been shown to appeal to the emotions of the audience and to lend legitimacy to the speaker and their message. However, its use is not without controversy as critics argue that it can be divisive, exclusionary, and even dangerous when used to promote intolerance and hatred towards certain groups.

### **The Role of Religious Discourse in American Politics: A Comparative Look at Secularism and Governance Globally**

The use of religious discourse in political speeches reflects the complex relationship between religion and politics in our world today. It highlights the power of religion to shape our values, beliefs, and identity, and its potential to inspire both positive and negative actions. Thus, the use of religious discourse in political speeches is an important aspect of American political culture. In comparison to other countries, the use of religious language in politics is more common in America. This is due to the unique history of the country, its political system, and its global impact on other nations.

Religion has played a significant role in American history since its founding. Many of the country's early settlers were seeking religious freedom, and this quest for religious liberty has remained an important part of American identity. The country's founding documents, such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, also reflect this religious influence. The Preamble of the Declaration of Independence states that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights” (United States, 1776), while the Constitution begins with the words “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.” (United States, 1787)

The United States of America has a unique system of government with a strong emphasis on individualism, freedom, and democracy. Religion, with its ability to inspire



and motivate people, is often used as a tool for political persuasion. Furthermore, America's global impact on other nations also plays a role in the importance of religious discourse in American politics. As one of the most powerful nations in the world, the United States has significant influence on the political and cultural beliefs of other countries. The use of religious language in American political speeches can have a ripple effect on other nations, inspiring and motivating people to pursue similar values and beliefs.

In countries where there is a strict separation of church and state, religious language is less likely to appear in political speeches, legislation, or governmental actions. The idea here is that governance should be based on secular principles that are accessible and applicable to everyone, regardless of their religious beliefs. This ensures that no single religious group gains unfair advantages or imposes its beliefs on others. The emphasis on secularism in some countries, particularly in Europe, is often rooted in their historical experiences with religious conflict and persecution. For example, Europe has been the battleground for religious wars and has witnessed the persecution of various religious groups over the centuries. These painful histories contribute to the cautious approach toward mixing religion and politics.

Different countries have different political systems that also impact the role of religion in public life. Parliamentary systems, like those in much of Europe, may be less likely to involve religious language in political discourse, especially if there are multiple parties representing a range of views. In contrast, countries with fewer dominant parties might see more mixing of religion and politics if the major parties adopt religious language.

Secularism, as defined in the text, is the separation of religion from civil affairs and the state. In a broader context, it can also refer to minimizing the role of religion in any public sphere, including education, law, and public services. The preference for secularism in some countries doesn't mean religion is deemed unimportant; rather, it's considered a private matter that should not interfere with governance. This can lead to different kinds of political rhetoric, campaigns, and even policy-making compared to countries where religion plays a more public role. In summary, the role of religion in politics varies greatly around the world, influenced by historical, cultural, and political factors. Some countries have a more secular approach, carefully delineating the boundaries between religion and state to ensure a level playing field for all citizens.

### **Conclusion**

In the formulation of political discourse, the concept of "generative infrastructure" takes on a nuanced layer of meaning. As scholar Laviniu Lăpădat theorised, "The generative infrastructure required to assemble and coagulate a coherent political public image draws its strength from within an interactional paradigm that creates a bond between the political communicator and the target audience for which the political message of that communicator is designated. In simpler terms, this highlights the critical role religious language can play as a powerful tool for creating a compelling and relatable political narrative. Through invoking religious themes or scripture, politicians can deepen the bond with their audience, adding a layer of moral or spiritual resonance to their message. (Lăpădat, 2022:80).

"Political discourse should be both diplomatic and motivational," assert Paunescu & Chiritescu (2019: 13). Further buttressing this view on the importance of communication in political discourse is the idea that any successful act of

## Religious Resources in the Formulation of Political Discourse

communication begins with preparedness and harmonized agreement (Bărbuceanu, 2019:51). In this context, communication becomes a linchpin for connecting religious values with political objectives. This point is particularly underscored by Stoian, who declares, "Communication is a key element in the development of every society" (Stoian, 2019: 134). "The persuasive discourse used also consists of selling ideas" (Scorțan, 2019:58), rendering communication not just a tool but a strategic asset. Religious language can thus serve as a powerful resource that not only emphasizes the moral and ethical dimensions of political issues but also seeks to unify a diverse populace under a shared set of values or beliefs. However, "lack of coherence" in such communication strategies can dilute their unifying power (Burtea-Cioroianu, 2020:143). This highlights the imperative role that communication plays in leveraging religious resources to effectively shape and influence political discourse.

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