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The Political Use of Religious Symbols: A Case Study of the 1972 Presidential Campaign

Bernard F. Donahue

The relationship between politics and religion in the United States has been studied by political scientists from many perspectives. Church-state relations, religious bloc voting, political issues with strong religious overtones—these and other politico-religious phenomena have long been subjects of scholarly activity within the discipline.¹ However, the use of religious symbols in politics has been much neglected by political scientists (though not by sociologists, psychologists and scholars). Long ago Harold D. Lasswell said “It is of the utmost importance to political science to examine in detail . . . the processes of symbolization.”² Religious symbolization in American politics urges itself upon the political analyst, moreover, because of “the unique relationship” which has existed between religion and politics throughout the history of the nation.³ And there are, perhaps, no richer and more concentrated examples of politico-religious symbolism than those found in the campaign oratory to which the American public is regularly subjected. Candidates for the American presidency have long resorted to the manipulation of such symbols.⁴ Hence, a presidential cam-

¹ An overview of the traditional issues in this area is provided by Murray S. Stedam, Jr., *Religion and Politics in America* (New York, 1964).

² Harold D. Lasswell, “The Politics of Prevention,” in *A Source Book for the Study of Personality and Politics*, eds. Fred I. Greenstein and Michael Lerner (Chicago, 1971), p. 545. This is a chapter from Lasswell’s early work, *Psychopathology and Politics* (Chicago, 1930).

³ Among many others, Peter F. Drucker has made this point: “The unique relationship between religion, the state and society is perhaps the most fundamental—certainly it is the most distinctive—feature of American religious as well as American political life. It is . . . central to any understanding of American institutions”; idem., “Organized Religion and the American Creed,” in M. A. Fitzsimons, Thomas T. McAvoy, and Frank O’Malley (eds.), *The Image of Man* (Notre Dame, 1959), p. 353.

⁴ Cf. Robert S. Alley, *So Help Me God: Religion and the Presidency, Wilson to Nixon* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1972) and Michael Novak, *Choosing Our King: Powerful Symbols in Presidential Politics* (New York, 1974).

paing is a good situation for the study of the political use of religious symbols. The 1972 contest between George McGovern and Richard Nixon is an excellent case study. Frequently characterized by the public press as an election to choose "a national minister" because of the manifest use of politico-religious symbols by the candidates, the campaign provides ample evidence of the uses to which religious symbolization can be applied in American politics. As such, it can furnish some instructive insights.

American politicians have long accorded to religious symbols a prominent role in the shaping of a political image for themselves. The use of "God-words," attendance at religious services, association with clergymen, and other explicit forms of religious symbolization do have an impact on the electorate if for no other reason than that many voters have some religious identity as well as having a political one.⁵ And just as a religious identity is composed of cognitive (beliefs), normative (values) and instrumental (ritual) elements, so also is the political identity constituted of political beliefs, values and activities. On the phenomenological level religious and political symbols can then be viewed as a means of giving visibility to these identities. In this context the politician's use of religious symbols furnishes one other, though by no means decisive, opportunity for him to establish his identity with the voters in a favorable way. This assumption, of course, raises many questions. Chief among them is the precise question: which religious symbols does a candidate for office employ, if he is so inclined, in fashioning the political rhetoric of his campaign?

The initial response to this question must reach deeply into the psyche of the candidate and the electorate as well. For, beyond the "God-words" of campaign speeches, there is a level at which politico-religious symbolization becomes a significant instrument of identification and nonidentification between candidates and voters. It is precisely at this level that the 1972 presidential campaign appears as an important case study of the political use of religious symbols in American politics.

What this campaign revealed is that there are several "clusters" of politico-religious symbols which a candidate might employ, con-

⁵ "A person's identity, that which he feels he is and somehow must be, is a mixture of things *sui generis* (properties he feels to be special to himself) and things shared with some group—a family, a religious body, a community, a nation" (Robert E. Lane, *Political Thinking and Consciousness: The Private Life of the Political Mind* [Chicago, 1969], p. 132).

sciously or unconsciously, with manipulative intent or not, and that the particular symbol cluster which he may use has a real impact on his appeal to the electorate. That Richard Nixon used one politico-religious symbol cluster and won the election, while George McGovern used another and was defeated, provides some insight into the successful and unsuccessful use of religious symbols in a presidential campaign. These were in no way decisive. A host of factors determined the outcome. But politico-religious symbolization did have an influence.

When he took as his campaign slogan, "Come home, America," McGovern launched his effort as the Democratic nominee for president by employing a religious symbol which had both a manifest and a latent significance. This bifurcation of religious symbols became a characteristic of his oratory throughout the campaign. The manifest religious signification of this slogan is derived from the fact that the onetime minister was intoning the refrain of a popular old hymn.⁶ However, its latent significance as a politico-religious symbol was associated with the image of the Prodigal Son being exhorted to return to the paths of righteousness. Thus, in this simple campaign slogan McGovern had in fact established not only a political but also a religious stance toward the electorate. It was, then, with good reason that the whole tone and thrust of his campaign were labeled "the politics of righteousness."⁷ More specifically, his religious symbol cluster rested upon explicit biblical references and a subliminal message of political and religious righteousness.

On the one hand, McGovern's use of phrases and paraphrases from the Bible was frequent and obvious: "I believe that no political party can serve two masters"; "A nation does not live by arms alone"; "It [his campaign organization] is an organization that gives dramatic proof to the power of love and to a faith that can literally move mountains." In campaign speeches the biblical phrases came easily to "the preacher from the prairies," and they stood in stark contrast to speeches he made under other circumstances, such as on the floor of the Senate. On the other hand, the latent message contained in his symbol cluster held together

⁶ "Come home, come home,/Ye who are weary, come home./Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling,/Calling, oh, sinner, come home" (*Softly and Tenderly* by Will Lamartine Thompson).

⁷ *Newsweek*, November 6, 1972, p. 43.

much in McGovern's campaign speeches: the nation had fallen from grace and stood in need of redemption. "I believe that the greatest contribution that America can now make to our fellow mortals is to heal our own great but very deeply troubled land. We must respond to that ancient command: 'Physician, cure thyself.'"

From this starting point the logic of McGovern's politico-religious symbolism flowed consistently. His candidacy appeared as a religious crusade, "a coalition of conscience and decency," against the forces of evil, to wit, "the most corrupt and immoral administration in history." But every crusade needs a leader, and McGovern was the prophet imploring a divine mandate: "For myself, as this campaign begins, I ask only, in the words of Solomon, give me now wisdom and knowledge that I may go out and come in before this people, for who can judge this thy people that is so great?" Indeed, he was the prophet who could, given the electoral mandate, lead his people to the promised land: "The people want a President who will restore their trust in government by trusting them. They want a leadership that will not set one standard for the powerful and one for those without power. They hunger for that clarifying vision of national purpose that only a President can provide—a President who will lift our eyes above the daily entanglements to a more distant horizon." Thus, McGovern attempted to evoke the image of the prophet—identifying himself with the oppressed, critical of the evil which surrounded him, and issuing the call to conversion.

In undertaking this latter task he had finally to come to the guilt within the electorate itself: "I think this country is a great and marvelous land that has wandered away from what the American people really want it to be"; and, hence, also to its role in the extirpation of that guilt: "It is the time for this land to become again a witness to the world for what is just and noble in human affairs. It is time to live more with faith and less with fear, with an abiding confidence that can sweep away the strongest barriers between us and teach us that we are truly brothers and sisters . . . together we will call America home to the ideals that nourished us from the beginning."

In brief, McGovern's politico-religious symbolism relied heavily upon biblical religion. He used phrases which might be expected to elicit favorable responses from the churchgoing members of the electorate and images with which "the oppressed" among them might identify. Whether he thus structured his campaign rhetoric

with such obvious usage of religious symbolism consciously or unconsciously, with or without a manipulative intent, will be discussed later. What is of interest is that his argument for the necessity of change (at least of replacing Nixon with himself) was couched in religious-symbolic terms which, consciously or not, rested on the assumption that there is a religious identity within the American electorate which can be mobilized for the purpose of gaining votes. The disastrous outcome of the election for McGovern challenges this assumption as much as any of the other policy assumptions which carried him to defeat. The least that can be said is that the use of politico-religious symbolism in campaign speeches does not of itself win or lose elections for candidates. Nevertheless, the fact of such usage does raise questions to which answers might be sought. Is the use of religious symbols in American political campaigns quite simply a worthless technique for winning votes? Or, might it even be counterproductive, provoking voters to vote against the candidate who employs religious symbolism in political speeches? Or, perhaps, only to vote against a candidate who uses a particular ensemble of religious symbols? Indeed, is there any basis for assuming that any religious identity among the voters has any relationship to their political identity? And, if there is, can a given package of religious symbols be used as an effective means of winning votes for a candidate? An answer to these questions will be attempted after first analyzing the political rhetoric of Richard Nixon's campaign.

Nixon's campaign speeches, few as they were, stand in sharp contrast to McGovern's. One searches with difficulty for symbols drawn from the Bible; the Scriptures of the Judaeo-Christian tradition are simply not a part of Nixon's rhetorical tools.⁸ There are, however, certain theologically oriented terms—faith, belief, hope, spirit—which are very much a part of Nixon's political vocabulary. But even more importantly, they are employed in creating a context which conveys a latent politico-religious message to the electorate, one which is sharply different from the latent message delivered by McGovern. Through it Nixon assumes the stance of a comforter of the people, rather than as a challenger: "I begin with an article of faith. It has become fashionable in recent years to

⁸ A rare example does appear with a typically Nixonian touch in his proclamation of "the eleventh commandment: No one who is able to work shall find it more profitable to go on welfare than to go to work."

point up what is wrong with what is called 'the American system.' The critics contend that it is so unfair, so corrupt, so unjust that we should tear it down and substitute something else in its place. I totally disagree. I believe in the American system." Such a fundamental article of faith becomes then the basis for affirming the long-standing goodness of the nation: "America has given more generously of itself toward maintaining freedom, preserving peace, alleviating human suffering around the globe than any nation has ever done in the history of man." And the nation is not only affirmed, but confirmed in grace: "in the final analysis America is great. Not because it is strong, not because it is rich, but because this is a good country." Consequently, the future is guaranteed to the people: "As we look ahead over the coming decades, vast new growth and change are not only certainties, they will be the dominant reality of this world and particularly of our life in America."

Thus Nixon projected the image, not of a prophet calling the people to a conversion from their sinfulness, but of a priest comforting his people, assuring them of their goodness and striving to enhance their own self-esteem. In short, Nixon wanted the voter to say to himself, "I am good," while McGovern was trying to make him say, "I am a sinner." Nixon's religious stance toward the electorate was thereby solidly established, and its political significance was then made clear through the Nixonian penchant for appropriating the symbols of the opposition: "To those millions who have been driven out of their home in the Democratic Party, we say, 'Come home.' We say 'Come home,' not to another party, but we say 'Come home' to the great principles we Americans believe in together." This invitation is thereupon joined to the key phrase in Nixon's strategy for the conducting of the campaign: "I ask you to join us as members of a new American majority bound together by our common ideals." That this new American majority did indeed have some common political ideas, if not religious ideals, became abundantly obvious in the overwhelming Nixon victory at the polls. The "new majority" carried more political clout than the "coalition of conscience and decency." But while a strong political realism infused the Nixon approach to the "new majority," it, too, was associated with a religious symbolization. Both campaigners did use a rhetoric capable of establishing both a political and a religious identity with the electorate.

That Nixon's was the more successful has much to do with his politics and something to do with his religious imagery. Each of these facets of his victory needs to be explained and requires a preface at this point.

The political identity of the "new American majority" was astutely identified by Richard Scammon and Ben Wattenberg in their analysis of the 1968 election.⁹ First of all, these writers defined the substance of the political issues which were important to the members of the "real majority": "The substantive idea is that many Americans have begun casting their ballots along the lines of issues relatively new to the American scene. For several decades Americans have voted basically along the lines of bread-and-butter economic issues. Now, in addition to the older, still potent economic concerns, Americans are apparently beginning to array themselves politically along the axes of certain social institutions as well. These situations have been described variously as law and order, backlash, antiyouth, malaise, change or alienation. These situations, we believe, constitute a new and potent political issue. We call it the social issue."¹⁰ This "social issue" has not only political relevance but, as we shall see, it also had a significant relation to the question of its religious symbolization in the campaign's oratory.

Another important observation by Scammon and Wattenberg had to do with the structure of the electorate: "The great majority of the voters in America are unyoung, unpoor and unblack; they are middle-aged, middle-class, middle-minded."¹¹ Joining this fact to the "social issue" as they identified it, the two then spelled out the strategic idea for winning elections, that is, "the manner in which candidates for office try to make hay with both the substance of an election and the structure of the electorate. In American political life this has almost invariably manifested itself as an attempt to capture the center ground of our electoral battlefield. The reason for this tropism toward the center is simple: that is where victory lies."¹²

In 1968 both Nixon and Hubert Humphrey wrestled for the center ground on the "social issue," and the outcome between the

⁹ Richard Scammon and Ben Wattenberg, *The Real Majority* (New York, 1970).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹² *Ibid.*

two was a narrow victory for Nixon. In the 1972 election the "social issue" was still at the heart of American politics, but the result was now a stunning victory for Nixon. He had, during his first term, fixed himself solidly in the center of the political spectrum. Ghetto riots and campus disorders were disappearing, and the war in Vietnam was winding down. Moreover, he now faced an opponent whose position was to the left of center on the "social issue," a fact which aided the Republican argument that the Democratic Party had been "seized by a radical clique which scorns our nation's past and would blight her future." The temper of the electorate was such that McGovern's proposals on busing to promote racial balance in schools, expanded welfare programs and amnesty for war dissenters tended to confirm the charge that such off-center proposals were indeed "radical." Also, the electorate viewed itself more as sinned against than sinning in view of the recent history of the high crime rate, ghetto riots, campus disorders and the erosion of traditional moral standards.

Consequently, McGovern's subliminal message of a guilty people in need of redemption was scarcely one with which the "new majority" could identify; it was, in fact, one which tended to alienate them. Likewise, in building his political base among the young, the poor and the racial minorities, McGovern identified his campaign with the "real minority" as "the oppressed" of the society. The outcome was, then, easily predictable. "In this election, at least, President Nixon forged a new majority. Composed of the white middle class, blue-collar workers, trade-unionists, businessmen, farmers, Catholics, Protestants and many European ethnic groups."¹³ Nixon's 60.8 percent of the popular vote was the second highest in the history of the nation's balloting for President. Although his personal popularity may not have matched his electoral support, Nixon proved that he had the political formula for success and that McGovern did not.

From this lengthy excursion into the political dimensions of the election, it might appear superfluous, if not irrelevant, to link the Nixon victory and McGovern defeat to any political use of religious symbols. Yet, while not a critical factor, the religious symbolization in the campaign did play what Charles P. Henderson has called a

¹³ *U.S. News and World Report*, November 20, 1972, p. 14.

"decisive subliminal role."¹⁴ McGovern did in fact use a highly religious rhetoric, and Nixon in his own way did strike a definite religious stance toward the electorate. In each case, as has been argued here, the particular politico-religious symbolization which each of them employed tended to reenforce, either positively or negatively, the political choice made by the voters. A stronger argument for this influence can be made from an analysis of American religion in the decade preceding the 1972 election.¹⁵

The 60's were marked by the highly visible engagement of the churches in the great social and political issues of the day—civil rights, poverty and the war in Vietnam. This engagement, however, served to demonstrate that church members were themselves in serious disagreement over the role of religion within society. Demands for social, economic and political change were framed by some in terms of religious injunctions, and by others such activism was considered beyond the legitimate sphere of religious activity. At its core this division within the ranks of church memberships centered on the question of the religious identities of the members. What role is the church to play in one's life? Is it a comforter to which one turns to find solace in distress, consolation in affliction? Is it a challenger from which one expects leadership in overcoming the evils in the world? In other words, does one relate to the church in its priestly function, its prophetic function or to both?¹⁶ The point of these questions is precisely that they were posed to American church members and elicited from them a sharper awareness of the relationship between political and religious values. In this context one may easily relate what could be called the "religious issue" to Scammon and Wattenberg's "social issue": the search for comfort and the desire for challenge can shape political as well as religious preferences.¹⁷ For an astute politician

¹⁴ Charles P. Henderson, "The (Social) Gospel According to 1. Richard Nixon 2. George McGovern," *Commonweal*, September 29, 1972, p. 518.

¹⁵ Some of the more prominent facets of this phenomenon are investigated in "The Sixties: Radical Change in American Religion," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (January, 1970).

¹⁶ These issues are studied by Charles Y. Glock, Benjamin B. Ringer and Earl R. Babbie, *To Comfort and To Challenge: A Dilemma of the Contemporary Church* (Berkeley, 1967), and also by Jeffrey K. Hadden, *The Gathering Storm in the Churches: The Widening Gap between Clergy and Laymen* (Garden City, New York, 1969).

¹⁷ Gibson Winter early in the decade portrayed such a fusion of social and religious values in *The Suburban Captivity of the Churches* (New York, 1962).

this, then, provides the kind of opportunity which Lasswell described: "Propaganda on behalf of a symbol can become a powerful factor in social development because of the flexibility in the displacement of emotion from one set of symbols to another."¹⁸ Resentment toward a challenging church can be transferred to a politician using prophetic religious symbols; the desire for a comforting church can be realized in a priestly politician.

In the 1972 campaign, then, not only the political dimensions of the "social issue" but also the symbolic dimensions of the "religious issue" favored the candidate who offered comfort to the electorate. As has been noted previously, this is the image which Nixon presented to the voters. Thus, his politico-religious symbol cluster tended to reenforce his favorable image among those voters who identified not only with his political positions but with his religious stance as well. McGovern, on the other hand, employed a symbol cluster which was not only off-center on the "social issue," but was also one which could bring down upon himself the resentment which had been generated by the social and political activism of the churches.

The critical electoral question, therefore, reduced itself to the size of the groups within the electorate which identified with one or the other symbol cluster. Where in fact was the "real majority" on these terms? The numerical majority, according to Scammon and Wattenberg, was constituted of the "unyoung, unpoor, unblack, middle-aged, middle-class, middle-minded." The election results seemed to show this group formed Nixon's "new majority" in relation to the "social issue"; there is some evidence that it did also in respect to the "religious issue."

Apart from whatever discontents the "real majority" might be suffering, as a group it can be identified as the socially privileged group in America, as over against the socially deprived groups made up of the poor and the racial minorities who make up the "real minority" in the nation. That this distinction has relevance in terms of the "social issue" was shown by Scammon and Wattenberg; that it also has relevance in terms of the "religious issue" has been suggested in a study conducted by Thomas C. Campbell and Yoshio Fukuyama.¹⁹ One of the findings of this sampling of the

¹⁸ Lasswell, "Politics of Prevention," p. 546.

¹⁹ Thomas C. Campbell and Yoshio Fukuyama, *The Fragmented Layman: An Empirical Study of Lay Attitudes* (Philadelphia, 1970).

attitudes of church members was that among them "the socially privileged showed a preference for certain social attitudes and the socially deprived showed a preference for different social attitudes."²⁰ This difference is, in turn, reflected in different orientations in church participation which can be correlated with the preference for a comforter church or a challenger church. In *The Suburban Captivity of the Churches* Gibson Winter noted that "the striking fact about congregational and parochial life is the extent to which it is a vehicle of the social identity of middle-class people."²¹ From this one can assume that the "real majority" of middle-aged, middle-class, middle-minded America with its socially privileged status has a marked preference for being comforted rather than for being challenged by its churches. Under this aspect politico-religious symbols which reenforce this preference in the political arena would seem, then, to have a decided advantage. Thus, Nixon's image, delivered through his symbol cluster and portraying him as a comforter of the people, could only draw strength from the "real majority's" religious disposition, whereas McGovern the challenger tended to lose contact with it.

McGovern could not have used a more unpopular symbol cluster than that of the prophetic figure appealing to the socially deprived populace. This choice of politico-religious symbols was, as he revealed in an interview, a quite conscious one. When asked why he used words which have both a political and a religious meaning, he replied: "It is important to use words like that to enlist basic feelings and values for legitimate social purposes. I am conscious of borrowing religious phrases for political purposes."²² Enlisting basic feelings may indeed be a kind of political dynamite, as demagogic politicians well realize, but the critical question is whether the feelings so elicited will work for or against the politician. In McGovern's case it appears, in retrospect, that he hurt rather than helped himself by his choice of religious symbols; not only did his political positions, to the left of center as they were, assume an image of being "radical" in the context of the "social issue," but his religious symbolization conveyed the image of his being a religious "radical" as well. He had become a politician-preacher of "the social gospel" which, as an issue within American

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

²¹ Winter, *Suburban Captivity*, p. 87.

²² Quoted in Henderson, "The (Social) Gospel," p. 519.

churches, had by 1972 become a divisive factor among church-affiliated members of the electorate. This had already been noted two months before the election by Charles P. Henderson: "The Nixon-McGovern contest represents a confrontation between the major factions of the entire religious community."²³ This observation was borne out in the campaign as prominent members of the liberal religious establishment, "social gossellers" themselves, gave their support to McGovern's candidacy. But, as Henderson put it trenchantly: "If popular opinion polls have any relevance in this regard, it must be noted that no list of endorsements from the liberal community is likely to have the impact on McGovern's behalf that the single recommendation of Billy Graham will accomplish for Nixon."²⁴ This raises again the question of Nixon's own religious stance toward the electorate.

As set out earlier, Nixon's use of religious symbols was much less obvious than the biblical symbols employed by McGovern; at the same time they were more powerful. Apart from the White House worship services and the concomitant symbolic relevance of their leaders being chosen from the conservative religious establishment,²⁵ and apart from the "comforting" message of his political speeches, Nixon's religious symbolization was couched in terms of what has come to be called "the American civil religion," described by Robert Bellah as "a set of religious beliefs, symbols and rituals growing out of the historical American experience interpreted in the dimension of transcendence."²⁶ Although there is disagreement about the theoretical viability of this phenomenon among scholars studying it,²⁷ its practical application by Nixon in the 1972 campaign is apparent.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 522. At the same time Henderson saw that "though Nixon and McGovern may never explicitly mention religion, they will both seek to call forth deep sentiments and symbols that are in large part a product of religion" (p. 519).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 524.

²⁵ See Ben Hibbs, ed., *White House Sermons* (New York, 1972).

²⁶ Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," in *The Religious Situation, 1968* (Boston, 1968), pp. 331-55. Lowell D. Streiker and Gerald S. Strober put this in a broader perspective: "The sociopolitical attitudes of Americans are influenced by what they believe to be ultimately true, real and desirable. One source of such convictions is the religion of their churches. A second source is civil religion, the implicit faith in the American way of life" (*Religion and the New Majority* [New York, 1972] p. 171).

²⁷ See John F. Wilson, "The Status of Civil Religion in America," in *The Religion of the Republic*, ed. Elwyn A. Smith (Philadelphia, 1971), pp. 1-21.

That civil religion and the use of its politico-religious symbols are, in fact, a device worth being considered by any presidential candidate because a President is "called upon by custom, by Congress and by the unique requirements of current events to act as high priest in the civil religion."²⁸ Each President or presidential aspirant may tailor the various emphases and symbol clusters of the civil religion according to his own internal dispositions and to external circumstances, but the underlying premises of the civil religion infuse all these individuations. In referring to Nixon, Henderson describes them succinctly: "Nixon vibrates to the rhythms of American folk religion. He perfectly illustrates the curious inbreeding of patriotism and piety, the Protestant ethic, and liberal pragmatism that has been so pervasive in this nation's history."²⁹ Moreover, the puritan ethic and the work ethic supplied for Nixon policy positions on law and order, the preservation of traditional moral standards, and welfare which would tend to give a highly moralistic tone to the new majority's preferences on the various items of the "social issue." By thus fusing the political and religious dimensions the latter supports the former. The politico-religious symbols derived from the civil religion thereby provided an influential input to Nixon's oratory. Using bland (and blind) religious terms such as faith, belief, hope and spirit in conjunction with moralistic political solutions to the "social issue" furnished Nixon with a politico-religious rhetoric which was capable of establishing bases for both a political and religious identity with the "new majority" in the electorate. Hence, it became possible for him to reduce all of the problems facing the nation, as he did in his first inaugural address, to "a crisis of the spirit" for which was needed "an answer of the spirit." Nixon had not only become President of the nation but the high priest of its civil religion as well.³⁰

²⁸ Charles P. Henderson, *The Nixon Theology* (New York, 1972), p. 27. See also John Sutherland Bonnell, *Presidential Profiles: Religion in the Life of American Presidents* (Philadelphia, 1971) and Alley, *So Help Me God*, pp. 20-31.

²⁹ Henderson, *Nixon Theology*, p. xi.

³⁰ The price which a President may have to pay for assuming the role of high priest may be better understood now in the wake of the historically unprecedented resignation in disgrace of Richard Nixon. Any religious-mythic aura which may have surrounded him (his successors also?) sustained a severe blow when the American people were admitted to the Oval Office via "the tapes" and there encountered not only political chicanery of the rankest sort

The inherent harmony between civil religion as expressed by Nixon and church religion was perhaps best exemplified by the fact that Billy Graham took this "crisis of the spirit" as the text of his sermon at the first of Nixon's White House worship services.³¹ The deeper significance of this event is drawn out by Henderson: "When the President and his evangelist call for a recovery of this country's spiritual heritage and insist that the nation address its problems from the perspective of an historical faith, they are pointing to a specific phenomenon in American religion. They are recommending a return to the nationalistic religion of their common Protestant origins. Theirs is a religion which sees a perfect harmony between faith in God and in the nation and which identifies the will of God with the welfare of the state."³² This convergence of political and religious identities illustrated in the Nixon-Graham relationship formed the basis for the politico-religious symbolization which Nixon delivered to the electorate in 1972. In anticipation of this facet of the campaign Streiker and Strober drew the appropriate conclusion: "We believe the attitudinal center (that is, of middle America in relation to the Social Issue) is genuinely in tune with Graham's theological and social theory. We further suggest it is to this group that those seeking the Presidency in 1972 must basically appeal. Quite obviously President Nixon realizes this as his attempts to identify with Graham during the last several years clearly demonstrate."³³ In using the particular religious symbol cluster of American civil religion Nixon also realized "where

but also a most "ungodly" torrent of profanities and vulgarities. On top of that came the self-destructing revelation of Nixon's participation in the obstruction of justice called the "cover-up" and the attendant realization by the people that they had been lied to by their President for over two years. Apart from the loss of legal, political and ethical supports for his presidency, Richard Nixon must also have lost any religious-mythic basis for support by the people. In fact, he may have invited an added measure of fury from a betrayed people; the storm of protest aroused by Ford's pardon of Nixon provides some indication of the people's sense of moral outrage in the whole affair.

It is worthy of note that when President Ford used a most blatantly religious symbolism in the announcement of the pardon, a sense of popular revulsion at such a usage was quite marked. Whether this new antagonism toward the use of religious symbols in political rhetoric is directed specifically toward this case or is the beginning of a greater awareness by the public of the manipulative, and therefore unacceptable, use of religion in politics remains to be seen.

³¹ See Hibbs, *White House Sermons*, pp. 1-9.

³² Henderson, *Nixon Theology*, p. 13.

³³ Streiker and Strober, *Religion and the New Majority*, p. 192.

it was at" as far as the "new majority" in the electorate was concerned. It would be most difficult to assert that it did in fact win him any votes; in the total context it is easier to say that it did not cost him the votes which McGovern's particular religious symbol cluster must have cost him.

The foregoing analysis of the politico-religious symbolization employed by Nixon and McGovern in the 1972 presidential campaign represents an effort to establish the existence of a functional relationship between religious symbols and their use in political oratory. No attempt has been made to establish such use of religious symbols as a decisive factor in influencing the voters. Nevertheless, the abiding religiosity of the American public, buttressed by their church affiliations and civil religion, tends to make them susceptible to the influence of a political rhetoric which employs religious symbols. Whether the emotion displaced from the religious symbol to the political object is positive or negative remains, of course, the critical question. In any event, it appears certain that any presidential candidate is constrained, at least in terms of the civil religion, to employ religious symbols in establishing his identity in the minds of the electorate. On the pragmatic political level this assumption about presidential image-building was very forcefully stated by one of Nixon's campaign advisers in 1968: "We have to be very clear on this point: that the response is to the image, not to the man. . . . Politics is much more emotional than it is rational, and this is particularly true of Presidential politics. People identify with a President in a way they do with no other public figure. Potential presidents are measured against an ideal that's a combination of leading man, God, father, hero, pope, king, with maybe just a touch of the avenging Furies thrown in. . . . Reverence goes where power is; it's no coincidence that there's such persistent confusion between love and fear in the whole history of man's relationship to his gods. . . . Selection of a President has to be an act of faith."³⁴

Such political pragmatism is indeed rooted in a perceptive understanding of "the political animal." A presidential candidate must present to the electorate something more than a political program. The American political tradition has provided ample evidence of the infusion of a transcendental element into political

³⁴ Ray Price as quoted in Joe McGinniss, *The Selling of the President 1968* (New York, 1969), pp. 193-194.

rhetoric. On the slogan level this has given birth to such symbols as the New Deal, the New Frontier and the Great Society. However, on the psychological level these transcendental appeals may be traced to what Robert E. Lane cites as "the need to be moral, to feel moral, and to seem moral" which is "rooted in the human situation."³⁵ Consequently, one who is in a position of authority or aspires to one "tends to invoke moral arguments for his demands and tends to reenforce his instrumental statements with normative ones."³⁶ The transcendental or moral quality with which any presidential candidate will clothe his political program will tend, then, to be transmitted to the public not only in political terms but also in moral, and by association in the American context, religious symbols as well. In effect, they provide an aura of legitimacy for his political claims.

That such a need exists points, moreover, toward what Peter Berger calls "the intimate relationship between religion and social solidarity."³⁷ According to Berger religion establishes a sacred order in which man is able to maintain himself in the presence of chaos. So also must human society maintain itself in the face of chaos, and for this purpose a religiously legitimated human solidarity poses itself as both a psychic and social necessity of human existence. Thus, the political cosmos needs the support of a religious cosmos for the sake of the legitimacy which it can confer.

From these two perspectives, the need of the candidate to be identified as moral and the need of the people to relate their social existence to a transcendental value, the deeper roots of the political use of religious symbols become more clear. The American solidarity in a sacred cosmos may be derived from the Judaeo-Christian belief system or from their own civil religion, but a religious dimension remains a relevant component of their political cosmos. The legitimation of authority and authority-persons within the society, the issues of change (chaos), and the particular political and religious identities of the people—all such issues beget the need for a politico-religious symbolization to be taken into account by candidates for the American presidency.³⁸

³⁵ Lane, *Political Thinking and Consciousness*, p. 191.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, New York, 1967), p. 51.

³⁸ The pragmatic political reason for doing so on the superficial level still remains a compelling force. "A president is also free to take his oath of office

The 1972 presidential campaign, as perhaps none other in the nation's history, presented a classic exercise in the political use of religious symbols. McGovern's political rhetoric, relying heavily upon the Judaeo-Christian biblical religion, contrasted sharply with Nixon's reliance upon the symbols of the American civil religion. There is sufficient evidence here to affirm, in response to the questions raised earlier, that there are at least two basic religious symbol clusters which an American politician might use. Furthermore, either of these particular symbol clusters can transmit a latent politico-religious message to the electorate which may help or hurt the candidate, dependent upon the prevailing pattern of political concerns and religious orientations of the population. At the very least, such religious symbolization can reenforce the voters' identity or nonidentity with a particular candidate in the context of the existing political and religious climate. Although not a decisive factor in determining voters' preferences, religious symbols can nonetheless exert some influence insofar as they appear to impart a transcendental value to the candidate's political formulae.

All of this should suggest to political scientists, particularly those who investigate the normative elements which operate in the world of practical politics, that the analysis of politico-religious symbolization in American politics may be an area which deserves greater attention. At the very least such research may provide some contemporary insights into the political utility of religion which has been previously noted by Machiavelli and Rousseau.

For Machiavelli it was essential to the successful prince that he at least appear to be religious, so that religion, any religion, might be used as an instrument of social control.³⁹ It was critical to the prince's success, however, that he promote "a religion that teaches

sans Bible and not to mention God if he so desires, but none has yet had the nerve, the inclination, or both. More significant, perhaps, concerning the place of religious persuasion in the United States today, is the fact that few politicians, no matter how cynical or skeptical of religion they personally are, will end a major political address without a prayer or mention of a divinity, a higher power, a supernatural force or a direct plea to God" (George N. Gordon, *Persuasion: The Theory and Practice of Manipulative Communication* [New York, 1971], p. 198).

³⁹ "A prince . . . should be careful that there does not issue from his mouth anything that is not full of . . . five qualities. To those who see and hear him he should seem all compassion, all faith, all honesty, all humanity, all religion. There is nothing more necessary to make a show of possessing than this last quality" (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chap. 18).

that he who best serves the State best serves the gods."⁴⁰ Indeed, the truly great ruler is the one who always undertakes great enterprises "under the pretext of religion."⁴¹ "In truth there never was any remarkable lawgiver amongst any people who did not resort to divine authority, as otherwise his laws would not have been accepted."⁴²

On his part, Rousseau, while agreeing with the Machiavellian thesis of the political utility of religion, was more discriminating in his prescription for the most effective form of political religion. The sovereign should exclude any religion which sets man "in contradiction with himself."⁴³ He should tolerate the existence of religions "so long as their dogmas discover nothing contradictory to the duties of a citizen." And for his own purposes the sovereign should cultivate the development of a civil religion. "There is therefore a purely civil profession of faith, the articles of which it is the business of the Sovereign to arrange, not precisely as dogmas of religion, but as sentiments of sociability without which it is impossible to be either a good citizen or a faithful subject." In this way the sovereign may transfer the religious feelings of the people, and specifically the psychic power which accompanies them, to the political arena.

Such lessons in political expediency would seem to have been well learned by American politicians. This case study may serve to confirm such a belief in the political utility of religion as a manipulative instrument. A more precise understanding of this phenomenon appears to be worth searching for.

⁴⁰ J. W. Allen, *A History of Political Thought in the Sixteenth Century* (New York, 1960), p. 459.

⁴¹ *The Prince*, chap. 21.

⁴² Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, I: 11.

⁴³ The quotes in this paragraph are taken from Rousseau's *Social Contract*, IV: 8.