1. George W. Bush's "God Talk"

Problem and Research Question

George W. Bush was an ordinary president. Admittedly, many scholars and news media would strongly disagree with this main argument of my study. After the attacks of September 11, media reports claimed that the American president was promoting his personal agenda as a born again Christian and crusader in his speeches. They described him as the "theologian in chief" (The Washington Post 3/2/2003) and criticized "Bush's God talk" and his "overt Christian references" (Newsweek 3/10/2003). The European news media were even more skeptical. A leading German magazine wrote that after 9/11 Bush became more a priest than a president, who was on an evangelical crusade, pursuing his godly mission (Der Spiegel 2/17/2003). A British paper jeered at the fact that Bush described himself to be "on a direct mission from God" (The Observer 11/2/2003).

However, George W. Bush's rhetoric was not new. I will argue that the portrayal of Bush as an exceptional president who was overly religious compared to his predecessors, is a misinterpretation. The numerous references to God and the idea that America is on a mission, destined to fulfill God's work on earth, can all be explained through American civil religion. This concept, introduced by sociologist Robert N. Bellah (1968), explains the existence of a public religious dimension in the political sphere of the United States. It is mainly expressed through presidential speeches, which reflect a set of beliefs, rituals and myths about America that include references to God and divine symbols; but such references must be seen independently from particular religions and denominations. The concept of American civil religion has been applied to various other disciplines such as anthropology, cultural and religious studies, and political science. It has proven very useful for explaining religious references in presidential speeches (Toolin 1983; Pierard and Linder

1988). In order to reassess George W. Bush's rhetoric against this background, I will focus on the following questions: to what extent did George W. Bush use elements of American civil religion in his speeches after 9/11, and for what purposes? How far does the former president differ in this practice from his predecessors?

Since presidential rhetoric can be seen as an indicator and reflection of American values, this analysis will shed light on the political culture and atmosphere in the U.S. after 9/11. It will help to determine whether a shift towards religion in the public sphere actually took place after the terrorist attacks. Describing the civil religious facet of American identity is crucial for a better understanding of American values – and it therefore plays a vital role in the relationship of the U.S. with the rest of the world.

Scope, Methodology and Structure

I will conduct an analysis of a selection of George W. Bush's speeches. Language can shape the identity of individuals, the relationships between them, as well as the world they live in (Fairclough 1992), thereby constructing "systems of knowledge and beliefs" (Fairclough 1992, 64).

A critical analysis of presidential speeches not only allows identification of ways in which language is used by individuals, but also "*why* they construct themselves and the world in particular ways" (Dick 2004, 203). For example, is a speech "attempting to assert, persuade, justify, accuse, defend or explain" (Dick 2004, 205)?

Based on these considerations, George W. Bush's speeches are chosen according to their references to 9/11, the so-called War on Terror, and related foreign and domestic issues. In order to examine how Bush tried to influence the citizens by using civil religious language, I will focus mainly on speeches addressed to the American people or to their representatives in Congress rather than those given to international representatives. I will treat speeches given to different kinds of audiences in the United States – such as school children or troops, large audiences and small – as being equally important because, given the immense media

coverage of the president, " 'the people' are always listening" (Campbell and Jamieson 1990, 5).

The time frame comprises Bush's speeches from September 11, 2001, to the last speech before the Iraq war on March 19, 2003. Within that time frame lie crucial challenges that illustrate how Bush resorted to civil religious language for certain purposes: the Afghanistan invasion, the creation of a Department of Homeland Security, an increase in the defense budget, and finally the systematic build-up of support for the Iraq war.

The chapters are organized as follows: for the purpose of identifying American civil religion in Bush's rhetoric I will first define the concept itself. I will focus on the definition that Robert N. Bellah delivered in the 1960s. By describing the debate about Bellah's suggestions I will show that his definition, even though it was widely criticized, was never successfully replaced. I will therefore use the main elements that he has elaborated to track American civil religion in Bush's rhetoric: God and mission, freedom, sacrifice, and rebirth.

In the main part of this study I will look for these themes in Bush's speeches as published on the official website of the White House (www.whitehouse.gov, now transferred to archives available at http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov). Using a qualitative approach, I will describe in detail the use of those elements, and how it changed between the period right after the attacks of 9/11 and the launch of a public campaign against Iraq. At certain points I will include public opinion polls and references to the political challenges of the Bush administration in order to examine what George W. Bush tried to accomplish by such rhetoric.

In the subsequent chapter I will compare the use of American civil religion by George W. Bush with that of earlier presidents. My investigation will include examples ranging from the first president, George Washington, to Bill Clinton, Bush's immediate predecessor. These examples are chosen to illustrate recurrent patterns in presidential discourse, as well as to elaborate on how well Bush fits into such a rhetorical tradition. The

following chapter will establish whether or not Bush is unusual in his use of expressions that refer to his personal born again experience. The last chapter concludes the book with a summary of the results.

Throughout the chapters of my analysis I will treat Bush's rhetoric – and that of his predecessors – as the president's own words, even though presidential speeches or parts of them are often created by staff writers. Nearly all American presidents have used such writers but at the point when a president gives a speech he automatically assumes full responsibility for those words. In addition, the audience usually perceives his language as his own (Campbell and Jamieson 1990, 9-11; Bostdorff 1994, 13).

It is necessary to define the following terms. Although much research has been conducted on civil religion world-wide, for instance in Germany (Hase 2001, 46-49), I will focus on the United States of America. I will use the phrase "American civil religion" to make that clear. The phrases "civil religious language" or "civil religious rhetoric" refer to the U.S. as well. The terms "America" and "Americans" stand for the United States of America and its population. By "the Americans" I mean the majority of the Americans, knowing that they do not exist as a homogeneous group as such. The phrases "September 11" or "9/11" stand for the attacks of September 11, 2001, on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, as well as the downing of one plane in Pennsylvania. To simplify matters, I will occasionally refer to the "War on Terror", meaning the post-9/11 period which includes the military invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Even though it is a phrase promoted by the Bush administration to create national support for those invasions, it has widely been used in the scholarly world to describe the U.S. military action following 9/11 (Tilly 2004).

Previous Work in the Area

A short overview of the literature in the field shows that several scholars have applied the concept of American civil religion to the analysis of

presidential speeches. The examination of rhetoric is the key to research into the American belief system and religion in the public sphere. As Sacvan Bercovitch (1988) convincingly points out, speeches and other kinds of rhetoric not only reflect myths about America and its founding, but they are also the basis on which such values are transmitted between generations. Hence, it is not surprising that the "father" of American civil religion, Robert N. Bellah, examines the speeches of U.S. presidents in order to demonstrate that his concept, which comprises a set of American values, does exist (Bellah 1968). Roderick P. Hart (1977) also states that rhetoric is most illuminating when describing and assessing values and belief systems in America, although he would rather categorize them under the term "civic piety."

Two main studies provide significant insight into American civil religion and its use in presidential rhetoric: Cynthia Toolin (1983), and Richard V. Pierard and Robert D. Linder (1988). Toolin (1983) analyzes all presidential inaugurals from 1789 to 1981 and shows that, starting with the very first president, American civil religion is a continuing aspect of public discourse. Although presidential speeches beyond the genre of inaugurals must be taken into account to paint a clearer picture (Wilson 1974), Toolin's overview is most valuable because it is the first comprehensive study of this kind. Pierard and Linder (1988) go into more depth. They analyze American civil religion in the rhetoric of nine selected presidents, from George Washington to Ronald Reagan, and include different genres of speeches. Concentrating on those few "landmark" (Pierard and Linder 1988, 28) presidencies allows them to illustrate in detail how American civil religion was shaped by those presidents and preserved for further generations.

The results of Toolin, as well as Pierard and Linder, establish an essential basis for further research. They are very useful for the discipline of political science because they explain American beliefs and the alleged "God talk" of presidents from a broader perspective. However, research in the following decades mostly left aside American civil religion. Maybe this disregard was due to the controversy about Bellah's terminology; many authors tried to redefine his concept while basing their assumptions on

similar observations, as Gail Gehrig (1979) and Thomas Hase (2001) point out. Additionally, the new fervent interest in Christian fundamentalism, which has drawn increasing attention since the 1980s (Unger 2006), might have contributed to distracting scholars from the importance of civil religion.

Presidential rhetoric has nevertheless remained a subject of research in the last two decades, and some findings indirectly strengthen the arguments of Bellah, Toolin, and Pierard and Linder. Toolin's conclusion that inaugurals often contain civil religious language is supported by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1990). One of their findings in an analysis of different genres of presidential speeches is that American beliefs and values, including references to God, are often mentioned in inaugurals. Campbell and Jamieson do not, however, use the term "American civil religion". Vanessa B. Beasley (2004) examines State of the Union Addresses as well as inaugurals. Her findings suggest that U.S. presidents between 1885 and 2000 constructed national identity in an increasingly fragmented society through a certain unifying rhetoric, which in part relies on civil religious elements. A different approach is taken by Denise M. Bostdorff (1994). She concentrates on presidential discourse in foreign crises and argues that presidents often justify their actions by describing their political strategies in an ethical context. She shows, for instance, that the idea of America being on a mission to promote freedom is a typical justification for invasions – which fits Bellah's description of American civil religion, even though Bostdorff does not employ that term specifically.

Despite the fact that the aforementioned studies have their limitations – some do not introduce the concept of American civil religion, others only include one or two genres of speeches – they demonstrate that American presidents have used symbolic rhetoric in the manner suggested by Bellah at all times in U.S. history. Interestingly, the attacks of September 11 led to a new awareness of the term American civil religion. Some authors point out that this concept, or at least ideas very closely related to it, experienced a renaissance after the attacks. Since 9/11 many Americans have been looking for new meaning in life, and they find it in civil reli-

gious rituals (Angrosino 2002; Taylor 2005). This is reflected by the inclusion of civil religious elements in texts and pictures in newspapers after the attacks, as Jasmin Fischer shows in her dissertation. She also devotes a small part of her analysis to George W. Bush's civil religious rhetoric (Fischer 2005). In addition, Steven R. Goldzwig mentions that "Bush has played a key role as interpreter-in-chief of the new American civil religion of the 21st century" (Goldzwig 2002, 112). However, he only cites one speech of the former president.

Based on these developments, the role of George W. Bush's rhetoric in stimulating civil religious beliefs requires further examination. Recent work that incorporates the findings of Toolin, Pierard and Linder and others into a detailed analysis of Bush's 9/11 language and contrasts it with previous presidential rhetoric is lacking. The absence of such a study is especially unfortunate since the news media – above all in Europe – have failed to understand or respond adequately to Bush's perceived religious language. This study contributes to filling this gap.