Ronald Reagan’s religious convictions were crucial to his understanding of the world and performance as president, but few scholars have provided substantive analysis of his faith and its impact on his policies during his tenure in the White House. Although the circumstances of Reagan’s life and the seeming inconsistencies between his beliefs and his practices make his faith difficult to explain, it appears to have been genuine, very meaningful to him, and essential to his political philosophy. Reagan firmly believed and often declared that God intended America to be a beacon of hope, faith, freedom, and democracy — “a city on the hill”. Reagan was deeply influenced by his godly mother, Nelle, and raised in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Reagan’s firm belief that God had a plan for his life was fortified by his survival of an assassination attempt in March 1981. In many addresses, proclamations, letters, and private conversations, Reagan stressed his faith in God and prayer, the inspiration of the Bible, and the divinity of Jesus. Numerous leaders of the religious right were troubled by his infrequent church attendance and his wife’s interest in astrology. Although historians debate the nature of Reagan’s personal faith, they concur that he used religious rhetoric, discussed religious themes, and spoke to religious groups more than any other 20th-century president. Religion played a very important role in Reagan’s 1984 reelection campaign. Reagan’s personal life was not a paragon of evangelical piety, but his worldview was strongly shaped by his understanding of biblical teaching. His faith affected many of his policies, most notably his endeavors to curb abortion, pass a school prayer amendment, secure tuition tax credits, and oppose communism.
Dwight David Eisenhower, Dynamic Conservatism, and the Religious Revival of the 1950s
Gary Scott Smith

in Faith and the Presidency: From George Washington to George W. Bush
Published in print: 2006 Published Online: January 2007
Publisher: Oxford University Press
Item type: chapter

Dwight D. Eisenhower’s personal behavior, the mood of the 1950s, and shrewd publicity combined to make his administration seem more religious than those of most other presidents. Although the general did not join a church until the second Sunday after his inauguration, he is considered one of the most religious presidents in American history. Eisenhower attended church regularly, proclaimed national days of prayer, invited Billy Graham and other influential clergymen to the White House, and helped create an organization called the Foundation for Religious Action. Eisenhower maintained very cordial relations with most of the nation’s religious communities. The president met frequently with religious delegations, sent hundreds of messages to religious gatherings and groups, and spoke to numerous religious assemblies. His speeches contained more religious rhetoric than almost any other president’s, and he repeatedly called for a spiritual revival and a moral crusade to remedy the nation’s ills. While he was president, the highly publicized national prayer breakfasts began, the words “under God” were added to the Pledge of Allegiance, and Congress made the phrase “In God We Trust” the national motto. Rather than creating controversy about breaches of church-state separation, the Eisenhower administration’s significant interest in religion seemed to increase the public’s esteem and admiration for the man from Abilene. Inspired in part by his faith, Eisenhower promoted a “dynamic conservatism” that prodded voluntary organizations to combat economic and social problems and used the power of the federal government to remedy ills when their resources were insufficient. Eisenhower’s quest to achieve peace and his effort to ensure civil rights illustrate how his religious convictions influenced his presidency.

Religion, Rhetoric, and Running for Office
Brian Stiltner and Steven Michels

in Religious Voices in Public Places
Published in print: 2009 Published Online: September 2009
Publisher: Oxford University Press
Political campaigning has received relatively scant attention in the literature on public reason. This chapter examines the rhetoric of the four major candidates for U.S. president in 2008. These candidates serve as case studies of how American politicians present religious identities in public and how they address controversial issues concerning religion. It argues that while none of the candidates violated the basic requirements of public reason in their use of religious language, some of them created difficulties for themselves by using inauthentic or sectarian language. The candidacy of Barack Obama demonstrated the value of a capacious approach to public reason, an approach that makes connections between public purposes and the values that candidates and citizens hold dear.

The Consequences of Religious Language on Presidential Candidate Evaluations
Christopher B. Chapp

in Religious Rhetoric and American Politics: The Endurance of Civil Religion in Electoral Campaigns

Published in print: 2012 Published Online: August 2016

This chapter asserts that religious rhetoric is a significant cause of the relationship between religion and politics in the mass public, and that this process can be understood by examining both the specific qualities of religious messages and how varied message types interact with different religious predispositions. Using statistical tools to merge religious rhetoric variables with survey data collected in presidential elections from 1980 to 2004, the chapter shows how the ways in which candidates formulate the identity and emotive elements of religious rhetoric influences the electorate's view of them. These findings are consistent with the theory that identity briefing and emotion are a basis for political persuasion, and provide strong evidence that candidates' religious rhetoric is partly responsible for the relationship between voters' religious and political attitudes.
Religious Rhetoric and the Politics of Identity
Christopher B. Chapp

in Religious Rhetoric and American Politics: The Endurance of Civil Religion in Electoral Campaigns

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This chapter focuses on the invocation of religious identities in modern campaigns. It provides evidence that religious rhetoric is rarely concerned with taking stances on issues or rationalizing a complex policy agenda. Rather, religious rhetoric is primarily concerned with building a sense of shared identity between citizens and candidates. There are three common types of identity references: subgroup, which refers to specific denominations and faith traditions; civil religion appeals, which aims at engendering a spiritualized sense of national identity; and culture wars identities, which seek to make cultural fault lines prominent. Ultimately, the chapter shows how the rhetoric of religious identity neither sows the seeds of a large-scale cultural battle nor constitutes a remedy for social unity.

Religious Rhetoric and the Politics of Emotive Appeals
Christopher B. Chapp

in Religious Rhetoric and American Politics: The Endurance of Civil Religion in Electoral Campaigns

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This chapter begins by introducing a strategy for identifying emotive elements in speeches. By using the same rhetoric database in the previous chapter, it concludes that candidates adopt specific emotive frames to make identity-based appeals. Religious rhetoric tends to be exceptionally optimistic—far more positive and hopeful than secular campaign speech. The chapter also provides evidence that refutes claims about the growing divisiveness in religious rhetoric; there is insufficient evidence suggesting that presidential campaign religious rhetoric is being used as a tool to leverage large-scale cultural rifts. There are, however, significant prejudiced dimensions in the emotive characteristics of religious rhetoric, a conclusion that follows from the nature of existing religious divisions in the electorate.
A Theory of Religious Rhetoric in American Campaigns
Christopher B. Chapp

in Religious Rhetoric and American Politics: The Endurance of Civil Religion in Electoral Campaigns
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This chapter looks at the ambiguous role of religious expression and how it shapes American politics. Tackling this issue not only explains the role of religion in the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections—it also helps make sense of the meaning of religious and cultural divisions in a country premised on the separation of church and state. Religious rhetoric is an evolving genre that has its problematic and identity-laden roots in early Puritan sermonizing and Revolutionary pamphleteering. The chapter provides a theoretic framework for how religious rhetoric intensifies the emotions and identities of the American public and what the consequences of these rhetorical choices are. It shows that when specific forms of religious rhetoric are strategically deployed by candidates, the consequences extend far beyond the realm of any single electoral contest.

Religious Rhetoric and American Politics
Christopher B. Chapp

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From Ronald Reagan's regular invocation of America as “a city on a hill” to Barack Obama's use of spiritual language in describing social policy, religious rhetoric is a regular part of how candidates communicate with voters. Although the Constitution explicitly forbids a religious test as a qualification to public office, many citizens base their decisions about candidates on their expressed religious beliefs and values. This book shows that Americans often make political choices because they identify with a “civil religion.” The book examines the role of religious political rhetoric in U.S. elections by analyzing both how political elites use religious language and how voters respond to different expressions of religion in the public sphere. The book evaluates how citizens respond to religious stumping. Effective religious rhetoric, the book finds, is characterized by two factors—emotive cues and invocations of collective identity—and these factors regularly shape the outcomes of American
presidential elections and the dynamics of political representation. While we tend to think that certain issues (e.g., abortion) are invoked to appeal to specific religious constituencies who vote solely on such issues, the book shows that religious rhetoric is often more encompassing and less issue-specific. It concludes that voter identification with an American civic religion remains a driving force in U.S. elections, despite its potentially divisive undercurrents.

Religious Rhetoric in American Political History
Christopher B. Chapp

in Religious Rhetoric and American Politics: The Endurance of Civil Religion in Electoral Campaigns

This chapter begins by tackling emotion and identity from a historical point of view, evaluating the use of religious rhetoric in American politics from early Puritan political communities through the twentieth century. By examining the evolution of religious rhetoric, the chapter provides insight into how religious rhetoric is constitutive of American political culture and how it is used politically across contexts. The main argument here is that emotion and identity are central elements in religious rhetoric throughout American history; identity and emotion provide considerable insight into American political culture and political preference formation. Religious rhetoric, thus, is not attached to any one political issue or ideological outlook; rather, it is a flexible genre that has been appropriated to fit numerous political causes.

The Rhetorical Construction of Religious Constituencies
Christopher B. Chapp

in Religious Rhetoric and American Politics: The Endurance of Civil Religion in Electoral Campaigns

This chapter concludes that religious rhetoric is a force mainly responsible for shaping the contours of American political culture. Religious rhetoric is also electorally consequential and culturally significant, with important implications for the interpretation of American
political representation. Even though its use has changed over time, religious rhetoric has been remarkably consistent in its ability to stir up the emotions of the mass public and to create a sense of shared spiritualized identity. The chapter explores the interconnections among religious persuasion, representation, and culture. It is important to theorize the nature of religious constituencies to fully understand the politics of religious appeals. Ultimately, separation of church and state may just be a misnomer in American electoral politics, since religious rhetoric is responsible for actively creating religious constituencies that can drive election results.

Religion and Progressive Activism
Ruth Braunstein, Todd Nicholas Fuist, and Rhys H. Williams (eds)

Published in print: 2017 Published Online: January 2018
Publisher: NYU Press

This volume focuses on an important, if often overlooked, way that religion and politics intersect in the United States. Within almost every community, and involved with almost every possible issue or area of public concern, progressive religious activists are a driving force in American public life. Their presence complicates the prevailing wisdom that religion is necessarily conservative and political progressivism is necessarily secular. Yet little is known about these activists, either among the public or within academia. This book brings together a group of leading experts who describe and analyze the inner worlds and public activities of the progressive religious activist field, including chapters on faith-based community organizing, immigrant rights activism, the Plowshares movement, the New Left, and the Nuns on the Bus, among others. Other chapters consider the political engagement of various religious communities, including Mainline Protestants, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Catholics. Finally, authors consider connections between these activists and the Democratic Party, examine what factors lead congregations to mobilize for progressive causes, and trace the revival of civil religious rhetoric. Taken together, this book challenges common perceptions of religiously motivated social action, and offers new ways of thinking about the American religio-political landscape as a whole.

Intimating the Sacred
Andrew Hock Soon Ng

Published in print: 2011 Published Online: January 2012
Publisher: Hong Kong University Press
Religion has permeated Anglophone literature in Malaysia from colonial times to the present. This study provides insights on the practices of everyday religiosity as represented in literature, which is often starkly opposed to the religious rhetoric promoted by the government. The book also reveals the intersections between religion and other facets of colonial and postcolonial identity such as class, gender and sexuality.

Washington Formulates a Buddhist Policy, 1954–1957
Eugene Ford

in Cold War Monks: Buddhism and America's Secret Strategy in Southeast Asia
Published in print: 2017 Published Online: May 2018
Publisher: Yale University Press
DOI: 10.12987/yale/9780300218565.003.0003

This chapter looks at how the comprehensive strategy for Southeast Asian Buddhism that would eventually emerge did not represent an entirely new direction for U.S. officials. Rather, it was an approach that found numerous, if fragmentary, precedents in earlier efforts to marshal faith, often through the use of religious rhetoric, against what was perceived as an atheistic Soviet menace. The Sixth Great Buddhist Synod that Burma's government held during 1954–56 coincided with intensified efforts within the Dwight D. Eisenhower administration to formulate a coherent policy toward religion. Religion's bearing on the Cold War had emerged as the main preoccupation of the president.

Introduction
Gary Scott Smith

in Religion in the Oval Office: The Religious Lives of American Presidents
Published in print: 2015 Published Online: March 2015
Publisher: Oxford University Press
DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199391394.003.0001

Since George Washington, faith has played a very important and often controversial role in the lives of American presidents. Nevertheless, few scholars have carefully analyzed how chief executives’ religious convictions affected their lives, policies, or decisions. Substantial evidence contradicts the frequent claim that a president’s faith matters little in how he governs. Throughout American history many citizens have viewed strong faith as an asset, if not a requirement, for politicians, especially presidents. Most Americans have expected the president to
uphold the nation’s highest values and to serve as its moral leader. Many argue that the presidents’ character is as or more significant than their intellect, administrative abilities, or speaking talents. While paying close attention to historical contexts and shifting social and moral values, the book explores the lives, beliefs, character, use of religious rhetoric, policies, elections, and relationships with religious constituencies of eleven of America’s more colorful, charismatic, and complex leaders.

Harry S. Truman
Gary Scott Smith

in Religion in the Oval Office: The Religious Lives of American Presidents

Published in print: 2015 Published Online: March 2015
Publisher: Oxford University Press
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Item type: chapter

Harry Truman is rarely considered one of America’s most religious presidents perhaps because most biographers have paid little attention to his faith and because of his use of vulgar language. Ample evidence indicates, however, that Truman’s faith was genuine and very meaningful and influenced him substantially. Simultaneously pious and profane, Truman had an unsophisticated understanding of Christianity and attended church irregularly, but he prayed daily for God’s guidance and knew the Bible well. Jesus’s example and teaching, especially His Sermon on the Mount, served as a basis for Truman’s personal and professional life, guided his political philosophy, and helped shape his domestic and foreign policies. Arguably no president used more religious rhetoric to promote American aims. Truman’s faith played a significant role in many of his domestic policies and strongly affected his foreign policy, especially his approach to the Cold War, efforts to achieve peace, and recognition of Israel.