The God Card: Strategic Employment
of Religious Language in U.S. Presidential Discourse

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The United States, despite official separation of church and state, is a country dominated politically by Christianity. This is evident in the almost unbroken ranks of Christians elected to the presidency; Christianity is currently a prerequisite to reach the office and a factor of salience when in office. Presidential discourse is frequently infused with religious language. Content analysis of 106 "high-state" and 342 "minor-state" presidential addresses from Roosevelt to Trump provides evidence to illustrate how such language may be employed strategically. The use of general religious language and explicit references to God sharply escalated from the Reagan presidency, and, somewhat surprisingly, it is Donald Trump who is shown to have the highest rate with both these measures. There is also suggestion that this language may have been employed by some presidents to help trespass into areas of opposition strength.

Keywords: presidential speech, religion, issue ownership, party politics, content analysis

Article 6 of the U.S. Constitution specifically forbids a religious stipulation for holding office: "No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office of public trust under the United States" (§ 3). Yet Christianity is the sole religion to have had an occupant in the Oval Office,[2] and, indeed, it is reasonable to state that it is currently unfeasible for anyone other than a Christian to occupy that office. A Pew Research Center poll (Lipka, 2014) found that 53% of respondents thought that a presidential candidate's atheism would make them unable to support the candidate—the least favored trait of all those asked in the poll. Similarly, there are now, and have been, very few non-Christians elected to congressional office. The 115th Congress is 91% Christian, showing little difference from the makeup of the 87th Congress in 1961, which was 95% Christian.

[2] Neither Thomas Jefferson nor Abraham Lincoln had any formal religious affiliation while in office, and the precise nature of their beliefs is debated.

There is little doubt that the U.S. is currently, and has historically been, a particularly religious country; the vast majority (>75%) of citizens claim affiliation with the Christian religion. And although some (e.g., Putnam & Campbell, 2010, in their measures of the three B's—Belief, Belonging, and Behavior) claim that the level of religiosity in the country has seen significant decreases over recent decades, others (e.g., Hout & Fischer, 2002) dispute this, and argue that by other measures the level is stable, and possibly even increasing. In the U.S., religious affiliation does appear to be in decline. In the 1972 General Social Survey, only 7% self-identified as having no affiliation with one particular creed; by 2014 the figure was 21%. Protestant affiliation over the same period declined significantly (Hout & Smith, 2015). Hout and Fischer (2002), however, argue that the increase in "nones" is more a result of changing generational norms and a reaction against the religious right rather than a rejection of personal belief and religiosity. Although the religiosity level of the country is debated, there is little room for debate about the (purported) level of Christian religiosity embedded in the top political figure in the country.

Christian language is almost ever present in presidential speech (Bailey & Lindholm, 2003; Coe & Domke, 2006), the simplest current example being that the requisite conclusion for almost every presidential address is now a request for God to "bless America." However, religious references are not restricted to this conclusion; presidents frequently explicitly mention God or refer to biblical passages in speeches, and some have even led prayers during speeches. Hart (1977) argues that presidents are both inaugurated and ordained.

Balmer (2008) provides a detailed examination of "God in the White House" (to borrow his book title) from Kennedy to George W. Bush. This examination includes analysis of specific presidential addresses with significant religious content. Kennedy, in September 1960, addressed the issue of his Catholicism—an issue that had plagued the candidacy of Al Smith in the 1920s. Reagan used a 1986 speech commemorating the Statue of Liberty to outline his vision of the U.S. as the shining "city on a hill," an antithesis to the "evil empire" of the Soviet Union. George W. Bush echoed that speech in his address following the September 11 attacks, contrasting the U.S. "beacon for freedom" with the new "evil" threat. These examples are illustrative of the change between these periods—Kennedy speaking to try to convince voters to disregard a candidate's religion, and Reagan and Bush placing themselves as devout Christian leaders, and the leaders of a nation that stands as a Christian paradigm.

The goal of this research is to contribute to a better understanding of apparent strategic use of religious rhetoric by U.S. presidents. This research uses content analysis to study 106 "high-state" addresses (States of the Union [SOTU] and inaugurals), and 342 "minor-state" addresses to the nation, given by presidents Franklin Roosevelt through Donald Trump. The full corpus of addresses originates from a data set established by Coe and Neumann (2011); this data set is updated to include the remainder of Obama's terms and the first year of the presidency of Donald Trump. Previous research has typically concentrated on high-state speeches (Coe & Chenoweth, 2015, is a notable exception). Also, this research examines the rate of use of religious language to account for the significant differences in speech lengths—prior research typically concentrated on raw counts of usage. The use of a wider set of speeches and a standardized measure allows for a more thorough examination as to how and when religious language is employed in important moments of political discourse.

The guiding research questions are as follows:

RQ1:   How frequently do presidents use overt and more covert religious language within their public addresses?

RQ2:   Is there evidence to suggest that such usage is undertaken strategically?

Conceptualization

The words of presidents, certainly in the past hundred years, have been widely distributed and read or heard by much of the population; a population they rely on for support (and often reelection). Since the 1980s, a high proportion of U.S. voters has tended to vote along very homogenous religious lines, particularly the most devout believers: White Evangelicals and Mormons vote Republican; Black Protestants vote Democrat (Putnam & Campbell, 2010; Smidt et al., 2010). Even in the 2016 election, with a candidate of widely questioned Christian belief on the Republican ticket, and who was initially largely disavowed by the Christian Right, White Evangelicals[3] still voted overwhelmingly for Trump, though Mormons were less faithful to the party (Smith & Martínez, 2016). Presidents of both parties are therefore required to both appeal to the Christian voter, in an attempt to move them to their side, and also appeal to their devout constituents to ensure they are motivated to turn out on election days (the two main campaign strategies being essentially to "persuade" or to "get out the vote").

Coe and Domke (2006) argue that use of religious rhetoric by presidents is an important method for them to "signal and maintain close ties with a societal faction" (p. 313). They also note that such signaling can be traced back to the 1789 inaugural address of George Washington, where he offered "fervent supplications to that Almighty Being who rules over the universe" (Peters & Woolley, 2018, para. 2). It is certainly not a phenomenon begun with Reagan or George W. Bush. Lambert (2008) outlines how Jefferson's religious beliefs were of contention in the election of 1800, with Jefferson's writings on religion subject to much criticism, leading to his opponents labeling of him as an "infidel." Similar accusations were leveled at Al Smith in the 1920s, and then at John F. Kennedy in the 1950s; Kennedy was not the first, nor the last, candidate to have to try to persuade voters to compartmentalize their political and religious allegiances. The religiosity of the president has frequently been germane, or been made to be germane—something they can address in their rhetoric.

This rhetoric, recently at least, due to its wide dissemination, plays a role in the religious socialization of the population (Coe & Domke, 2006). It may also be added that it plays a role in the socialization of the subsequent incumbent. There is a reason why iterations of "God bless America" have become de rigueur for both sitting presidents and candidates: the listening public expects it (and its absence is noted), and the orator wants to deliver it in an attempt at appearing presidential; there are "genre imperatives" (Griswold, 1981) to presidential addresses (see also Campbell & Jamieson, 1990, specifically on inaugurals). More generally, frequent use of such rhetoric over time likely plays a role to embed a normative expectation for the president to sound (and be) Christian.

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[3] African American Evangelicals voted overwhelmingly for Clinton.

"Christian" is deliberately used here as opposed to "religious" because of the prominence of that religion within the country. The U.S. General Social Survey (Hout & Smith, 2015), an annual survey undertaken since 1972, reports that Americans list their religious affiliation as typically (over the period of the study) in the following ranges: 60–70% Protestant, 20–30% Catholic, and 10–20% other religions or no affiliation. In 2014, just 1.5% of respondents identified as Jewish, and 4.2% as any other religion. It is also pertinent that every president considered in this research is, or was, a Christian, and (except Kennedy) also, specifically, Protestant. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, religious discourse can be considered as practically synonymous with Christian religious discourse.

Presidents use religious language relatively frequently in their addresses, and they are usually, given the shared religion between president and public, addressing an audience receptive to such language. The addresses to the nation considered here typically played a dual role of informing the public on a subject but also persuading the public in some manner—for example, that the president is dealing with an issue, or that the administration's plan for the issue is the best one. From this, it is logical to conclude that religion may be a device employed to aid with such persuasion, and it therefore follows that connecting religion to certain issues or certain philosophies may be a device strategically employed where apposite to garner public support.

Issue Ownership Theory

Issue ownership theory posits that in the minds of the electorate, and the parties, certain issues are handled more adroitly by one party than the other (Petrocik, 1996; Petrocik, Benoit, & Hansen, 2003; Sides, 2006). A question consistently asked on the U.S. National Election Study (NES) is, "Which party do you trust to do a better job handling [issue]?" Republicans are consistently seen as better at handling foreign policy and defense, whereas the Democrats have an advantage on social welfare issues. Republicans are strong on the economy and law and order, and Democrats are good on health care and education. Some of these are arguably objectively "true," but some are more of a reflection of long-held perceptions. The NES clearly measures the perception, and politicians are aware of this perception—something they frequently consider in their public rhetoric. Studies have shown how candidates try to keep the campaign, and media coverage of the campaign, focused on their issues (Petrocik, 1996). Sides (2006) concluded that party issue ownership was present, but "weak." Sides also provided evidence that candidates are frequently prepared to "trespass" into opposition areas of strength, particularly when issues are of particular salience in the public consciousness (i.e., "riding the wave"; Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994).

Issue ownership would suggest that presidents may employ religious rhetoric more on owned issues; this practice would perhaps bolster their position on issues of strength by illustrating that God is on their side. However, Sides' (2006) work on "trespassing" would seem to more strongly support a hypothesis that religious language may be used more on issues owned by the opposition. Sides argued that parties, when trespassing, will attempt to frame an issue on which they have a competitive disadvantage as consonant with a wider party ideology. As the Republicans became increasingly identified as the party of religion from the Reagan era (Balmer, 2008; Lambert, 2008), it would conceivably follow that they may increasingly use religious language in connection with Democrat-owned issues (e.g., social welfare and health) to illustrate that the issue at least comports with their party ideology. Democrats post Reagan were keen to be seen as fiscally responsible and tough on crime—areas in which they had been particularly criticized. Again, it is reasonable that they may have

used religion—particularly given the manifest religiosity of both Clinton and Obama—as an avenue into these Republican strongholds.

Method

Previous work has been undertaken to establish words and phrases that may be reliably categorized as "religious language." Domke and Coe (2008), in analyzing speeches from Roosevelt to George W. Bush, coded for both specific explicit references to God and words related to a construct of religion. These authors adapted a list established by Hart and Childers (2005), who defined the words they chose as "religious terms (*n* = 200)—broad-based, Judeo-Christian terminology, including value-laden terms, religious personalities, and theological constructs" (p. 186). This definition fits with the dimensions required for this research, though for reliability and replicability, the Domke and Coe list is largely used. However, this list is slightly reduced, with the following stems removed: Islam*, Muslim*, and Buddhis*. The words related to Islam were not included as, though very infrequent, more than 90% of instances of their use were from Clinton on, and from this period the terms often used in instances such as "Islamic terrorism." Such use is qualitatively distinct to an invocation of Judeo-Christian religious terminology. No instances of Buddhis* were found, so its removal is simply for consistency. Jew* is retained because of the close relationship between Judaism and Christianity, particularly, the centrality of the Hebrew Bible to both religions.[4] The reduced list of "faith terms" used in this research contains 102 words and lexemes (the full list is contained in Appendix A). A list of specific "God terms" was also used to check for more overt religious language use, specifically, "God," "Almighty," "Creator," "Supreme Being," "Christ," "Lord," "Him," "He," "His." The pronouns were counted only when it was clear that the reference was to God—typically a capitalized pronoun midsentence, invariably shortly following use of one of the other "God" terms.

I performed content analysis[5] of presidential speeches covering all presidencies from Roosevelt to Trump. This covered seven Democrat and seven Republican presidencies. The content analysis was a mixed method of manual analysis, aided by word processing and natural language processing software. I searched for religious terms in the corpus of speeches and converted them to appropriate umbrella terms ("Faithterm" and "Godterm"). This was automated for all words or stems where only one possible apposite lexeme would be converted. Where there was a risk of a term being incorrectly identified as a religious term, each instance was checked manually. To explain with examples, "popes," "popery," and "popedom" would all clearly fall into the same lexeme from the stem "pope," and therefore all were included as faith terms. The inclusion of "popet" (a rarely used alternative spelling of puppet) would clearly be incorrect. Another obvious example is "He." Usually, this was used as the generic male pronoun; however, as mentioned previously, in certain usage it is intended to refer to God, and therefore, in such instances, qualifies as a God term. Therefore, all instances of "He" (and

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[4] Islam terms only accounted for 2% of religious words used. The data were analyzed both including and excluding terms related to Islam—excluding such terms had small impacts on the rates of religious language usage, but no substantive impact on overall findings and conclusions. Only 26 instances of Jew* (zero of "Judaism") were found in the archive.

[5] Interestingly, Krippendorff and Bock (2009) cite what may be the first known instance of content analysis being employed: a controversy in 18th-century Sweden, where the method was also employed to check for level of religious references—in this instance, in a song book.

"Him," "His") were examined manually. Words were classified as "faith" terms if they were one of the 102 words and lexemes contained in Appendix A. The metric used for the rate of usage of such words was simply the number of faith terms per thousand words of speech (FTPT). Words were classified as "God" words if included in the list previously outlined, with the same calculation used to provide God terms per thousand (GTPT). Faith terms and God terms combined measured religious terms per thousand (RTPT).

Roosevelt was chosen as the starting point because political historians largely agree that the modern presidency started with him (Leuchtenburg, 1988; Neustadt, 1991). Also, it was with Roosevelt that delivering an oral address for States of the Union became consolidated. Before that, and on some subsequent occasions, a written statement was delivered to Congress. His presidency also coincided with developments in recording and transmission, which allowed the speeches to be transmitted to a national audience. Other scholars (Hart, 1977; Oakley, 1986) have argued that it was also from the late 1940s that the escalation of religion in the civil sphere occurred significantly. This research mainly considers spoken addresses, not written statements.[6]

The presidency archive (Woolley & Peters, 2017) contains the full text of speeches and written statements for a wide range of presidential material, including States of the Union, inaugural addresses, and other addresses to the nation. The online archive was scraped by a custom-made script developed using the Scrapy[7] framework with the Python programing language. A random sample of speeches was manually checked against the Government Publishing Office and Miller Center archives to ensure accuracy, with no significant differences found in content.

States of the Union[8] addresses, by their nature, must cover a range of policy areas, and although presidents may be able to concentrate on, and emphasize, their issues, they cannot completely ignore other issues. Scholars have argued that SOTU addresses are an opportunity to promote national values and individual policy areas (Campbell & Jamieson, 1990).

Inaugurals are a very ceremonial occasion where, as argued by Hart (1977), presidents are both officially sworn into office, but also ordained. The use of a Bible (one has been used at every inauguration thus far) in the swearing-in ceremony overtly places Christian religion as a part of the proceedings. The event is an opportunity to present the person to the nation as president; often, these speeches are lighter on policy and more centered on personality and values (see Campbell & Jamieson, 1990, for their analysis of the inaugural as a rhetorical genre).

Previous research (Coe & Domke, 2006; Lim, 2002; Teten, 2003) has used these "high-state" (Coe & Domke, 2006) speeches as their data source. Coe and Neumann (2011) produced a list of 406 "major addresses" of presidents Roosevelt to Obama to provide a wider data source than just the high-state addresses. This

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[6] Written messages with no spoken address were given after Roosevelt by Truman in 1946 and 1953, Eisenhower in 1961, and Carter in 1981.

[7] https://scrapy.org/

[8] Presidents Reagan through Trump addressed joint sessions of Congress shortly after inauguration. Technically, these are not States of the Union. However, they fulfil a very similar role and are widely considered as SOTU addresses—the presidency archive explicitly encourages them to be considered as such.

research adds a further 42 addresses, to include the remainder of the Obama presidency and the first year of the Trump presidency. These speeches conform to the stipulations set by Coe and Neumann of: major spoken addresses that are broadcast to the nation, addressed to the American people, with the president controlling the message. "Major public addresses" ($n = 448$) would be a succinct description for the full corpus, with "minor-state" addresses ($n = 342$) differentiating these from "high-state" addresses ($n = 106$).

The addresses were classified into policy and other appropriate labels using the descriptions of speeches supplied by Coe and Neumann (2011) in the existing corpus, and I classified the additional speeches into apposite categories by the same methodology employed by Coe and Neumann. Categories such as "farewell address" or "inaugural" were self-evident. Other speeches were clear from their description. For example, "signing the tax reduction act" (Ford, March 29, 1975) was classified in the "economy" category, whereas "Watergate" (Nixon, April 29, 1974) and "Iran–Contra controversy" (Reagan, November 13, 1986) were included in a "scandal" category. When archive descriptions were unclear, I read the speeches before assigning them to a category. Where it was still unclear following reading, speeches were placed in the "mixed-topic" speech category.

Findings

Figure 1a illustrates the number of religious terms used (RTPT) in all addresses by presidency. Figure 1b shows the rate of use of God terms (GTPT).
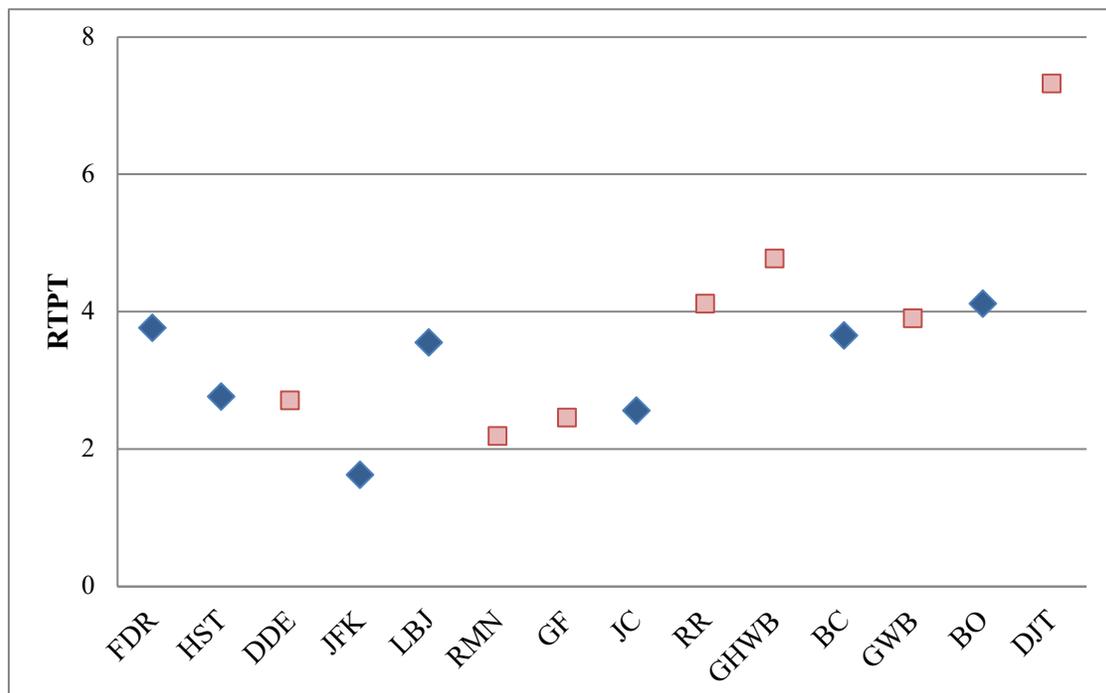
Figure 1a. Religious terms per thousand words by presidency.
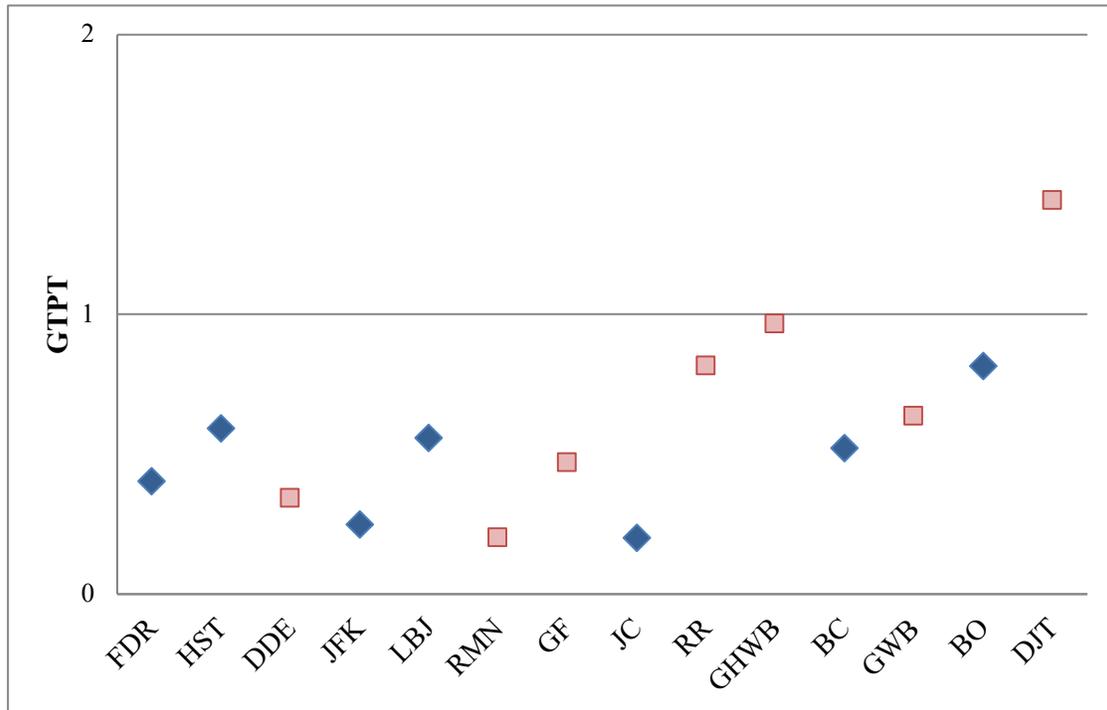
Figure 1b. God terms per thousand words by presidency.

The average across Republican presidencies is 3.5 religious terms and 0.59 God terms per thousand words. For Democrats, the commensurate figures are very similar—3.4 and 0.53, respectively.

A change from Reagan forward is well demarcated, particularly for the Republican presidencies. Pre-Reagan Republicans used 2.4 RTPT and 0.31 GTPT; post-Reagan Republicans (Reagan is included in the post-Reagan category in all analyses) had commensurate figures of 4.3 RTPT and 0.80 GTPT. The figures for Democratic presidents also increase between these two periods, but to a much lesser extent; the RTPT figure goes from 3.1 to 3.9 and the GTPT figure from 0.42 to 0.70.

Intriguingly, it is Trump who has the highest rate of usage of religious terms overall, using 7.3 RTPT and 1.41 GTPT in his addresses. Note, however, that at the time of writing, Trump had far fewer speeches than any other president in the archive. Yet, when the data are examined, the finding holds. He has the top two individual speeches for rate of use of religious language. The first is a speech given following the 2017 Las Vegas shooting in which 58 people were killed, so a high rate of religious terminology is understandable. Indeed, Table 1 illustrates that national tragedies are typically high in religious terms. Yet this particular speech has an RTPT of more than 52—five times the average for speeches following national tragedies. Speeches of this type with the next highest rates were G. W. Bush's remarks following the loss of the Space Shuttle Columbia (32 RTPT) and Obama's remarks following the 2015 school shooting in Oregon (25 RTPT). The speech with the second highest RTPT is Trump's speech introducing Neil Gorsuch as his

nominee for the Supreme Court—a speech which has no manifestly obvious reason to be so high in religious terminology. These two Trump speeches are also the fifth and sixth highest of all speeches in GTPT.

If high-state addresses are considered separately, Trump's RTPT of 3.9 is the fifth highest (behind Reagan, Roosevelt, G. W. Bush, and Carter), but his rate of 1.0 GTPT is the highest by far, the next highest being Reagan at 0.82. Again, a note of caution is warranted, as most presidents have a ratio of 4:1 for SOTU to inaugurals, whereas Trump's is currently 2:1, and inaugurals, as highlighted earlier and demonstrated in Table 1, are typically higher in rates of religious terminology. If SOTU addresses are separated, Trump's speeches remain highly placed; second (behind Reagan) for GTPT and third for FTPT (behind Reagan and Roosevelt). Another plausible explanation tested was that SOTU early presidency are, for some reason, higher in religious language. However, an examination of SOTU for each president does not suggest any such pattern.

Donald Trump's religiosity is, of course, personal to him, and we cannot know for sure the extent of his "Belief." It is known that he is of Lutheran heritage, was brought up in a Presbyterian household, and identifies as a Protestant. However, it is fair to say that his level of religiosity has been widely questioned, and the component of religiosity of "Behavior" provides support for this doubt. He is a very infrequent church attendee, has publicly acknowledged his marital infidelity, and has been divorced twice, to give just some examples. Trump had overwhelming electoral support from the White Evangelical community, but even leaders from that community who were, and still are, vociferous in their support are somewhat coy in discussing Trump's religious credentials. During the campaign, he was referred to by Evangelical leader James Dobson as a "baby Christian"—a descriptor subsequently used by others on the Christian Right. A *Christianity Today* poll in January 2016 found just 5% of Protestant pastors who identified as Republican were supporting Trump in the primaries. A national Pew Research poll at the same time showed that only 30% of adults polled believed that Trump is "very" (5%) or "somewhat" (25%) religious. In an interview (Murphy-Gill, 2017), David Holmes, professor of religious studies, uses the remarks of political scientist David Innes, that Trump's religion "seems to be a sincerely held, vague, nominal, but respectful form of old-school Protestantism" (para. 56). Whatever the truth, it seems fair to conclude that Trump has a particularly vested interest in promulgating an appearance of devotion.

Two other presidents included in this study—Kennedy and Carter—also encountered concerns with respect to their religion before taking office. Kennedy was the first and only Catholic president, and Carter was the first Evangelical. Thirty years before the election of Kennedy, another Catholic, Al Smith, received the Democratic nomination but lost in a landslide to Hoover. Although probably not a deciding factor in the race, Smith was subjected to much anti-Catholic sentiment by a public concerned that, as a Catholic, Smith's ultimate loyalty would be to the church and the Pope, rather than to the country (Balmer, 2008). Early in the campaign, Kennedy directly addressed this subject, stating in the campaign speech mentioned earlier that "I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute" (Balmer, 2008, p. 8). During his time in office, his speeches indicate an attempt to maintain such a separation, at least rhetorically; for all speeches he has the lowest RTPT of any president, and the third lowest GTPT. Similarly, Jimmy Carter has the fourth lowest RTPT and the lowest GTPT. Carter, in fact, did not use a single God term in his SOTU addresses—only Nixon has the same statistic. In contrast, Reagan used 27, Obama 22, and Trump has already used seven in his two SOTU addresses to date.

These findings largely confirm previous research in this area (Domke & Coe, 2008), but by examining a much wider corpus of speeches and developing a standardized measure provide a more robust analysis and bring analysis up to date. The update with the new data point of Trump provides a particularly interesting finding.

Figures 1a and 1b illustrated a general upward trend in religious language over time, with a fairly clear demarcation point around Reagan, particularly concerning Republican presidents. This finding has clear face validity, given what is known of the influence of the Christian Right on the Republican Party since Reagan came to office (Lambert, 2008; Wuthnow, 1988).

Figures 2a and 2b separate the data into pre- and post-Reagan periods and clearly demonstrate both the overall change in rate between the two periods, but also how the changes are more marked for Republican presidents between the periods.
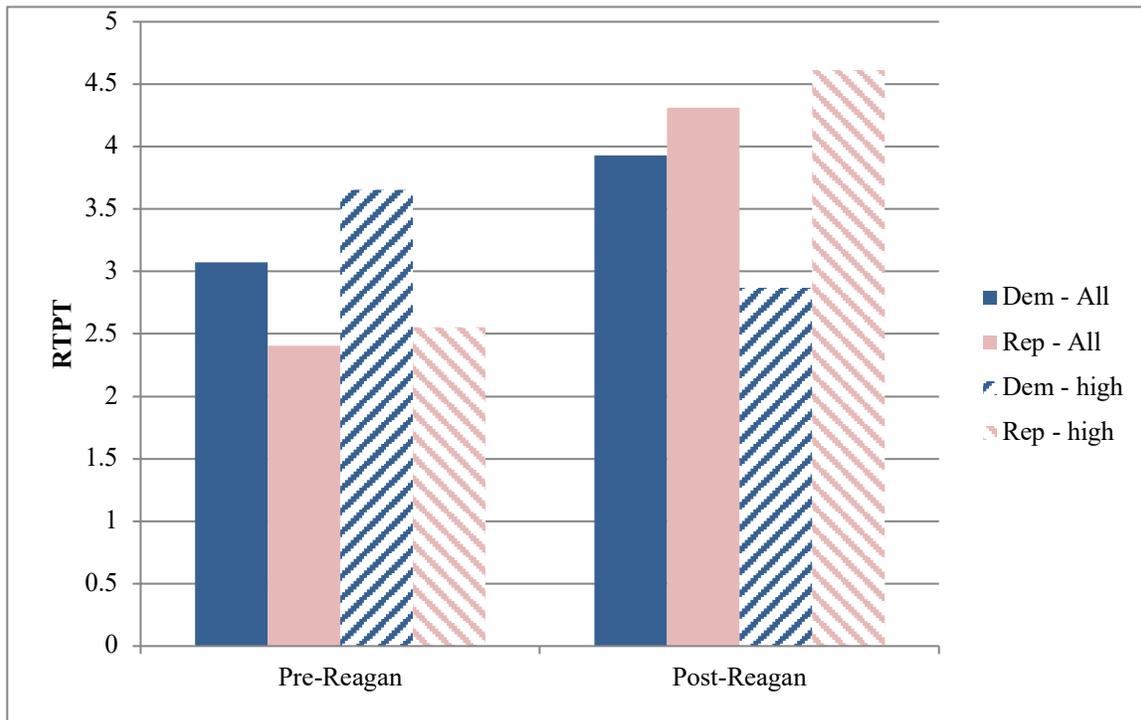
Figure 2a. Religious terms per thousand words by party and period.
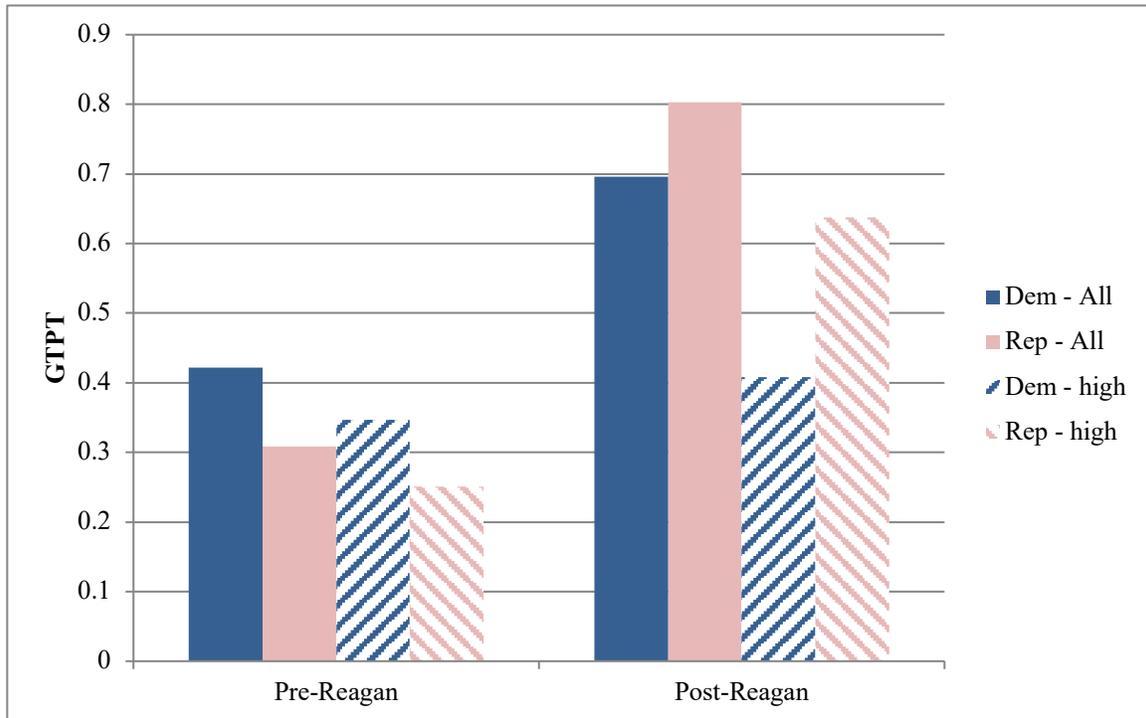
Figure 2b. God terms per thousand words by party and period.

Speeches and Issue Ownership

The 448 addresses are categorized in Table 1, along with their attendant rates of usage of God and religious terms. Even with this wide range of speeches concentrating on a multitude of topics, inaugurals are the speeches with the highest rate of GTPT and second highest rate of RTPT, behind speeches following national tragedies or disasters—speeches that one may expect to contain high levels of religiosity. Consistently, when presidents first present themselves to the nation as the new leader, they take this "first official opportunity to wield the power of language" (Sigelman, 1996, p. 81) as a moment to present themselves, partially at least, within a Christian framework. The "communal values drawn from the past" identified by Campbell and Jamieson (1990, p. 15) are likely presented as Christian values.

Table 1 provides face validity for the methodology employed; speeches in which one may expect higher levels of religiosity are indeed positioned toward the top of the table, that is, tragedies, inaugurals, and holiday addresses, which are all emotive occasions. At the other end of the table are located policy-specific speeches (on agriculture, labor relations, health and the economy), which are unlikely to be as affecting.

***Table 1. Presidential Addresses by Focus of the Speech and
Rates of Religious Terminology (Ordered by RTPT).***

	No. of speeches	GTPT	RTPT
National tragedy/disaster [a]	16	1.63	9.7
Inaugural	22	1.75	9.4
Holiday address [b]	4	1.43	8.6
Law and order	7	1.20	7.6
Defense	89	0.95	4.5
Immigration	3	1.55	4.5
Farewell address	7	0.37	3.6
High state	106	0.42	3.5
Minor state	342	0.62	3.4
Elections	15	0.33	3.4
Foreign affairs [c]	45	0.53	3.3
Mixed topic speech	14	0.43	3.2
Terrorism	16	0.63	3.0
State of the Union	84	0.29	2.9
Civil rights	10	0.58	2.8
Domestic policy issues [d]	86	0.50	2.8
Cold war [e]	29	0.50	2.7
Environment	9	0.12	2.6
Presidential scandal	10	0.66	2.2
Social welfare	6	0.00	2.1
Economy	46	0.46	2.0
Health	3	0.28	1.9
Labor relations	11	0.57	1.7
Agriculture	2	0.00	0.6
All speeches	448	0.55	3.4

[a] Examples include the death of presidents, the space shuttle explosions, major hurricanes, and mass shootings.
[b] Reagan gave speeches for Flag Day and Independence Day in 1986, in 1991 G. H. W. Bush addressed the nation for Thanksgiving and Christmas.
[c] Not including defense-related issues such as wars.
[d] Combines agriculture, civil rights, economy, health, labor relations, law and order, and social welfare. N.B.: Some of these individual categories contain few speeches, so the figures carry a degree of caution.
[e] Specifically related to U.S.–Soviet relations 1945–91.

Figures 3a and 3b illustrate the change in rates between the pre- and post-Reagan eras for speeches related to prominent policy areas.
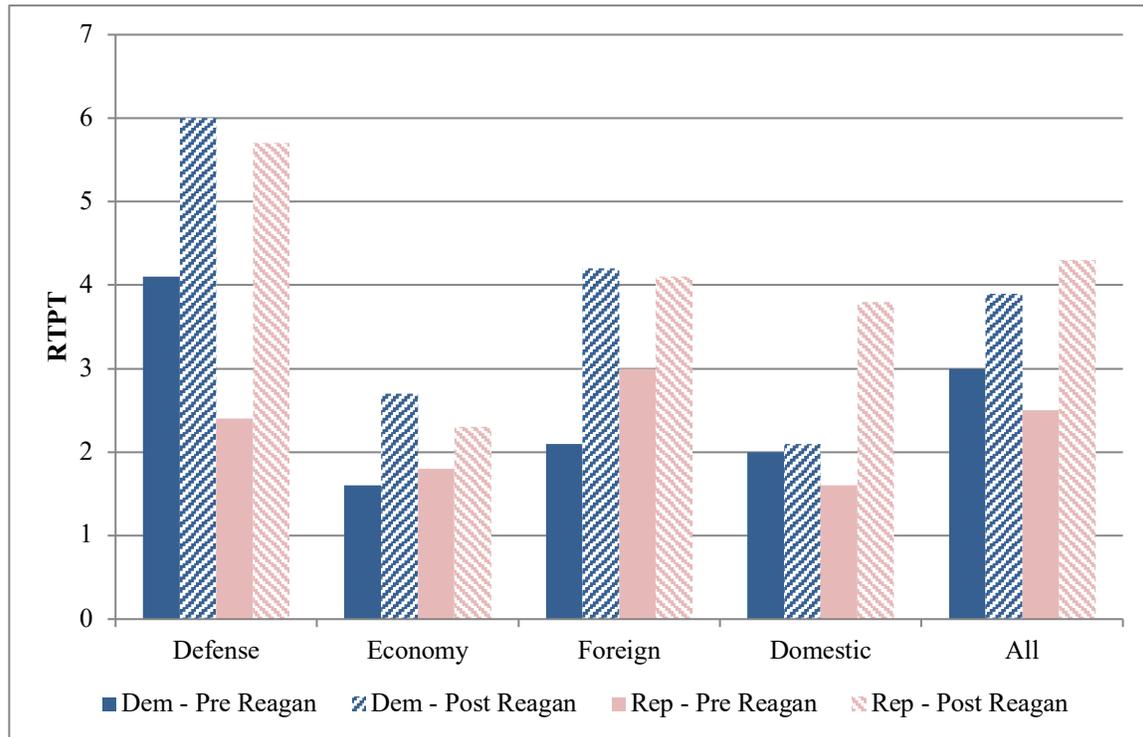
Figure 3a. Religious terms per thousand words by speech type and period.
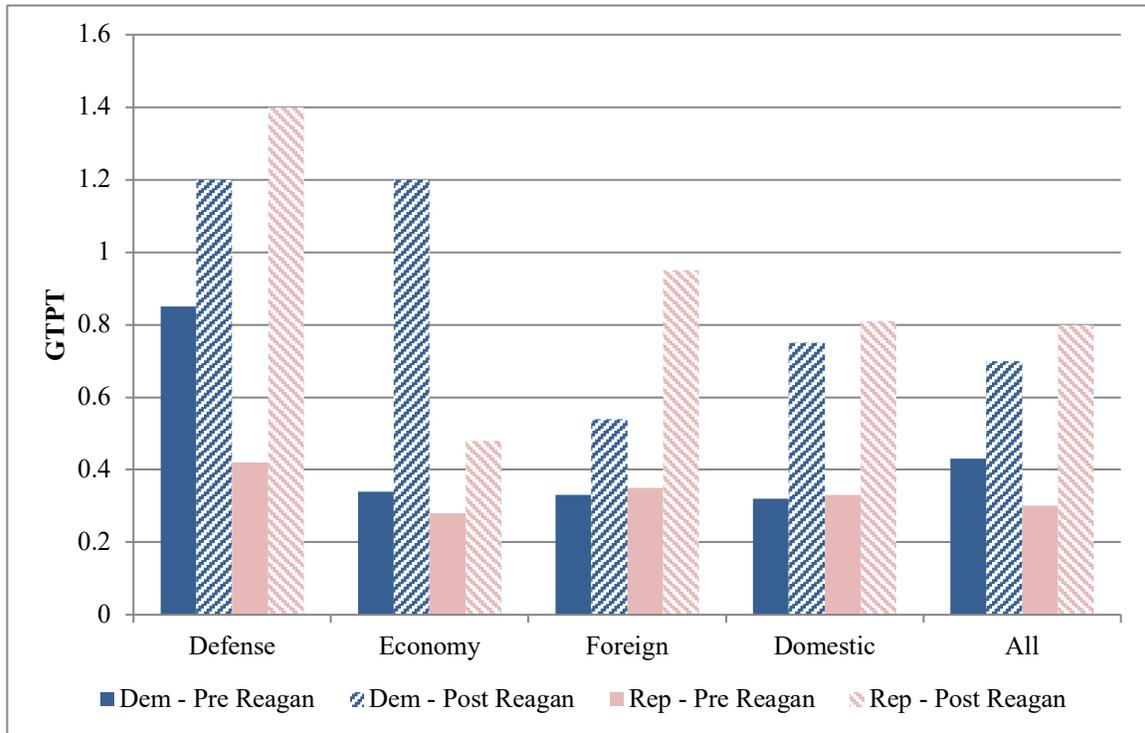
Figure 3b. God terms per thousand words by speech type and period.

There is, perhaps, some evidence here that Democratic presidents have attempted to use religious language to "trespass" into Republican areas. Their rate of use of overt religious language post-Reagan in economic speeches is surprisingly high. The high rates found in defense speeches, which have the second highest RTPT rate for policy speeches, and a GTPT rate almost double the overall speech average, is a result of presidents of both parties imbuing such speeches with religious language. Again, this has a degree of face validity given the events to which these speeches were often referring; frequently, the subject was war. Note that it is the relatively high figures for defense speeches by Democratic presidents post-Reagan that strongly influences the overall rate figures.

If speeches specifically about terrorism are examined, the RTPT for Democrats is 5.5 and for Republicans just 2.5, and the GTPT 1.36 and 0.50, respectively. It is worth noting that such speeches were given just by presidents G. W. Bush, Clinton, and Obama,[9] and all three have very similar rates overall for use of religious language. Yet, on this topic, Bush's rate of using religious language drops slightly, whereas both Clinton's and Obama's increases significantly. Previous research argued that the "[George W.] Bush administration's 'war on terror' provides an ideal discursive environment in which to employ religious themes" (Coe & Domke, 2006, p. 324). Yet, in speeches specifically on that topic, Bush used religious

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[9] Although only 16 speeches specifically on terrorism were delivered, these speeches total more than 75,000 words, a sufficiently robust quantity for this comparison

language at a markedly low rate—much lower than both his predecessor and successor did on the topic. This difference is a result of both his relatively low rate of usage and the relatively high rates of usage by Clinton and Obama.

There are insufficient speeches specifically on Democrat-owned issues to enable valid comparisons between parties to check, using the previous methodology, for further evidence of trespassing. However, SOTU addresses and inaugurals are, by nature, multi-issue and usually very long speeches ($\bar{x}$ = 4,364 words). It is possible, therefore, to use these speeches to look for further evidence of trespassing. In these speeches, religious terms were extracted using a Key-Word-In-Context (KWIC) approach, which extracted the sentence containing the religious term (from the list of 111 previously established) plus the preceding and subsequent sentences. These "religious extracts" were checked for policy indicator words and compared against the full text of speeches. The KWIC extraction was aided by use of the natural language processing software Wordstat.

A "bag-of-words" approach was used to establish the policy areas in high-state addresses. The areas, and indicator words, were established iteratively following both manual reading of the texts and automated frequency analysis using Wordstat. The frequency analysis was read for words with clear relevance to policy areas, with identifiable words assigned to the six most common areas of policy. Examples of policy areas with their indicator terms (plus their lexemes where appropriate) include: economic (econom*, tax*, business*, wealth*); education (educat*, school*, teach*, college); welfare (welfare, unemploy*, poverty); health (doctor, nurse, hospital*, medic*); defense (defense, war, army, militar*). Petrocik et al. (2003) argue that the presence of indicator words is an appropriate index of the presence or absence of an issue, particularly when analysis concentrates on the relative frequency of occurrence of words, as is the case here.

To analyze whether the policy areas found in the religious extracts differed between presidents, a standardized measure was developed that accounted for differences in both speech length and frequency of referring to certain policy areas. Speeches differ significantly in their length (σ = 1,882), and, naturally, certain presidents may have placed more emphasis on certain policy areas than others, and it would therefore be expected that these policy areas would then be found more frequently within the religious extracts, simply because of their higher frequency within the speeches generally. The standardized measure developed was the rate of policy words in the full speeches divided by the rate of policy words in the three-sentence religious extracts. A measure closer to 1.0 would indicate a higher propensity to collocate that issue with religious language.

This approach also found some evidence of post-Reagan trespassing; post-Reagan Democrats showed a higher propensity for discussing economic policy in collocation with religious terms than did their Republican contemporaries (see Figure 4a). Those same contemporaries meanwhile showed a higher propensity to collocate terms relevant to Democrat-owned issues (health, social welfare, education) with religious language than did Democrats from that period (see Figure 4d). However, these findings do not hold for social welfare policy (see Figure 4b) nor Republican-owned issues collectively (see Figure 4c). Although there is some evidence for the use of religious language as an aid to trespassing, the hypothesis is not fully supported.
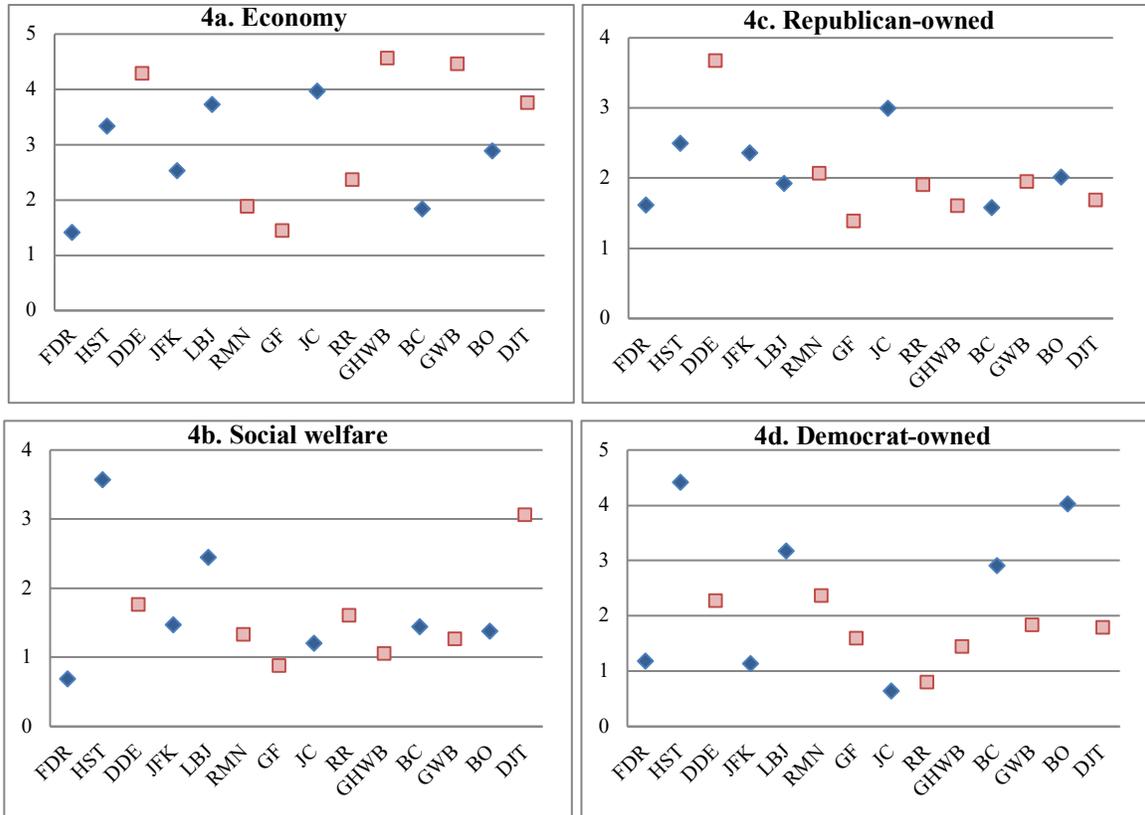
Figures 4. Standardized measure illustrating propensity to collocate religious language with language connected to (a) economy, (b) social welfare, (c) Republican-owned issues, and (d) Democrat-owned issues.

Oral Versus Written

It was noted earlier that written SOTU addresses were excluded from prior analysis. Comparing these written addresses against those spoken for presidents who undertook both appears to validate this decision, as there is a marked change between a president verbally addressing the nation and a president writing to Congress. Table 2 shows that the rate of religious words is typically around four times higher in oral addresses than in written addresses, and that God terms all but disappear in written addresses. Clearly, when telling the nation about the state of the union, religious speech is used far more often than when writing to Congress with the same information. What is not clear is how much of this change may be due to the delivery mechanism (speech or writing) and what part is due to considerations of the audience of the message. This does, however, add further weight to the earlier argument that a normative expectation has developed for a president to use a minimum level of religious language when addressing the people.

Table 2. Comparison of Written and Spoken States of the Union.

	RTPT		GTPT	
	Spoken	Written	Spoken	Written
Truman	2.4	0.79	0.10	0.04
Eisenhower	2.2	0.73	0.27	0.12
Nixon	2.2	0.53	0.00	0.00
Carter	2.8	0.60	0.00	0.00
Overall	2.3	0.58	0.14	0.01

Discussion

This research confirms prior conclusions about how Christianity has become a staple of inclusion in highly considered and carefully worded public political statements. The speeches analyzed here would have generally gone through multiple drafts, been worked on by several writers, and been checked by a range of government offices, so it can be reasonably assumed that the use of religious language is often deliberate, considered, and with purpose.

The data considered here strongly suggest several interpretations of how this religious language is employed. There is a clear trend for using more religious terminology over time; this confirms and extends prior work in this area. Reagan's overt use of religiosity during his time in office seems to have had a lasting impact on subsequent use of religious language in national presidential addresses. There is stronger evidence to support the hypothesis that religious language is used as an aid to trespass rather than to augment authority on owned issues. This evidence is strongest for post-Reagan presidencies. It has a degree of face validity given both the conclusions here and from prior research as to the increasing use of religious rhetoric from that presidency. Post-Reagan Republicans increasingly use religious language as an aid to trespass into Democrat-owned areas of policy. The post-Reagan Democrats may be trying to do the same with the areas of the economy and defense. The recruitment of God to aid in an area of policy where one is seen as having a competitive disadvantage has clear appeal, but the evidence is insufficient to support such a conclusion outside these identified areas.

Of course, though these data are suggestive of a deliberative effort, they cannot reveal whether there was true intent with the way religious terms were used in connection with various policy areas. It may not ever be clear whether the multiple authors of these speeches were consciously using religious terms in a particular manner, and the strength of findings here are insufficient alone to be able to conclude otherwise. An interesting, though unfeasible, avenue to explore would be in examining final versions of the speeches against earlier drafts to see whether, and where, religious language is added as speeches become finalized. Of course, the speeches analyzed here are matters of public record and historical documents; their drafts are generally not.

This research cannot answer whether the use of language in these speeches had an influence on public opinion. Some authors (Edwards, 2006) argue that presidential rhetoric has little to no impact on public opinion or perceptions. Coe and Domke (2006), however, note that the wide dissemination of

presidential rhetoric likely has an impact on religious socialization. The impact, or potential for impact, is unknown, but what is important, in terms of this work, at least, is that presidents and their political operatives believe there to be an impact, and therefore write and deliver speeches under an assumption of influence.

The findings outside the issue ownership questions are stronger. These data illustrate that both Kennedy and Carter appear to have made attempts to assuage concerns about their religion by lessening the religious content of their addresses to the nation. The data on Trump appear to illustrate that he has attempted to do the same, just in the opposite direction, by increasing the religiosity of his addresses to perhaps answer criticism of his apparent lower faith level. It is naturally worth noting that Trump is currently the last data point on a series that already had an extant positive trend line. However, he still lies far above that trend line. A Pew Research poll in 2012 found that 67% of Americans thought it important for a president to have strong religious beliefs—the figure rose to 81% with Republican respondents. Clearly, all nominees for the office must display their Christian credentials, but Republican nominees would appear to have a greater need to do so. Trump received 81% of the White Evangelical vote in 2016. A remarkable level of support came from much of the "Bible belt," support for a man who had widely questioned religiosity and was a billionaire New Yorker. Mitt Romney, John McCain, and George W. Bush all received less in the prior three elections (Smith & Martínez, 2016; and see Hoover, 2017, for a discussion germane to the role of religion in the election of Trump).

Balmer (2008) notes how Reagan, as a divorcé, was largely given a pass by the Evangelical community, but, as a result, had to work to prove his religious bona fides. Maybe Trump has to work even harder to achieve the same ends. Perhaps Trump's use of religious language is an artifact of an increasing importance of religion to Trump personally, or perhaps it more illustrates an acknowledgement of the increasing importance of the religious to Trump politically.

The oral versus written SOTU finding shows that presidents consistently use a much higher rate of religious language in SOTU addresses delivered orally than when delivering the same information to Congress in writing. This evidence supports an interpretation that presidents are more concerned to present an appearance of religiosity to the public at large than to congressional colleagues.

All the presidents discussed here were clear in establishing their Christian credentials, and seemingly made conscious efforts to present these credentials to the public. Kennedy—the sole non-Protestant president considered here—famously promised there would be an "absolute" separation between his Catholic beliefs and his actions in office. His speeches indicate consideration to keep to that promise. Jimmy Carter faced some similar concerns. Carter was a devout "born again" Christian; an uncomfortable religious position for many at that time. His speech content may be acknowledgement of that unease. He used the least overt religious language of any president; he did not use a God term in any of his SOTU addresses (or indeed his nomination acceptance speeches at the Democratic conventions), just two during his inauguration, and used them very sparingly in his other speeches. Both these presidents seemed to work to maintain Jefferson's wall at a personal level; Reagan essentially blew it up. George W. Bush replaced it with a bridge, a term he used to describe his newly founded Office of Faith-based and Community Initiatives. Trump may want to foster the impression that, in his White House, not even a bridge is required.

This work adds to an understanding of the use of Christian religious rhetoric within prominent public discourses of the most powerful political figures of recent United States history. All these men shared the same religion and have used their position to place that religion's philosophies and beliefs to support their political philosophies and beliefs. Although this research cannot conclude that religion is used in a universally systematic way to support certain policy positions, it does provide further illustration that religion is employed as a political tool, and that religious language is seemingly used strategically when apposite.

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Appendix

Table A1. List of Faith Words (adapted from Domke & Coe, 2008).

amen	consecrat*	jew*	rebirth	sin
angel	covenant	lamp	reborn	sins
angels	creed*	martyr*	redeem*	sinner
angelic	crusade*	miracle*	redemption	sinners
apostle*	denomination*	mission*	religio*	sinning
backslid*	devotion	orthodox*	repent*	sinned
baptism*	devout	parable*	restor*	solemn*
baptize	disciple*	pastor*	resurrect*	soul*
believer*	epistle*	peacemaker*	reverend*	sow
bible*	evil*	penance	sabbath	sows
biblical	faith*	piety	sacrament	sown
bless*	fellowship*	pious	sacred	sowed
cathedral*	fruits	pope*	saint*	spirit*
christian*	genesis	pray*	salvation	temple*
church	gospel*	priest*	sanctity	testament
churches	grace	prophe*	sanctify	theolog*
clergy	hallow*	proverb*	sanctuary*	trinity
commandment*	heaven*	psalm*	scriptur*	worship*
communion	holy	pulpit*	sermon*	
confession*	hymn*	rabbi*	servant*	
congregation*	immortal*	reap	shrine*	

*All possible endings of that stem under the same lexeme.