The Inauguration Ceremony as Public Theology

The cases of George H. W. Bush and Barack Obama

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The Inauguration of George H. W. Bush

George Herbert Walker Bush (b. 1924) was sworn in as President of the U.S. on January 20, 1989. Bush’s day began with a family church service at St. John’s Episcopal Church led by The Rev. Tom Bagby from St. Martin’s Episcopal Church in Houston, Texas, the church Bush went to during his years in Houston. John Harper, rector of St. John’s Episcopal Church and Vice President elect Dan Quayle’s minister participated. Bush commented: “We were surrounded by family and a few friends.”

A few hours after the church service, the inaugural ceremony took place at the West front of the U.S. Capitol. Justice Sandra Day O’Connor swore in Vice President Dan Quayle (b.1947), a conservative Presbyterian, and Chief Justice William Rehnquist swore in George H. W. Bush, who comes from an

Episcopalian tradition. Bush, dressed in a dark business suit with a silver tie, placed his hand on two Bibles. Bush mentioned one of them in his introductory statement, saying: "I’ve just repeated word for word the oath taken by George Washington 200 years ago, and the Bible on which I placed my hand is the Bible on which he placed his."\(^2\) This Bible, belonging to St. John’s Masonic Lodge No. 1, was opened at random. However, the second Bible used was a Family Bible and this was opened to the so called Beatitudes in the Gospel according to Matthew, i.e. chapter 5, the beginning of Jesus’ famous Sermon on the Mount.\(^3\)

Barbara held the two Bibles. She comments in her memoirs: “I have used a different Bible at each of George’s swearing-ins—one for the United Nations, one for the CIA, two for vice president, and one [beside the Washington Bible, author’s note] for president—so each of the children may have one.\(^4\)

The close family friend Rev. Billy Graham led the invocation, the introductory prayer. Alvie Powell, a Staff Sergeant in the U.S. Army, sang *The Star-Spangled Banner* and *God Bless America* at the inaugural ceremony. Patriotism and faith in God were interconnected also when it come to the musical parts at the occasion. On his part, Bush continued the inaugural speech on the same route saying: “And my first act as President is a prayer. I ask you to bow your heads.” And he prayed:

Heavenly Father, we bow our heads and thank You for Your love. Accept our thanks for the peace that yields this day and the shared faith that makes its continuance likely. Make us strong to do your work, willing to heed and hear Your will, and write on our hearts these words: "Use power to help people".


For we are given power not to advance our own purposes, nor to make a great show in the world, nor a name. There is but one just use of power, and it is to serve people. Help us remember, Lord. Amen.

The prayer revealed traces of a traditional Christian theology: there is a Heavenly father who loves, has a will, listens to prayer and interacts with human life. Noteworthy is the fact that “Lord” in a prayer in the Christian tradition often refers to Jesus Christ.

Bush continued: "America is never wholly herself unless she is engaged in high moral principle." He mentions old timeless values, as "duty, sacrifice, commitment, and a patriotism that finds its expression in taking part and pitching in." After addressing some areas including problematic political issues, he states: "Our challenges are great, but our will is greater. And if our flaws are endless, God’s love is truly boundless." And the address, the first speech by the new President of the United States ends: "God bless you. And God bless the United States of America."

The Rev. Billy Graham gave the benediction at the end of the ceremony. Altogether, the religious dimension was clear and outspoken during this political event.

George F. Will comments in Suddenly, The American Idea Abroad and At Home 1986–1990: "New presidents serve up rich sauces of symbolism...Amidst the familiar metaphors...of Bush’s inaugural address there ran a vein of familiar moralism. It equates rectitude with right, and assumes that having the right attitude is tantamount to doing the right thing." Another comment is given by David Domke and Kevin Coe in their book The God Strategy, not least on the prayer included by President Bush. They compared the Bush prayer with the one used by Dwight

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5 WCPD, 1989, 100.
6 WCPD, 1989, 100.
8 WCPD, 1989, 102.
Eisenhower in his inaugural address in 1953. Interestingly, Domke and Coe notice that “Eisenhower’s focus was primarily on the motivations and actions that he, Congress, and the American public might exhibit.” In contrast, they write that Bush ”focused a significant portion of his prayer on God’s character and wishes, and he spoke in a distinctly personal manner.” They also mention that “for both presidents, the prayers expressed a desire to serve God and people,” but describe some differences in “how this desire was communicated.” They state: “Eisenhower invoked God three times and prioritized the American public and nation, an approach emblematic of the abstract ‘civil religion’ common among presidents during America’s first 200 years. In contrast, Bush invoked God six times, prioritized God and divine will, and spoke in the far more intimate manner commonly found in modern evangelicalism, using such words as Father, love, hearts, You and Your, and Lord.” They viewed Bush’s approach as a “significant rhetorical elevation of God’s role vis-à-vis the nation’s leaders and citizens,” and write that his words “recalled an era of religious understanding that pre-dates the scientific rationalism derided by many conservative Christians.”

Over all, Domke and Coe comment on Bush’s inaugural address, saying that “Bush’s politics were exactly the type desired by the many Americans interested in a president who is not only a political leader but a spiritual one as well.”

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10 The prayer delivered at Eisenhower’s Inaugural Address went as follows: Almighty God, as we stand here at this moment my future associates in the executive branch of government join me in beseeching that people in this throng, and their fellow citizens everywhere. Give us, people in this throng, and their fellow citizens everywhere. Give us. We pray, the power to discern clearly right from wrong, and allow all our words and actions to be governed thereby, and by the laws of this land. Especially we pray that our concern shall be for all the people regardless of station, race or calling. May cooperation be permitted and be the mutual aim of those who, under the concepts of our Constitution, hold to differing political faiths; so that all may work for the good of our beloved country and Thy glory. Amen.”


12 Domke & Coe (2008), 36.

13 Domke & Coe (2008), 36f.
It is also noteworthy that Bush Sr. applied both the approach of Carter, using Micah 6:8 at his inauguration, i.e. a usage of a Bible passage for private, personal, matters, and the approach of Reagan, who used II Chronicles 7:14, i.e. verses directed to the nation, when choosing his Bible passage. Many of the verses chosen by Bush can be used in a more personal application, but the verse on peacemakers can be and was applied (also) to the role of the U.S. in the world. All these three presidents chose Bible verses that reflect a faith position in a more theistic than deistic tradition.

The Bush Sr. inaugural week celebrations in 1989 culminated in the special service of prayer and thanksgiving at Washington National Cathedral on January 22. On the cathedral’s website it is noted that “the service reflected the expressed wish of the Bush family that the inaugural festivities conclude with quiet reflection and prayer.”14 It marked the continuation of a tradition renewed by Reagan—he held a national prayer service at Washington National Cathedral as part of his second inauguration in 1985. The cathedral website underlines that the service “marked the involvement of the American presidency with the Cathedral in a way that was, paradoxically, a testament to the unity of a nation of people who are free to come together to pray and to the diversity of religious expression in America.”15

About 3,550 people were gathered with Barbara and George Bush, Dan and Marilyn Quayle, their families, and other members of the new administration at the service, and the purpose was “to pray for the future of the nation and the success of the work ahead.”16 The Rt. Rev. John T. Walker, Episcopal bishop of Washington and dean of Washington National Cathedral, presided at the service. In his welcoming words he declared: “This morning this Cathedral reflects the

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great diversity that is our nation…But we are a nation united in the person of our president. He is our symbol of unity. And it is appropriate, therefore, that we gather together on this occasion to pray for his life and health and for the life and health of the nation.”

Cathedral Provost Charles A. Perry officiated at the service, patterned after a simple Morning Prayer service. It consisted of music, lessons, and prayers combined with three special segments. Each of these comprised of a Scripture reading, a homily, and a litany prayer. The three different sections were “designed to reflect upon and emphasize the breadth of the decision-making impact of the American presidency: ‘Caring for the People of America,’ ‘Caring for God’s Creation,’ and ‘Reconciliation of the Peoples of the Earth.’” It is interesting to note that the homilists for the three parts were not only the Rev. Professor Peter Gomes, minister at The Memorial Church of Harvard University and the Most Rev. Edmond L. Browning, presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, U.S.A., but also the Honorable John Ashcroft, Governor of Missouri, who later became U.S. Attorney General (2001–2005) in the George W. Bush administration.

This service was seen as the key feature of the first proclamation of the new President: Proclamation 5936 – National Day of Prayer and Thanksgiving, 1989. In this, Bush declared:

We celebrate America as ‘one nation under God.’ As I assume the office of President, I am humbled before God and seek His counsel and favor on our land, and join with our first President who said, ‘...it would be peculiarly improper to omit in this first official act, my fervent supplications to that Almighty Being who rules over the universe...that his benediction may consecrate to the liberties and happiness of the people of the United States, a government instituted by themselves for these essential purposes.’

Now, Therefore, I, George Bush...proclaim January 22, 1989, a National Day of Prayer and Thanksgiving and call upon the citizens of our great Nation to gather together on this day in homes and places of worship to pray in thanksgiving for our blessings and peace, freedom, prosperity, and Independence.
all Americans kneel humbly before our Heavenly Father in search of His
counsel and for His divine guidance and wisdom upon the leaders of the United
States of America.\textsuperscript{19}

As a preparation of the service at the National Cathedral, a letter from
President Bush was sent to more than 200,000 congregations nationwide. The
letter encouraged them “to use portions of the Cathedral service in their own
worship services during the inaugural celebration. And following the service,
when the Cathedral bells pealed out in celebration, churches across the country
rang their bells as well. The result was that, in a sense, anyone who wanted to
could pray for the nation along with the president.”\textsuperscript{20}

Bush had placed himself in a tradition of the founding fathers and first
president of the nation, George Washington, viewing the nation as a nation under
that “Almighty Being who rules over the universe.” He placed himself in a tradition
viewing the nation as a nation “under God,” a phrase incorporated into the Pledge
of Allegiance on June 14, 1954, during the Eisenhower era, by a Joint Resolution
of Congress amending §7 of the Flag Code enacted in 1942.\textsuperscript{21} Bush reportedly
stood in line with this unanimous congressional vote in 1954 throughout his
presidency, and with the words in the accompanying House of Representative’s
report: “...Underlying this concept is the belief that the human person is important
because he was created by God and endowed by Him with certain inalienable

\textsuperscript{19}http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=20424&st=&st1=#axzz1NAYq0xml
(Retrieved May 23, 2011).

\textsuperscript{20}http://www.nationalcathedral.org/about/presidentialInaugural1989.shtml (retrieved
2010-10-06).

\textsuperscript{21}To Amend the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America
enacted June 14, 1954. Joint resolution to codify and emphasize existing rules and
customs pertaining to the display and use of the flag of the United States of America,
approved June 22, 1942, as amended (36 U. S. C., sec. 172). It reads as follows: \textsc{Sec}. 7.
“The following is designated as the pledge of allegiance to the flag, ‘I pledge allegiance
to the flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands, one
Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.’ Such pledge should be
rendered by standing with the right hand over the heart. However, civilians will always
show full respect to the flag when the pledge is given by merely standing at attention,
men removing the headdress. Persons in uniform shall render the military salute.’”
rights which no civil authority may usurp. The inclusion of God in our pledge therefore would further acknowledge the dependence of our people and our Government upon the moral directions of the Creator.”

Therefore, he could, as President say: “Let all Americans kneel humbly before our Heavenly Father in search of His counsel and for His divine guidance and wisdom upon the leaders of the United States of America.”

Thus, for the Bushes the inaugural weekend ended by attending a Sunday service at the Washington National Cathedral. Barbara Bush comments on this service in her memoirs: “It was truly beautiful. The cathedral has special meaning for us: Neil, Marvin, and Doro went to the cathedral for schools, the boys were confirmed there…it was one of my favorite places to bring visitors; Bishop John Walker was a friend. So we felt very much at home.”

The cathedral was very much a familiar place, yes, like a home for the Bushes, not only a place where you officially fulfill your presidential duties.

From the very beginning of his presidency, Bush used quite an astonishing religious vocabulary, not least from an Old World political perspective. It would hardly be acceptable for a European politician to express him- or herself in a similar way under similar circumstances. In United States, this is a part of a tradition, which was pronounced and renewed from the Reagan era and on. It is clear that Bush, even though often seen as a more secular president than Carter or Reagan, or for that matter his son George W. Bush, took a similar foundational religio-political approach as his former chief. The religio-political approach was not only a part of the inaugural ceremonies of Bush’s first week in office. They continued throughout

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22 Quoted in Domke & Coe (2008), 14f.
23 Bush, B. (1994), 361. Gutin mentions the busy schedule also for the First Lady. During the first 100 days of the Bush administration Barbara alone or with George hosted 18 receptions, 16 dinners, 24 coffee or teas, 19 luncheons, and 2 breakfasts. In addition, Barbara visited 9 states, 4 countries, conducted 24 press interviews, participated in 42 “doing and caring events,” and 41 other types of events. Also, she received, on an average, 100,000 letters per year. The Second Lady’s staff in the White House included fourteen people. Gutin Myra G. (2008), Barbara Bush: Presidential Matriarch (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas), 59f.
24 See, for example, Domke & Koe (2008), 3ff.
his presidency. We find statements on prayer, on the will of God, on God’s love, the
blessings of God, God’s guidance, advice and wisdom etc., and the statements are
addressed both to individuals, to the nation as a “nation under God,” and to the
president himself, searching for counsel, wisdom and guidance.

The statements during the inaugural week can be viewed as an introductory
religio-political accord to a ”symphony” that followed, in which many “instruments”
were used during the coming four years. The themes used were more of a theistic
than a deistic kind, more picked up from a traditional Christian heritage than an
Enlightenment heritage.

The Inauguration of President Barack Obama

Also Barack Hussein Obama held his hand on a Bible when he was sworn
in on January 20, 2009. The Bible used was the same Bible as used by Abraham
Lincoln during the inauguration ceremonies on March 4, 1861.25

The invocation was held by a famous Evangelical pastor, Dr. Rick Warren
from Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California. The ceremony included a
patriotic song from 1832, “My Country ’Tis of Thee,” sung by Aretha Franklin.
The fourth verse (not always sung, but well known) reads: “Our fathers’ God, to
thee, author of liberty, to thee we sing; long may our land be bright with freedom's
holy light; protect us by thy might, great God, our King.”26

One more pastor participated at the inauguration, the elderly black veteran
from the Civil Rights Movement Rev. Dr. Joseph E. Lowery, a Methodist who

25 Only one of the 44 presidents of the U.S. chose not to use a Bible when sworn in—the
very religious John Quincy Adams, who in 1825 instead placed his hand on some law
texts. In fact, another example exists. Lyndon B Johnson was installed in the presidential
plane Air Force One after the assassination of John F Kennedy. No Bible was available at
this moment. Instead a Catholic Liturgical Hand Book (Missale) was used. However,
Johnson used a Bible during the inauguration in 1965.

founded The Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1957 together with Martin Luther King Jr. Lowery delivered the more than five minute long benediction/prayer (Obama’s address was 21 minutes long).27

Of course, the National anthem was sung. One verse (even if not always sung) includes the following words: “Blest with vict’ry and peace, may the Heav’n rescued land. Praise the Power that hath made and preserved us a nation! Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just, And this be our motto: “In God is our trust.”28

The religious dimension was heard also in the inaugural speech. Obama mentioned “the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness.” He mentioned “God’s grace” and referred to the Bible, saying: “But in the words of Scripture, the time has come to set aside childish things.” This pointed at St. Paul’s so called “love chapter,” the thirteenth chapter in Paul’s First letter to the Corinthians, and the reference to setting aside childish things is verse 11. In order to be inclusive Obama also mentioned that the U.S. “are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and non-believers,” which of course is true, but it is also true, and can be noted, that according to recent surveys about 80% of the Americans have a Christian affiliation (and there are more Christians in the so called unaffiliated group) and there are only 0.6% with a Muslim, 1.7% with a Jewish, 0.3% with a Hindu, and 1.6% with an atheist affiliation.29 The speech ended with a traditional “God bless you. And God bless the United States of America.”30

Also, The Honorable Dianne Feinstein, a Democratic Senator from California, who chaired the congressional inaugural committee and acted as the

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inauguration’s master of ceremonies, ended her welcoming remarks with “God bless America!”

Also this time, other Christian services were held during the inauguration days. Obama, as Bush Sr., started his inaugural day with a service at St. John’s Episcopal Church, and the first day in office, January 21, with another service in National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., in which the Rev. Otis Moss Jr., pastor emeritus of Olivet Institutional Baptist Church in Cleveland, delivered an opening prayer, choirs participated, the old and popular hymn “Amazing Grace” was sung and psalms and biblical passages read.

But, as one commentator wrote, “the service had a strongly nonsectarian feel, with many prayers mentioning no deity in particular.” The sermon was held by the Obama chosen Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) General Minister and President Sharon E. Watkins. She summoned Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Cherokee sources, among others. The Rev. Canon Carol L. Wade of the cathedral had as a preparation worked closely with Obama’s inaugural committee and had even rewritten some of the responsive prayers from the Book of Common Prayer to stress the religious diversity in the service. Among the invited Muslims, Ingrid Mattson, President of the Islamic Society of North America and Professor of Islamic Studies and Christian-Muslim Relations at Hartford Seminary, Conn., participated. She has supported Hamas and Hizbollah and the invitation to her to this service in the National Cathedral was of course criticized, but reflected most likely Obama’s wish to be inclusive. In all, twenty prominent religious leaders

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were invited, also including Jews, Hindus and others. The closing prayer was held by Katharine Jefferts-Schori, presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church.  

Obama had also been criticized for inviting Rick Warren to the inaugural ceremony, not least since Warren has a clear stance on the issue of marriage; he opposes same-sex marriages. Most likely as a consequence of this criticism Obama invited the controversial Episcopal Bishop Gene Robinson, who had left his family for a man and lives in a homosexual relationship, to the opening of celebrations prayer at Lincoln Memorial the Sunday leading up to the inauguration week.

Obama has been a member of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, where the black preacher Jeremiah A. Write Jr. has served as a pastor. Write Jr. became a good friend of Obama and Obama got married in this church and his two daughters were baptized there. Obama left, after hard political pressure, the membership in this church during the presidential campaign of 2008 due to Write Jr.’s controversial and racist messages during this period, defending Write Jr. until it was politically impossible for him to continue to do so.

Obama calls himself a Christian and has described Jesus as “a bridge between God and man,” and stressed “a personal relationship with Jesus Christ” and said that he “committed myself to Christ” in Trinity United Church of Christ.

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35 As “Uma Mysorekar, president of the Hindu Temple Society of North America; Rabbi Haskal Lookstein of Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun in New York; Donald W. Wuerl, Catholic archbishop of Washington; Archbishop Demetrios, the New York-based primate of the Greek Orthodox Church in America; and the Rev. Kirbyjon Caldwell, senior pastor of Windsor Village United Methodist Church in Houston.”


36 Robinson was among those who attacked Obama over the choice of Rick Warren. He called it a "slap in the face" and said it was a “great honour to be there representing The Episcopal Church, the people of New Hampshire, and all of us in the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community.”

http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/faith/article5504882.ece (Retrieved Aug. 29, 2011).

Clearly, the Obama inaugural ceremonies were placed in the same Christian tradition as Bush’s inaugural ceremonies, but included parts that could be viewed as inclusive or as “syncretistic” and un-American. In any case, the religious dimension during the ceremonies had strong theological content. Even though the “inclusive” or “syncretistic” parts can be said to point at a deistic tradition, it is most likely more correct to describe it as an outflow of a liberal type of Christianity.

Civil Religion or Public Theology?

In sum, the religious dimension at the two inaugural ceremonies of two American presidents in recent time, that in many eyes have been viewed as at least fairly secular, includes a strong and outspoken theological content. It is neither a deistic French type of civil-religion in a Jean-Jacques Rousseau tradition, as shown in *Du Contrat Social, ou Principe du Droit Politique* and introduced in the American modern civil religion debate by sociologist Robert N. Bellah in 1967, nor a classical French sociological theory that focuses on civil religion as cultural religion, or similar modern definitions, that is found; and it is not compatible with an understanding of civil religion as religious nationalism as presented in German sociological theory. Instead, it is a special American kind of civil religion that more correctly could be described as a public theology. This is surely rooted in an Enlightenment tradition, but historically even more so in the Puritan tradition, with classical theistic interpretations. It deals with an ultimate reality, an acting God and transcendental values, along with a special interpretation of the American history in which God is guiding the nation.

In the case of George H. W. Bush the religious dimensions has a traditional Evangelical twist and in the case of Barack Obama a more Christian liberal touch. The common overall message is that the United States is a nation

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under God, and that God is an active God who blesses individuals as well as the nation, that the Scripture is guiding the presidents in their political life. Pastors from the white Evangelical tradition as well as from the Christian black tradition participated with convocations and benedictions.

The religio-political setting—with songs, pastors, presidential addresses, prayers, blessings etc.—is clearly revealing an American sentiment, which includes an interconnection between patriotism and Christianity. “God bless America” and “One nation under God” are common themes as well as other references related to Christian theological viewpoints. The ceremonies themselves not only reveal parts of a theology, they become a proclamation of a public theology. They form a sort of a rites-de-passage of the nation, bringing forward a new President; from now on acting as a pastor (priest and prophet) of the nation, using the White House as an impressive pulpit.

This type of civil religion can rightfully be described as public theology. It is public, and not private, since it addresses all and it is concerned with the wellbeing of the society as a whole, and is perceived as having relevance for all citizens. It can be characterized as theology since it deals with a transcendental dimension which clarifies that the nation is a nation “under God,” the motto of the nation is “In God We Trust,” foundational national documents as the Declaration of Independence relates to God, and it also describes God, God’s work, His incarnation in Jesus Christ etc., and other outspoken Christian aspects in various ways through presidential addresses, remarks and proclamations etc. It is theology also in a broader sense, since theology can be viewed as a foundation, not least ethically, in ordering the civil society and morally guiding the nation as well as the individuals of the society—including the president.

Church and state are separated but the interconnection between religion and politics remains in modern American political culture, as a part of an
American political presidential tradition starting already at the first inaugural speech by George Washington on April 30, 1789.\textsuperscript{39}