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The Evolution of Christian America: Christianity in Presidential Discourse, 1981–2013

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Commentators have been quick to note the declining number of self-professed Christians in the United States and view this as the end of "Christian America." Such observations are overstated, but it is clear that Christian America—understood as a communicative construct—is undergoing a substantial evolution. This article traces that evolution via a content analysis of every explicit mention of Christianity in presidential communications from 1981 to 2013—more than 2,200 mentions in all. We argue that shifts in religious identification, political engagement, and global affairs make it likely that recent presidents have altered their Christian discourse. In particular, we find that recent presidents have emphasized linkages between Christians and those of other faiths or no faith at all, but deemphasized linkages between Christianity and America's heritage.

Keywords: presidential discourse, Christianity, identity, context theory, Obama

The April 3, 2009, cover of *Newsweek* magazine did not appear especially concerned with subtlety. Against a black background, red letters formed the shape of a Christian cross, reading "The Decline and Fall of Christian America." Inside, the cover story—by prominent religion writer Jon Meacham—was even more bluntly titled: "The End of Christian America." Noting a 10-point decline in Christian self-identification in the United States between 1990 and 2008, the article made the case that the nation was undergoing a religious transformation, one that ensured the "Christian God" was "less of a force in U.S. politics and culture than at any other time in recent memory" (Meacham, 2009, para. 3). *Newsweek* was not alone in its assessment. A week prior to the article's publication, Albert Mohler, a longtime conservative Christian standard-bearer, took to his blog to interpret the same poll referenced in the *Newsweek* article. To Mohler, the increasing secularism of New Englanders indicated that the United States was on a path toward a "post-Christian culture." The more "deadly danger" that this change portended, Mohler wrote, was "the loss of Christian faith" altogether (Mohler, 2009, para. 16). A year

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later, author Gabe Lyons put a more positive spin on similar trends, publishing *The Next Christians: The Good News About the End of Christian America* (Lyons, 2010).

Such claims about the death of Christian America warrant serious attention in a nation where three in four Americans still identify as Christians and where political invocations of God and faith have recently reached modern-era highs (Domke & Coe, 2010). The present study explores the possibility that Christian America might be, if not heading for extinction, at least evolving in important ways. Our investigation rests on three premises. The first is that "Christian America"—and related notions, such as America as a "Christian nation"—are not objective realities but rather discursive constructions. One can point to the sizeable number of U.S. Christians as an indicator that Christianity is a dominant force in American life, but whether the United States is a Christian nation does not rest on such facts; it rests on the manner in which Christianity and America, God and country, are woven together in public discourse. As Straughn and Feld (2010) noted in their study of the enduring public perception that the United States is a Christian nation, "statements like 'America is a Christian nation' represent a discursive practice that seeks to align the boundaries of authentic national belonging with adherence to the dominant religious faith" (p. 281; see also Hartman, Zhang, & Wischstadt, 2005). Second, we suggest that of all the communicative sites where understandings of Christian America might take root, the U.S. presidency is the most important. The president is the single most symbolically powerful embodiment of American identity as well as the "high priest" of American civil religion (Hart, 2005; see also Domke & Coe, 2010). As such, the president is in a unique position to construct, maintain, or challenge the idea of a Christian America. Finally, consistent with research on "strategic political communications" (Manheim, 1991) and the "context theory" of presidential leadership (Cohen, 2010), we recognize that presidents are strategic actors who work hard to fit their discourse to the circumstances in which they govern. Our analysis extends these scholarly perspectives into the realm of presidents' religious communication, expecting that presidential constructions of the United States as a Christian nation will be congruent with on-the-ground changes in the nation's religious and political composition.

With these premises in mind, the article proceeds as follows. We first elaborate on the important role that presidents' public communications play in the construction of American civil religion and discuss the massive changes in public religiosity that took place beginning in 1981 with the presidency of Ronald Reagan. We then develop an argument that several key cultural transformations—in religious identification, political engagement, and global religious affairs—may have encouraged recent presidents to alter the manner in which they talk about Christianity. We predict, specifically, that recent presidents have been more likely to draw linkages between Christians and those who subscribe to other faiths or no faith at all, but have also been less likely to draw linkages between Christianity and America's heritage. We test these expectations via a content analysis of every explicit mention of Christianity in the census of presidents' public communications from 1981 to 2013—more than 2,200 mentions in all. The study thus provides needed insight into how presidential constructions of Christian America are evolving, while also contributing one of the broadest analyses to date to the growing body of scholarship that seeks to assess over-time changes in presidents' public religiosity (e.g., Chapp, 2012; Domke & Coe, 2010; Kaylor, 2010; Kradel, 2008; Roof, 2009; Shogan, 2006).

Presidential Discourse and Religion in the United States

Scholars interested in the intersection of politics and religion in the United States typically rely on sociologist Robert Bellah's (1967) notion of "civil religion" as a conceptual framework. Bellah, borrowing a phrase from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, conceived of civil religion as "a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals" (Bellah, 1967, p. 4) through which a society "interprets its historical experience in light of transcendent reality" (Bellah, 1975, p. 3). U.S. civil religion has multiple facets, some of which are not strikingly religious (exalting the nation almost as much as a Supreme Being) and others that are deeply grounded in religious—especially Christian—tradition (Chapp, 2012; Domke & Coe, 2010). Whatever form civil religion takes, two things remain true. The first is that U.S. civil religion is necessarily about both God and country. As religious historian Conrad Cherry (1971) explains, Americans have, throughout their history, "been possessed by an acute sense of divine election," such that the belief has become "the essence of America's motivating mythology" (p. vii). Consequently, what is at stake in the construction and maintenance of American civil religion is not just religious identity but national identity as well (see also Hart, 2005; Straughn & Feld, 2010).

The second reality of U.S. civil religion is that the president is the central figure involved in its circulation. The president is one of the few people who regularly invokes religious themes while also having the attention of a large segment of the citizenry. Thus, the extent and manner of a president's public expressions of faith shape perceptions in important ways. Domke and Coe (2010) point out that, because presidents powerfully represent U.S. identity and because their communications often circulate widely, they "have great power to shape public impressions of what the United States is and what it means to be American" (p. 51; see also Hart, 2005; Roof, 2009). Presidential constructions of civil religion thus have tremendous symbolic power, but they also have measurable empirical power to influence U.S. political attitudes. Chapp (2012), for example, employed both experiments and surveys in a detailed investigation of the impact of civil religious discourse, concluding that "religious rhetoric is a central force responsible [for] shaping the contours of American political culture. Religious rhetoric is also electorally consequential and culturally significant, with important implications for how we interpret American political representation" (p. 16). Chapp's findings are consistent with several other recent empirical analyses (e.g., Calfano, & Djupe, 2009; Weber & Thornton, 2012).

Given the importance of presidential constructions of civil religion, it is perhaps not surprising that they have been the focus of a substantial body of research. Some of this work has illuminated in detail a specific president's use of religious rhetoric in just a few key speeches (e.g., Frank, 2011; Petre & Langsdorf, 2010), whereas other studies have tracked similarities and differences across presidents (e.g., Domke & Coe, 2010; Hart, 2005; Hogue, 2012; Kradel, 2008; Roof, 2009; Shogan, 2006). Perhaps the single most consistent finding of this latter group of studies is that Ronald Reagan's presidency was a transformative period for American religious discourse. Consider, for example, Domke and Coe's (2010) analysis of presidents' public religiosity from Franklin Roosevelt to George W. Bush. Comparing pre-1981 presidents to Reagan and his successors, Domke and Coe observed a more than 100% increase in presidents' invocations of God, a more than 150% increase in presidents' issuance of religion-themed proclamations, and a more than 200% increase in presidential speeches at religious sites or to religious audiences. These increases were not confined to Reagan; they showed remarkable consistency among

George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush. Other studies have demonstrated similar increases in broad religious and moral themes (Shogan, 2006) and in presidential mentions of prayer (Kradel, 2008), as well as a notable shift in tone toward greater "religious nationalism" (Roof, 2009). Acknowledging these shifts, we focus our analysis on the period since 1981—what might be called, borrowing from Domke and Coe (2010), the "God strategy" era of U.S. politics.

Importantly, these striking changes in presidents' public religiosity coincided with key transformations taking place in American life. In the 1960s, various cultural upheavals—centered on civil rights, war, sex, and drugs, among other things—began to threaten traditional understandings of American national identity, especially in the minds of the nation's growing number of Christian conservatives (Domke & Coe, 2010; Hogue, 2012). These changes, as well as U.S. Supreme Court decisions in the early 1960s outlawing officially sanctioned public-school prayer and in the early 1970s legalizing abortion, helped draw some prominent conservative Christian leaders—most notably Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson—into politics. As Falwell (1979) himself explained it:

> For too long, we have sat back and said politics are for the people in Washington, business is for those on Wall Street and religion is our business. But the fact is, you cannot separate the sacred and the secular. . . . If all the fundamentalists knew who to vote for and did it together, we could elect anybody. If every one of these people could be intelligently taught and mobilized, brother, we could turn this nation upside down for God! (p. 120)

Falwell and others began establishing organizations designed to meet this objective, including the Moral Majority in 1979 and the National Affairs Briefing in 1980. In 1981, these efforts contributed to the election of Ronald Reagan (see Hogue, 2012), who during his time in office made numerous moves to publicly signal his support for this new constituency. These remarkable transformations in American public religiosity, then, were not just about Reagan. They were about cultural and political undercurrents that a president was willing to turn into visible and consequential waves via his public communications. Such an interplay of forces, we suggest, continued throughout the next several decades—but with a very different trajectory.

The Evolution of Christian America

The three decades that have passed since Ronald Reagan crystallized in American life a new brand of public religiosity have been marked by dramatic change.[2] Consider the remarkable shifts in the religious identity of the American populace. Christianity is still far and away the majority faith in the United States—roughly three in four Americans identify as Christians—but a rapid transformation is under way. If one follows the percentage increase or decrease among major religious groups in their proportion of adherents among the U.S. public between 1980 and 2008, the pattern is striking. Those from Judeo-Christian traditions all experienced declines: The proportion of Protestants declined by 14%, Catholics by

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[2] This section of the article more fully develops an argument given initial voice in Coe and Chenoweth (2013).

4%, and Jews by 23%. Meanwhile, two groups—those following faiths other than Christianity and those unaffiliated with any religion at all—saw large gains. The former group—consisting primarily of Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus—increased by 65%. The latter group—atheists, agnostics, and others disinterested in traditional religion—increased by an amazing 128%. By 2008, this group amounted to 16% of the public, roughly the same proportion as mainline Protestants.[3] Taken together, these trends leave little doubt which direction America's religious identification is heading.

These changes among the citizenry have been paralleled by substantial changes in political engagement. Consider, for example, how U.S. political leadership has diversified with respect to religious affiliation. For years, the U.S. Congress was almost exclusively Judeo-Christian; however, 2006 saw the first two Buddhists and the first Muslim elected. A second Muslim was elected in 2008, and 2012 brought the first Hindu. Nonbelievers were also represented for the first time when, in 2007, Congressman Pete Stark of California made public the fact that he did not believe in a Supreme Being. This shift in political engagement has not been exclusive to Congress. Religiously motivated political advocacy groups—long associated primarily with the so-called religious right—have diversified as well. Indeed, liberal Christian groups have gained increasing prominence in the past decade, particularly since the 2004 election. The progressive Christian organization Sojourners, for example, had gained such political relevance by 2007 that it hosted a CNN-broadcast political forum with Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and John Edwards, the leading Democratic presidential hopefuls at the time. Nonbelievers and others disinterested in traditional religion have also become increasingly organized and engaged. The number of people financially supporting the American Humanist Organization, for instance, roughly doubled between 2004 and 2009, and atheist "meet-up" groups have been increasing dramatically as well (MacDonald, 2009; see also Anspach, Coe, & Thurlow, 2007).

As these domestic currents have shaped the United States, global change has also been a force. Globalization—something that gained public attention and accelerated throughout the 1990s—continued apace in the 2000s, drawing regular debate and large-scale protest. Several nations—including China, India, and Brazil—have grown as challengers to the United States' economic prowess. These developments create a global environment in which cross-national exchange and understanding—often of nations whose dominant faith is not Christianity—have new and consequential implications for the construction of American identity (see Coe & Neumann, 2011). Global religious affairs in particular were dramatically thrust onto the world stage after the 9/11 attacks. Islam entered the American imagination to an unprecedented degree, and in a manner that appears to have had enduring consequences. By 2007, about half of Americans believed that "violent conflict" between Western nations and Muslim nations was "inevitable," roughly the same proportion that held an unfavorable view of Islam (CBS News, 2007). Yet the American public also seeks resolution to these conflicts: 8 in 10 Americans believe it is important for President Obama to try to improve U.S. relations with Muslim nations (ABC News/Washington Post, 2009). These are the contradictory impulses that mark American identity as citizens increasingly wrestle with the diversity of global religious perspectives.

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[3] Data on religious identification are based on the authors' analysis of the General Social Survey. The question asks: "What is your religious preference? Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other religion, or no religion?"

Such powerful transformations—in religious identification, political engagement, and global religious affairs—are not lost on presidents. A large body of research on strategic political communications (e.g., Coe, 2007; Domke, 2004; Manheim, 1991) illustrates that politicians—especially presidents, who are answerable to the entire nation and must try to engage the entire world—go to great lengths to assess the political and cultural currents of their time. They do so, in part, so they might communicate in ways that are congruent with external realities. Though the causal direction of the relationship between cultural realities and presidential discourse is difficult to clearly establish—and not something we attempt to discern in this study—it is plausible that over the past three decades presidential discourse might have shifted in ways that are consistent with the changing times. Notably, such changes would not necessarily involve saying *less* about Christianity. This is because targeted messaging is increasingly valuable to presidents. Cohen's (2010) context theory of presidential leadership holds that major contextual changes in the mid-1980s—particularly polarized political parties and the fragmentation of the media environment—encouraged recent presidents to narrowly target their messages to particular segments of the population. Domke and Coe (2010) identify such a "narrowcasting" strategy in the case of religious communication in particular, showing how targeting particular religious constituencies can have considerable political value (see also Coe, Domke, & Schmidt, 2015). In short, presidents have little to lose and much to gain from talking about Christianity when the situation calls for it. Because of this, we do not anticipate a substantial over-time decline in presidential discussions of Christianity.

What we do anticipate is that presidents have changed *how* they talk about Christianity. Two expectations guide our analysis. The first is that presidents will increasingly connect Christianity to other faiths and to nonbelievers. Doing so would be a tangible means of speaking to the changing religious dynamics at home and abroad—a communication strategy designed to directly acknowledge the growing numbers of Americans who follow non-Christian faiths or no faith at all, and to signal respect for the many nations of the world where Christianity is a minority faith. Our second expectation is that, as time passes, presidents will become less likely to directly connect Christianity to America's heritage. These linkages are among the strongest indicators a president can offer to frame the United States as a Christian nation. Given the changing circumstances, such statements would have decreasing value for presidents, and could risk alienating those diverse and growing religious constituencies that want to be included in presidential conceptions of what it means to be an American. Taken together, these two shifts in presidential discourse would represent a considerable reimagining of Christian America—one that would be congruent with the religious and political changes that have taken place in the United States and around the globe over the past three decades.

Method

Our analysis focuses on presidential communications from the inauguration of Ronald Reagan in 1981 to the end of Barack Obama's first term on January 20, 2013. Beginning our analysis with Reagan is useful because, as discussed, it was during his term that public religiosity in U.S. politics underwent several dramatic—and, thus far, enduring—changes. We accessed the *Public Papers of the Presidents* (available online at http://www.americanpresidency.org) and searched every available type of presidential communication. These include major addresses to the nation, all other public speeches (to any audience, anywhere in the world), all recorded interactions with the press (e.g., debates, briefings, interviews),

proclamations, executive orders, and statements. Via computer, we identified in these communications every mention of Christianity, Christians, or any Christian denomination.[4] This returned 2,243 terms. From that number we excluded irrelevant terms (e.g., mentions of a person named Christian), leaving 2,232 in the final analysis. This represents the census of presidents' explicit mentions of Christianity during our period of analysis.

We used the program TextQuest (http://www.textquest.de/pages/intro.php) to isolate each mention of Christianity within the text. The unit of analysis was the single mention of any use of a relevant term. The initial referential unit was 300 characters on either side of each mention, with additional material added when necessary to fully understand the usage of the term in context. Each mention was then manually coded according to the following categories:

Type. This category identified which component of Christianity was being discussed: Christian churches, Christian organizations, Christian people, or Christianity as a faith. Mentions of *churches* were typically a specific church (e.g., Ebenezer Baptist Church), a collection of churches (e.g., Southern Baptist churches), or a formalized hierarchy of the church (e.g., the Catholic Church). The few mentions of Christian relics (e.g., Christian cross) were also coded here. Mentions of non-church *organizations* were typically schools (e.g., Assumption Catholic School), political parties or organizations (e.g., Christian Democrats), community groups (e.g., Lutheran Senior Service Center), or charity groups (e.g., Catholic Relief Services). Mentions of *people* were typically a specific person (e.g., an evangelical minister) or larger group (e.g., the Catholic faithful). Mentions of *faith* were those that spoke of Christianity as a whole (e.g., Judeo-Christian tradition) or of a denomination as a whole (e.g., Catholicism).

Linkage to other faiths. This category captured cases where presidents directly linked Christianity to non-Judeo-Christian faiths. Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus accounted for nearly all such linkages. Examples included "It doesn't matter whether you're Muslim, Christian, Jew, Hindu" and "Free societies emerged in largely Buddhist Thailand . . . and the largely Christian Philippines."

Linkage to nonbelievers. This category captured cases where presidents directly linked Christianity to nonbelievers. The few mentions of agnostics were also coded in this category. We recognize that agnostics are not, strictly speaking, nonbelievers. However, in presidential speech, as in many surveys of public religious identification, atheists and agnostics are typically grouped together. Examples included "It really doesn't matter whether we're black or white, atheist or Christian" and "We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, Sikhs and non-believers."

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[4] The following terms, including all possible endings and variants, were included (number of mentions appears in parentheses): Catholic (755), Christian (739), Baptist (199), Protestant (196), Methodist (86), Orthodox (85; only references to Orthodox Christian groups were included), Evangelical (48), Quaker (27), Jesuit (18), Episcopal (17), Lutheran (14), Presbyterian (14), Pentecostal (12), Mennonite (9), Amish (6), Nazarene (3), Anglican (2), Adventist (1), Calvinist (1), Congregationalist (0).

Heritage. This category captured cases where presidents directly linked Christianity to America's heritage, including its founding narratives and early history. Examples included "ours is a Judeo-Christian heritage" and "Baptists have had an extraordinary influence on American history."

Two coders completed the content analysis. As a check of reliability, approximately 20% of the total mentions were cross-coded. Chance-corrected reliabilities (using Krippendorff's α) were as follows: Type (.76), Other (.92), Nonbeliever (.89), Heritage (.72).

Results

We begin our examination by focusing on broad patterns in the extent and type of presidential mentions of Christianity over time, then turn to our expectations for presidential linkages to other faiths/nonbelievers and to America's heritage. Throughout the results, we present descriptive statistics without accompanying statistical tests. Working with the census of presidential mentions of Christianity renders inferential statistics unnecessary.

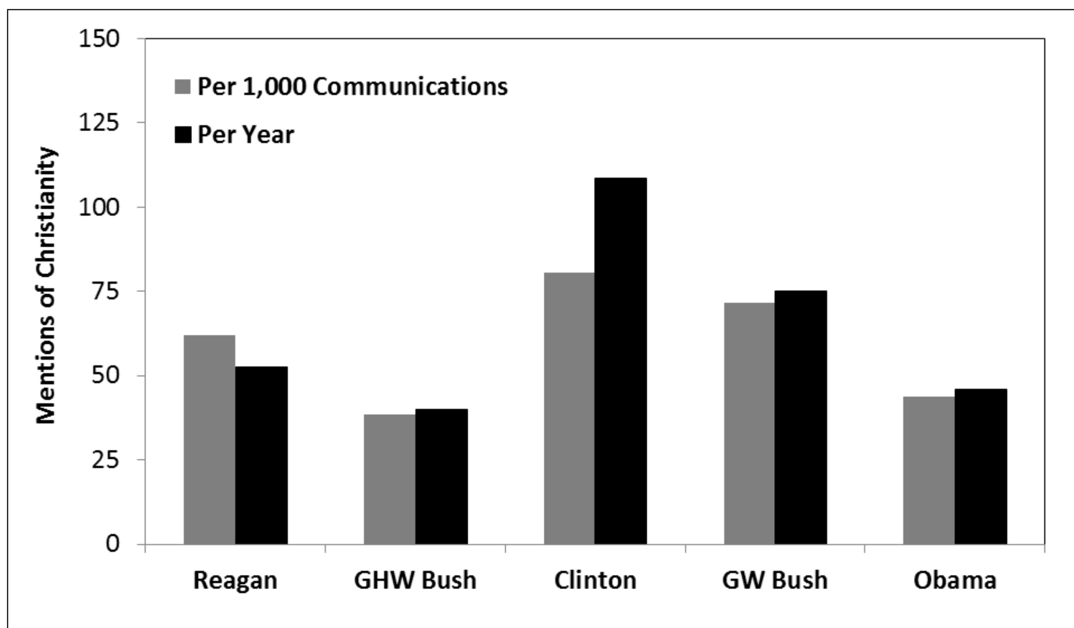

Figure 1. Presidential mentions of Christianity, 1981–2013.

Since 1981, presidents have explicitly mentioned Christianity roughly 70 times in the average year. As Figure 1 makes clear, however, there has been considerable variation among individual presidents in the extent of these mentions. The black bars in the figure show each president's average mentions per year in office. The gray bars show each president's average mentions per 1,000 communications, a way of controlling for the fact that some presidents issue more public communications

than others. Both trends illustrate the same pattern: Clinton and G. W. Bush led the way in mentions of Christianity, with Reagan, G. H. W. Bush, and Obama noticeably lower. Even on the controlled measure, where the variation is not as stark, the difference between the extremes is striking. The heaviest user of Christian discourse (Clinton, at roughly 80 mentions per 1,000 communications) *more than doubled* the lightest user (G. H. W. Bush, at roughly 39 mentions per 1,000 communications). For our purposes, the most important point that can be gleaned from Figure 1 is that, consistent with our expectation, there has been no steady downward trend in presidential mentions of Christianity. If anything, the trend has been more upward than downward, with Clinton and G. W. Bush elevating the presence of Christianity in the presidency for four terms before Obama returned it to the previous norm. What these patterns indicate is that, if Christian America is declining in the presidency, it is happening not by a decreasing *presence* of Christianity, but rather by changes in *how* Christianity is portrayed.

Notably, presidents exhibit little variation in the specific terms that make up their references to Christianity. In fact, just two terms, *Christian* and *Catholic* (and their variants) account for 67% of presidents' total mentions of Christianity. Moreover, adding just two more terms to that list—*Baptist* and *Protestant* (and their variants)—increases that percentage to 85. In other words, presidents rarely discuss Christianity in terms of specific, smaller denominations, opting instead to focus their Christian discourse on the broader—and more visible—forms of Christianity. Lutherans and Presbyterians, for instance, were each mentioned just 14 times over the course of 32 years of presidential communications.

Where presidential variation exists, it turns out, is not in these terms but in the different aspects of Christianity that these terms can be used to signify. A president's mention of Catholicism, for example, might refer to a church (e.g., Catholic Church), a non-church organization (e.g., Catholic school), a person (e.g., Catholic priest), or the faith itself (e.g., Catholicism). Our investigation of presidents' use of these different types of Christian terms revealed meaningful variation among presidents of different political parties. Figure 2 illustrates these differences, showing the percentage of Democrats' and Republicans' total mentions that focused on each of these four types of Christian discourse. The figure makes several things apparent. Democrats and Republicans were largely consistent in their emphasis on churches and faith. In neither category were presidents from either party consistently higher or lower than those of the other party. However, Democrats' and Republicans' emphasis on people—the most common category for both groups—was noticeably different. Democrats focused on people in 65% of their mentions, whereas Republicans did so only 42% of the time. One must be cautious when generalizing about parties from just a few individuals, but it is noteworthy that these party-level trends were consistent at the individual level. Obama, the lower of the two Democrats, was still 10 points higher than G. H. W. Bush, who was the *highest* among Republicans. Where Republicans primarily made up for this gap was in their heightened emphasis on Christian organizations. Of Republicans' mentions of Christianity, 24% focused on organizations, whereas only 8% of Democrats' mentions did so—and again these differences were consistent among individual presidents. Further, this pattern is growing: Reagan focused 16% of his mentions on organizations, G. H. W. 20%, and G. W. Bush 30%.

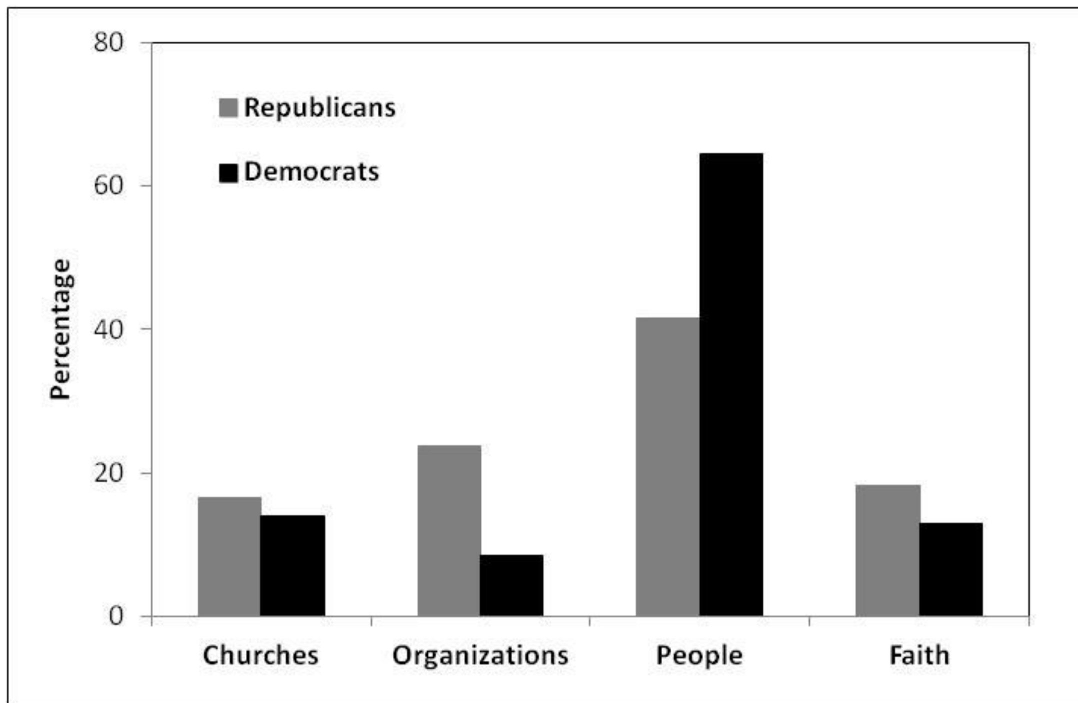

Figure 2. Types of Christian discourse emphasized by Democrats and Republicans.

These disparities are consistent with structural differences in the makeup of politically organized Christians in the United States. Several high-profile Christian organizations—including the National Association of Evangelicals, the National Religious Broadcasters Association, the Southern Baptist Convention, and the Knights of Columbus—represent large, politically engaged constituencies that lean conservative. Given these leanings, Republican presidents are often invited to speak to these organizations, but Democrats are not (Domke & Coe, 2010). Not surprisingly, Republicans' Christian discourse regularly mentions such organizations whereas Democrats' does not. And, as these organizations gained increasing prominence over the decades considered here, they became an increasingly common feature of Republican presidents' discourse. Such differences seem to indicate that presidential invocations of Christianity are not entirely a matter of choice. Consistent with the literature on strategic political communications (Manheim, 1991) and context theory (Cohen, 2010), it is evident that the context in which presidents operate influences their discursive choices. It is precisely the changing U.S. sociopolitical context that grounds our remaining expectations.

Linkages to Other Faiths and Nonbelievers

Given the considerable religious and political transformations discussed above, we expected to see an increase in presidents' willingness to explicitly connect Christianity to other faiths and to nonbelievers. The data bear this out. Figure 3 shows, for each president, the percentage of total mentions

that made an explicit link to non-Christian faiths (the gray bars) or to nonbelievers (the black bars).[5] Linkages to non-Christian faiths were at roughly 10% during the Reagan presidency, then dipped to below 6% during G. H. W. Bush's tenure before rising dramatically when Clinton took office.

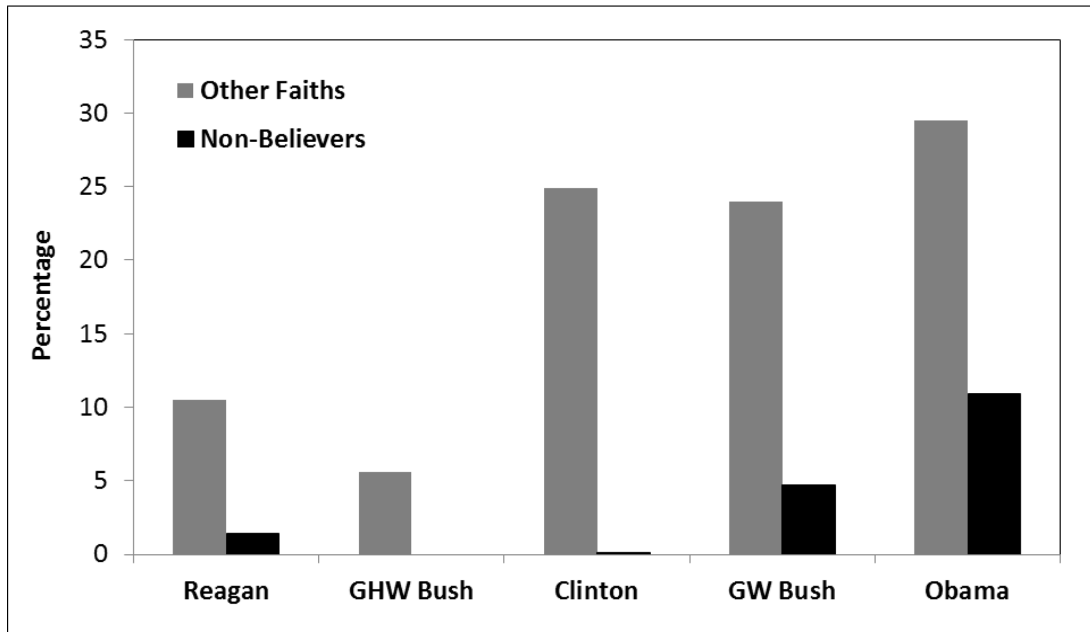

Figure 3. Presidential linkages of Christianity to other faiths and nonbelievers.

G. W. Bush roughly maintained this level, and then Obama elevated things once again. The trend in linkages to nonbelievers followed a similar trajectory, but with a later initiation. Pairings of nonbelievers and Christians were virtually absent prior to G. W. Bush's term. Bush made such linkages in roughly 5% of his mentions of Christianity. Obama then elevated this trend noticeably, linking Christians and nonbelievers in 11% of his mentions. In sum, for the first 12 years of our period of analysis, less than 1 of every 12 presidential references to Christianity were paired to either non-Christian faiths, nonbelievers, or both. By the end of the period, more than 3 in 10 mentions made such linkages. It appears that Christian America is indeed evolving—something a few examples from presidential speeches help to illustrate.

[5] More precisely, these are linkages to non-*Judeo*-Christian faiths, because our analysis does not focus on presidential linkages of Christianity to Judaism. Given that American culture has a long history of connecting these two faiths in terms of the nation's "Judeo-Christian tradition" (Silk, 1984), such linkages are not central to our expectations for change. On average, the five presidents examined here connected Judaism to Christianity in 24.2% of their total mentions.

Reagan and G. H. W. Bush had little to say about nonbelievers. The latter did not link them to Christianity at all, and the former did so just six times. Reagan used atheism as a means of distinguishing the United States from the Soviet Union:

> I want to tell you one little incident that occurred recently in my meeting with the General Secretary over there . . . knowing, of course, that officially their nation is atheist, and we know that ours is based on the Judeo-Christian religion. (June 3, 1988)[6]

These two presidents had somewhat more to say with respect to Christianity and other faiths. Reagan, for example, linked Christianity to Judaism and Islam, saying "The other great religions of the West—Christianity and Islam—can recognize their roots in Judaism" (April 19, 1985). Bush went a bit further, while also making clear the parameters of American identity: "They [immigrants] represent the whole range of religions—Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist. They're Arab, Iranian, Indian, Korean, Thai descent. But they will tell you that they are Americans first" (May 7, 1990).

The sound of such constructions began to change more noticeably with Clinton. In characteristic language, Clinton said: "I hear the complex music of our many differing languages, and I know that in each of them our words for work, for opportunity, for children, for hope carry the same meaning. I see the roots of our many ancient civilizations, whether Confucian or Islamic or Judeo-Christian. I know there is much we can learn from each other's rich and proud cultures" (November 19, 1993). Unlike Reagan and G. H. W. Bush, Clinton not only linked multiple faiths in peaceful coexistence, he suggested that people of different faiths might even work together and learn from one another. Clinton drew such connections in the context of Christmas as well:

> For a Christian family to light the Christmas tree in Bethlehem is a great honor. It is an interesting thing to contemplate that in this small place, the home of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, the embodiment of my faith was born a Jew and is still recognized by Muslims as a prophet. (December 14, 1998)

G. W. Bush made very strong statements connecting Christians to followers of other faiths and to nonbelievers, and was explicit about how these citizens fit into the fabric of America. He said, for example, "You can worship or not worship, and you're equally American. You're equally American if you're a Christian, Jew, or Muslim, atheist, agnostic. We must never lose sight of that" (April 6, 2006). Bush also often linked faith in general—Christian and non-Christian alike—to the doing of good deeds:

> I want to remind the world that helping people in need is a central part of not only the Christian faith but of Judaism and the Hindu faith and of course a central part of Islamic traditions. And that's why our coalition is more than just one to rout terrorism out of the world. It's one to bind together, to knit those traditions in a way that helps people in need. (October 4, 2001)

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[6] Presidential quotations, here and throughout the article, are drawn from the *Public Papers of the Presidents*, available online at http://www.americanpresidency.org.

Obama made similarly strong pronouncements about the composition of America, often taking a personal tone:

> I'm also somebody who deeply believes that the—part of the bedrock strength of this country is that it embraces people of many faiths and of no faith, that this is a country that is still predominantly Christian, but we have Jews, Muslims, Hindus, atheists, agnostics, Buddhists, and that their own path to grace is one that we have to revere and respect as much as our own. (September 28, 2010)

This is, like Bush's rhetoric, boldly inclusive language. Also like Bush, Obama often linked his faith with the doing of good deeds:

> For if there is one law that we can be most certain of, it is the law that binds people of all faiths and no faith together. It's no coincidence that it exists in Christianity and Judaism, in Islam and Hinduism, in Buddhism and humanism. It is, of course, the Golden Rule: the call to treat one another as we wish to be treated, the call to love, the call to serve, to do what we can to make a difference. (May 17, 2009)

What stands out about these statements, along with the change over time, is how often in drawing these linkages presidents were explicitly defining America. Language about the "bedrock strength of this country," about being "equally American," about what the nation is "based on"—all of this clearly signals what America is about. Our analysis found such definitional statements to be quite common: More than one in four presidential linkages to non-Christians/nonbelievers occurred as presidents were defining America or its people.[7] This underscores how interconnected God and country are in presidential speech: For those of other faiths and for nonbelievers, three decades was enough time to bring them fully into the fold of presidential constructions of Christianity—which, often, were constructions of America as well.

Linkages to American Heritage

We turn our attention, finally, to perhaps the strongest indicator of presidential constructions of Christian America: connections of Christianity to the nation's heritage. Given how strong such statements are, they were understandably rare: Roughly 6% of presidential mentions of Christianity draw such a connection. Our expectation was that these connections would decline during the period of analysis, and Figure 4 reveals this to be the case. The figure shows the percentage of each president's total mentions of Christianity that drew a linkage to America's founding, tradition, or heritage. Reagan and G. H. W. Bush led the way on this measure, the former making such a connection in 12.4% of his mentions, and the latter in 13.1%. There was a noticeable drop during the terms of Clinton (3.3% of mentions) and G. W. Bush (4.5%). Obama then all but removed these linkages from the presidency: Only 1.6% of his mentions situated Christianity within America's heritage. Notably, given Obama's relatively low total mentions of

[7] Every president except Clinton made such America-defining statements in at least 30% of their linkages. Clinton was a notable outlier, doing so only 6% of the time.

Christianity, this 1.6% amounted to just three such linkages during his entire first term. In contrast, no other president made fewer than three such linkages *per year*, on average.

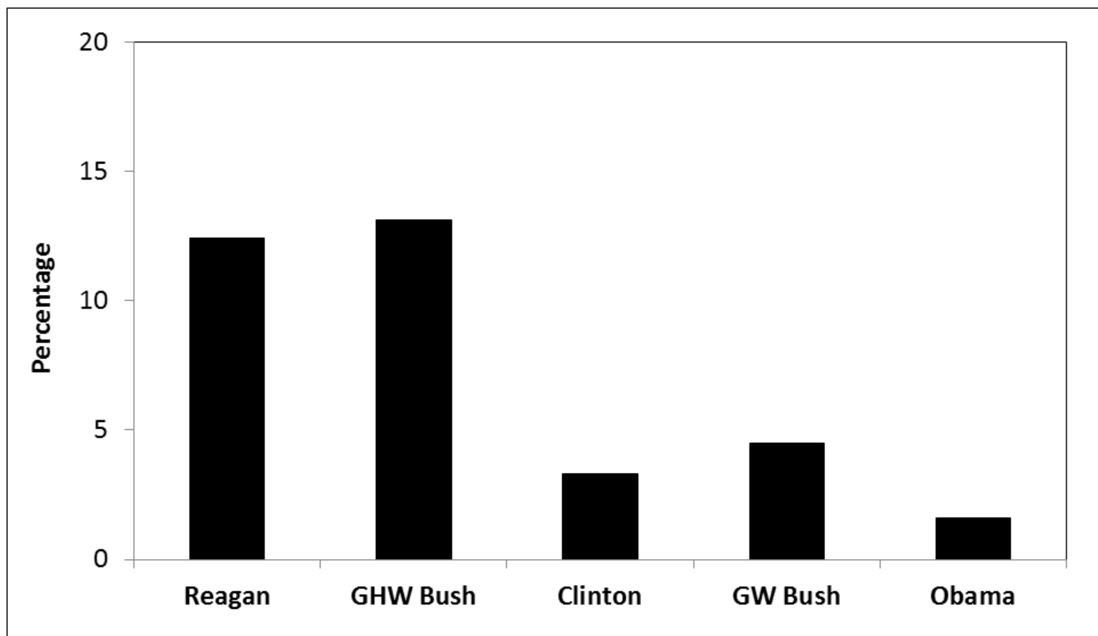

Figure 4. Presidential linkages of Christianity to America's heritage.

To gain additional insight into this trend, we isolated just those connections of Christianity to America's heritage that were as explicit as a president could possibly make them; that is, those cases where presidents used the words "Christian heritage," "Christian tradition," or "Christian nation" to directly link American heritage to the Christian faith.[8] Such explicit phrasing had a home in the presidency during the early years of our period of analysis, always coming in the styling of America's "Judeo-Christian heritage" or "Judeo-Christian tradition."[9] During Reagan's eight years in the White House, he used such language 20 times. He spoke, for example, of "getting back to these fundamentals of our Judeo-Christian tradition" (September 6, 1984) and argued that, as a nation, "our view of human rights derives from our Judeo-Christian heritage" (May 4, 1988). Several times he also tied this lesson to holidays, once saying:

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[8] We also searched for "Christian America," but presidents did not use this phrasing.

[9] *Judeo-Christian* is an interesting term in its own right. Silk (1984) offers a useful discussion of the expression, noting its first use in 1899 but its broader emergence in U.S. culture—and in the presidency—in the mid-20th century. As this phrase emerged, it was used to suggest a "common western religious outlook" (pp. 65–66) that sometimes served to differentiate religion in the United States from other faiths and places (see also Hartman, Zhang, & Wischstadt, 2005).

"Although the time and date of the first American thanksgiving observance may be uncertain, there is no question but that this treasured custom derives from our Judeo-Christian heritage" (November 15, 1985). There was little left to the imagination in Reagan's connections of God and country. Speaking of the founding fathers, Reagan said:

> "We hold these truths to be self-evident," they wrote in the Declaration of Independence, "that all men are created equal," and that they're "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights." Our forefathers found their inspiration, justification, and vision in the Judeo-Christian tradition that emphasizes the value of life and the worth of the individual. (August 24, 1985)

When G. H. W. Bush took office, he noticeably decreased the frequency of these explicit declarations, making six over his four years in office. His tone, however, was remarkably similar to Reagan's. He said, for instance, "We are proud to celebrate our country's Judeo-Christian heritage unrivaled in the world" (August 22, 1992), and shared his view that "recently in America have we seen the rise of legal theories and practices that reject our Judeo-Christian tradition" (August 5, 1992). On another occasion, he put it even more strongly: "Our Nation's Judeo-Christian heritage, affirmed in its founding documents and in the traditional values that remain the heart of America, goes hand in hand with the success of this great yet precious experiment in self-government" (March 20, 1991). But this tone, and these types of statements, disappeared entirely in the presidency after Bush left office. Neither Clinton, G. W. Bush, nor Obama made any such claims. After 12 years, a strikingly bold feature of presidents' Christian America repertoire had been erased.

Yet the story does not end there. Obama made the next move when he directly *challenged* the belief in America as a Christian nation. In widely publicized remarks made at a news conference in Ankara, Turkey, during his first year in office, Obama said:

> That's something that's very important to me. I've said before that one of the great strengths of the United States is—although, as I mentioned, we have a very large Christian population—we do not consider ourselves a Christian nation or a Jewish nation or a Muslim nation; we consider ourselves a nation of citizens who are bound by ideals and a set of values. (April 6, 2009)

Over the course of three decades, then, presidents' rhetorical willingness to position America as a Christian nation has clearly changed. The explicit constructions used by Reagan and G. H. W. Bush have given way to silence—and in one case even challenge—in recent years.

Discussion

Examining the census of presidential mentions of Christianity from 1981 to 2013 has provided considerable insight into the evolution of Christian America. It is clear that popular concerns about the end of Christian America are overstated. Presidents talk often about Christianity, and the two presidents who bookend our study—Reagan and Obama—talked about Christianity with almost identical frequency. Given

the reality that Christians are still far and away the dominant faith community in the United States, presidents continue to have a strong incentive to attend to Christianity. Consistent with Cohen's (2010) context theory, presidents engage Christian audiences in part by carefully crafting messages that can be targeted directly to the Christian faithful—what is known as "narrowcasting" (e.g., Domke & Coe, 2010). This allows presidents to benefit from using a broader discursive strategy in certain contexts while speaking in a more concrete, explicitly religious fashion with smaller audiences they know to be composed predominantly of Christians. Clearly, Christianity will remain an important cultural and discursive force in U.S. politics.

Our results also reveal an enduring—even growing—difference in how presidents of different parties address Christianity. Although both parties focused more attention on people than on any other type of Christian mention, Democrats emphasized people significantly more than did their Republican counterparts. Republicans, meanwhile, were significantly more likely than Democrats to address Christianity by referencing a Christian organization (such as the Southern Baptist Convention or the National Association of Evangelicals). The likely explanation for this pattern is that many Christian organizations lean toward political conservatism and therefore tend to invite, or be courted by, Republican presidents for speaking engagements. Such differences have broader implications for the kinds of religious communication strategies presidents employ. For example, when Bill Clinton took office, he implemented a short Christmastime greeting made available for nationwide broadcast. George W. Bush, however, discontinued these messages. Domke and Coe (2010) make the case that such greetings were unnecessary for Bush, given that he regularly had the ear of key religious audiences—something that was not the case for Clinton.

It is possible that these party-level differences also speak to a divide in core values. Research on moral foundations theory demonstrates that conservatives tend toward a "binding" approach to morality that often "focuses on the group as the locus of moral value" (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009, p. 1030; see also Haidt & Joseph, 2007). Among the foundations that make up this binding approach to morality are in-group loyalty and respect for authority. Accordingly, conservatives might be drawn to organizations because organizations have the capacity to unify like-minded individuals in a hierarchical way. Liberals, in contrast, more often take what Graham, Haidt, and Nosek (2009) call an "individualizing" approach, which "focuses on individuals as the locus of control" (p. 1030). Given this, it follows that Democrats might be more inclined to focus their discourse on people than on organizations as representatives of the liberal Christian constituency. If such foundational variation in core values is indeed at play, party differences in presidential discussions of Christianity may evolve slowly—or perhaps not at all.

And yet our findings make clear that Christian America as constructed by presidents is evolving in important ways. For one, presidents have increasingly made noticeable overtures to those who subscribe to non-Judeo-Christian faiths or to no faith at all. Indeed, linkages to Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, atheists, and agnostics that were once rare or nearly absent in presidential discourse are now fairly common. And as presidents make these linkages, they regularly do so in terms that explicitly define who constitutes America. We have argued that these rhetorical shifts coincide meaningfully with sizable transformations in religious identification, political engagement, and global religious affairs. Although we make no claim to causal direction, research has demonstrated that presidents can be sensitive to such trends (Cohen, 2010;

Domke, 2004; Manheim, 1991). Consequently, it seems possible that "civil religion" (Bellah, 1967) in the presidency is headed toward greater pluralism—a long-standing ideal of religion in America that has not always been realized (Eck, 2001). Recall that citizens identifying as being affiliated with some "other" religion and those identifying as having no particular faith at all are a rapidly growing part of the American populace. A more pluralistic citizenry will likely encourage a more pluralistic approach to national discourse from the president, and trends in presidential rhetoric will probably reflect this shift.

Our data also reveal that presidents have noticeably decreased the extent to which they rhetorically link Christianity to America's heritage. The explicit constructions of the United States as a Christian nation that were common in Reagan's time have become nearly extinct in Obama's. For some Christians, this transformation in the construction of America's Christian identity to a more pluralistic identity will likely be difficult. According to social identity theory, such identity threats often lead to a heightening of in-group identity (Davies, Steele, & Markus, 2008). The solution to such potential difficulties may lie in recategorization, through which individuals redefine their understandings of who constitutes the in-group. For example, Straughn and Feld (2010) suggest that many Americans have been conditioned—through discourse, in part—to connect the country's "moral prestige" with Christian values. This connection marginalizes those who are not Christian, leaving them with "invisible barriers to symbolic inclusion" (p. 281). In other words, by reframing the United States as a pluralistic nation instead of a Christian nation, presidents might ultimately take a step toward greater harmony among various religious groups. Recall Obama's statement in Turkey: "We do not consider ourselves a Christian nation or a Jewish nation or a Muslim nation; we consider ourselves a nation of citizens who are bound by ideals and a set of values" (April 6, 2009). This is just one statement, of course, and not a typical one. But this is perhaps the kind of recategorization of American identity that will become commonplace in coming years.

Importantly, there are political consequences for reshaping American understandings of God and country. President Obama learned this lesson when, in his inaugural address, he said, "For we know that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness. We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus and nonbelievers" (January 20, 2009). Predictably, this statement was well received by many secular Americans who had long felt left out of presidential constructions of American civil religion, and by the 2012 election some commentators were referring to these "nones" as the most important component of Obama's "religious" coalition (see Markoe, 2012; Waldman, 2009). Some Christian conservatives, however, viewed Obama's statement very differently. For example, Bishop E. W. Jackson of the Exodus Faith Ministries in Chesapeake, Virginia, charged the president with "trying to redefine American culture, which is distinctively Christian. . . . What disturbs me is that he seems to be trying to redefine who we are" (see Free Republic, 2009, para. 4). In some ways, Jackson is exactly right. For the past few decades, presidents have been rhetorically redefining the nature of Christian America—and, by extension, who Americans are.

Naturally, this study had a few limitations. Use of a computer to identify mentions of Christianity ensures accurate tracking of explicit mentions but cannot identify implicit mentions. Such implicit discussions are important, but presumably also far less common than the explicit discussions considered here. Further, our data cannot speak to constructions of Christian America prior to 1981. It is possible that what we have observed in the presidency lately is a return to a previous state rather than an evolution.

However, the literature gives no reason to believe this would be the case (e.g., Chapp, 2012; Domke & Coe, 2010). Finally, we have argued that presidential constructions of Christian America matter for public understandings of American identity, but we do not test such effects. Our view is that effects do often occur, given the considerable symbolic power (Bellah, 1967; Domke & Coe, 2010; Hart, 2005) and empirical consequences (Calfano & Djupe, 2009; Chapp, 2012; Weber & Thornton, 2012) of politicians' religious discourse.

Future research could address these limitations and seek additional insight into presidential constructions of—and challenges to—the idea of Christian America. Several paths seem particularly fruitful. First, future studies could explore constructions of Christianity outside of the presidency. Other political figures, media organizations, and religious leaders all contribute to public understandings of religious faith and its role in the nation, and these discourses warrant attention. Second, it is clear that party affiliation is a factor in presidential invocations of religious faith. Future research could attempt to better understand the nature and breadth of this partisan divide. Finally, future research might seek to trace the relationship between public understandings of Christianity and presidential constructions of Christianity. Public perceptions of the United States as a Christian nation have interesting contours (Straughn & Feld, 2010), which might be better understood by directly tying public opinion data to careful analyses of political discourse. These and other approaches would provide needed insight into the important yet complex relationship between God and country.

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