



## Civil Religion and the Bush Doctrine of Preemptive War

### Revisiting the Civil Religion Hypothesis During the War on Terror

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#### Abstract

Scholars have struggled to offer a concise definition of “American civil religion” (ACR). This article proposes a narrow definition in order to test whether civil religious views can be associated with opinions on a specific foreign policy: preemptive strikes during the War on Terror. Drawing on extant literature, it develops a four-fold definition: belief that (1) America is a beacon of freedom; (2) God specially blesses America; (3) America is exceptional; and (4) America should promote democracy abroad. Data from a 2008 survey indicate that those believing America is blessed and exceptional are statistically more likely to support preemption. There is no statistical evidence that Americans who believe the nation is a beacon of democracy support preemption more or less than other Americans. Finally, the “export democracy” hypothesis is not statistically significant and also runs counter to expectations, suggesting further research is necessary.

Keywords: American civil religion, war on terror, George W. Bush, elite rhetoric, public opinion

#### Introduction

Beyond all differences of race or creed, we are one country, mourning together and facing danger together. Deep in the American character, there is honor, and it is stronger than cynicism. And many have discovered again that even in tragedy – especially in tragedy – God is near. In a single instant, we realized that this will be a decisive decade in the history of

liberty, that we've been called to a unique role in human events (President George W. Bush, 2002 State of the Union Address).

For a brief period in the 1960s and 1970s, the social sciences were preoccupied with the possibility that American nationalism had a specifically religious dimension. Scholars studied this phenomenon, what Robert Bellah called the “American civil religion” (or ACR), extensively through the 1980s. Yet for all of the scholarly research on the topic, the question of how it interacts with public opinion has been largely overlooked. Instead, work focused almost exclusively on proving *whether* civil religion exists, not examining what effects it may have on the realm of politics (Herberg; Hammond; Mathisen; Angrosino; Huntington). In addition – and perhaps as importantly – political scientists have recently paid civil religion scant attention.<sup>1</sup> Putnam and Campbell discuss civil religion as an artifact of the post-World War II religious boom but not as an enduring facet of the nation’s politics. This article seeks to fill some of this blank space. I therefore pose a question to move research beyond simply defining ACR and onto examining what effects its tenets may have in the realm of politics: when do Americans support the doctrine of preemptive war?

This reorientation is a necessary first step in addressing civil religion today. The term “civil religion” means many things to many people – an ambiguity which has made it difficult to analyze – and has been a thorn in the side of scholars since Bellah resurrected the term in the 1960s. Broadly speaking, it connotes the collection of “beliefs, symbols, and rituals” that help define a master narrative of what it means to be an “American” (Bellah 2005: 42). Studies often focus on one of these elements. Some look at symbols, like the sanctity of the presidency (Verba; Novak; Endy; Pierard and Linder), the Constitution as biblical analogue (Levinson 1979, 1987; Grey; Crapanzano; Pelikan), and the flag as sacred symbol (Marvin and Ingle). Others examine practices associated with civil religion, such as holidays (Warner). Still others focus upon themes, for instance America as sacrifice, birth and rebirth, and the Exodus narrative (Lowell; Toolin; Schwartz). Clearly, ACR is a multifaceted concept. In the interest of selecting a manageable definition for the purpose of this article, I employ a version of ACR that emphasizes the nation’s role on the global stage (for corroboration, see Bellah 1992; Pierard and Linder; Adams; Jolicoeur and Knowles; Toolin). This is not the only definition available, though it is well suited for measuring civil religious beliefs as they pertain to foreign policy.

Synthesizing these components of civil religion highlighted in the literature, I propose a four-part working definition of civil religion as it applies to Americans’ opinions of the country’s place in the world. The first is the prophetic belief that the United States has a moral obligation to take a leadership role in world affairs, a recurring theme throughout presidential inaugural addresses (Toolin: 46). In the parlance of Jonathan Winthrop, I examine if it matters that Americans envision themselves “as a city upon a hill.” Second, I take into account whether Americans believe their country is uniquely blessed by God and under divine providence. In the third instance, I measure belief in American cultural superiority, or as it is better known “American Exceptionalism.” Subscription to ACR

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<sup>1</sup> There are explorations of civil religion in political theory, but these discourses are necessarily elite-level discourse analyses. They are also somewhat theoretical and do not explore how Americans engage with civil religious tenets. For more on political theory and civil religion, see for example, Beiner.

requires more than simply believing the United States is protected by God or that it must be a beacon to the rest of the world: it is fundamentally predicated upon a belief that American culture is the pinnacle of human society. The final component is that the United States has a so-called “special mission” to promote democracy worldwide. Current literature on ACR leads one to expect that the higher Americans score on these measures of civil religious belief, the more likely they are to support policy that appeals to them. In the case of George W. Bush, I suggest this means a policy of preemptive war.

This article makes several important contributions. First, it offers a much-needed restriction of the term civil religion by focusing upon the particular arena of foreign policy. One reason civil religion frustrates scholars is because it *does* mean a multitude of things. Furthermore, it involves questions of how presidents address the nation (Novak; Toolin; Linder), how the nation understands itself (Bellah 2005; Wimberley 1976; Stauffer), and how our electoral politics can be determined by appeals to these beliefs, symbols, and rituals (R. Wimberley 1980; Wimberley and Christenson; Chapp). By looking at civil religion as it respects a vital dimension of foreign policy, we are better situated to investigate how civil religion may operate in the real world and in the realm of politics. A second contribution is that it can further cement the empirical study of civil religion in the twenty-first century by studying its expression in the foreign policy of George W. Bush. Third, it explores whether presidents may find making civil religious appeals a fruitful pursuit when seeking public approval for foreign policies.

By analyzing how the four dimensions of civil religious beliefs may impact support for preemptive war, we gain insight into what effects ACR may have upon the political process. If civil religious Americans are more given to support preemptive action, this could have serious import not only for academics but also for politicians. If lauding the United States as a “city upon a hill” is an effective means of selling a policy of intervention, it would make sense for politicians to tap into this belief.

### Divining American Civil Religion

American civil religion offers citizens of the United States a way of crafting a national “master-narrative,” and thus a means of rallying the population of diverse beliefs, ethnicities, and religions around a shared conception of *American-ness*. This nationalism is more than an expression of the rally-round-the-flag effect: it represents an attachment to a mystical, moral community that holds a special place in cosmic time. Martin E. Marty suggests that like traditional religion, it indulges our “preoccupation with ultimacy” and is codified by symbols and myths (139-40). The result is a national narrative where Americans are the elect; they are members of the chosen people. American civil religion “has its own prophets and its own martyrs, its own sacred events and sacred places, its own solemn rituals and symbols. It is concerned that America be a society as perfectly in accord with the will of God as men can make it, and a light to all the nations” (Bellah 2005: 55). In short, it establishes a moral community – one where “we” are good, upstanding Americans and “they” are licentious, dangerous, and decidedly “*un-American*.” Finally, the definition of ACR needs the crucial qualification that ACR is denominationally non-specific and rejects specific mention of either the Christian God or Jesus Christ.

One problem with the current literature on civil religion is the general lack of empirical analysis. Sociological or historical definitions identify specific variables, but aim to describe rather than test. Even so, some attempts have been made at empirical analysis. Thomas and Flippen's study of editorials published around "Honor America Day" showed no civil religious references (mentions of symbols or concepts), leading them to conclude that ACR is more a scholarly invention than a sociological fact. In another case, sociologist Ronald C. Wimberley concluded that there *does* exist a belief system distinct from both theistic and secular belief. Among his measurements are America's unique Providence under God, the importance of pluralistic values, and the highest respect for liberal democracy. In later work, he finds evidence that the "highly civil religious" were more likely to have voted for Nixon in 1972 (R. Wimberley 1980). His later work concludes that civil religion affects voter choice *but only weakly* affects some domestic policy preferences (Wimberley and Christenson: 222).

So why should a study of civil religion focus upon Americans' support for preemptive strikes against perceived threats, as justified by President Bush? First, there is reason to believe that Wimberley and Christenson overlook important differences between foreign and domestic policies. Weak correlations observed in past studies may demonstrate that presidential rhetoric carries different weight in regard to foreign matters than in regard to domestic matters. This is supported by the literature's heavy emphasis on a president's role as leader during times of war and crisis (Endy; Toolin; Linder). This so-called prophetic president attempts to line Americans up under a banner of common heritage, leading the nation to confront threats or crises. One need not look too far into history to find times where the president fulfilled precisely this role. Franklin D. Roosevelt led the nation headlong into World War II after Pearl Harbor; Lyndon B. Johnson used the Gulf of Tonkin incident to justify escalating the War in Vietnam; and, as I argue here, George W. Bush used the terrorist attacks of September 11 to initiate the now-familiar War on Terror. Each of these presidents addressed the nation in dark times and asked for sacrifices, mostly in the form of sending troops into harm's way. Each of these presidents was careful to emphasize American virtue as well as greatness. Second, recent analysis shows that George W. Bush was more likely to frame foreign policy than other initiatives in religious terms (Chapp: 51).

Given these facts, it would seem possible that presidents have specific civil religious themes running throughout their administrative policies. Eric Linder makes just this argument, calling attention to what he calls Bill Clinton's universalistic civil religion. In Clinton's first inaugural address, he argues, the president "outline[s] his view of America's world mission and his vision for a world community of civil faith" (Linder: 744). Similarly, David Adams highlights Reagan's persistent emphasis upon voluntarism, and how that theme became his civil religion. He goes on to suggest that this accounts for the president's famous contention that government is not the solution to a problem, but that "government *is* the problem." Presidents' civil religions are *more* specific than the tropes of American exceptionalism and America's status as a blessed nation – they often come to embody a particular expression of ACR, which is furthered through continued appeals: for Clinton it was cosmopolitanism, for Reagan it was voluntarism. I contend that Bush's appeals came to be most associated with preemptive military action.

One would expect, therefore, that President Bush would try framing his policy of preemptive strikes in civil religious language. Even a cursory look at Bush's corpus of

speeches backs up this suspicion. His use of classical civil religious rhetoric, as well as his wedding of muscular foreign policy with a doctrine of preemptive war, is well documented. One example:

We cannot defend America and our friends by hoping for the best. We cannot put our faith in the word of tyrants, who solemnly sign non-proliferation treaties, and then systemically break them. If we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long – Our security will require . . . all Americans to be forward-looking and resolute, to be ready for preemptive action when necessary to defend our liberty and to defend our lives (2002b).

And in another case, Bush argues that the “defense of freedom requires the advance of freedom” (2005). For the president, the advancement of freedom requires the country to get behind a sort of “shoot first ask questions later” foreign policy.

### **Bush, Preemptive War, and the Civil Religion Hypotheses**

Throughout his presidency, in countless speeches and public statements, Bush draws upon the tenets of ACR. Beginning with the basics, he complies with the civil religious stricture of “being religious without being specifically Christian.” His language is pietistic, yet non-descript. In a 2003 article for *National Review*, conservative commentator Fred Barnes makes this observation:

While he readily invokes God, he carefully avoids mention of Jesus Christ, and he calls for tolerance of all faiths. His comments have been confined to four specific areas: comforting people in grief, citing faith’s ability to improve lives, commenting on the mysterious ways of providence, and mentioning God’s concern for humanity.

Excluding ceremonial speeches such as those on Easter or Christmas, Bush avoids mentioning Jesus by name. In fact, an examination of his National Prayer Breakfast speeches indicates that he made no specific religious references, whereas Clinton invoked the name of Jesus in three of his speeches (in 1993, 1994, and 2000). Although he is a born-again Christian and includes copious scriptural references in his speeches, Bush exhibits a steadfast commitment to the idea of religious non-specificity and pluralism. His message is constant: America is a land of religious freedom, where people of all faiths are welcome, and where the actions of a few co-religionists do not condemn an entire world religion (2002a). As he states in 2006, “You are equally American if you’re a Hebrew—a Jew or a Christian or Muslim. You’re equally American if you choose not to have faith.” He appeals in a basic sense to the political and social norms that scholars call civil religion.

### **The Bush Doctrine as Civil Religion**

To determine whether Bush promotes a specific civil religion, in the tradition of Clinton’s cosmopolitanism or Reagan’s voluntarism, we must turn to the four-part definition of civil religion discussed above. First is the notion that America is a beacon of freedom to the world, and therefore has a moral obligation to be a leader. Second is the belief that God has specially blessed the United States. Third is the idea that America is an exceptional

nation – while its culture may not be perfect, it is superior to all others. And finally, there is the notion that a large component of America’s moral mission is to promote and spread democracy worldwide. As it becomes obvious below, Bush consistently uses each of the four components of the definition of ACR.

Bush was not the first president to assert that America is a beacon of freedom to the world, being most notably preceded by Kennedy and Reagan. A keyword search through the *American Presidency Project* (<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu>) at the University of California, Santa Barbara shows Bush’s successor, Barack Obama, has called America a beacon 78 times during his presidency as of October 2014. Yet it is Bush who, in the days and months following 9/11, became famous for using this rallying cry of American civil religion. The night of the attacks he delivered an address from the Oval Office where he stated outright that America was attacked because, “[W]e’re the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining” (2001a). Through the run-up to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Bush continually referenced America as an exemplar and moral leader on the world stage. In August of 2002, for instance, he stated that the United States was not going to be deterred from its war on terrorism:

And I want the message to go to friend and foe alike: We’re in this deal for the long haul. See, this is our freedom at stake. History has called this Nation into action. History has put the spotlight on the great beacon of freedom, and we’re not going to blink (2002d).

While attempting to gain support for the USA Patriot Act – an integral component of the War on Terror – Bush invoked the language of ACR, lauding Americans’ abilities to bring people of diverse backgrounds together under the banner of one society. “We’re such a beacon” of hope and freedom, he concludes triumphantly (2004). In fact, another search through the *American Presidency Project* shows that Bush referenced the United States as a “beacon” of freedom in 108 speeches during his eight years in office.

Next there is the claim that Bush believes that God specially blesses the United States, and that these blessings are clear for all to see. In a speech praising the work of veterans, the president highlights this integral tenet of civil religion: “[F]rom the day of our founding, America’s own great hope has never been in ourselves alone. The founders humbly sought the wisdom and blessing of Divine Providence.” He continues, closing the speech with the familiar wish that we may “always live by that same trust, and may God continue to watch over the United States of America” (2002c). There are, of course, the recurrent requests for God to bless the United States of America. Belief in divine providence is a constant in Bush’s civil religious rhetoric and provides important context for his proposed policies (e.g. 2006, 2008). These references come in addition to his constant exhortation for God to bless America.

The third component of the civil religion hypothesis, that America’s culture is exceptional and superior to all other cultures, is perhaps best known by its historical corollary: manifest destiny. Westward expansion has been associated with religious behavior and nationalism since Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis. E. Wimberley reminds us that this push to the coast was often framed in quasi-religious language.

During the mid-nineteenth century the concept of “manifest destiny” reflected the belief that America had a divinely ordained mission (a divine call) to spread American democracy and culture across the vast North American continent (6).

Believing the United States ought to spread *American* democracy across the continent is to believe that American culture is in some sense exceptional. This, I suggest, is inherent in Bush’s worldview. He may not have been unique among presidents, but he was unabashed in arguing that America is the greatest nation on earth, filled with the greatest people on earth (2002e). When justifying the War on Terror he stated, “the defense of freedom requires the advance of freedom” (2005); this is a similar extension of American influence seen in the nineteenth century. As the world’s first official democracy, there is nothing more fundamental to American culture than that we are a special people – not only by our special relationship with God, but by comparisons to other cultures as well (Linder).

The final dimension of Bush’s civil religion is the belief that America should support democracy everywhere. This is a common theme in American foreign policy which is found in the Monroe Doctrine, America’s acquisition of the Philippines in 1898, and in the nation’s turbulent relationships with autocrats during the twentieth century. While there is certainly hypocrisy in imperialism and support for ruthless dictators, these are political realities; it is hard to suggest that Americans idealize themselves as rolling *back* democracy worldwide. Bush trumpeted this clarion call, claiming that the preemptive war in Iraq was not fought solely to take away Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction, but to bring democracy to oppressed Iraqis. The Brookings Institution report underscores the central role that spreading democracy played in Bush’s foreign policies (Daalder et al.).

There was a time when many said that the cultures of Japan and Germany were incapable of sustaining democratic values. They were wrong. Some say the same of Iraq today. They too are mistaken. The nation of Iraq, with its proud heritage, abundant resources, and skilled and educated people, is fully capable of moving toward democracy and living in freedom (Bush 2003).

The tacit assumption is that democracy is something yearned for by every society, and it is the job of the United States to facilitate transitions from autocracy to democracy.

Given the close relationship between preemptive war and the democratic wish that Bush seems to paint, one should wonder whether his strategy is well founded. During the early years of his presidency the question of preemption was intertwined with expressions of American civil religion. Success or failure in convincing Americans of the merits of the Bush Doctrine could well have been linked with Bush’s ability to connect with “civil religious” Americans.

## Data and Methods

The data in this article come from the “Religion and America’s Role in the World” (RARW) report. Between September 4 and 21, 2008, the Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research Group carried out a nationally representative survey of 1000 adults and 400 young evangelicals. Because the survey oversampled young evangelicals by combining a random phone number generator and an “opt in” questionnaire, I have dropped the 400 young

evangelicals. This maintains the assumptions of simple random sampling, and leaves a pool of 1000 respondents. The fully articulated model contains, however, only 333 observations, a regrettable consequence of some respondents answering that they did not know or did not respond to the question.

The dependent variable of the survey is support for preemptive war and was posed in a way suggesting an ordered preference. Respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the following statement:

The United States should use military force to prevent potential threats before they occur. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Do you STRONGLY (agree/disagree) or SOMEWHAT (agree/disagree)?

Responses were scored from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree (4). The evident ordering of categories, in addition to the discrete nature of the measure, leads to an ordered logit model over OLS regression. A Brant test shows that the model is not in violation of the parallel regression assumption. While there is one variable (America is blessed by God) that is in violation, the differences between the multinomial logit analysis and ordered logit analyses are trivial. Results for this test are in Appendix Table 1.

Before moving on, however, it is important to highlight implications, especially when these data were collected. Because the survey was conducted in September 2008, it does not present a picture of civil religious belief when Americans were making up their minds about the War on Terror. Ideally the RARW study would have been conducted longitudinally for the sake of comparison because timing is significant. Since the survey was conducted *after* the initial public demand for military action, it is less likely to be biased by the “rally round the flag effect” and, therefore, to more accurately reflect civil religious belief. Similarly, in 2008 the War on Terror was increasingly associated with George W. Bush. As I demonstrate below, by controlling for evaluations of Bush’s presidency I am further able to isolate the effects of ACR and its support for the policy of preemption. In sum, the data analyzed in this article offers a conservative test of the effects of ACR.

### Variables and Hypotheses

Was there a civil religious dimension that Bush could tap as a means of rallying Americans to his cause? To address this question, I located four questions from the RARW study that capture the phenomena noted in Bush’s speeches. I emphasize, again, that these measures are not exhaustive of all elements of ACR. The survey does not ask questions about the flag, the Constitution, or the office of the presidency – all of which are touchstones in the literature on civil religion. For this reason (as well as a Cronbach alpha score that falls just short of statistical significance, explained in the Results section), I do not claim that *these and only these* elements of civil religion are important in predicting civil religious receptivity to preemptive war. However, they are certainly important.

Like support for preemptive war, the independent variables measuring civil religious beliefs are also categorical and ordered. The first three independent measures take on the same one to four (1-4) values as the dependent variable, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. On average respondents “somewhat approve” of BEACON and BLESSED, while the mean is less enthusiastic for EXCEPTIONALISM, averaging “somewhat

disapprove.” The last variable, DEMOCRACY was posed slightly differently and, takes on values from one to five (1-5), ranging from not very important to extremely important. The variable DEMOCRACY has a mean of “somewhat important.” These variables, along with the original wording of the survey questions are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Independent Variables and Survey Questions (RARW)

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BEACON	The United States has a moral obligation to take a leadership role in world affairs. Do you agree or disagree with that statement (said only if necessary)? Do you STRONGLY (agree/disagree) or SOMEWHAT (agree/disagree)?
BLESSED	God has uniquely blessed America. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Do you STRONGLY (agree/disagree) or SOMEWHAT (agree/disagree)?
EXCEPTIONALISM	Our people are not perfect, but our culture is superior to others. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Do you STRONGLY (agree/disagree) or SOMEWHAT (agree/disagree)?
DEMOCRACY	Promoting democracy in other nations: is that extremely important for American foreign policy, very important, somewhat important, just a little important, or not very important for American foreign policy?

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A series of control variables has been included to account for all variation in my dependent measures. These variables take account of variance in support for preemptive war due to religious, political, and other demographic characteristics accepted to affect opinions of war. A full list of control variables, see Appendix Table 2; for the descriptive statistics for all variables, Appendix Table 3.

Given the close relationship between traditional and civil religion, this model controls for some aspects of respondents’ faith. Bellah asserts that civil religion exists “alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from” traditional religion; I include a variable measuring frequency of religious service attendance to account for religiosity. Additionally, I include a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent belongs to a “Judeo-Christian” faith to control for the effects of belonging to a “religion of the majority” of Americans – notably Christians (Mormons included) and Judaism – a connection that scholars often suggest exists.

After controlling for religious factors, there remain political determinants of support for preemption. I include three such controls. First is a feeling thermometer of George W. Bush. It seems that opinions of preemptive war will correlate with whether respondents approve/disapprove of the president. Next I include whether the respondent answered that “violence and war” were the world’s greatest challenges. The more threatening respondents find the world to be, the more likely they are to back policies that intend to mitigate those fears. Finally, I control for whether respondents thought that “morals” is the most important global issue – again, trying to soak up any variance not caused by purely civil religious beliefs.

I address general demographic factors, which are drawn from Christenson and Wimberley’s study on the demographics of civil religious belief (80). While that study

suggests neither gender nor race have any appreciable impact upon civil religious belief, other literature indicates they should nonetheless be included as controls. For instance, it is still unclear whether African Americans are more likely to support war than Whites (Nincic and Nincic), even as some evidence suggests African Americans were more dovish than Whites during the Gulf War (Mueller). For similar reasons I include respondent gender: findings show that women are less likely than men to support intervention abroad because they are socialized as caregivers (Goldstein). The last demographic variables – income, education level, and age – were added to the regression to control for possible, if untheorized, effects.

### Hypotheses

The formal hypotheses are as follows. When controlling for other religious, political, and socioeconomic factors:

(H1) *The more strongly a respondent agrees with the assertion that the United States should serve as a beacon of hope and leader on the world stage (BEACON), the more likely he or she is to support preemptive war.* The idea that America should be an exemplar for the world is as old as the country itself. This hypothesis states that, if Bush has been able to wed his policy of preemption to the civil religious tenet of being a “city upon a hill,” we should be able to observe a positive relationship.

(H2) *The more strongly a respondent agrees with the assertion that God has specially blessed the United States (BLESSSED), the more likely he or she is to support preemptive war.* According to the ACR hypothesis, belief in God’s special providence is a cornerstone of civil religion in the United States. It should therefore follow that, if George Bush has been successful in speaking the language of civil religion to gain support for his policies, we should see a positive relationship between the variable measuring “blessed” and the dependent measure for preemptive military action.

(H3) *The more strongly a respondent agrees with the assertion that American culture is superior to all other cultures (EXCEPTIONALISM), the more likely he or she is to support preemptive war.* The notion that American culture is superior to all others is an uncontested component of the ACR hypothesis. If Bush has truly integrated American exceptionalism into his civil religious rhetoric, we should be able to observe a positive relationship between support for exceptionalism and support for preemptive war.

(H4) *The more strongly a respondent agrees that the United States has an important, special mission to promote democracy worldwide (DEMOCRACY), the more likely he or she is to support preemptive war.* George W. Bush put a lot of effort into defending his doctrine of preemption, most notably in Iraq, by emphasizing the importance of spreading democracy to formerly autocratic countries. If he is successful, therefore, one would assume that the more Americans agree with his justification, the more they would agree with his means to that end.

George W. Bush justified the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as necessary for preserving democracy here and abroad. If it is possible to successfully integrate the major beliefs of ACR into his argument, results should show that Americans rating highly on these measures support his policy of preemption.

## Results

Results from the full model (Table 2) indicate mixed evidence for whether civil religious beliefs correlate with approval of the doctrine of preemptive strikes. Before proceeding I should comment on why civil religion is articulated as four separate hypotheses, and are not measured as a single index. While a single measure is extremely significant (coefficient 0.93 and robust SE of 0.23), a test for inter-item correlation produces a Cronbach alpha of 0.595, which falls below accepted levels. In the interest of rigor, therefore, I do not claim that these measures of civil religion hang together as a single measure of civil religiosity. Accordingly, they are explored as independent facets of a larger phenomenon.

The first three hypotheses – BEACON, BLESSED, and EXCEPTIONALISM – all show movement in the predicted direction. That is to say, as respondents become increasingly civil religious, they are more likely to report supporting Bush's doctrine of preemptive war. Both the BLESSED and EXCEPTIONAL hypotheses attain standard levels of significance, coming in below the 0.01 level. It appears that Bush may have had significant support from Americans who subscribe to these tenets of ACR. The results for BEACON do not attain standard levels of significance ( $p=0.217$ ), but nonetheless indicate that the notion that "America as an exemplar nation" could be a powerful trope in shaping opinions on policy.

Results for the DEMOCRACY hypothesis, however, do not suggest that Bush's appeals to "bring Iraqis democracy" could have led more civil religious Americans to approve of his preemptive war policies. While the measure fails to attain conventional levels of significance ( $p=0.649$ ), it is nonetheless in the *opposite* of the predicted direction. These data suggest that increased support for America's spreading democracy may in fact be negatively correlated with the support for the doctrine of preemptive war. Low levels of significance make interpreting this coefficient difficult, but the evidence is suggestive nonetheless.

The controls in Table 2 indicate significant, though not entirely surprising results. Warm feelings for President Bush are unsurprisingly a positive and statistically significant predictor for support for preemptive strikes. The same goes for gender: women are less likely to support preemptive strikes than men, a fact that conforms to current literature on women's political opinions. The control for age indicates that older respondents are less likely than younger respondents to support preemptive war at conventionally significant levels.

What is interesting is the set of variables that do *not* attain standard levels of significance. The control for frequency of worship is, in fact, negative and approaches significance at the  $p \leq 0.10$  level. Given Bush's documented usage of religious coded language to prime explicitly religious Americans (e.g., Albertson), it is curious that the *more* religious an individual is the *less* likely they are to support a cornerstone of his foreign policy. It is also important to note that the dummy variable indicating whether a respondent belongs to a Judeo-Christian faith (Protestant, Catholic, Mormon, or Jew) is not a statistically significant

predictor of support for preemptive war ( $p=0.953$ ). Even when substituting a dummy variable for only “Protestant,” to test whether responses were driven by more specifically Christian nationalism the results are similar (a coefficient of 0.04 and standard error of 0.236). These results fail to provide evidence that civil religious appeals lead those of a Judeo-Christian faith to support preemption any more or less than other Americans. Furthermore, they suggest that if presidents want to garner public support for preemptive strikes, explicit religious appeals may not be the most efficacious approach.

Table 2. Ordered Logit Regression Results for Impact of Civil Religious Beliefs on Support for Preemptive War

Independent Variables	Coefficient (SE)
BEACON	0.164 (.133)
BLESSED	0.379 (.116)**
EXCEPTIONALISM	0.382 (.127)**
DEMOCRACY	-0.049 (.108)
Religious Controls	
Frequency of religious service attendance	-0.119 (.084)
Is respondent of a Judeo-Christian faith 0=No, 1=Yes	-0.016 (.277)
Political Controls	
Feeling thermometer of President Bush	0.027 (.004)**
The greatest threat in the world are issues of violence	0.052 (.240)
The greatest threat in the world are issues of morality	-0.261 (.328)
Demographic Controls	
Race	0.383 (.327)
Age	-0.415 (.110)**
Gender	-0.668 (.219)**
Income	-0.014 (.080)
Education level	-0.113 (.090)

Ordered logit coefficients with robust standard errors.  $N=333$ ; likelihood = -386.51; pseudo  $R^2=0.1601$ ; \* $p<.05$ , \*\* $p<.01$  for a two-tailed test.

Finally, neither belief that violence was the most pressing global issue, nor crises of morals, was a statistically significant predictor of support preemptive war. Directionalities for both make intuitive sense (those who ranked violence as the greatest threat are more likely to support preemptive war; those who ranked morals, thereby being more religious, less likely), but there is no evidence that these opinions have an impact upon support for the Bush Doctrine.

Table 3 presents the same results as predicted probabilities. (For details on the control variables, see Tables 4 and 5 in the Appendix.) These are included to offer insight on the matter of substantive significance. Wimberley and Christenson argue that ACR does not affect policy preferences to a significant extent. The results below contradict that conclusion: some civil religious beliefs, it appears, do affect opinions on preemptive war.

Table 3. Change in Predicted Probabilities for Impact of Civil Religious Beliefs on Support for Preemptive War, Independent Variables

Independent Variables	Min/Max Shift in Independent Variable Change in Predicted Probabilities [95% Confidence Intervals]			
	Support for Preempt=1	Support for Preempt=2	Support for Preempt=3	Support for Preempt=4
	BEACON	-0.0792 [-0.2471, 0.0441]	-0.0434 [-0.1360, 0.0380]	0.0448 [-0.0386, 0.1504]
BLESSED	<b>-0.1938*</b> [-0.3636, -0.0678]	-0.0826 [-0.1807, 0.0546]	0.1079 [-0.0138, 0.2141]	<b>0.1685*</b> [0.0522, 0.3133]
EXCEPTIONALISM	<b>-0.1558*</b> [-0.3049, -0.0389]	<b>-0.1168*</b> [-0.2132, -0.0063]	0.0635 [-0.1196, 0.1176]	<b>0.2091*</b> [0.0629, 0.4201]
DEMOCRACY	0.0301 [-0.1126, 0.1553]	0.0190 [-0.0642, 0.1221]	-0.0164 [-0.0923, 0.0827]	-0.0326 [-0.2338, 0.1093]

Ordered logit coefficients: N=333; likelihood = -386.51; pseudo R2=0.1601;  
Significant results **bolded\*** at the .05 level.

It is obvious that both the BLESSED and EXCEPTIONALISM variables have a significant impact upon support for preemption. Let us look first at the variable of God blessing America. All else being equal, moving from a response of “strongly disagreeing” to “strongly agreeing” that the United States is blessed by God, respondents are 19.38 percent *less* likely to rate a low score of 1 (i.e. “strongly disagree”) on a policy of preemptive war. As expected, with the same min-to-max shift (from strong disagreement to strong agreement with BLESSED), the model predicts respondents are 16.85 percent *more* likely to say they “strongly agree” with preemptive war. In other words, those respondents who would be more receptive to Bush’s constant calls for God to bless America are also significantly more likely to support his calls to preemptive war, as expressed through civil religious appeals.

Similarly, min-to-max shifts in the EXCEPTIONALISM variable show convincing results. All else being equal, respondents moving from the lowest indicator of American exceptionalism to the greatest become 15.58 percent *less* likely to “strongly disagree” with preemptive war. This means that Americans who score higher on American exceptionalism are less likely than Americans who score lower on this measure to support preemptive war. With the same min-to-max shift in EXCEPTIONALISM, respondents are 11.68 percent *less* likely to “somewhat disagree” with preemption and 20.91 percent *more* likely to “strongly agree” with the Bush doctrine of preemptive war. By way of comparison, moving from the least favorable to the most favorable opinion of President Bush results in a higher predicted probability of strong agreement with preemption. Although the BEACON variable is not statistically significant, it does begin to approach conventional levels (p=0.217). It predicts that moving from “strongly disagreeing” that America is a beacon to the world to “strongly agreeing” results in 8 percent decrease in the predicted probability of strongly disagreeing

with preemption. These results gesture toward a possible relationship. Finally, as noted earlier, subscription to the belief that the United States should promote democracy worldwide does not come close to conventional levels of significance and runs counter to what scholars in civil religion would expect; there is no evidence to rule against the null hypothesis. Results support hypotheses two and three; support for hypothesis one is tenuous; and results do not support hypothesis four.

Results show a fairly strong relationship between service attendance and the predicted probabilities for supporting preemptive war. While not attaining conventional levels of significance, a quick look at the confidence intervals indicates just how close these predictions come. When respondents “strongly disagree” or “strongly agree” with preemption, the variable for worship is only barely insignificant at traditional levels. These results are so nearly significant as to suggest that highly religious Americans are more likely to oppose preemptive war than support it.<sup>2</sup>

It is perplexing that results show that the more religious an American is the less likely he or she is to support preemptive war. That is, religious attendance, a measure of traditional religiosity, is *negatively* correlated with belief in preemption. What accounts for this seeming discrepancy? One possibility could be the presence of Catholics in the sample. As Smidt, Kellstedt, and Guth demonstrate, while on the whole Catholics barely lean Democratic (41% GOP and 44% Democrat), there are meaningful political differences among Catholics. The so-called “traditionalist” Catholics (those who are most theologically conservative and active in church) are 56% Republican and 29% Democrat, respectively; whereas “modernist” Catholics, who rate lower on measures of traditional religiosity, are 30% Republican and 50% Democrat (Smidt et al.: 27). It is possible that more Catholic respondents were modernist and fewer were traditionalist, which would make religiosity data more likely to result in opposition to Bush’s policy of preemptive war than in support for it. Unfortunately, there were not enough Catholics in the sample (70 of 333) to permit meaningful analysis of Catholic respondents. There is a similar tendency among Mainline Protestants to split 45% “lean Democrat” and 45% “lean Republican,” though that trend has since reversed to 39% Democrat leaning vs. 51% GOP leaning (Pew 2012). It is possible that these Democratic-leaning Mainline Protestants also skewed the correlation with religiosity negative. Nevertheless, Bush’s appeals to civil religion mesh with expectations from the literature, but the “most religious” Americans did not identify with Bush’s message.

Finally, it is worth noting the large and statistically significant effects that both gender and age have on the predicted probabilities regarding support for preemptive war. Consistent with past research on the gender-gap in support for armed intervention, women are 12 percent more likely to strongly oppose preemption than men, all else being equal; and they are 9 percent less likely than men to strongly support the Bush doctrine. And moving from the youngest (18-30) to the oldest (over 75) demographics, respondents are 25.5 percent more likely to strongly oppose preemption and 27.43 percent less likely to strongly support it. These controls were introduced to help isolate the effects of the key independent

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<sup>2</sup> This near significance suggests to me that future analysis should continue testing for the influence of service attendance and support for preemption.

variables, yet their magnitude and significance may help direct future research. More importantly, there are potential avenues for further work in the empirical study of civil religion.

This new articulation of ACR – one that examines only a specific aspect of foreign policy – suggests that President Bush may well have been able to channel civil religious belief into support for his doctrine of preemptive war.

### **Discussion**

Traditional civil religion scholarship emphasizes the importance of at least four vital beliefs: that the United States should be a beacon of leadership to other nations; that God has blessed America specially; that America's culture is superior to all others in the world; and that America has a special mission to promote democracy abroad. Like the presidents before him, as well as his successor, George W. Bush spoke the language of the American civil religion. In his attempt to garner support for a doctrine of preemptive war, Bush appealed to all of these strains of American thought.

These new empirical tests of the ACR hypothesis offer evidence that Bush *may* have been successful in this endeavor to prime civil religious Americans to accept his policy of preemption. I say “may” because my results are based off of a survey, which demonstrates correlation but not causality. Nonetheless, this study does show that some civil religious beliefs correlate with support for the doctrine of preemptive war. The only dimension of civil religious belief that seems to have failed in allying behind the Bush Doctrine is the idea that the United States should help spread democracy. In fact, respondents who rate as highly civil religious on that dimension may well oppose Bush's particular civil religion (although, again, the null hypothesis in this case cannot be rejected). Finally, I find no statistical relationship between support for preemption and belief in America's role as a beacon of hope, even though the measure approaches statistical significance.

What accounts for the hypotheses' divergent outcomes? To begin, it is possible that both the BEACON and DEMOCRACY measures are tapping more complex sentiments than either EXCEPTIONALISM or BLESSED. Unlike the latter hypotheses, which are more self-descriptive (that the United States is both divinely sanctioned and exceptional), both the belief that America should be a beacon and that it should spread democracy require Americans to consider their relationship with others.<sup>3</sup> Simply put, they are more political or policy oriented and could correlate with other policy opinions that are not accounted for in this model. There are also differences between both EXCEPTIONAL and BLESSED. For instance, we cannot rule out that Americans supporting non-intervention do so because they see it as America's moral obligation – that is to say, it is an expression of their interpretation of civil religion. Similarly, belief in the value of spreading democracy is associated with both neoconservatives as well as neoliberals (who would understand that mission differently). This study suggests that Bush's language about spreading democracy may have resonated with the former group but not with truly “civil religious” Americans. In sum, there may be

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<sup>3</sup> The distinction is similar to that between nationalism (we are great and we will win) and patriotism, which seeks to understand the nation in a slightly more nuanced, potentially critical fashion (see further on this distinction, Schatz et al.; Huddy and Khatib).

differences between more simplistic and complicated dimensions of civil religious thought; further research should work to disentangle them.

The results of this study pose a few additional questions. One of the most prominent is whether civil religion matters in discussions of modern politics and, in particular, how presidents frame their policies. While the empirical results suggest that adherence to some traditional tenets of ACR (belief that America is a beacon and should spread democracy) do not translate into *de facto* support for the president's policy on preemptive war, they do not minimize the significance of the civil religion hypotheses. Support for preemptive war is not determined only by opinion of the person in the oval office. Neither is it determined by perceptions of global threats. It is, in fact, linked with at least some elements of a religiously laden national narrative existing alongside both politics and faith.

The current model only tests one possible arena in which ACR has been employed, the question of foreign policy (and more specifically preemptive military action). A more germane question raised by these results is the ability of leaders to actually *use* civil religious rhetoric to gain support for their policies. Again, Wimberley and Christenson suggest that civil religious beliefs do not greatly affect domestic policy opinions. This study offers evidence that subscription to some civil religious beliefs may help sell *specific* policies. One question, then, could be whether President Obama garnered support for the Affordable Care Act through civil religious appeals. The 44<sup>th</sup> president's rhetorical flourish and ability to speak the language of ACR is well known (Frank; Hammer). Whether he can or did convert that into policy support is a matter for further empirical study.

The null results for two hypotheses, as well as the unexpected direction of one of these, further demonstrate that the constellation of beliefs caught up in ACR may not be as easily accessible to politicians as they at first seem. It is one thing for a leader to end a speech with the traditional "God bless the United States of America" and it is quite another for Americans to change their opinions of specific policies because of such appeals. Bush may have been able to gain support for his preemptive war policy by appealing to Americans who believe the country is being guided by God and that it is exceptional, but it appears he was unable to convince Americans that either America's moral obligation to lead the world *or* that it has a special mission to deliver democracy to the dark corners of the globe justifies preemptive war. Politically salient facts – such as respondent feelings about President Bush – matter immensely when determining opinions of his policies. It is somewhat counterintuitive that religious attendance was negatively correlated with support for preemption. By no means is civil religion the only explanation for why Americans supported or opposed the Bush Doctrine. At the same time, the civil religion angle appears to be an underappreciated element of this story.

## Conclusion

From this discussion emerges a broader avenue for further inquiry. Is there something about the very ends that Bush was seeking that made them incommensurate with appeals to the American civil religion? Had his policy been for multilateralism, of engaging in dialogue until the very last moment, would he have been able to call upon support from the full panoply of beliefs under the umbrella of ACR? Furthermore, had the foreign policy been one of non-aggression, would this have led highly civil religious Americans to appraise his

policies differently? The possibility of competing versions of civil religion has been proposed (Marty; Marx; Cladis), and this study offers some empirical validation of this argument. For instance, civil religious belief in America as a “beacon” need not only fuel interventionist policies but also potentially non-interventionist ones. It is possible that a president’s ability to successfully invoke strains of civil religious rhetoric are more restricted by their policy than past research on civil religion has demonstrated. Future work could test whether a foreign policy-centered civil religion may be more or less effective than a domestic policy-centered variant, such as, for instance, Obama’s social gospel-inspired appeals for the ACA. In fact, Chapp’s analysis of Bush’s and Obama’s stump speeches indicates that the two employ religious rhetoric in precisely this way (50-51).

There are two significant limitations to this study. The first, as discussed earlier, is the timing of the survey. Bush made his case for preemption years before the survey used in this study was conducted. If the survey had been conducted during the lead-up to the war, there could indeed have been variations in the relationship between appeals to civil religious ideals and support for preemptive war. As explained in the data section of this paper, this criticism is less relevant than it at first seems. The fact that the survey was conducted in 2008 offers us a *conservative* estimate of support for preemptive war. By this point, popular support for the Bush Doctrine was as much a reflection of support for Bush than anything else: the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were unpopular, the deteriorating economy was at the forefront of the presidential campaign, and Americans were far from primed on issues of preemptive war. In spite of all of this, there is evidence that support for basic civil religious tenets correlate with support for the Bush Doctrine of preemptive war. The second limitation is more fundamental: this study uses an existing survey. Future research should design and implement surveys to increase specificity, sample size and, more importantly, to explore in more nuanced ways to prime civil religious beliefs. This could help answer questions of causality, not just correlation.

Ultimately, this study matters for three reasons. First, it has specified the civil religion hypothesis in a way that lends itself to empirical inquiry. Therefore, it joins Chapp’s study in a revival of empirical ACR research. Second, it highlights new applications of the civil religion hypothesis for the twenty-first century by applying it to policy preferences rather than to candidates. The fact that facets of American Civil Religion may have resonated with some Americans, affecting support or disapproval of Bush’s doctrine of preemption, is a unique preliminary finding that contradicts past research and suggests avenues for further inquiry. Third, while it shows the potential of civil religion as a rhetorical tool, it also shines light upon fissures and dynamics at work within this more restricted definition of ACR. This study demonstrates that presidential policies may not tap into all civil religious beliefs in equal measure; there may well be limitations to its rhetorical power. Further research around the hypothesis of American Civil Religion may have a great deal to teach us about rhetoric, public opinion, and politics writ large.

**Appendix**

*Appendix Table 1. Brant Test for Parallel Regression Assumption*

Variable	chi2	p>chi2	df
All	30.12	0.357	28
BEACON	0.64	0.727	2
BLESSED	2.76	0.251	2
EXCEPTIONALISM	7.42	0.024	2
DEMOCRACY	3.66	0.161	2
WORSHIP	1.61	0.447	2
JUDEOCHRIST	1.16	0.559	2
BUSH	1.31	0.520	2
VIOLENCE	0.70	0.703	2
MORALS	0.74	0.691	2
RACE	2.54	0.280	2
AGE	0.60	0.743	2
GENDER	0.10	0.953	2
INCOME	3.43	0.180	2
EDUCATION	2.77	0.250	2

A significant test statistic provides evidence that the parallel regression assumption has been violated.

*Appendix Table 2: Control Variables and Scale*

WORSHIP	Frequency of religious service attendance 1=never, 2=hardly ever, 3=several times a year, 4=once or twice a month, 5=once a week, 6=more than once a week
JUDEOCHRIST	Is respondent of a Judeo-Christian faith 0=No, 1=Yes
BUSH	Feeling thermometer of President Bush 0=very negative, 50=neither positive nor negative, 100=very positive
VIOLENCE	The greatest threat in the world are issues of violence 0=disagrees, 1=agrees
MORALS	The greatest threat in the world are issues of morality 0=disagrees, 1=agrees
RACE	0=White, 1=non-White
AGE	1=18-30, 2=31-44, 3=45-59, 4=60-74, 5=older than 75
GENDER	0=male, 1=female
INCOME	1=less than \$10k, 2=\$10k-\$20k, 3=\$20k-\$30k, 4=\$30k-\$50k, 5=\$50k-\$75k, 6=\$75k-\$100k, 7=\$100k+
EDUCATION	1=1-11 <sup>th</sup> grade, 2=high school grad, 3=non-college post high school, 4=some college, 5=college grad, 6=post-graduate school

Appendix Table 3: Summary Statistics for Variables

Variable	Obs.	Mean	Standard Deviation	Median	Skewness
PREEMPT	959	2.60	1.17	3	-0.136
BEACON	471	2.97	1.05	3	-0.577
BLESSED	952	2.92	1.24	3	-0.601
EXCEPTIONALISM	956	2.31	1.14	2	0.238
DEMOCRACY	976	3.19	1.18	3	-0.454
WORSHIP	985	3.88	1.52	4	-0.180
JUDEOCHRIST	972	0.78	0.41	1	-1.358
BUSH	484	40.80	35.56	40	0.211
VIOLENCE	1000	0.34	0.48	0	0.657
MORALS	1000	0.11	0.32	0	2.445
RACE	952	0.17	0.38	0	1.765
AGE	985	3.05	1.16	3	-0.173
GENDER	1000	0.53	0.50	1	-0.124
INCOME	812	4.74	1.76	5	-0.407
EDUCATION	991	3.98	2.28	4	-0.360

Appendix Table 4. Change in Predicted Probabilities for Impact of Civil Religious Beliefs on Support for Preemptive War, Religious and Political Control Variables

Control Variables	Min/Max Shift in Control Variable Change in Predicted Probabilities [95% Confidence Intervals]			
	Support for Preempt=1	Support for Preempt=2	Support for Preempt=3	Support for Preempt=4
	WORSHIP	0.0874 [-0.0329, 0.2293]	0.0588 [-0.0331, 0.1690]	-0.0446 [-0.1353, 0.0615]
JUDEOCHRIST	-0.0025 [-0.1090, 0.0767]	-0.0016 [-0.0579, 0.0616]	0.0014 [-0.0447, 0.0680]	0.0027 [-0.1031, 0.0961]
BUSH	<b>-0.3602*</b> [-0.5634, -0.1462]	<b>-0.2121*</b> [-0.3131, -0.0389]	0.0845 [-0.1768, 0.2609]	<b>0.4878*</b> [0.2947, 0.6869]
VIOLENCE	-0.0080 [-0.0744, 0.0717]	-0.0049 [-0.0669, 0.0377]	0.0045 [-0.0489, 0.0420]	0.0085 [-0.0633, 0.1196]
MORALS	0.0366 [-0.0484, 0.1706]	0.0275 [-0.0502, 0.0906]	-0.0177 [-0.1023, 0.0255]	-0.0464 [-0.1498, 0.0934]

Ordered logit coefficients: N=333; likelihood = -386.51; pseudo R2=0.1601; Significant results **bolded\*** at the .05 level.

Appendix Table 5. Change in Predicted Probabilities for Impact of Civil Religious Beliefs on Support for Preemptive War, Demographic Control Variables

Control Variables	Min/Max Shift in Control Variable Change in Predicted Probabilities [95% Confidence Intervals]			
	Support for Preempt=1	Support for Preempt=2	Support for Preempt=3	Support for Preempt=4
RACE	-0.0517 [-0.1494, 0.0389]	-0.0416 [-0.1214, 0.0259]	0.0229 [-0.0721, 0.0851]	0.0704 [-0.0491, 0.2331]
AGE	<b>0.2550*</b> [0.0866, 0.4504]	0.1364 [-0.0114, 0.2520]	-0.1172 [-0.2426, 0.1085]	<b>-0.2743*</b> [-0.4976, -0.1132]
GENDER	<b>0.1231*</b> [0.0364, 0.2208]	0.0405 [-0.0376, 0.1208]	-0.0738 [-0.1403, 0.0094]	<b>-0.0898*</b> [-0.2023, -0.0249]
INCOME	-0.0132 [-0.1728, 0.1316]	-0.0082 [-0.0949, 0.1053]	0.0073 [-0.0779, 0.1018]	0.0141 [-0.2002, 0.1627]
EDUCATION	0.0830 [-0.0465, 0.2389]	0.0557 [-0.0336, 0.1691]	-0.0426 [-0.1398, 0.0695]	-0.0962 [-0.3025, 0.0570]

Ordered logit coefficients: N=333; likelihood = -386.51; pseudo R<sup>2</sup>=0.1601; Significant results **bolded\*** at the .05 level.

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