

## “To Restore the Soul of America:” Religious Rhetoric in Joe Biden’s President-Elect Victory Speech

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*On November 7, 2020, after being declared the winner of the 2020 presidential election, Joseph R. Biden delivered his President-Elect victory speech to a crowd in Wilmington, Delaware. Through a generic analysis of religious language in Biden’s victory speech, I suggest that Biden uses religious language in the tradition of American civil religion in an attempt to unify the country after a highly divisive and contested election, as well as to provide hope and comfort in the midst of a global pandemic. While Biden’s address adheres to the themes previous research has associated with the President-Elect victory speech genre, his address appears to utilize religious language more frequently than other victory speeches. I suggest that this is partly due to the unique circumstances in which Biden delivered his address: during a global pandemic, without the concession of his opponent, and at a time when many Americans refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of his election. Because there was no concession speech delivered by his opponent, Biden’s President-Elect victory speech attempted to achieve all of the objectives usually accomplished by a victory speech working in conjunction with a concession speech. Biden’s decision to utilize “Consoler-in-Chief” rhetoric in his victory speech is also discussed.*

**Keywords:** rhetorical criticism, political rhetoric, presidential rhetoric, political communication, generic criticism

### Introduction

On November 7, 2020, four days after the presidential election, Joseph R. Biden was declared the winner, at least by most reputable news outlets. Hours later, he delivered his President-Elect victory speech in front of a socially-distanced, mask-wearing crowd who watched from their vehicles in Wilmington, Delaware (Phillips, 2020). The situation in which Biden delivered his speech was unique for several reasons. First, the event took place during a global pandemic, where most attendees, aside from those directly involved in the organization and running of the event, participated via drive-in and virtually at home from their televisions, computers, and phones. Biden, Vice President-Elect Kamala Harris, and their families wore masks when they weren’t at the podium speaking. Furthermore, the event was unique in that no concession speech was delivered by President Donald Trump, and many Americans refused to accept the results of the presidential election – so much so, that many of them later stormed the U.S. Capitol Building in the January 6, 2021 insurrection as Congress met to formally count the electoral votes that gave Biden his victory.

Though he may have been elected and taken office in unprecedented times, Biden is no stranger to American politics, having served as a Senator from Delaware for 36 years and as Vice President under President Barack Obama (“Joe Biden: The President,” 2021). In addition of having the distinction of being the oldest person elected president (Peter, 2020), Joe Biden is also only the second Catholic president of the United States (Khalid, 2020). Biden “carries a rosary in his pocket and attends mass every Sunday” and is “known as a deeply devout person of faith” (Khalid, 2020, para. 6). Biden, who has experienced great personal loss, both in 1972 when his first wife Neilia and daughter Naomi were killed in a car accident and in 2015 when his eldest son Beau died of brain cancer, is said to have relied on his faith in order to cope with the tragedies he experienced in his life (Phelps & Saenz, 2015). Asma Khalid (2020) of NPR notes that Biden routinely uses religious references when speaking (para. 4), and his usage appears to be more associated with his personal identity than as a political ploy, although his campaign used it as a strategy in framing the 2020 presidential election as “a battle for the soul of a nation” (para. 5). She observes that Biden’s “speeches are woven with references to God, biblical language, or the Pope” (para. 1).

In this essay, I explore Biden's use of religious language in his November 7, 2020 President-Elect victory speech. Through generic analysis as a research method, I suggest that Biden uses religious language in the tradition of American civil religion (Bellah, 1998) in an attempt to unify the country after a highly divisive and contested election, as well as to provide hope and comfort in the midst of a global pandemic. While Biden's address adheres to the themes previous research has associated with President-Elect victory speeches, his address appears to utilize religious language more than other victory speeches. I suggest that while this is likely due to Biden's identity as a Catholic, it is also a result of the unique circumstances in which Biden delivered his address: during a global pandemic, without the concession of his opponent, and at a time when many Americans refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of his election. Because there was no concession speech delivered by his opponent, Biden was placed in the unique situation of attempting to deliver a sole speech that would encompass all of the characteristics typically accomplished through two speeches: a victory speech working in conjunction with a concession speech. Biden's decision to utilize "Consoler-in-Chief" rhetoric in his victory speech is also discussed in this article.

### **Religious Language in Presidential Rhetoric**

For the purposes of this article, I utilize Warner et al.'s (2011) definition of religious references in presidential rhetoric, which they adapted from Preston's (2006) definition of religious words: "those words that in and of themselves connote a relationship to faith in a higher, spiritual god and that relate to a recognized denomination or faith, including civil religion if it incorporates the values and rituals of a faith based religion" (Warner et al., 2011, p. 161). This definition encompasses terms that directly relate to a specific religion, as well as terms that express "American civil religion," a "social construction" (Mathison, 1989, p. 129) which is "derived from Christianity" (Bellah, 1998, p. 104) but vaguely refers to God and never mentions Jesus Christ specifically in an attempt to connect with the diverse American public. As Toolin (2001) explains, American civil religion is "a belief system that draws upon the religious ideologies and common historical experiences of the American people" (p. 39). Bellah (1998) argues that American civil religion "at its best is a genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality as seen in, or, one could almost say, as revealed through the experience of the American people" (p. 12). Williams and Alexander (1994) suggest that American civil religion "has both priestly and prophetic orientations – it celebrates and criticizes" (p. 4). Hinckley (1990) observes the role that presidents play in espousing American civil religion, suggesting that presidents are "the moral leaders and high priests of the American society" and that they "preach, reminding the American people of religious and moral principles and urging them to conduct themselves in accord with these principles" (p. 73). Roderick Hart explores the concept of American civil religion in two books, *The Political Pulpit* (1977) and *The Political Pulpit Revisited* (2005), the latter of which he co-edited with John L. Pauley II. Hart (1977) examines "distinguishing aspects of civil-religious discourse" (p. 67), including expedient complexity, non-existential content, ritualistic presence, and prosaic animus. He concludes that,

unless the American people suddenly choose *not* to accommodate one another through public ritual, or to recreate and promulgate their national myths, or to continue to honor the rhetorically based contract they have enforced upon church and state, civic piety – of a changing yet changeless variety – will continue to distinguish the cultural and symbolic landscape of the United States. (Hart, 1977, p. 111, emphasis Hart's)

In this article, I explore Joe Biden's use of religious references rooted in the tradition of American civil religion in his 2020 President-Elect victory speech.

Scholars have often explored the use of religious language in different speech genres, including inaugural addresses (Bellah, 1998; Browne, 2002; Coe & Domke, 2006; Daughton, 1993; Iancu & Balaban, 2013; Isetti, 1996; Lucas, 1993; Slagell, 1991) and war messages (Coles, 2002; Diez-Bosch & Franch, 2017; Parillo, 2000; Warner et al., 2011). Boase (1989) notes that "with the exception of

Washington's short one-hundred-thirty-five-word second inaugural, every President's first official address, usually in the peroration, has invoked divine blessing" (p. 1). Coles (2002) explores the use of religious language in conjunction with a "manifest destiny" theme in two war messages: George H.W. Bush's Gulf War rhetoric and Bill Clinton's rhetoric concerning the Kosovo conflict. She observes that Bush's rhetoric is more "priestly" in that it creates the vision of the United States as a "chosen nation" (p. 413), and that Clinton's rhetoric is more "pastoral," suggesting that the United States has "fallen short of the promise" (p. 414). Warner et al. (2011) study how Lyndon B. Johnson and George W. Bush used religious language to justify war, noting that both presidents "used inherently religious language to escalate, launch, and justify their respective wars" (p. 167). They conclude that "when American presidents sprinkle their definitional reasons for war with religious language...they can generate more support – if they do not go too far, meaning if they stick with basic, Western, civil religious concepts" (p. 168).

Religious references are also often found on the campaign trail (Boase, 1989; Isetti, 1996; Medhurst, 2005), in public policy debates (Siker, 2012), in rhetoric in times of crisis (Friedenberg, 2005), at White House Prayer Breakfasts (Ofulue, 2005), in presidential eulogies (Schrader, 2011), in State of the Union speeches (Coe & Domke, 2006; Smith, 2011) and in commemorative epideictic rhetoric (Bostdorff, 2003). Scholars have particularly noted the use of religious rhetoric by Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. Ofulue (2005) observes Bill Clinton's use of religious rhetoric at a 1998 White House Prayer Breakfast, arguing that Clinton uses religious language at an event with clergy in an "attempt to redeem for himself a persona as the leader of American civil religion after personal scandal" (p. 128). Schrader (2011) examines Bill Clinton's use of religious references in his Oklahoma City Bombing Memorial Prayer Service Address, suggesting that presidents may use "religious rhetoric in times of crisis to console the grieving audience" (p. 13). Smith (2011) explores the change in George W. Bush's Manichaean religious rhetoric in his study of the 2006 State of the Union Address. Also studying George W. Bush's use of religious language, Bostdorff (2003) compares Bush's post-September 11 rhetoric to the Puritan rhetoric of covenant renewal, noting that "the president's discourse depicted a benevolent God and placed primary blame for the nation's problems on external sources, rather than on his 'parishioners'" (p. 294). In this article on religious rhetoric in Biden's President-Elect victory speech, I observe how Biden has used a number of these strategies noted in previous work, including the "manifest destiny" theme (Coles, 2002), the invocation of divine blessing (Boase, 1989), and consolation rhetoric (Schrader, 2011).

While religious references have been studied in a wide range of presidential addresses, few scholars have explored the use of religious references in President-Elect victory or concession speeches. Weaver (1982) notes that Jimmy Carter's concession speech during the 1980 presidential election utilized religious references and that this act was in line with his "image as a 'charitable Christian'" (p. 488). In their study of George W. Bush's President-Elect victory speech and Al Gore's concession speech after the contested 2000 election, Ritter and Howell (2001) note that Bush and Gore's speeches contained a greater number of religious references than previous victory and concession speeches. They suggest that this increased usage of religious references, in conjunction with their own personal beliefs (Gore as a Southern Baptist and Bush as a Methodist), indicates that they may have viewed the results of the election as "the hand of God in America's destiny" (p. 2328). Through this article on Joe Biden's use of religious rhetoric in his President-Elect victory speech, I seek to contribute to the literature on the use of religious language in this speech genre.

### **The Rhetoric of President-Elect Victory Speeches**

Victory and concession speeches are part of what Weaver (1982) refers to as the "dramatic ritual" of the presidential campaign process (p. 480). She argues that "public announcements of victory and defeat are important elements in the transition from political conflict and division to reconciliation and the development of a shared sense of purpose" (p. 480). She notes that it is through the "reciprocating ritual"

of victory and concession speeches that “a campaign officially terminates” and “the rhetorical ending occurs” (p. 481).

Through her study of victory and concession speeches from 1952 to 1980, Weaver (1982) observes two types of conventions used in these addresses: procedural conventions that have formed a “set of requirements that govern the situation,” and substantive conventions, which “govern the content of acknowledgement statements” (p. 481). Among the procedural conventions she observes are 1. that the “loser must concede before the victor can announce” (p. 481), 2. that “each statement must be a response to its counterpart” (p. 482), 3. that the “losing candidate appears personally to a crowd of supporters, surrounded by [his/her/their] family” (p. 482), 4. that personal messages are sent from the losing candidate to the winning candidate, 5. that the “winning candidate appears personally, but not necessarily surrounded by supporters or family” (p. 482), and 6. that incumbency has the ability to change these conventions “with regard to how much emphasis the victor places on the message of concession” (p. 482). Substantive conventions of both concession and victory speeches include expressing gratitude and appealing for unification, while concession speeches also focus on “loyal opposition” and offering support to the new president (pp. 484-485), and victory speeches focus on showing humility and dedication to the country (pp. 485-486). Corcoran (1995) extends Weaver’s (1982) work by exploring all presidential concession speeches from 1952 to 1992, concluding that concession speeches involve “complex spiritual concerns: catharsis, confession, and forgiveness” (p. 284).

Building on the work of Corcoran (1995), Weaver (1982), and Welch (1999), Ritter and Howell (2001) conclude that victory and concession speeches: 1. serve as “a formal declaration of victory or defeat,” 2. “call for national unity,” 3. pay “tribute to American democracy,” 4. “affirm the candidate’s campaign,” 5. publicly acknowledge the “transformed roles for candidates,” and 6. thank supporters (p. 2316). Ritter and Howell (2001) suggest that these six characteristics have been reflected in victory and concession speeches since the 1950s, when these speeches were first televised to the general public (p. 2317). They found that during the 2000 election, Bush and Gore amplified some themes, such as declaring defeat or victory and calling for national unity, while truncating others, such as affirming the campaign, acknowledging the transformation of roles, and thanking supporters. In this study of Joe Biden’s President-Elect victory speech, I note how Biden attempts to accomplish all six of the characteristics noted previously by Ritter and Howell (2001).

Scholars have also examined how victory and concession speeches have changed during the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Willyard and Ritter (2005) study the victory and concession speeches given by Bush and Kerry after the 2004 presidential election. They note how the ritual was unusual in that both vice-presidential candidates spoke before and from the same stage as the presidential candidates, and that Kerry’s running-mate, John Edwards, delivered a speech with a message that was inconsistent with Kerry’s message of concession (p. 489). Howell (2011) explores how the issues of gender, race, and age were addressed in McCain and Obama’s concession and victory speeches after the 2008 presidential election. He argues that while both candidates adhered to the conventions of the genre and both addressed issues related to race, neither candidate addressed issues related to age, and only McCain addressed issues related to gender. Mirer and Bode (2015) explore concession statements in a new medium: tweets. In a study of 200 Twitter feeds of congressional, gubernatorial, and senatorial candidates in the 2010 mid-term election, they found that while some concession traditions, such as thanking supporters, affirming the campaign, and acknowledging role transformation were observed, others, such as calling for unity and legitimizing or praising democracy, were disregarded. While the ritual itself and the media used to conduct the ritual may change, it appears that the majority of the conventions of the genre have been maintained in victory and concession rhetoric in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

President-Elect victory speeches are frequently studied in conjunction with concession speeches, as illustrated in the work by Ritter and Howell (2001) and Weaver (1982), as the two speeches together often provide a thorough response to a rhetorical situation (Bitzer, 1968). Weaver (1982) goes so far as to argue that “victory and concession statements are inseparable parts of the process of ‘acknowledgement’” (p. 481), and Willyard and Ritter (2005) echo the importance of studying victory and concession speeches in conjunction with one another, stating that “victory and concession speeches are reciprocal in nature”

(p. 497). Welch (1999) observes that it is important to examine such speeches not only from a genre perspective, but also through the influence that a specific rhetorical situation may have on the speeches. For example, in their discussion of the 2000 presidential election, Ritter and Howell (2001) note that George W. Bush faced a number of constraints when delivering his victory speech: he lacked a clear mandate, did not win the popular vote, and faced a divided electorate. In the 2020 presidential election, while Joe Biden won the popular and the electoral vote, receiving more votes than any presidential candidate in history (Montanaro, 2020), thus having a mandate, he, like Bush, faced a divided electorate, but for a different reason: Biden's opponent refused to concede, and misinformation regarding election fraud was being spread to the point that many Americans believed Biden had "stolen" the election. His opponent, Trump, further aided the spread of these falsehoods not only by refusing to concede but through tweets, such as the 300 tweets amplifying voting falsehoods observed by Linda Qui (2020) of the *New York Times* ten days after the election, and remarks such as "We will never concede. It doesn't happen. You don't concede when there's theft involved" (Gearan & Dawsey, 2021, para. 2). Unlike in other situations where victory and concession speeches have worked together to restore faith in American democracy and legitimize the democratic process, Biden faced the unprecedented rhetorical situation of accomplishing the same tasks without the help of a cooperative opponent. Ritter and Howell (2001) note that typically the ritual of victory and concession speeches begins when "the vanquished opponent initiates the ritual by offering a private concession to the victorious candidate followed by a public declaration of concession" (p. 2316). However, in the 2020 presidential election, no such offering was provided by "the vanquished opponent," placing Biden in the unique situation of attempting to deliver a speech that would encompass all six characteristics of the victory and concession speeches alone.

### Method

In this article, I use generic criticism to better understand Biden's use of religious language in his President-Elect victory speech. Generic criticism is a type of rhetorical criticism that is "based on the idea that observable, explicable, and predictable rhetorical commonalities occur in groups of discourses as well as in groups of people" (Benoit, 2009, p. 77). Drawing from the work of Aristotle and Kenneth Burke, Campbell and Jamieson (1982) define genres as "dynamic fusions of substantive, stylistic, and situational elements" and as "constellations that are strategic responses to the demands of the situation and the purposes of the rhetor" (p. 146). They note that a "generic perspective recognizes...that all rhetoric is influenced by prior rhetoric [and that] all rhetorical acts resemble other rhetorical acts" (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978, p. 22). Benoit (2009) explains that in order to conduct generic criticism, a critic must first identify a genre of discourse, and then, using an inductive approach, study numerous examples of this genre in order to "develop a description or generalization of its characteristics" (p. 77). Finally, a critic must apply what has been learned about the genre in order to "understand and evaluate other, as yet unexamined, instances of that genre" (p. 78). In this article, because the President-Elect victory speech as a speech genre has been examined in detail by previous scholars (see Corcoran, 1995; Howell, 2011; Ritter & Howell, 2001; Ritter & Howell, 2010; Welch, 1999; Weaver, 1982; Willyard & Ritter, 2005), my analysis will focus primarily on Benoit's (2009) final step of generic criticism, noting how Biden's speech both embodies elements of the genre and incorporates different elements that are not commonly associated with President-Elect victory speeches. I argue these different elements are due to the fact that no concession speech was given; therefore, Biden's speech needed to do the work of both a victory speech and a concession speech simultaneously.

### Analysis

After Vice-President Kamala Harris introduced him, President-Elect Joe Biden jogged to the podium wearing a mask as Bruce Springsteen's "We Take Care of Our Own," a song with lyrics that emphasize American pride, played in the background. While this act may seem informal and perhaps un-presidential to some, it served two purposes: to illustrate Biden's physical fitness, thereby nonverbally

putting to rest questions that had been raised – primarily by the Trump campaign - regarding his health and age (Lucey & Thomas, 2020), and to convey the importance of, and Biden’s commitment to, wearing masks to combat the spread of COVID-19. Before beginning his remarks, Biden greeted Harris at the podium, paused for a photo-op with her, and then pointed out a number of people he saw in the audience, including representatives from Delaware and his sister. Harris also put on a mask to greet him, and they both wore masks for the photo-op, further reiterating the nonverbal message of the importance of wearing masks during the pandemic.

As he took the podium, Biden declared victory, accomplishing the first of Ritter and Howell’s (2001) characteristics of victory and concession speeches, assuring his audience that “the people of this nation have spoken,” and that “they have delivered us a clear victory,” “a convincing victory,” and “a victory for ‘We the People.’”<sup>1</sup> To further support this claim, Biden added that “we have won with the most votes ever cast for a presidential ticket in the history of this nation – 74 million.” By providing a statistic describing the number of votes received, Biden supported his argument for his listeners, and attempted to put to rest questions regarding the legitimacy of his election. While all President-Elects declare victory in their victory speeches (Ritter & Howell, 2001; Weaver, 1982; Willyard & Ritter, 2005; Howell, 2011), this was especially important for Biden, who lacked a concession speech from his opponent. As Trump’s statements and lack of concession speech continued to cast doubt on the election’s legitimacy, Biden was placed in the unusual and awkward position of declaring victory and justifying the legitimacy of the election on his own, which likely accounted for the speech beginning with a declaration and defense of his victory.

Immediately after declaring victory and stating that he was “humbled by the trust and confidence” placed in him by the American people, which served to transfer his role as candidate to the role of President-Elect, Biden used language through which he sought to unify the country, accomplishing the second characteristic of victory and concession speeches (Ritter & Howell, 2001). In an echo of his campaign rhetoric, he stated, “I pledge to be a President who seeks not to divide, but unify; who doesn’t see red states and blue states, but a United States, and who will work with all my heart to win the confidence of the whole people.” While unifying the country has consistently been part of victory and concession speeches in previous years, it is even more important during highly contested elections when Americans are passionately divided on issues. Ritter and Howell (2001) observed that during the highly contested 2000 presidential election, both Gore and Bush “expanded their treatment” of the “calling for national unity” theme because they felt it was vital in helping the country move forward (p. 2328). Unlike in 2000, however, Biden could not rely on his political opponent to provide a complementary unification message, which may account for why the unity theme was repeated so often throughout his victory speech.

Biden then offered statements that accomplished the functions of paying “tribute to American democracy” and “affirming the candidate’s campaign” (Ritter & Howell, 2001, p. 2316). He referenced three of his campaign’s goals - “rebuild[ing] the backbone of the nation – the middle class,” “mak[ing] America respected around the world again,” and “unit[ing] us here at home” – the last of which also connected with the unification purpose of his victory speech. It is here where the first religious reference in the address appears: Biden began this section by stating that he “sought this office to restore the soul of America.” While this statement directly referenced a campaign theme, the word “soul” also implies a spiritual element. In a *New York Times* article, Elizabeth Dias (2020) explores what was meant by this campaign slogan, suggesting that it conveyed a broader morality that transcended specific religious and philosophical ideals. In this speech, as well as in campaign communications that utilized the phrase, Biden used American civil religion to expound his vision for the country. Civil religion, as Bellah (1967) explains, consists of a “public religious dimension expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals” (p.

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<sup>1</sup> This article does not use page numbers when referencing quotes in Biden’s speech because at the time this study was conducted, the speech only appeared online, and websites do not typically use page numbers. For a complete transcript of the speech, please see <https://apnews.com/article/election-2020-joe-biden-religion-technology-race-and-ethnicity-2b961c70bc72c2516046bfd378e95de>

4); it is intentionally vague in order to enable the majority of the populace to identify with it and the speaker who invokes it. American civil religion has served “as the glue that holds a diverse and pluralistic nation together” (Isetti, 1996, p. 686). Restoring “the soul of America” may mean different things to different individuals and communities, but it implies a return to a broader morality that many associate with the country.

In the next part of the speech, Biden thanked his family, friends, and supporters, illustrating the sixth theme, “thanking supporters,” in victory and concession speeches (Ritter & Howell, 2001). He began by thanking his wife, referring to himself as “Jill’s husband” and praising her roles as a military mom and an educator, assuring “America’s educators” that they would “have one of [their] own in the White House.” He continued by thanking his children and the rest of his family before turning to his running mate, Kamala Harris, and noting her historic win that made her “the first woman, first woman of South Asian descent, and first daughter of immigrants” elected to the office of Vice President. He noted that this is “long overdue” and that in her election, “America has bent the arc of the moral universe toward justice.” The use of the word “moral” here also implies a religious dimension, suggesting that the pursuit of justice – and in particular justice for marginalized communities in the form of political representation – is part of America’s duty as a nation, as well as part of America’s civil religion.

He then thanked Harris and her husband Doug Emhoff by making a joke that they are “honorary Bidens and there’s no way out” before thanking his campaign team and volunteers. In a return to the unity theme, he stated that his campaign coalition was the “broadest and most diverse in history” and then specifically mentioned a number of different groups: “Democrats, Republicans, Independents, progressives, moderates, conservatives, young, old, urban, suburban, rural, gay, straight, transgender, white, Latino, Asian, Native American,” and “African American.” He saved “African American” for last in order to praise this particular group of Americans for “always hav[ing his] back,” “especially for those moments when this campaign was at its lowest.” By referencing different groups in the country, Biden cast a wide net that celebrated diversity while promoting unity by showing how different groups of people came together in pursuit of a common goal. This praise of diversity enabled him to make a short policy statement. He stated, “I wanted a campaign that represented America, and I think we did that. Now that’s what I want the administration to look like.” Without focusing on the details of possible future cabinet picks, Biden let his audience know that diversity would be a priority in his new administration. This also served a transitional function, enabling him to shift from the role of candidate to the role of President-Elect.

Biden then returned to the unity theme by addressing Trump supporters, and appealing “for the healing of partisan wounds” (Ritter & Howell, 2001, p. 2316):

I understand your disappointment tonight. I’ve lost a couple of elections myself. But now, let’s give each other a chance. It’s time to put away the harsh rhetoric, to lower the temperature, to see each other again, to listen to each other again. To make progress, we must stop treating our opponents as our enemy. We are not enemies. We are Americans.

Through this statement, Biden recognized the polarization that existed throughout the campaign (and, indeed, long before the 2020 election campaign began) and made a plea to move forward as a unified nation. This plea introduced Biden’s next religious reference: in a quote from Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8, Biden stated, “The Bible tells us that to everything there is a season – a time to build, a time to reap, a time to sow, and a time to heal. This is the time to heal in America.” While many President-Elects have utilized American civil religion by referencing God in their victory speeches (Ritter & Howell, 2001, p. 2328), it is rare that a President-Elect explicitly mentions the Bible. I believe this was included for two reasons: first, as a personal choice by Biden himself, who is a devout Catholic (Khalid, 2020), and second, as a means of connecting to religious Americans who may have voted for Trump. Frank Newport (2020), a senior scientist at Gallup, suggests that while the Catholic vote was split between Trump and Biden, and religious Americans who practiced non-Christian religions primarily supported Biden, white evangelicals overwhelmingly supported Trump. A direct reference to the Bible in a section of his victory speech that

addressed Americans who did not vote for him may have been an attempt by Biden to connect with the white evangelicals who voted for his opponent. In this way, the religious reference to Ecclesiastes served as a call to national unity, urging Americans to join together and move forward.

In the next section of the speech, Biden addressed future goals, asking “What is the people’s will? What is our mandate?” This served to further transition his role from candidate to President-Elect and affirmed the campaign’s objectives and values. Using a war metaphor, Biden stated that “Americans have called on us to marshal the forces of decency and the forces of fairness. To marshal the forces of science and the forces of hope in the great battles of our time.” These “battles” included “the battle to control the virus, the battle to build prosperity, the battle to secure your family’s health care, the battle to achieve racial justice and root out systematic racism in this country, the battle to save the climate, the battle to restore decency, defend democracy, and give everybody in this country a fair shot.” He repeated the word “battle” with each description in order to emphasize the gravity of these struggles. In this list, Biden presented the values of his new administration, and at the end of it, declared that “Our work begins with getting COVID under control.” This enabled him to state his first specific policy goal: “On Monday, I will name a group of leading scientists and experts as Transition Advisors to help take the Biden-Harris COVID plan and convert it into an action blueprint that starts January 20, 2021. That plan will be built on a bedrock of science. It will be constructed out of compassion, empathy, and concern.” With this statement, he drew a distinction between his future administration’s management of the pandemic and the previous administration’s management,<sup>2</sup> further reinforcing the transition of his role from candidate to President-Elect.

Biden again returned to the unity theme of the speech, while clearly defining his new role. He stated, “I ran as a proud Democrat. I will now be an American president. I will work as hard for those who didn’t vote for me as those who did.” In another reference to American civil religion, he declared, “Let this grim era of demonization in America begin to end - here and now.” This “demonization” referred to Democrats and Republicans refusing to work together to solve the country’s problems, although it implied the lack of civility between people with different views throughout the country as well. Biden said that he would make the choice to cooperate, and that he “call[s] on Congress – Democrats and Republicans alike – to make that choice with [him].” While this statement emphasized his new role as President-Elect, it also encouraged the unification of a divided nation and, through religious references related to American civil religion, designated cooperation as “right” and division as “wrong.”

The speech transitioned to a section in which Biden placed the demands of the current moment within the context of major moments in American history. He referred to these as “inflection points” that have shaped America, and specifically noted Lincoln “coming to save the Union” in 1860, FDR “promising a beleaguered country a New Deal” in 1932, JFK “pledging a New Frontier” in 1960, and Obama making history in 2008 as the first Black man elected President. Biden placed this moment in that succession and returned to his theme of the “battle for the soul of America.” Using another religious reference, he stated, “Our nation is shaped by the constant battle between our better angels and our darkest impulses. It is time for our better angels to prevail.” This statement referenced Lincoln’s first inaugural address, which ended with “The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely as they will be, by the better angels of our nature.” Like Lincoln, Biden called upon his audience – the American people – to let their “better angels prevail” by serving as a “beacon for the globe” and by setting a positive example for the world.

This reference to America as a “beacon for the globe” implies the myth of manifest destiny, which Coles (2002) explains involves the United States being viewed as on a “mission by example” (p. 407). Fairbanks (1981) identified two “missions:” 1. a divine mission to serve as an example of democracy for the rest of the world, and 2. a mission to lead other nations to democratic ideals. In this

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<sup>2</sup> Please see Parker & Stern’s 2021 article in *Public Administration* for an analysis of the Trump Administration’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic.



part of his speech, Biden utilized the first mission of the manifest destiny myth by suggesting that the United States be a “beacon for the globe,” serving as an example of democracy for the rest of the world.

This example, in Biden’s view, is illustrated through the possibilities and opportunities that America should provide, including the “opportunity to go as far as [people’s] dreams and God-given ability will take them.” The use of this religious reference also appeared in various instances of Biden’s campaign rhetoric, including his Democratic National Convention speech in August 2020 and on a section of his campaign website geared towards Catholics entitled “Highlights from Joe Biden’s Vision for America.” It is likely that the reference was both a personal choice and designed to connect with the Catholic segment of his audience, as the phrase “God-given” in reference to people’s purposes and dignity as humans is commonly used in Catholic rhetoric and social teaching.

Further elaborating on the possibilities and opportunities in America, Biden claimed that “We’re always looking ahead.” He then used repetition of the phrase “ahead to an America” to build excitement as he moved to the end of the speech:

Ahead to an America that’s freer and more just. Ahead to an America that creates jobs with dignity and respect. Ahead to an America that cures disease – like cancer and Alzheimer’s. Ahead to an America that never leaves anyone behind. Ahead to an America that never gives up, never gives in.

He ended this segment of the speech by saying, “This is a great nation, and we are a good people. This is the United States of America, and there has never been anything we haven’t been able to do when we’ve done it together.” This served primarily to rally his audience, but it also emphasized his campaign (and administration’s) goals and the repeated unity theme of bringing Americans together.

While the speech could have ended with this rallying cry to work together and look forward to a brighter future, Biden continued to speak, switching to a more solemn tone as he returned to the present moment. He referenced a hymn that “means a lot to [him] and to [his] family, particularly [his] deceased son Beau.” He told his audience that this hymn “captures the faith that sustains me and which I believe sustains America, and I hope it can provide some comfort and solace to the more than 230,000 families who have lost a loved one to this terrible virus this year.” Biden then proceeded to quote “On Eagle’s Wings,” a hymn written by Michael Joncas in the 1970s that references Psalm 91. It is perhaps not surprising that the hymn quoted mentions the eagle, the United States’ national emblem, providing a metaphor for not just the healing of individuals but the healing of a nation:

And He will raise you up on eagle’s wings,  
Bear you on the breath of dawn,  
Make you to shine like the sun,  
And hold you in the palm of His Hand.

Isetti (1996) states that “biblical stories and archetypes are often employed in public speeches...because they can become an effective literary means of expressing the depths of human experience” (p. 685). While Biden’s speech did not use a biblical story or archetype, the religious quote of a hymn serves the same function: to “express the depths of human experience.” In his use of this religious quote, Biden took on an unusual role for a President-Elect in a victory speech: he became “Consoler-in-Chief,” a role that Presidents often use when delivering memorial service speeches after a national tragedy (Davies, 2017) or in rhetorical hybrid speeches such as presidential eulogies (Jamieson & Campbell, 1982). While other religious references in this speech are likely due to Biden’s personal religious beliefs and an attempt to connect with particular segments of his audience, with this quote, Biden directly stated why he chose to include it: in hopes that it would “provide solace” to those grieving the loss of loved ones who died from COVID-19. With this statement, he tried to console his audience, many of whom had suffered losses during the pandemic.

He concluded his speech by tying together multiple themes that he referenced previously in the speech: unity, consolation of those grieving, a call for justice, and hope for the future. He stated,

And now, together – on eagle’s wings – we embark on the work that God and history have called upon us to do. With full hearts and steady hands, with faith in America and in each other, with a love of country and a thirst for justice, let us be the nation that we know we can be. A nation united. A nation strengthened. A nation healed. The United States of America.

Here, he referenced the hymn he had previously quoted, as well as American civil religion through the word “faith” and manifest destiny through the phrase “work that God and history have called upon us to do.” This statement also appears to have a similar rhythm and meaning as the conclusion of Lincoln’s second inaugural address, which reads,

With malice towards none and charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and all nations.

It is perhaps not surprising that Biden’s speech resembles both of Lincoln’s inaugural addresses in certain ways. Some political commentators have suggested that the country has not been as divided as it is now since the Civil War (Brownstein, 2021), as evidenced by the insurrection at the Capitol two months after the delivery of Biden’s speech. Biden also was elected during a particularly difficult time (during a global pandemic), as was Lincoln (just before and during the American Civil War). Lincoln’s rhetoric, which emphasized national unity and moving forward in a time of division and crisis, likely influenced Biden and his writing team. Furthermore, Biden’s usage of both the battle metaphor and religious rhetoric parallel Lincoln’s rhetoric, which often utilized religious language (Slagell, 1991; Parillo, 2000). Because of the circumstances in which Biden delivered his speech, Lincoln’s rhetoric likely provided inspiration to Biden and his team, which would account for certain similarities between Biden’s victory speech and Lincoln’s inaugural addresses.

Before closing, Biden added one more personal story at the end of the speech that extended his use of the word “faith:” he explained how his grandfather used to tell him, “Joey, keep the faith” while his grandmother would tell him, “no, spread the faith.” He urged Americans to “spread the faith,” finishing with “God love you all and may God bless the United States of America.” While “God bless America” is a common conclusion of presidential speeches which serves to invoke divine blessing (Boase, 1989), Biden added his own personal ending, with which he concludes all of his speeches: “And may God protect our troops.” This statement denotes his role as a military father, as his son Beau was a recipient of the Bronze Star. Biden’s frequent use of religious language, and in particular his use of personal narrative that includes religious language, suggests that his personal religious beliefs influenced his rhetoric at the end of the speech. Biden finished with a repeated “thank you” as a playlist including Jackie Wilson’s “Higher and Higher,” Kygo and Whitney Houston’s “Higher Love,” and Tom Petty’s “Won’t Back Down” played, and his wife joined him on stage, followed by his family, Vice-President-Elect Harris, her husband, and their family. Confetti was sprayed, American flags waved, car horns beeped, and fireworks were launched as victory was celebrated in a socially-distanced way by those in attendance in their vehicles.

## Conclusion

While Biden’s President-Elect victory speech addressed the six themes identified by previous studies on victory and concession speeches (Ritter & Howell, 2001, p. 2316), the circumstances in which Biden delivered the address required an adjustment to how these goals were accomplished. Because there was no concession speech to accompany Biden’s victory speech, Biden was presented with the unusual

challenge of accomplishing all of the goals by himself that would typically be accomplished in two speeches. This was an especially difficult task regarding the themes of calling for national unity and paying tribute to American democracy due to his opponent's refusal to concede and unfounded accusations of widespread voter fraud, which questioned the American electoral system, and thus American democracy itself.

The speech repeatedly emphasized the themes of the "call for national unity" and the "transformed roles for candidates" (Ritter & Howell, 2001, p. 2316) perhaps more than most President-Elect victory speeches. The "call for national unity" was perhaps the most prominent theme in the speech, and Biden emphasized this in various ways: by calling for the end of the "demonization" of political opposition, by referencing important historical moments, by recognizing the diverse groups of Americans who made his election possible, by utilizing a battle metaphor, and by noting objectives that had the potential to create common ground. The "transformed roles for candidates" theme also took a leading role in Biden's speech. In most victory speeches, the "transformed roles for candidates" takes place with the help of a concession speech from the losing candidate. However, because there was no concession speech, Biden defended the legitimacy of the election at the beginning of the speech and then returned to this theme frequently throughout the speech in subtle ways, such as talking about his administration's plans, emphasizing unity under his leadership, and providing solace as Consoler-in-Chief to those who lost loved ones during the pandemic.

A particularly unique characteristic of Biden's victory speech is his decision at the end of the speech to take on the role of Consoler-in-Chief. While this is a role that presidents often play when faced with responding to national disasters and tragedies (Davies, 2017) or in situations like presidential eulogies where a rhetorical hybrid speech is required (Jamieson & Campbell, 1982), it is rare that a President-Elect would choose to take on such a role during a victory speech. Biden likely made this choice because of the unique situation in which he found himself – having been elected President in the midst of a devastating global pandemic in which hundreds of thousands of Americans had lost their lives – and because of his previous experience in mourning his first wife and daughter, and later his son Beau. Biden's choice to become Consoler-in-Chief early is further illustrated by both his later decision in January 2021 to hold a memorial service for those who died from COVID-19 the evening before his inauguration and by his decision to include numerous religious references in his victory speech. In previous work (Schrader, 2011), I have noted that presidents may use religious language to console a grieving audience, and Biden did this through his reference to the "On Eagle's Wings" hymn at the end of his victory speech.

As Ritter and Howell (2001) observe, "victory and concession speeches reflect the individual people who present them" (p. 2328). I contend that the high number of religious references in Biden's speech is primarily due to his own individual personality. Warner et al. (2011) suggest that "the personal religious lives of presidents can influence their worldview, and therefore their rhetoric, as well as how their rhetoric is perceived" (p. 155). Biden's victory speech reflected the personality of its speaker: a devout Catholic who attends mass regularly and often uses religious references in his personal everyday speech (Khalid, 2020). Despite the difficult circumstances in which the speech was delivered, Biden's victory speech provided some closure to the 2020 presidential election and addressed all of the themes of victory and concession speeches in a way that aligned with his personal beliefs. Through this speech, Biden promoted unity and celebrated the democratic electoral process, seeking to "restore the soul of America" through the promise of a hopeful future.

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