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# The Bush Presidency: Undermining the Separation Between Church and State

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## Introduction: The Establishment Clause

The Establishment Clause is an important element of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. It states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..." However, the Establishment Clause does more than reinforce the freedom of religion; given the high religious diversity of the United States, the Clause functions to "de-politicize" religion. The Establishment Clause is supposed to remove religious issues from the ballot box and politics, overall (Levy 1).

\* The Establishment Clause separates government and religion in order to maintain civility between believers and non-believers. In spite of the Establishment Clause, religion saturates American public life. Every president swears the oath of office with one hand on the Bible and often says "So help me God." Almost every president has proclaimed days of prayer and thanksgiving to God. The Supreme Court opens its session only after the bailiff has asked God to save the Court and the United States. Witnesses in court swear to tell the truth, "So help me God." Congress, as well as every state legislature, starts its daily sessions with a prayer from a chaplain whose salary is paid using public tax money. All of us, including schoolchildren, invoke God on behalf of our nation when pledging allegiance to the flag. Even U.S. currency announces that "In God We Trust" (Levy 2).

Despite the intentions of the Establishment Clause it is clear that religion still plays a great role in both American's daily lives and the U.S. government. However, it is especially concerning when the president of the United States allows his religious beliefs to shape his political agenda. George W. Bush has been described as the most religious president in recent American history. While this may be an overstatement, Bush certainly is among the most religious presidents in the sense that he blurred the line between religion and politics. This chapter will analyze religion's affect on George W. Bush's political agenda and his blurring of the line separating church and state.

## Finding God

George W. Bush was 39 years old when he rededicated himself to Christ. Bush began "reading the Bible more regularly, he read daily devotionals, turned more to prayer, and joined a men's Bible study group." Soon after, Bush gave up drinking, later he gave up smoking and chewing tobacco. "He attributes his healthier lifestyle and subsequent political success directly to his decision for Christ." Bush has stated, "There is only one reason that I am in the Oval Office and not in a bar. I found faith. I found God. I am here because of the power of prayer" (Berggren 615).

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Bush has always been comfortable sharing his faith with others. This was especially evident during the 1999 Republican presidential debates. When asked who his favorite political philosopher was Bush responded, "Christ, because he has changed my heart. When you turn your heart and your life over to Christ, when you accept Christ as the Savior, it changes your heart. It changes your life. And that's what happened to me." George W. Bush also feels very comfortable in front of Evangelical audiences. He considers many Evangelical preachers to be close friends and Bush often surrounds himself with fellow believers in his personal, business, and political life (Berggren 615).

Unlike most other presidents, George W. Bush does not separate his faith from politics. Bush sees "politics as a religious vocation, a calling, and a sacred duty to be performed for God and humankind." Bush has stated that he prays that he be as good a "messenger of His will as possible." For personal strength, Bush consults not his father, the former president of the United States, but the heavenly Father (Berggren 616).

President George W. Bush transformed the White House into a place of faith, specifically Evangelical faith. Bush chose several individuals with strong religious backgrounds or devotional habits to serve in his administration. He opened every cabinet meeting with a prayer and insisted on a "high moral tone" in the White House. Overall, the Bush White House became a "largely tee-totaling, non-smoking, non-cussing affair." Former speechwriter David Frum, an orthodox Jew, explained that if one wants "to understand the Bush White House, you must understand its predominant creed and culture – modern Evangelicalism." Frum also noted that the first words spoken to him in the White House were "Missed you at Bible study" (Berggren 614).

George W. Bush has made numerous references to his belief that he could not be president if he did not believe in a "divine plan that supersedes all human plans." Richard Land, of the Southern Baptist Convention, recalled Bush once saying, "I believe God wants me to be President" (Wallis 65).

From day one, George W. Bush integrated his faith into his presidency. His first official act as president was to make Inaugural Day a National Day of Prayer and Thanksgiving, stating "I cannot succeed in this task without the favor of God and the prayers of the people." During this proclamation President Bush asks the American people to "bow our heads in humility before God that calls us not to judge our neighbors, but to love them, to ask His guidance upon our Nation and its leaders in every level of government" (Kengor 89-90).

Bush's personal faith helped his interest in promoting his policy of compassionate conservatism in dealing with faith-based initiatives, abstinence, abortion, stem-cell research, and same-sex marriage as part of his new administration (Wallis 62). Also, Bush's religion shaped his foreign policy after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

### **Faith-Based Initiatives**

\* One of the first major acts of the Bush presidency was also the most controversial policy of the administration. On January 29, 2001, just nine days after his inauguration, President Bush introduced a major public policy initiative; it proposed to provide government funds for churches that offer social service programs to the needy. Bush called this 'Faith-based Initiative' and it was the foundation of his compassionate conservatism. President Bush sought to "encourage contributions to religious organizations and, at the same time, encourage those groups to take on a wider range of social services using funding from the federal government" (Formicola 5).

In order to achieve this, President Bush signed two executive orders. The first order created a White

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House Office of Faith-based and Community Initiatives. The goal of the office was to ensure that local community “helpers and healers,” who operate within faith-based or religiously affiliated organizations and institutions, can receive federal money with less bureaucratic obstacles to overcome (Kengor 98). The second order established centers at five cabinet agencies – Justice House and Urban Development, the Department of Labor, Education, and Health and Human Services – to ensure cooperation between church related service programs and the government (Formicola 5).

President Bush also created a Compassionate Capital Fund which aimed to match private giving with federal money. Bush recommended allowing taxpayers to deduct charitable contributions with the hope that this would spark an increase in charitable giving. He also sought to implement a ‘charitable choice’ policy, which would ensure that faith-based groups are not denied federal contracts simply because they are faith-based (Kengor 99).

\* In December 2002 Bush signed yet another faith-based initiative executive order. The order directed all federal agencies to give equal treatment when providing social service grants. It elaborated that faith-based organizations should not be held to different standards or denied government grants because they are faith-based. Bush stated, “The days of discriminating against religious groups because they are religious is coming to an end” (Kengor 101).

\* Additionally, Bush singled out several federal agencies with the claim that they had a history of discriminating against faith-based groups. Specifically he ordered that the Federal Emergency and Management Agency (FEMA) “revise its policy on emergency relief, which denied funding to religious organizations seeking to offer assistance after natural disasters.” President Bush also singled out the departments of Housing and Urban Development and Health and Human Services. Bush then announced that the federal government would be producing a guide book explaining how faith-based organizations can apply for federal grants (Kengor 101-102).


Federal assistance to faith-based organizations was a priority on Bush’s political agenda. Bush often spoke of the power of religion in helping him overcome substance abuse and he connected his own experience with the work of “religious providers seeking to transform lives” (Formicola 7). Bush believed that faith-based initiatives would “enforce the positive role of religion in society, recognizing that in many cases churches, synagogues, and mosques are the only institutions able to suffer with the poor and act as the voice of the voice-less, in a world that equates check-writing with charity.” It was believed that faith-based initiative was a good way to get the poor on the political agenda. Bush argued that faith-based initiative served to empower the poor and allow faith-based organizations to continue their great work. Competing for government funds would only enhance the service currently being provided. The President stated many times, “I have faith that faith will work in solving the problems” (Formicola 15-16).

\* Realizing that opponents of the faith-based initiative would cite violation of the Establishment Clause Bush explained that the initiative “respects the role, mission, integrity, and autonomy of religious groups.” Bush continued that although the initiative allows faith-based organizations to hire individuals who subscribe to their spiritual point of view it also requires respect for both the religious and non-religious views of the beneficiaries of publicly funded religious agencies. Therefore, religious belief is not a prerequisite for faith-based assistance. “The policy stipulates that if an individual client objects to the religious character of a social program, a secular alternative must be provided” (Formicola 15).

There still existed many opponents to Bush’s faith-based initiative though. Concerns were raised that there was no empirical evidence suggesting that faith-based social services are more effective than secular programs in reducing dependency or changing people’s lives. Also, some were concerned that religious groups would compete with each other for funds rather than work in cooperative ways to deal

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with problems in their community. However, the most prominent criticism was that the faith-based initiative violated the separation of church and state. These critics explained that the initiative creates an “entangling alliance and in many cases may end up funding specific religious or theological views.” They also worry about “governmental enforcement on the ban on religious proselytizing.” The Bush administration has insisted that faith-based organizations will not use American tax dollars to proselytize; however, there is no way to guarantee that a church will not require a prayer for food or shelter. There is also no guarantee that religious groups will not refuse to hire individuals of different faiths (Formicola 16-17).

 Even though America has one of the highest rates of religious affiliation and church attendance in the world, the U.S. Constitution has long been interpreted as requiring a separation of church and state. It is strongly believed that Americans feel they can worship freely because the government steers clear of organized religion. President Bush’s faith-based initiative threatens this balance. Claiming that social service of churches is not recognized and is not properly supported by taxpayer funds challenges the “American achievement of religious vitality in the midst of church-state separation” (Formicola 161). President Bush allowed his personal religion and support of faith-based organizations to affect his political agenda and blur the line between church and state.

### **Abstinence, Abortion, and Stem-Cell Research**

The controversies surrounding family planning and reproductive health policies began long before the George W. Bush presidency, however Bush played an integral role in the development of these policies. Upon assuming office President Bush successfully advocated for authorization of a federal abstinence program called Community Based Abstinence Education (CBAE). There existed two other federal abstinence programs dating back to 1981 and 1996; however Bush’s program had the most rigid guidelines. It required that educators, often religious organizations, teach that abstinence from sexual activity is the *only way* to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Also, during the Bush administration funding for family planning services, emergency contraception, and condoms decreased (McFarlane 408).

Overall, during the Bush administration, abstinence programs became far more prominent, support for contraceptive programs decreased, and induced abortion faced many new restrictions, as will be discussed next.

At the Republican National Convention during the 2000 presidential campaign Bush gave a speech stressing the importance of protecting the unborn. The change on abortion was almost immediate. On his first day in office Bush authorized a ban on all U.S. funding of abortion right groups internationally. Additionally, Bush appointed prominent pro-lifers to key cabinet positions including John Ashcroft as Attorney General and Tommy Thompson as Secretary of Health and Human Services (Kengor 92-93).

President Bush’s anti-abortion tactics did not end there, in the months and years to come Bush enacted many more anti-abortion policies. On August 5, 2002 Bush signed the Born Alive Infants Protection Act which provides for the protection of a child who survives an abortion. “In doing so, it affirmed the right to life of newborns.” If a child was able to survive an abortion it would now need to be protected rather than “destroyed by a doctor or nurse, regardless of whether its birth was intended or desired” (Kengor 93).

More policies followed; in January 2003 Bush signed the Sanctity of Life bill which defined human life as beginning at the time of conception. Two months later, President Bush chose not to veto the Republican Senate’s passage of a ban on partial-birth abortion. This was an especially significant move

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because former President Bill Clinton had repeatedly blocked this bill. Eventually, in November 2003 President Bush even signed the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban bill. Bush explained that he was simply fulfilling his promise: "When Congress sends me a bill against partial-birth abortions, I will sign it into law" (Kengor 94).

Banning partial-birth abortions was an easy decision for Bush, he stated multiple times the "procedure was an evil whose time had come to an end." A more difficult dilemma came about during his first summer in the White House. President Bush was obligated to decide whether to permit federal funding of embryonic stem-cell research (ESCR). "ESCR was the ultimate life issue – in both directions." Supporters of stem-cell research wanted to use stem cells from human embryos to do research that they believed would ultimately extend and improve lives. Supporters argued that stem-cells could produce advances in curing many life-threatening diseases (Kengor 96).

President George W. Bush was "torn" according to his press office. He felt that these "embryos were, if not lives themselves, at least potential lives – lives at the earliest stages of development." President Bush was appalled at the prospect of "embryo farms" or "parts farms." He believed that this was a "slippery slope into a Brave New World in which some 'humans' might one day be raised solely for their parts, exploited by those lucky enough not to be born or 'harvested' in such a fashion." As a result, Bush chose to halt federal funding of research on future or newly created embryos. However, Bush did allow continuing research on the existing 60 stem-cell lines that had already been extracted (Kengor 95-96).

The ESCR issue did not go away though. Just eight months later President Bush made another judgment on the topic:

"As we seek to improve human life, we must always preserve human dignity...Advances in biomedical technology must never come at the expense of human conscience. As we seek what is possible, we must always ask what is right, and we must not forget that even the most noble ends do not justify any means. Science has set before us decisions of immense consequence. We can pursue medical research with a clear sense of moral purpose or we can travel without an ethical compass into a world we could live to regret. How we answer the question of human cloning will place us on one path or the other. Human cloning is deeply troubling to me...Life is a creation, not a commodity. Our children are gifts to be loved and protected, not products to be designed and manufactured. Allowing cloning would be taking a significant step toward a society in which human beings are grown for spare body parts and children are engineered to custom specifications, and that's not acceptable."

Bush's strong opposition to stem-cell research and cloning and the way he framed the argument highlighted the President's tendency to judge such ethical challenges from a deeply moral, spiritual, and religious position (Kengor 96). Once again, President Bush allowed his personal religion and beliefs to shape his political agenda.

## **Same-Sex Marriage**

The Defense of Marriage Act, passed by Congress in 1996, defines marriage as "the legal union between one man and one woman as man and wife." Religious conservatives have perceived same-sex marriage as an "aggressive judicial assault on traditional marriage." As a result, they have sought to preserve the above definition of marriage in the "legal fabric" of the U.S. political system by advocating for the Federal Marriage Amendment. Such an amendment would constitutionally define marriage as a legal union between one man and one woman (DeLaet 305).

As the very title of the Defense of Marriage Act suggests, supporters of this definition believe that they

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are *defending* the traditional institution of marriage from attack by “modern forces and actors.” In their view, they are not advocating on behalf of a specific form of marriage or a particular ideological or religious perspective. Rather, they are simply defending the essential meaning of marriage as commonly understood throughout history (DeLaet 305).

In 2004 President George W. Bush articulated his views on the issue. The President made a speech calling for a constitutional amendment that would essentially make the Defense of Marriage Act part of the Constitution. The President stated:

“The union of a man and a woman is the most enduring human institution, honoring – honored and encouraged in all cultures and by every religious faith. Ages of experience have taught humanity that the commitment of a husband and wife to love and to serve one another promotes the welfare of children and the stability of society. Marriage cannot be severed from its cultural, religious, and natural roots without weakening the good influence of society. Government, by recognizing and protecting marriage, serves the interests of all” (DeLaet 305-306).

In this speech, President Bush summarizes the core of a “prominent conservative argument for codifying a traditional definition of marriage into law.” In the traditionalist sense, marriage, defined as the union between one man and one woman, is the most “enduring and fundamental” institution of human civilization. Accordingly, any change to this meaning of marriage is an “assault” not only on marriage, but also on social order, stability, and civilization itself (DeLaet 306).

Although President Bush’s remarks attempted to explain that this definition of marriage is universal and ‘neutral’ rather than a particularistic vision of marriage shaped by culture, religion, and ideology, Bush contradicted himself on many occasions (DeLaet 306). Bush has repeatedly stated that “Our nation must defend the sanctity of marriage.” Bush has also suggested that state legislatures define “legal arrangements other than marriage”. It is clear that Bush considers marriage outside of the traditional definition to be a corruption in society. In President Bush’s own words, “my style, my focus, and many of the issues I talk about...are reinforced by my religion” (Berggren 606). President Bush’s stance on same-sex marriage was deeply influenced by his conservative religion.

## War President

A defining characteristic of Evangelicalism is evangelism, meaning a sense of mission. Specifically in the case of foreign policy, Evangelical-styled presidents tend to view the world more in terms of what it could be than what it actually is. These presidents are more idealists than realists. It has often been said that Evangelical presidents have “political vision.” However, unlike many other active or politically visionary presidents, “there is an ostensible religious or moral dimension to their foreign policy programs.” Evangelism is clearly portrayed by the George W. Bush presidency (Berggren 616).

Prior to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, George W. Bush promised a “humble” foreign policy. Bush stated he planned on implementing a foreign policy that required “not the paternalistic leadership of an arrogant big brother, but the inviting and welcoming leadership of a great and noble nation.” Bush advocated a return to “unilateralist America-first policy.” President Bush often used the term “distinctly American internationalism” to describe his intentions. Overall, Bush was very skeptical of humanitarian interventions abroad. President Bush was “reluctant to take the lead in brokering peace in the Middle East, and ready to either withdraw or distance the United States from international agreements, such as the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty with Russia, the Kyoto Protocol on global warming, and the International Criminal Court.” He perceived these interventions as contrary to American interests (Berggren 619).

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However, after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the Bush presidency in relation to foreign policy changed dramatically. President George W. Bush began to show his Evangelical styles. September 11<sup>th</sup> became a catalyst for the President to begin expanding his 'compassion'. The terrorist attacks prompted Bush to "rally the armies of compassion" in order to help fellow human beings in need throughout the world. Bush proclaimed, "God is a God to everybody and intends every person to be born to freedom in the image of God" (Berggren 620).

President Bush would no longer promote an image of a "humble president, a humble policy, a humble America." Bush announced, "We are a country awakened to danger and called to defend freedom. Our grief has turned to anger, and anger to resolution. Whether we bring our enemies to justice or justice to our enemies, justice will be done." In the days after the attacks of 9/11 President Bush stood on the rubble of the World Trade Center and shouted from a bullhorn, "The people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon!" (Berggren 620).

Since 9/11 Bush has set out to remake the world explaining that his mission was to "make the world safe for democracy." President Bush led the United States into war in both Afghanistan and Iraq, justifying these invasions as part of the 'War on Terror'. Bush stated, "Our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil." Just as Bush had believed that he was called into politics and the presidency by God, Bush also believed that God called on him to lead the country "at a time like this" (Berggren 620-621).

Bush added fuel to the fire when he rejected the arguments that the September 11th attacks may have resulted from "U.S. support for corrupt and cruel dictatorships in the Middle East, for its unwavering support for Israel, and for past military interventions in the region." Rather, Bush insisted that America was attacked for its values. He stated, "They have attacked America, because we are freedom's home and defender. The War on Terror is simply a fight between good people and evil people." President Bush also continued to be adamant that the "evil must be resisted, defeated, and he and his country have been called by God to do it – to be freedom's champion" (Berggren 621).

George Bush was obviously convinced that America was involved in a moral battle between good and evil. He believed that those who were not with America were on the wrong side of the "divine confrontation" (Wallis 67). Bush has even announced that "every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. You are either with us, or you are with the terrorists. One cannot serve two masters, if you will; one cannot befriend good and evil simultaneously" (Berggren 621).

So, "to this aggressive extension of American power in the world, President George W. Bush added God." It is one thing for a nation to assert its "raw dominance" in the world; however, it is quite another to suggest, as Bush does, that "the success of American military and foreign policy is connected to a religiously inspired mission" or that his presidency may be a divine appointment during a difficult time (Wallis 62).

President Bush's faith and political circumstance led him to pursue a foreign policy of war and security in the Middle East. He aggravated European allies with his moral talk and willingness to pursue unilateral action. President Bush spent political capital on foreign policies that resulted in little political return or were incredibly risky. Nevertheless, he pursued them anyway and made it clear that he would give up the presidency for his principles and beliefs (Berggren 627).

According to former speech writer, David Frum, Bush "really does believe that after he has done his best to make the right decision, the rest is up to God." It is this belief that has allowed President Bush to take risks while remaining confident (Kengor 249). Bush stated, "Americans do not presume to equate

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God's purposes with any purpose of our own – prayer teaches us to trust, to accept that God's plan unfolds in his time, not our own." It is this belief that made him reckless and dangerous during a time of international uncertainty.

### **Conclusion: Has the Separation of Church and State been Undermined?**

While Bush believes that it is not a president's responsibility to "convert people to religion" or to proclaim "my religion is better than yours" he does believe that it is a president's responsibility to "set an example, to make sound decisions, to respect religion, and if asked, to herald religion." (Berggren 615) President George W. Bush's political agenda is an accurate portrayal of the above stated belief. Bush has explained many times that his faith and religion forms his general "frame of mind, attitude, and outlook."

During his political career George W. Bush cultivated strong ties with a diverse clergy, black and white Evangelical preachers, and Catholic Bishops. Bush was able to win the Republican Party's nomination for president in 2000 because he had vast support from religious conservatives. The 2004 election shaped up in similar ways; Bush won again with the strong support and voter turnout of Evangelicals, churchgoers, and, overall, those who cited Bush's personal character and moral values as paramount in their decision to re-elect him. Bush voters thought it was important for a president to be religious and for religion and faith to guide their personal behavior. The United States is a more or less religious nation and George W. Bush seemed to be an ideal candidate due to his strong faith. It can be assumed that Bush was elected due to a national feeling that "moral improvement" of some kind was required in the Oval Office (Berggren 614).

During his eight years in office President Bush enacted many new policies. This chapter touches on his new regulations allowing federal grants to construct social service facilities in religious institutions, a sweeping program allowing faith-based organizations to use federal funds to administer social welfare programs, a new abstinence-only policy, a ban on partial-birth abortions and human cloning, limits on stem-cell research, and an amendment against same-sex marriage. Bush also started a war against "evil."

It should have been anticipated that a man as devout as George W. Bush would shape his political agenda according to his religious beliefs. However, when Bush used his compassionate conservatism approach to domestic issues and approached foreign policy as a "mission" the public grew weary. Bush was accused of aligning his agenda with that of the Religious Right; this is not accurate though. The fashion in which Bush acted and spoke about his policies made it clear that he truly believed in what he was doing. His political agenda was his own.

An analysis of Bush's approach to domestic policy, including faith-based initiative and his views on abstinence, abortion, stem-cell research, and same-sex marriage in combination with his foreign policy, including the War on Terror, begs the American people to ask the question: Has Bush crossed the line of church-state separation? This is a complicated question. There is nothing wrong with having a religious president. Most presidents in U.S. history were religious; many, including Woodrow Wilson and Jimmy Carter, were even Evangelicals. Americans sometimes need a leader that is religious in times of crisis, such as 9/11, to share in their grief and soothe their hearts with spiritual comfort. But, while a president can be religious and occasionally even rely on his faith in performing in office, he must still respect the fundamental American commitment of separation of church and state.

A great benefit of keeping the nation neutral towards all religions is that it preserves the quality and character of all citizens, regardless of religious affiliation. President Bush entered dangerous territory when he attached his personal faith to his policies. The Founding Fathers wisely developed a

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constitutionally non-religious state. Public affairs should not be affected according to one man's religious vision.

The formulation of national and international policy should be separated from faith and God. President George W. Bush gave in to temptation when he acted religiously on his own, possibly fallible, interpretations of world events. The U.S. Constitution mandates a degree of separation between church and state in order to prevent an alliance between religious interests and government in order to prevent harm to this great nation; whether intentional or unintentional President Bush strengthened this alliance. This was a dangerous step by the leader of the free world.

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