
The following review was originally scheduled to be part of a forum on Lauren Frances Turek’s “Religious Rhetoric and the Evolution of George W. Bush’s Political Philosophy.” (*Journal of American Studies* 48:4) and should have appeared yesterday, with the review by Mark Edwards. We are publishing today it as a stand-alone review today and apologize for this error.

URL: [http://tiny.cc/AR578](http://tiny.cc/AR578)

Review by Raymond Haberski, Jr., Indiana University-Indianapolis

Americans live in an era that is as much a cliché as it is a reality. On 9/11, everything changed, or so the story goes. For former president George W. Bush, that statement is undoubtedly true; that day changed his life and as a result he changed the presidency of the United States. However, if there is one significant aspect of Bush’s world that did not change dramatically that day it might be his religion. And yet, according to Lauren Turek, an Assistant Professor of history at Trinity University in San Antonio, the prevailing view of Bush typically contends that the attacks on 9/11 were a formative moment in the President’s use of religion. Turek cites a 2006 essay published in *Presidential Studies Quarterly* in which the authors D.J. Berggren and N.C. Rae argue that “the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington transformed Bush from the lamb into the lion, from ‘self-help Methodist’ to a ‘messianic Calvinist’” (976). Turek does not dispute the assertion that many scholars and observers made during the Bush presidency that his rhetoric included a new “toolbox of religious tropes,” rather she points out that Bush’s “use of religious rhetoric to frame his policy agenda reflected the evolving significance that religion had in the development of his political career” (976).

Turek’s contributes to the investigation of religion and politics in recent U.S. history by investigating how George W. Bush used religion to frame his political agenda and to capture the support of a spectrum of conservative constituencies while he was Governor of Texas. Indeed, by the time 9/11 happened, Bush’s approach to public religion was fairly well defined. Turek argues that if 9/11 profoundly changed the Bush presidency—the challenges he faced, the actions he took—it did not fundamentally change the way Bush deployed religion as a rhetorical tool and ideological resource. Thus, Turek is not as interested in the theological and doctrinal context of Bush’s faith; rather she believes that scholars need to contend with how
Bush deployed religion in the years before 9/11 because the rhetorical patterns he used while President had their origins in his time as governor.

Turek quite correctly observes that most scholarship on Bush’s religion focuses on the period of his presidency and rarely accounts for anything before the 2000 Presidential election. For example, two books with the same photo on their covers showing George W. Bush seated behind a microphone but in front of an enormous painting of Jesus make scant mention of Bush’s faith before 2000 even though the image they both use comes from Bush’s time as governor of Texas. When scholars have discussed Bush’s faith, they often do so either in relation to doctrinal issues and theology or as part of the general stream of American politicians who use religion to appeal to voters. Professor William Abraham suggested in an unpublished paper that Bush “is a moderate, even liberal, evangelical shaped by the spiritual warmth, the ad hoc social activism, the reserved moralism, the friendly fellowship, the wariness of alcohol, and the theological fuzziness of United Methodism in Texas. He is an insider to the jargon, the ethos, and the practices of contemporary evangelical Methodism as found in mainline United Methodism in Texas.” Turek acknowledges the character of Bush’s Christianity but finds it lacking in concrete connections to the way Bush governed in Texas. Her essay demonstrates that when scholars discuss Bush’s faith-based politics before 2000 they often fail to note the particular kind of language and philosophical approach toward religion that Bush used in his political battles before reaching the White House.

While Governor of Texas, Bush developed a one-two legislative punch that coupled a philosophical position called “compassionate conservatism” with a policy initiative known as “Faith in Action.” The key influence behind the former was Marvin Olasky, a University of Texas journalism professor who, Turek relates, “advocated private, faith-based initiatives to provide social services to the poor.” Olasky “proved profoundly influential in shaping Bush’s thinking about welfare reform in Texas,” helping shape a tag line Bush used through his first year as President: “government can’t make people love one another…only faith can do that.” Bush introduced “Faith in Action” in 1996, Turek argues, as a way to “bridge the gap between social and economic conservative principles,” and in particular to appeal to evangelical voters who were a decisive faction in the Republican Party nationally. Bush also claimed that this initiative drew strength from a principled separation of church and state: “[his] proposal protected the mission of the church while allowing religious groups to perform the vital services that he believed the government could not—and should not—

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provide” (988). In Bush’s design, compassionate conservatism required recognizing spheres of action that divided church from state and prevented both from corrupting the other.

Bush’s effort to promote and implement these ideas grew into a significant piece of legislation called the Faith-Based Bill. In the speeches he made in support of the bill throughout 1996 and 1997, Bush developed a rhetorical pattern that became a fundamental part of his public use of his personal faith. Only by returning to God and “our bedrock values” he said, would Texas and by extension the United States overcome the ills that plagued society. Turek contends that “The success of the bill, and the national attention that it garnered for Bush, ensured that this new faith-infused language about cultural change and ‘bedrock values’ would become a hallmark of his future speeches and stated political philosophy” (989).

By identifying this particular historical moment, Turek offers an alternative to the 9/11 effect. She makes the case that the Faith-Based Bill functioned as a pivot for Bush’s philosophical and political career; he found a rhetorical tool that effectively graphed his commitment to a personal Christian faith onto a political campaign that appealed to those voters and constituencies necessary to succeed in Texas and ultimately the nation. Turek demonstrates that Bush learned through experience that the religion he held personally significant but politically insignificant in his first run for governor could be cultivated to advance both his political ambitions as well as a conservative philosophy of limited government and individual accountability. Thus Turek concludes that “his deep faith and comfort with utilizing religious tropes to explain his political agenda may help illuminate why he latched onto faith-based language when reaching for a way to understand and describe the new world that he believed the United States faced on 12 September 2001” (998).

With her close-reading of Bush’s work on a specific legislative initiative, Turek has provided a necessary corrective to scholarship that has been inordinately influenced by Bush’s words and actions following 9/11. By encouraging observers to consider how Bush mixed personal faith with political calculations, she has shown scholarly fidelity to her subject religious convictions, which is especially refreshing given the abundance of scholarship and opinion that is highly critical of Bush’s God-speak. The clarity of Turek’s argument raises a couple of questions. First, Turek seeks to add to the emerging scholarship on the ‘third wave’ of conservatism in the late 1990s, such as Justin Vaise’s Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement, that investigates fissures within the Republican Party and conservative movement. Missing from this discussion, though, is the challenge posed by neoconservatives who ultimately compelled Bush to apply his religious rhetoric to the world stage. If Bush effectively bridged a gap between social and economic conservatives in the movement, how did his rhetoric play with the neoconservatives? That question begs a second one: can Turek make her case about the significance of Bush’s pre-presidential religious rhetoric without carrying her study into at least the first few years of his presidency? She acknowledges that “few of the tropes that Bush utilized in speeches prior to his presidency took on the messianic and crusading tones of his rhetoric after 9/11.” If so, then does Turek’s analysis simply confirm the assumption that religious ideas rarely have anything more than indirect

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In other words, while Bush’s religion played a role in shaping his policymaking during his time as Governor of Texas, 9/11 had much more of an effect on Bush’s religion than the other way around. Turek mentions ethicist Peter Singer and the politically left-wing evangelical leader Jim Wallis as but two of the many commentators who have roundly criticized Bush for using his view of Christianity to justify American imperial ambitions. Of course, they are not alone in that critique. With her essay, though, Turek has at least shown that Bush had a history using religion to govern well before the fateful day that changed everything.

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