

David Domke and Kevin Coe, **The God Strategy: How Religion Became a Political Weapon in America**, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, 240 pp., \$30.00 (hardcover).

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A forum held by *The Washington Post* and *Newsweek* in 2006 concluded that “religion is the most pervasive yet least understood topic in global life” (146). As any glance at the news reveals, the task of unraveling the relationship between religious and political communication remains urgent. Under the aegis of faith, for example, U.S. presidents have felt “called” to their positions, described political plans as “covenants,” and delivered prayers during national convention speeches. It is into this charged and confusing atmosphere that David Domke and Kevin Coe have taken a welcome step. In *The God Strategy*, they analyze significant shifts and trends in the political-religious language of American presidential addresses and party platforms since 1932. In particular, they demonstrate how religious communication has increased exponentially within national politics since the early 1980s.

Domke and Coe first take their readers through an historical overview of the relationship between American Christianity and politics. After the famous Scopes Trial of 1925, many fundamentalists retreated from public life, but built a huge cultural infrastructure that bulwarked their political re-engagement in the 1960s and 1970s (given policy changes with abortion and prayer in public schools, etc.). In the late '70s, conservatives began to notice how Jimmy Carter wielded religiosity in his politics, without alienating many religious and non-religious groups. Domke and Coe argue that this observation was the rhetorical forbear to the contemporary use of “the God strategy,” or “a mixture of voice and agenda that are secularized, while . . . deliberately finding opportunities to ‘signal’ sympathy for religious conservatives’ views” (18). They claim presidents use the God strategy to narrowcast to religious groups, and that this process mostly flies beneath the public’s awareness.

They identify four political-religious signals that make up the God strategy. By speaking the language of the faithful, politicians signal that they are political priests, link America with divine will, show they embrace religious symbols, practices, and rituals, and use morality politics to herald bellwether issues and trump other public concerns (19). Domke and Coe argue that religious symbols and codes are resonant in American politics because of the information overload in our age. Many citizens rely on truncated religious cues to make quick political decisions. This is why voters in many recent elections often reduce an array of political issues to “moral referendums.”

One of the major claims of the book is that, beginning with Ronald Reagan, the degree of religious communication in presidential politics increased substantially — and showed little sign of wavering through 2006. Domke and Coe mostly use content analyses of presidential inaugurals from 1933 to 2004 to support this claim throughout. Surprisingly, even Bill Clinton’s presidency broke little from this trend. He used “national re-birth” and “the new covenant” as organizing themes in his inaugural addresses, and engaged many religious communities during his administration (59).

Domke and Coe's argument becomes more compelling when they chart how political agency connects or diverges from religion in these speeches. President Eisenhower talked about God infrequently, and used religious language to focus on actions that the government could take in responding to political exigencies. George W. Bush, however, puts religious language in his political discourse to talk about God's character and wishes. Hence, one President confirmed the place of human agency in politics, while another limited its role. In a larger sense, from 1933 to 1981, presidents used a "petitioner" speaking style 86% of the time when connecting God to liberty and freedom in their national addresses. Domke and Coe note a striking change from 1981 on forward, as presidents used a "prophetic" style to speak on God's behalf — issuing proclamations about God's will in politics (67). Similarly, using the same data from 1933 to 2004, they find that 77% of the usage of the terms "mission" and "crusade" have occurred in presidential inaugurations since 1981.

Presidents signal to religious believers that they are with them through the God strategy. Since 1981, presidents have vastly increased their trips to places of religious significance. Prior to Reagan, only Presidents Nixon and Carter made visits to meet with the Pope in Rome. In all, there were only three visits in 48 years. Since Reagan, American presidents have made 17 such trips. Similarly, presidents have increased their speeches at religious colleges, and often turn special days that mark national occasions into holy days. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, President Bush called for a "national day of prayer and remembrance" as a cue to religious conservatives that he was with them. Remarkably, there has been a tenfold increase in these religious proclamations over national days since Reagan took office (84). Furthermore, and contrary to common scholarly beliefs that national political discourses only engage in an abstract, civil religion — many presidential Christmas messages have used the word "Jesus" in them since the 1970s.

In the latter part of the book, Domke and Coe analyze the language of Republican and Democrat platforms from 1932 through the present. They find the language of faith and family increased within these platforms in the last 40 years. They also look for shifts and trends with five key issues: school prayer, abortion, research on stem cells, ERA, and gay-lesbian relationships. There were almost no mention of any of these issues in party platforms until 1968. Their findings show that while Democrats generally introduced these key political topics, after a period of time, Republicans eventually gave attention to these issues with far greater frequency. From 1972 to 1984, the Democratic platforms contained double the language on these issues as their Republican counterparts. Since 1988, however, Republicans led the charge in spotlighting these topics.

Looking to the 2006 House and Senate elections, Domke and Coe find that there appear to be constraints on the God strategy. They argue that many Americans appear to object to both too much and too little faith in politics. In 2006, many prominent conservatives such as Senator Rick Santorum (R-PA) lost their positions to religious moderates. The authors purport that new religious leaders such as Rick Warren may be driving substantial changes to the American political-religious landscape. In 2006, for instance, Warren asserted that evangelicals need to be less identified with one party, and expand their concerns to issues such as poverty and global warming.

The book concludes with a number of useful implications and recommendations for both scholars and the general public. Domke and Coe believe that everyone should be wary of the ways in which governmental actions can be claimed in terms of God's will. If policies are framed as religious directives, then "they are beyond question" (140). Moreover, "both the Gospel of John and the record of evils past teach one thing: in the beginning, always, are words" (140). All Americans need to be reminded that their Founders fled a Europe engulfed in religious politics. The Constitution does not have one reference to God anywhere within its text, and also states that no religious test shall be required of any holder of public office. As Domke and Coe put it, if the public had demanded the God strategy from their political leaders with the same fervor prior to 1981, it would have excluded Presidents such as FDR, Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy from public office.

The authors provide two recommendations for overcoming negligent or simplified understandings of religion and politics. Firstly, they claim the news media underestimate the importance of religious values in American public life. Since many journalists are non-religious, they rarely question faith positions, and often provide uncritical platforms for those in corporate and political establishments. They believe that journalists should more rigorously dissect religious machinations, and give voice to new religious leaders such as Brian McLaren, T.D. Jakes, and others, as opposed to the "old guard" of Pat Robertson and company (144-145).

Secondly, they find the public education system is sorely lacking in religious-political instruction and discussion. American public school curricula pay little attention to religion, despite its inextricable connection to many American's lives. Rather than letting religion sit as an "elephant in the room," it should critically engaged from all fronts. Their recommendation is particularly amenable to communication education, as "conflict laden topics should lead to more discussion, more conversation and learning, not less" (146).

*The God Strategy* is a major contribution to scholarship across disciplines focused on the tenuous relationship between religious and political communication. The analyses in the book might have been bolstered by reference to more theory, however. Domke and Coe tend to stay within the boundaries of their content analyses, meaning most of the work stays at the level of description, rather than developed explanation. They might have pushed their interpretations and implications further. For instance, what do terms such as "mission" and "prophet" portend for civil society and the public sphere? Is there an agenda-setting function within and between different groups in regards to this faith-driven language? How do these conceptual shifts impact current U.S. policy?

Some may also find their choice of "presidential inaugurals" a little worn. Other similar works in communication, such as Roderick Hart's *The Political Pulpit*, have been faulted for being too president-centric — not going beyond official works of civil religious discourse, or looking to the way in which audiences construct their own religious and political understandings. Examining vernacular or unofficial variants of these types of discourses would also provide a way to get beyond simply looking at Christianity, in our diverse society. Additionally, the book might have situated itself more at the nexus of a number of vital scholarly and non-scholarly conversations on religious and political communication — from Roderick Hart to Sam Harris.

That said, *The God Strategy* provides us with a vast body of new data that covers much political rhetoric in the last century. In particular, anyone seeking to make sense of the intrusions (or overlaps) of religion on the political sphere in the past 28 years will be confronted with some interesting comparisons and contrasts from which to draw. Domke and Coe's recommendations also provide a nice bridge between communication research and public affairs. They underscore the stakes of these communicative phenomena and advance a spirit of inquiry over matters often ignored or left out of discussions of politics, culture, and communication. As such, they've provided a heuristic path that both scholars and the public should continue to follow.