


Remembering 9/11: Religious Maximalism in the United States of America Twenty Years after the Attacks

Recordando 11/9: maximalistas religiosos nos Estados Unidos da América vinte anos após os ataques

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Abstract

On September 11, 2001, Al Qaeda partisans hijacked four American airliners. Three of the planes struck their targets: the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon outside of Washington, DC. In *"Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11"* (2nd ed., 2006), Bruce Lincoln made several provocative proposals about the study of religion and the category of fundamentalism, based on his reflection after those attacks. This article extends some of Lincoln's proposals by refining his category "religious maximalism" in terms of his four domains of religion (transcendent discourse, practices, community, and regulatory institution), rather than considering it as a replacement for the category "fundamentalism" or as a global religious pattern. The article then examines several presidential speeches to chart the progress of Christian maximalism in the United States of America. The last four presidential speeches before the 20th anniversary of 9/11 were delivered by President Donald Trump. These speeches deemphasized religion, ignored history, disregarded basic factual accuracy, and promoted the authoritarian use of power. These signaled a move not toward religious maximalism, but rather toward racist nationalism. The article concludes that American Christian maximalists who helped elect President Trump did not gain control of the national transcendent discourse during his term of office, but they did gain considerable control of judicial and legislative power. It remains to be seen whether they can use their power in the national regulatory institutions to move the United States of America toward Christian maximalism in the long wake of 9/11.

Keywords: Christian maximalism. Politics and religion. Religion in the United States of America. Religious nationalism. Terrorist attacks.

Resumo

Em 11 de setembro de 2001, partidários da Al Qaeda sequestraram quatro aviões norte-americanos. Três deles acertaram seus alvos: o World Trade Center em Nova Iorque e o Pentágono, perto de Washington D.C. Na obra "Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11" (2ª edição, 2006), Bruce Lincoln fez várias propostas provocativas sobre o estudo da religião e a categoria fundamentalismo, tendo por base suas reflexões após esses ataques. Este artigo desenvolve algumas das propostas de Lincoln refinando sua categoria de "maximalismo religioso" em termos dos quatro domínios da religião (discurso transcendente, práticas, comunidade e instituição reguladora), mais do que considerando-a um substituto para a categoria "fundamentalismo" ou um padrão religioso global. O artigo avalia vários discursos presidenciais para mapear o progresso do maximalismo cristão nos Estados Unidos

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da América. Os últimos quatro discursos antes do 20º aniversário de 11 de setembro foram pronunciados pelo presidente Donald Trump. Esses discursos tiraram a ênfase da religião, ignoraram a história, desconsideraram a acuidade básica dos fatos e promoveram o uso autoritário do poder. Eles não sinalizaram um movimento em direção ao maximalismo religioso, mas em direção ao nacionalismo racista. O artigo conclui que os maximalistas cristãos norte-americanos que ajudaram a eleger Trump não obtiveram controle sobre o discurso nacional transcendente durante seu mandato, mas conseguiram um considerável controle judiciário e legislativo. Ainda fica em aberto se eles poderão usar seu poder nas instituições reguladoras para conduzir os Estados Unidos da América em direção a um maximalismo cristão na longa esteira de 11/9.

Palavras-chave: Maximalismo cristão. Religião e política. Religião nos Estados Unidos da América. Nacionalismo religioso. Ataque terrorista.

Introduction

On September 11, 2001, operatives of Al Qaeda hijacked four planes in the United States. One struck the North Tower of the World Trade Center in New York City at 8:46 a.m. (EDT O). Another crashed into the South Tower at 9:02 a.m., and thirty-five minutes later a third plane hit the western side of the Pentagon near Washington, DC. The passengers and crew in the fourth plane resisted the hijackers who then crashed the plane at 10:03 a.m. in a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania, without reaching their goal of striking either the White House or the US Capitol Building. By 10:30 a.m. both towers of the World Trade Center had collapsed (Timeline..., 2001). In this way, within two hours a small group of men completed a spectacular attack against the United States with nearly 3000 casualties. On October 7 – less than a month later – the US launched its counterattack with an invasion of Afghanistan.

In 2003, Bruce Lincoln challenged scholars in the study of religion to take seriously the suicide hijackings on September 11, 2001, and the American response. What started out for Lincoln as a consideration of whether these acts should be considered religious (Lincoln, 2006)² expanded into explorations of the meaning of “religion,” the relation of religion and culture, the connection of religion to rebellion and revolution, the dynamics of religious violence, and more. Especially salient were his close readings of a spiritual manual for the hijackers’ last night before the attack, President George Bush’s announcement of the invasion of Afghanistan on October 7, and Osama bin Laden’s statement broadcast later the same day (Lincoln, 2006).

In this article, I extend Lincoln’s discussion by nuancing his proposal that fundamentalism is better conceptualized as “religious maximalism,” and by examining later presidential speeches on anniversaries of 9/11 – two presidential speeches on the 10th anniversary of the hijackings³, and the last four presidential anniversary speeches before the 20th anniversary, by which time US troops will have withdrawn from Afghanistan. I do not treat these presidential speeches as personal statements. As formal addresses, they reflect broader ideological concerns about national and international affairs, authored by anonymous staff members, presumably with input from the presidents. As such, the speeches were vehicles by which “the American state spoke to the American nation”, with the president speaking “as the representative and director of this apparatus” (Lincoln, 2006, p. 24).

The attacks appear to have had the ultimate goal of establishing Islamist religious maximalism in the US (Lincoln, 2006) and in this sense, the attacks have not been successful, for the commemorative speeches of the American state exhibit forms of Christian religious minimalism. In strategic terms, however,

² Citations are from the second edition, published in 2006.

³ I do not discuss the speeches of former President Clinton and Vice President Biden for they cover similar topics (Whitfield..., 2011).

the attacks were a success, drawing the US into multiple military failures that raise questions about the survival of American religious minimalism. The 9/11 attacks may have created an opportunity for Christian maximalism to become dominant in the US.

Maximalism, minimalism, Bush, and Bin Laden

In his bracing analysis of the religiosity of the 9/11 hijackers, Lincoln recommended that we discard the term “fundamentalist” as a category in the study of religion. In dominant discourses the term is provocative and dismissive, he observed, but the important problem with “fundamentalist” is that it “[...] fails to capture what is really crucial: that is, the conviction that religion ought to permeate all aspects of social, indeed of human existence” (Lincoln, 2006, p. 5). Its defining feature is a life in which religion cannot be “confined to a limited time, place, and role [...] with little capacity to shape and stabilize other aspects of human activity or invest them with transcendent meaning” (Lincoln, 2006, p. 5). Minimalism, on the other hand, “is the position taken by Kant at the culmination of the Enlightenment, which restricts religion to an important set of (chiefly metaphysical) concerns, protects its privileges against state intrusion, but restricts its activity and influence to this specialized sphere” (Lincoln, 2006, p. 6).

Lincoln then used this distinction to analyze two formal addresses from October 7, 2001, at the start of the American invasion of Afghanistan (Lincoln, 2006). Less than one month after 9/11, US President George W. Bush went on TV to announce the beginning of the invasion, and later that same day Al Jazeera broadcasted a pre-recorded “response” from Osama bin Laden. Lincoln argued that these two speeches contained “symmetric dualisms,” since “[...] [b]oth men constructed a Manichaean struggle, where Sons of Light confront Sons of Darkness, and all must enlist on one side or another, without the possibility of neutrality, hesitation, or middle ground” (Lincoln, 2006, p. 20). The American president portrayed the struggle in secular moral terms – civilization vs. terrorism and good vs. evil – and avoided describing it as a war between religions. The leader of Al Qaeda, however, deployed a religious dualism in which the struggle was between Islam and the paganism of America and the West (Lincoln, 2006).

Both competing dualisms appealed to religious maximalism. Bin Laden gave his audience two alternatives: they could side with him and the true representatives of Islam (*i.e.*, the Islamic maximalists, in Lincoln’s terms), or they could side with the infidel non-Muslims and their hypocritical allies who claimed to be good Muslims. Bush, on the other hand, faced a more complicated problem. The American administration needed to appeal to the American majority, who were religious minimalists, and also to American Christian maximalists, who were some of his core supporters. The solution penned by Bush’s speech-writers, according to Lincoln, was to sprinkle the announcements with allusions to Christian scripture and imagery that would be noticed by Christian maximalists but not by the rest of his audience. In this way, Bush could appeal overtly to the Christian minimalist ethos of American public discourse while signaling to Christian maximalists that “[...] he understands and sympathizes with their views, even if the requirements of his office (also, those of practical politics) constrain him from giving full-throated voice not just to the religious values they prefer, but to their maximalist construction of all values as religious” (Lincoln, 2006, p. 32, author’s emphasis).

Lincoln’s proposal to retire “fundamentalism” in favor of “maximalism” has received a mixed response. The new terminology has not seen much actual use in secondary literature – not discussed in Antoun (2010); Haynes (2016); or Gierycz (2020) – even though some reviewers seemed to approve of the new term – Hall (2004); Cusack (2005). Others recognized the need for a new category without

endorsing Lincoln's proposal (Campo, 2003; Reader, 2003)⁴. Specific critiques of the new term point out that maximalism does not include the crucial fundamentalist theme of a return to an earlier period of complete adherence to truth (Reader, 2003); that the maximalist/minimalist distinction still assumes a model of irresolvable conflict between the West and Islam (Zecharya, 2007); that the term is too broad since it has to include all societies except those in the post-Enlightenment West (Juergensmeyer, 2003); and that Lincoln's definition of maximalism is decontextualized and lacks the nuance necessary to address complex issues (Campo, 2003; Juergensmeyer, 2003).

My own position is that Lincoln's maximalist/minimalist distinction is helpful, but his definition is too brief. Moreover, we should evaluate it on its own as a concept rather than as a replacement for the older fundamentalist category or as a global religious pattern (Ozzano, 2016). In fact, "maximalism" would be more useful if elaborated in terms of Lincoln's four domains of religion that he proposed in a discussion of the 9/11 hijackers. Lincoln did not attempt to define "religion", but rather articulated four related domains that any discussion of religion should at least address – transcendent discourse, practices, community, and regulatory institutions. The transcendent discourse may be based on a number of sources – scriptures, personal revelations, ancestral traditions, interpretations of nature – but its essential feature is that it claims an authority and truth that transcends the contingency of this world. This discourse is used to authorize a set of practices aimed at producing proper human subjects and a proper world. The discourse and practices in turn define a specific community with particular affinities and discrete identities. That community recognizes institutions and leaders whose job is to regulate and modify the current discourse, practices, and community boundaries while maintaining a sense of continuity with the community's historical memory (Lincoln, 2006).

This framework using a set of domains is more helpful because it allows us to be more precise about the definition of maximalism in the religious struggles that followed 9/11. The difference between the American administration's minimalism and Al Qaeda's maximalism on October 7, 2001, was this: the Islamist maximalists recognized one transcendent discourse over all sectors of social life with all regulatory institutions operating according to religious norms; but the American minimalist position recognized a separate, complementary transcendent discourse authorizing the actions of the state and denied that religious institutions could regulate the state's actions. The American minimalist position presents its two transcendent discourses as compatible, advocating and constructing an alleged "separation of church and state." The American maximalists whose support Bush tried to garner through biblical allusions agreed with the Islamists that governmental and religious discourses should be united, with the institutions of the state regulating behavior according to their unified religious discourse. The two forms of religious maximalism disagreed on the correct discourse – Christian nationalist or Islamist.

Framed in these terms, we see that the American state justified its decision to invade Afghanistan with a transcendent and universal discourse of freedom, justice, and peace. According to the president, the US government defends "[...] not only our precious freedoms, but also the freedom of people everywhere to live and raise their children free from fear" (§14)⁵. Those who threatened those freedoms were "terrorists", and the American military campaign was designed "to drive them out and bring them to justice" (§6). The speech concluded by noting, "The battle is now joined on many fronts [...] Peace and freedom will prevail" (§23). This discourse requires of men and women great risk and sacrifice, perhaps even "the ultimate sacrifice of their lives" (§18) and it is subject to its own, non-religious institutional

⁴ For a broader discussion see Watt (2007).

⁵ The numeration for these quotations come from Lincoln (2006, p. 103). Lincoln used the transcript published by the New York Times (Bush's..., 2001), which does not include Lincoln's numeration.

regulation. Bush noted his independent governmental role and discourse through the choice of location, saying, "I'm speaking to you today from the Treaty Room of the White House, a place where American Presidents have worked for peace" (§13).

Bush's announcement maintained that the president's institutional independence is compatible with religious discourses. This was especially clear when the president highlighted his role as a supreme military official in a way that signaled that this institutional autonomy was complemented by religious practice: "A Commander-in-Chief sends America's sons and daughters into a battle in a foreign land only after the greatest care and a lot of prayer" (§18). Moreover, the speech claimed that Americans "are friends of almost a billion worldwide who practice the Islamic faith" (§8) and are enemies "of those who [...] profane a great religion by committing murder in its name" (§9). The compatibility of the two American discourses was signaled when the president ended his speech with the benediction, "May God continue to bless America".

This minimalist ethos is the context for Bush's covert appeal to American Christian maximalists observed by Lincoln. The American state maintained in this announcement to the American nation that it was not engaging in a war between Christianity and Islam, but the biblical allusions suggested – without actually affirming – a deep sympathy with the theocratic goals of the Christian maximalists whose political support was crucial for the Bush administration.

The Al Qaeda speech, on the other hand, cast the 9/11 attacks and the coming military battles completely within a transcendent religious discourse and not in a separate, complementary discourse. Lincoln could have made this point even more strongly, but his transcript of Bin Laden's speech omitted these comments that immediately preceded the beginning of Lincoln's transcript.

Let the whole world know that we shall never accept that the tragedy of Andalusia (ph) would be repeated in Palestine. We cannot accept that Palestine will become Jewish. And with regard to you, Muslims, this is the day of question. This is a new (inaudible) against you, all against the Muslims and Medina. So be like the followers of the prophet, peace be upon him, and all countrymen (ph), lovers of God and the prophet within, and a new battle, great battle, similar to the great battles of Islam, like the conqueror of Jerusalem. So, hurry up to the dignity of life and the eternity of death. Thanks to God, he who God guides will never lose. And I believe that there's only one God. And I declare I believe there's no prophet but Mohammed (Osama..., 2001, online).

Moreover, Bin Laden explicitly described the American campaign as an attack on Islam and Muslims when he asserted that the American infidels and their Muslim allies "went out seeking to fight Islam and to attack the people in the name of terrorism"⁶. The maximalist religious discourse required a military defense of the community and its practices. According to bin Laden, the governments of the Muslim nations should have responded to these threats, but they were mired in hypocrisy and alliances with infidels.

The quote above from bin Laden's speech adds important aspects to the historical narrative that he generated in his speech. It is a history of struggle against infidelity that goes back to the prophet and his followers. "Andalusia" refers to Al-Andalus, the area in southern Spain that was ruled by Muslim states from 711-1492 CE and then lost to Christian rule. Bin Laden vowed that such a loss would not be replayed in Palestine – this time to Jewish rule – where western aggression had led to over 80 years of suffering for the Islamic nation (Lincoln, 2006). This aggression culminated in devastating destruction in Iraq (§7) and even the presence of foreign pagan troops in Saudi Arabia (§10). With 9/11, however, the

⁶ This religious confrontation was diluted in the New York Times transcript used by Lincoln, which read, "They have been telling the world falsehoods that they are fighting terrorism" (Campo, 2003, p. 723).

sword had fallen on the US and America's inhabitants would not experience safety until there was peace in Palestine and the "land of Mohammed" (*i.e.*, Saudi Arabia) was free from the foreign troops (§11).

The American announcement generated a different historical narrative that was vague and brief. According to Bush's speech, America had always been a generous country devoted to peace (Lincoln, 2006). A month earlier on 9/11, barbaric terrorists who profaned Islam had attacked the US (§9), but in the intervening weeks, a generation of young Americans had gained a new understanding of freedom, duty, and sacrifice (§22). Supported by "the collective will of the world," the US would now clear the way to bring the criminals to justice (§4, 6).

Thus, the response of the American state to the 9/11 attacks promoted a very short official history of Christian minimalism in the face of aggression from an Islamic maximalist group. The American minimalism asserted the state's institutional autonomy from religious authorities but also claimed that its transcendent discourse was complementary to those of religious authorities. The speech announcing the American invasion of Afghanistan went even further, as Lincoln noted, hinting to American Christian maximalists that the state actually sympathized with them even though the president could not say so openly.

The Tenth Anniversary of 9/11, 2011

During the first few years after 2001, September 11 commemorations were widespread and somber affairs, but as the decade wore on commemorations, in general, became less prominent. The three main focal points for national memorials were related to the sites of the three attacks – the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and a field outside Shanksville. These three sites became the favored locations for formal speeches by presidents and other dignitaries annually on September 11.

The speeches at these sites are for commemorations, and so the genre and tenor differ from the bellicose declarations of October 7, 2001. They were performed for national rather than international audiences with more emphasis on grief, loss, and resilience. Whereas the October 7, 2001 speeches focused on attacking others, the later commemorations centered more on victims who were attacked and their surviving families. Nevertheless, in the course of these commemorative speeches, some similar themes surfaced⁷, and they all wrestled with the significance of 9/11.

The 10th anniversary of the attacks in the US was the occasion for a major national ritual involving three main events (Sutton, 2011). On Saturday, Sept. 10, the Flight 93 National Memorial was dedicated at the crash site near Shanksville. The Memorial honors the 40 passengers and crew members who prevented an attack on the nation's capital, but lost their lives in their attempt to regain control of the airplane from the hijackers. Former Presidents Clinton and Bush spoke at this event, as did Vice President Biden. The main ceremonial event of the weekend took place the next day on September 11 in New York City, which was the dedication of the new 9/11 Memorial at Ground Zero. The tightly-scripted ceremonies involved solemn readings by Presidents Bush and Obama, by governors, mayors, and others, and the reading of the names of 2,983 victims. There were no speeches. That evening "A Concert of Hope" was held at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, and that evening event included remarks from President Obama.

In the 2011 speech by former President Bush at the Flight 93 National Memorial dedication on September 10, it was clear that the American state was never committed to Christian maximalism. In his speech a decade after the 9/11 attacks, the president still invoked the same transcendent American

⁷ The themes in Bush's announcement of Oct. 7, 2001, are similar to those in his address to the nation on the evening of the attacks (George..., 2011) and in his comments at the National Prayer Service three days later at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC (Bush..., 2001).

discourse – freedom, love, sacrifice, and duty. The emphasis shifted a bit, however, with more emphasis on love and duty, while “sacrifice” was extended by using “freedom”, “selflessness”, “courage/bravery”, and “service” as synonyms. This discourse was not set in opposition to any facet of a religious phenomenon, but rather in opposition to evil. “One of the lessons of 9/11”, Bush told the audience, “is that evil is real, and so is courage”. The generations who study the story of Flight 93 would learn “that love and sacrifice can triumph over evil and hate”⁸. Thus, a complex confrontation of international interests was reduced to a morality tale.

I describe this discourse as autonomous because it did not invoke any religious institutions with jurisdiction over its authority. Instead, former president Bush embedded the discourse in a number of governmental institutions, with references (in this order) to the Secretary of the Interior, the Vice President, another former president, the Speaker of the House, members of Congress, the National Park Service, the Pentagon, the military, police officers, firefighters, military veterans, and the Capitol building in DC. There were no references to churches, temples, mosques, clergy, or specific religions.

The speech asserted that this American political discourse is compatible with religious discourses when it claims that the events of 9/11 evoked a spontaneous unity among all Americans, regardless of political party, ethnicity, or faith.

In the days after 9/11, the response came like a single hand over a single heart. Members of Congress from both sides of the aisle gathered on the steps of the capitol and sang, ‘God bless America’. Neighbors reached out to neighbors of all backgrounds and beliefs (George..., 2011, online).

There was also a generic reference to religious practice that infused the chaotic rescue efforts. The audience was told that a special forces soldier was searching the burning ruins for survivors and “[...] [a]s he entered one room he prayed to find someone alive”. In that very room, he found and rescued a severely burned woman, who later said “[...] she’d been praying for rescue. She called him her guardian angel”.

There were, however, two references to religious practices that give the speech a Christian ethos without promoting a maximalist discourse. The audience was told that one of the passengers who resisted the hijackers first recited the Lord’s Prayer with an “air phone operator”. Then the actions of the 40 passengers and crew were described as the opening of the international battle with terrorism, which was sanctified by Christian scripture with a quotation of Jesus from the Gospel of John (15:13).

With their selfless act, the men and women who stormed the cockpit lived out the words, ‘Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends’. And with their brave decision, they launched the first counter-offensive of the war on terror

The speech did not portray the resistance on Flight 93 as a maximalist holy war for it is not a struggle authorized primarily by Christian discourse. Rather, the war on terror is said to have begun when Americans worked together according to a minimalist national discourse that was also appropriate to Christian values.

The speech also generated two related historical narratives, one about the decade since 9/11 and one stretching back to the mid-19th century. On 9/11, the president told the audience, the nation came together in unity. In the decade after the attack, the nation had been tested in many ways both at home

⁸ The quotations and citations related to this speech all come from George... (2011).

and abroad. But through it all, the nation was protected by the military, an exemplar of the values enshrined in the national discourse.

For 10 years, our troops have risked and given their lives to prevent our enemies from attacking America again. They've kept us safe; they have made us proud, and they have upheld the spirit of service shown by the passengers of Flight 93 (George..., 2011, online).

The national narrative stretched back further, according to President Bush, because 9/11 was worthy of comparison to the Civil War. Bush invoked President Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, delivered on Nov. 19, 1863, and in so doing Bush likened the 40 passengers and crew of Flight 93 to the Union soldiers in their sacrifice to preserve the nation during the Civil War. This comparison suggests how different the American empire of the early 21st century was from the American republic of the mid-19th century. In the Gettysburg Address, President Lincoln exhorted the living to preserve a nation "[...] conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal" (Abraham Lincoln Online, 1863). In Bush's speech at the dedication of the Flight 93 Memorial, on the other hand, he exhorted the living to support American intervention throughout the world.

[W]e have a duty to remain engaged in the world [...]. It may be tempting to think it doesn't matter what happens to a villager in Afghanistan or a child in Africa [...]. A world of dignity and liberty and hope will be safer and better for all. The surest way to move toward that vision is for the United States of America to lead the cause of freedom (George..., 2011, online).

On September 11, 2011 – the morning after the dedication of the Flight 93 Memorial – Presidents Bush and Obama participated with short readings in the dedication ceremonies for the 9/11 National Memorial where the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center once stood (Sutton, 2011; 9/11 Memorial & Museum, 2011). That evening, President Obama gave his 9/11 anniversary speech at "A Concert for Hope" at the Kennedy Center (Remarks..., 2011).

The speech by President Obama was distinctive in several ways. It was both the most openly religious of the commemoration speeches examined here, but also the most overt in its description of a religious minimalist orientation. The religious orientation of Obama's speech was signaled from the first sentence, a quotation of Psalm 30:5b, "The Bible tells us – 'weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning'" The president used the King James Version, which enhanced the sense of religious language and authority. The quote was repeated again near the end of the speech and the structure of the verse gave shape to the material in between: the destruction and loss of life on 9/11 led to one of America's darkest nights, but then the body of the speech elaborated on the ways in which the country had moved forward in the ensuing decade toward the morning – a new experience of unity, sacrifice, strength, and peace. After the second use of Psalm 30:5b, the speech concluded with an assertion of divine guidance, an exhortation, and a blessing.

With a just God as our guide, let us honor those who have been lost, let us rededicate ourselves to the ideals that define our nation, and let us look to the future with hearts full of hope. May God bless the memory of those we lost, and may God bless the United States of America.

That conclusion on its own might suggest a religious maximalist orientation, but the rest of the speech actually laid out an explicit minimalist approach. The transcendent discourse of America, according to the speech, underscores "the bonds between all Americans" that go beyond religious commitment. "Our faith – in God and each other – has not changed". "Our belief in America" comes from a "timeless ideal" that people govern themselves, are created equal, and all deserve the same freedom. The president

emphasized the diversity and inclusion of that ideal by noting that in spite of fierce debates America's national unity allows all to flourish: "[O]ur markets still provide innovators with the chance to create, our citizens are still free to speak their minds, and our souls are still enriched in our churches and temples, our synagogues and mosques". This is an overtly minimalist assertion, for religion occupies a special restricted efficacy related to spiritual growth that is separated from economy and politics.

Moreover, this national unity is available to any citizen of any faith.

The United States will never wage war against Islam or any religion...In the biggest cities and the smallest towns, in our schools and workplaces, you still see people of every conceivable race, religion and ethnicity – all of them pledging allegiance to one flag; all of them reaching for the same American dream – e pluribus unum, out of many, we are one (Remarks..., 2011, online).

Along with this overt religious minimalism, Obama generated a distinctive historical narrative of the US that began with the challenge of slavery. It is one of the only places where these presidential speeches recognized national shortcomings. The president, however, laid out this narrative of problems from the optimistic viewpoint of imaginary future Americans who would know of American successes.

They will remember that we have overcome slavery and Civil War; bread lines and fascism; recession and riots; Communism and, yes, terrorism. They will be reminded that we are not perfect, but our democracy is durable, and that democracy – reflecting, as it does, the imperfections of man – also gives us the opportunity to perfect our union [...]. It will be said of us that we kept that faith; that we took a painful blow, and emerged stronger (Remarks..., 2011, online).

Finally, Obama's speech is distinctive in admitting to ambivalence about war and military occupation rather than asserting that America was involved in a dualistic battle between good and evil. While "service to our nation is full of glory, war itself is never glorious", and military families have paid an especially heavy price. Moreover, Obama's speech was the only one under assessment here that replied directly to some of the accusations of bin Laden (who had been assassinated in Pakistan by US forces four months earlier on May 2, 2011). Obama asserted that the US was determined not to occupy Kandahar, Kabul, Mosul, or Basra, but rather to leave those cities and regions "to free people and sovereign states" and "to move on from a decade of war to a future of peace". He ignored the problem of Palestine.

Thus, on the tenth anniversary of 9/11, the American state articulated a clear religious minimalism for the American nation that was in line with the earlier statements from 2001. A decade after the attacks, former President Bush and President Obama both emphasized that the 9/11 had generated a unity among Americans based on freedom, justice, sacrifice, love, and duty, and that unity was common to Americans of any religious persuasion. The military invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq were described as noble projects to win freedom for other peoples and to bring America's assailants to justice, and not as attempts at political or economic domination. The scion of the Bush dynasty emphasized the duty of the American nation to lead the global cause of freedom, while America's first Black president highlighted the need for the nation to create a more perfect union. But both assumed that religious discourses supported the political discourse of the American imperial project, and they made their appeals on that basis.

Approach to the 20th Anniversary: 2017-2020

The 16th-19th commemorations of the 9/11 attacks occurred during the Trump administration. During those years the president alternated between speaking at the Pentagon (2017 and 2019) and at

the Flight 93 National Memorial (2018 and 2020)⁹. The four speeches used similar rhetorical strategies found in earlier speeches and covered many familiar themes. There are, however, some distinctive features in these four addresses that deemphasized religion and that ignored history, evincing a more authoritarian use of power coupled with a disregard for basic factual accuracy. This was not a move toward religious maximalism but rather toward racist nationalism.

There is a surprising lack of attention to institutionalized religion – maximalist or minimalist – in the Trump era speeches, given that a crucial factor in the president's election was support from conservative white evangelicals (Dougherty *et al.*, 2020; Smith, 2017). In fact, there is almost no formal religious content beyond cultural generalities such as patriots joining “[...] the immortal ranks of American heroes” (Transcript..., 2018, online), a proud father looking down from heaven at his daughter's achievements (2019), the memorial as sacred ground (2020), and a few references to prayer. President Trump did mention the Lord's Prayer story (2018) and the story of the woman who prayed for help and then called her rescuer a guardian angel (2019), which were found also in Bush's 2011 speech at the Flight 93 Memorial dedication.

Perhaps more striking is the fact that there are no biblical quotes or allusions in Trump's speeches. In Bush's address to the nation on the evening of the 9/11 attacks, the president cited Psalm 23 (Statement..., 2001). A month later on Oct. 7 when the invasion of Afghanistan began Bush alluded to Jewish and Christian scriptures in a way that Christian maximalists would have recognized. During the 10th anniversary in 2011, Bush quoted John 15:13, and Obama's speech was structured around Psalm 30:5b. Trump's speeches, on the other hand, indicated no interest in supporting their assertions with Jewish or Christian scriptures.

Another distinctive feature is an implied denigration of Islam, for Trump's speeches made no effort to distinguish Islamist terrorists from other Muslims (Transcript..., 2018). According to the Trump speeches Americans faced “the menace of radical Islamic terrorism” (Trump..., 2018, online), “the threat of radical Islamic terrorism” (Remarks..., 2019, online), and “radical Islamic terrorists” (Donald..., 2020, online) but there were no provisos about Muslims who disagreed with the “terrorists” nor any defense of mainstream American Muslims. There was a hint of inclusivity in the (Pentagon..., 2017) speech when the president noted that the nearly 7000 American soldiers killed since 9/11 included people “from all backgrounds, all races, all faiths”. There was a similar reference in the 2020 speech, but the unexplained duplication of religious terminology and the labeling of races according to skin pigmentation belied a deep ambivalence about national unity: “In the days and weeks after 9/11, citizens of all faiths, background, colors, and creeds, came together, prayed together, mourned together, and rebuilt together”.

Nor do the Trump era speeches attempt to contextualize the 9/11 attacks in American history. At the 10th anniversary, President Bush connected 9/11 to the sentiments of the Gettysburg Address and President Obama tied 9/11 to the challenges of slavery and the American Civil War. By way of contrast the Trump speeches contained generalizations about American resolve but mentioned no historical events prior to 9/11 except to note, “For more than seven decades, the Pentagon has stood as a global symbol of American might” (Pentagon..., 2017, online).

Instead of dealing with religious topics or generating an American historical narrative, the speeches during the Trump administration instead highlighted national symbols like the flag and the cross – totemic items in a Durkheimian sense (Riley, 2014), material objects that represent the nation without linguistic content but associated with violence and requiring allegiance. While the American flag figured prominently

⁹ In the discussions I refer to these speeches by year. The transcripts for each year can be found online: Pentagon... (2017, 2019); Transcript ... (2018); Donald... (2020).

in the iconography and settings of all the speeches since 9/11, the flag was not a subject of reflection in the Sept. 11 address to the nation in 2001, the announcement of the invasion of Afghanistan a month later, nor in 9/11 speeches by Bush and Obama in 2011¹⁰. Thus, the references in the Trump speeches are an attempt to capture and to define the interpretation of these symbols.

The flag was mentioned in all four Trump speeches, but in the first Trump 9/11 speech (Pentagon..., 2017) the American flag was an important topic. In the 2017 speech, Trump praised the people who work in the Pentagon for they “[...] secure our freedom, they defend our flag, and they support our courageous troops all around the world”. The soldiers who died since 9/11 “[...] were all there to dedicate their lives, and they defend our one great American flag”. Then near the end of the speech, there is a longer statement.

[T]errorists tried to break our resolve. It's not going to happen. But where they left a mark with fire and rubble, Americans defiantly raised the stars and stripes – our beautiful flag that for more than two centuries has graced our ships, flown in our skies, and led our brave heroes to victory after victory in battle. That flag binds us all together as Americans who cherish our values and protect our way of life. The flag that reminds us today of who we are, what we stand for, and why we fight (Pentagon..., 2017, online).

Woven into that beautiful flag is the story of our resolve. We have overcome every challenge – every single challenge, every one of them – we've triumphed over every evil and remained united as one nation under God. America does not bend. We do not waver. And we will never, ever yield.

This paean to the flag in 2017 was related to major racial tensions simmering in America. In 2016 National Football League (NFL) quarterback Colin Kaepernick began to protest police brutality against communities of color at each game by sitting or kneeling during the national anthem rather than standing and facing the flag. Some other players joined him during the 2016 season. During preseason games in August 2017, the protest grew larger (NFL..., 2017). The goal, according to a fellow athlete and protester was to make a positive impact on many social justice issues, “[...] including systemic oppression against people of color, police brutality and the criminal justice system. We also discussed how we could use our platform, provided to us by being professional athletes in the N.F.L., to speak for those who are voiceless” (Reid, 2017, online). Professional football was an especially volatile setting for protest since American football games are broadcast live and after 9/11 have become even more strongly associated with nationalism and militarism (Butterworth, 2008).

President Trump became involved in these conflicts. He attacked the racial protests and the protesters verbally, stating (among other things) at a campaign rally, “Wouldn't you love to see one of the NFL owners, when somebody disrespects our flag, to say, 'Get that son of a bitch off the field right now. Out! He's fired. He's fired!'” (Graham, 2017, online). The president later told the media that his reaction to the racial protests had nothing to do with racial issues. “I never said anything about race. This has nothing to do with race or anything else. This has to do with respect for our country and respect for our flag” (Graham; Pengelly, 2017, online).

The president tried to delimit the interpretation of the American flag as a symbol that demanded respect and obedience. He associated it with institutions like the military, police, big business, and the judicial system that enforced his values as a powerful, extremely wealthy, white male. Many people from communities of color and their allies saw those institutions differently, and this racial confrontation found expression in Trump's 9/11 speech of 2017.

¹⁰ Obama's 2011 speech included one reference to the flag in passing (Remarks..., 2011; and cited above in this article) but the flag was not a subject of discussion.

References to crosses in the Trump era commemorations were also distinctive. There were no references to crosses in the earlier speeches under review here, nor in Bush's 2001 address to the nation on Sept. 11, nor even in Bush's remarks at the prayer service for victims three days later on Sept. 14 at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC (Bush..., 2001).

In the first Trump memorial in 2017, however, there was a brief reference to a simple wooden cross at the site that later became the Flight 93 National Memorial. The 2020 speech again mentioned that simple cross and also told the story of another cross. It is the longest story in any of the Trump speeches. The story was about a retired marine who worked relentlessly as a volunteer in the rescue efforts in the wreckage of the World Trade Center in 2001 but who was not identified publicly for five years. After that, the marine reconnected with two men whose lives he saved and they gave him a steel cross, said to be made from the very beam he helped lift to free them from the rubble. The president then quoted the marine's interpretation of the steel cross.

It [the cross] means a lot. It's a symbol of what we are as Americans, because that day we all came together and stood as a nation, as Americans. It didn't matter what race you were, what religion you were. It didn't matter. We all came together to help one another. I'd die for this country. I'd die for this country (Remarks..., 2020, online).

The scope of my article does not allow me to go into the incredible courage and harrowing trauma of this marine's actual experience in the wreckage of the World Trade Center (Garvin, 2015; Walansky, 2020). For the purposes of the president's speech, however, the marine's story was perfect. He was an African American who served eight years in the Marine Corps before 9/11 and was ready to die for his country. On 9/11 and in the ensuing days he went to incredible lengths to save the lives of strangers in a catastrophe, which he understood to be part and parcel of his complete devotion to the country. Perhaps most importantly, the president could use the African American marine's words and deeds to assert that in America race and religion do not matter. All Americans are bound together as a nation under the symbol of the cross.

But the cross is not an inclusive, interfaith symbol. It is a Christian symbol that has also become an important icon for American Christian nationalism. Together, the flag and the cross play a special role in forms of American Christian nationalism that enforce white supremacy (Baker, 2011, 2017; Stephens, 2017). The invocation of the flag and the cross in the Trump era speeches reflect that administration's effort to make the American transcendent discourse more explicitly racist and nationalist, using Christian symbols without enforcing Christian discourse or practices (Long, 1986).

The authoritarian tone in the Trump administration's use of symbols like the flag and the cross against domestic opponents was reinforced by threats made against foreign enemies. American resolve was a standard theme in all the presidential 9/11 speeches of the last two decades, but they normally focused on keeping Americans safe and bringing enemies to justice. During the Bush years, the battle with enemies was cast in dualist terms of good vs. evil, but Obama's 10th-anniversary speech attempted to introduce nuance by noting that America needed to continue to work on its own problems in order to fully embody its national values.

The Trump era speeches returned to a dualistic rhetoric against enemies that went beyond the ideology of safety and justice to one of vilification, punishment, and domination. The opponents were "barbaric forces of evil and destruction", "enemies of all civilized people", "horrible, horrible enemies – enemies like we've never seen before" (Pentagon..., 2017, online). Those "evil men bent on terror and conquest" were "forces of terror" with a "wicked, horrible, evil plan" (Trump..., 2018, online).

They were “pure evil”; one leader was a “savage killer” while another was the “world’s top terrorist” whose death ended “the brutal reign of the Iranian butcher” (Donald..., 2020, online).

The 2019 speech, however, made a surprising move beyond standard presidential rhetoric of measured response to one of boasting and intimidation.

We do not seek conflict, but if anyone dares to strike our land, we will respond with the full measure of American power and the iron will of the American spirit. And that spirit is unbreakable. We had peace talks scheduled a few days ago. I called them off when I learned that they had killed a great American soldier from Puerto Rico and 11 other innocent people. They thought they would use this attack to show strength. But actually what they showed is unrelenting weakness. The last four days, we have hit our enemy harder than they have ever been hit before, and that will continue. And if, for any reason, they come back to our country, we will go wherever they are and use power the likes of which the United States has never used before. And I’m not even talking about nuclear power. They will have never seen anything like what will happen to them (Remarks..., 2019, online).

Along with the authoritarian tone, there were blatant falsehoods and self-aggrandizement in the Trump era speeches that are quite different from the falsehoods of earlier speeches¹¹. This is most evident in the 2019 speech when President Trump engaged in a narration about where he was during the attacks. This sort of personal anecdote about 9/11 was avoided in all earlier presidential speeches, but Trump’s story is doubly distinctive because his claim to have helped at Ground Zero appears to be fictitious. He recalled how he was watching a morning business TV show when confused reports surfaced of a fire in the first tower. Later he said he was watching the second tower from a Midtown Manhattan building when the second plane hit.

It was then that I realized the world was going to change. I was no longer going to be – and it could never, ever be – that innocent place that I thought it was.

Soon after, I went down to Ground Zero with men who worked for me to try to help in any little way that we could (Remarks..., 2019, online).

There is no evidence that Donald Trump went to the World Trade Center wreckage on September 11, nor that he brought in employees to help. Later on September 11, a few hours after the planes destroyed the World Trade Center, Trump did a live 10-minute phone interview with WWOR radio in which he said nothing about visiting Ground Zero. Instead, he bragged falsely that 40 Wall Street, a building he owned, was now the tallest structure in New York¹². Two days later on September 13, he was near Ground Zero where he did a live interview on German television and claimed to have 100 workers on the ground with 125 more coming (Donald..., 2001a). The same day he did an interview with NBC in which he claimed to have hundreds of workers in place with 125 more coming (Donald..., 2001b). Fifteen years later on the campaign trail, Trump claimed that he had also pitched in: “Everyone who helped clear the rubble – and I was there, and I watched, and I helped a little bit – but I want to tell you: Those people were amazing” (Bump, 2016). No one has been able to verify these claims (Putterman, 2019; Rogers,

¹¹ There is much to be said about the contradictions, lies, and suppressions in the political discourse of all the speeches under analysis here, but that would exceed the scope of this article.

¹² According to Trump in the interview, “[...] 40 Wall Street actually was the second-tallest building in downtown Manhattan, and it was actually, before the World Trade Center, was the tallest – and then, when they built the World Trade Center, it became known as the second-tallest. And now it’s the tallest” (Kruse, 2016, online). In 1930, 40 Wall Street was probably the tallest building in the world for a few weeks in May (40 Wall Street..., 2021), but in 2001 after the destruction of the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 40 Wall Street was still only the third-tallest building in New York City (List..., 2022).

2019), so it seems that Trump's statement in the 2019 9/11 commemoration speech was a dishonest attempt to portray himself as a hero of 9/11¹³.

With hindsight, the cynical, self-serving mendacity of the Trump administration (Trump's..., 2021) is even clearer in the 2018 speech. At the Flight 93 National Memorial, he honored the 40 citizens who sacrificed their own lives in order to prevent the hijackers' attack on the nation's capital. Then Trump promised, "As Commander-in-Chief, I will always do everything in my power to prevent terrorists from striking American soil". But less than 3 years later on Jan. 6, 2021, President Trump did the opposite of his Flight 93 Memorial pledge when he incited an angry mob to attack the nation's capital. Hundreds of people from that mob have been arrested and the FBI is treating it as an act of domestic terrorism (The Capitol..., 2021). As Commander-in-Chief, Trump did not prevent terrorists from striking American soil as he promised. Rather, the president sent terrorists to attack the capitol, completing the one objective of the 9/11 hijackers that had escaped them.

Thus, the Trump era speeches did not represent a shift toward religious maximalism, for they did not attempt to establish religious control of the nation's transcendent discourse. Nor did they reflect the standard religious minimalism of previous 9/11 presidential speeches, for the 9/11 speeches of the Trump era mostly ignored Judaism and Christianity as possible complementary discourses, showed disdain for Islam, and disregarded all other religious traditions. Religion was not even a concern in these speeches. The statements instead returned to the dualistic framework of good vs. evil and amplified it after it had been downplayed by Obama. National symbols were deployed to generate obedience, using a heightened rhetoric of intimidation and blatant falsehoods. This was not a turn toward religious maximalism but rather toward white nationalism using Christian symbols.

Conclusion

The fortunes of American Christian Maximalism

As I write this conclusion we are approaching the 20th anniversary of 9/11, and I do not claim to know what the legacy of September 11 will be, for after years of studying apocalyptic groups I am too jaded to predict the future. But a few things about the results of the 9/11 attacks are already evident.

One is that Al Qaeda appears to have won the confrontation with American military power in Afghanistan. Lincoln argued that in September 2001 the American state quickly concluded that 9/11 was an attack like Pearl Harbor; *i.e.*, a preemptive strike designed to reduce or destroy America's ability to respond. He further argued that those who carried out the attacks saw the strike more like Hiroshima – a demonstration of fearsome, incomparable power that would lead to America's surrender and assimilation (Lincoln, 2006, p. 17).

I cannot speak about the intentions of those who executed the attacks of 9/11, but the texts they left suggest that they expected a prolonged battle, not a surrender or a quick resolution. The spiritual manual for the hijackers' last 24 hours trained them to see themselves as martyrs and not as conquerors (Kippenberg, 2005; Kippenberg, 2006; Kitts, 2010). When we include the opening section of bin Laden's speech on October 7 that was not included in Lincoln's transcript, it becomes clear that Al Qaeda was preparing its operatives for a long battle that would eventually succeed. The opening section of bin Laden's

¹³ For Trump's other false claims about his activities related to 9/11, see Voytko (2020).

speech compares their situation to the struggle over Palestine, the battles of Mohammed's followers, and the conquest of Jerusalem (Osama..., 2001, also quoted above).

Al Qaeda's long battle against the US in Afghanistan has been successful. Al Qaeda has paid a heavy price and bin Laden himself was killed by American forces just months before the 10th anniversary, but the US state has begun a final withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan to be completed before the 20th anniversary of 9/11 (Gibbons-Neff *et al.*, 2021). The American retreat comes as Taliban fighters are regaining territory in the provinces, and at least one US intelligence report expects that the American-backed government of Afghanistan could fall within six months of the US withdrawal (Lamothe; Harris, 2021).

The US has paid a heavy price as well, with at least 2,400 troop deaths and over 20,000 injured soldiers, and a total cost of well over 2 trillion dollars so far. Total deaths for civilians and fighters on all sides are estimated at above 240,000, which alludes to the even heavier price paid by the Afghan people (Myers, 2021). Given the human, economic, political, and military toll of the Afghanistan invasion and related wars, I conclude that the September 11 hijackings were largely successful. The attacks did not bring the US to its knees (yet), but it drew the US into a defeat in Afghanistan and into multiple military failures across the Asian continent that generated unresolved problems in the US and in the world that will persist for decades and probably generations¹⁴.

A second thing that is evident: the defeat of American power in Afghanistan showed the tenuous character of the national transcendent discourse. The US state was not able to bring its assailants to justice, was not able to win the freedom of the Afghani people, was not able to establish democratic regimes in Afghanistan or elsewhere, and was not able to bring peace to the region. I do not expect the American state to recognize its failure, but the consequences of the actual failure will undermine the general credibility of the national transcendent discourse. This could, in turn, undermine the state's religious minimalism that attempts to maintain autonomy from religious transcendent discourses.

One other thing is evident. The "symmetric dualisms" of October 7, 2001, did not draw the American state to embrace religious maximalism (yet). In spite of President Bush's feigned sympathy for Christian maximalists in his announcement of the invasion of Afghanistan, presidential commemorations of 9/11 remained firmly in the religious minimalist camp. They promoted a national transcendent discourse of freedom, justice, service, and duty that was supposed to be complementary to the religious discourses of American citizens. At the 10th anniversary of 9/11, the rhetoric of former President Bush was more overt about his own Christian orientation than before, but he exhorted all citizens of all faiths to continue to support American military ventures throughout the world as an extension of America's duty to support the freedom of all people. The rhetoric of President Obama was somewhat more optimistic about the ability of all religious discourses to flourish in a minimalist America, with "people of every conceivable race, religion, and ethnicity – all of them pledging allegiance to one flag" (Remarks..., 2011). That optimism receded in the Trump administration speeches, as appeals to religion decreased and appeals to racialized nationalism increased. By the end of the Trump years, the president was inciting acts of domestic terrorism in support of his racist authoritarian agenda.

Thus, the American Christian maximalists who helped put the Trump administration into office did not win control of the national transcendent discourse, and the Biden administration is taking a decidedly

¹⁴ For example, America's invasion of Iraq in 2003 was also justified in part by Iraq's support of Al Qaeda and Iraq's alleged involvement in global terrorism (United States, 2002). The Bush administration estimated that the Iraq war would cost \$50 billion to \$60 billion for the invasion, the restoration of order, and the installation of a new government (Herszenhorn, 2008). As of 2020, the US had spent \$2 trillion there, and a 2018 report put the total casualties at 268,000-295,000 deaths including military and civilians on all sides (Crawford, 2018).

different approach to issues of race and religion in America. But American Christian maximalists made significant progress consolidating their influence in the judicial and legislative branches of American government. So it still remains to be seen whether Christian maximalists can use their growing strength in the nation's regulatory institutions to force a change in the nation's transcendent discourse that would move the US toward Christian maximalism in the long wake of 9/11.

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