

Daniela Hamann

## Concepts in Motion

Religion and Race in the Political Oratory  
of Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy and Barack Obama

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Daniela Hamann

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*For  
Mami  
Papi  
Jacy  
Geneviève  
and  
AJ*



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## Acknowledgments

I was just about to complete my M.A. when Barack Obama began his run for the Presidency. While I was writing my exam paper and contemplated that University life would soon be a memory of the past, I began to closely follow the rapid ascent of a young Senator who, very quickly, had a very real chance to become President, the first African American President to be precise. Everything that I could find about this young politician became my reading matter and I was instantly fascinated by his rather unusual childhood biography. When I read Barack Obama's autobiographies, I was captured by his way of thinking that he so openly shared with the reader. Being a mother of mixed children myself, I admired how he described his struggle to find his identity, how he was torn between black and white cultures, the two ethnicities he unites within himself. As a scholar, I was fascinated by his analysis of the two concepts inside his autobiographies that I would eventually choose to examine in my dissertation – religion and race. He used these concepts in his writing as well as in his oratory. It was fascinating to watch this aspiring President speak, particularly after learning that he had initially not been a very good rhetorician. Nevertheless, from the beginning of his campaign, his speeches were absolutely captivating and never dull and boring. Hence, I knew I wanted to further analyze his speeches as the main focus of my study. However, I did not only want to learn about the speeches of Barack Obama. Throughout his campaign, Barack Obama named two political figures that he considered role models and whose work he called inspirational: Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy. It was instantly clear to me that this was it: I wanted to compare the oratory of these three important American Presidents who at first glance seem to be so very dissimilar – not only because they stem from different eras, or the distinct party affiliations and the diverse ethnicities they represent – yet have so much in common.

It would not have been possible to finish this study successfully without the academic help of Mita Banerjee, Professor and chair of the Transnational American Studies Institute (Obama Institute) at Mainz University. She assisted me in finding my way when I thought I couldn't finish this project and she helped me finalize a very important step in my academic life.

Privately, I would not have been able to push through to success without the unconditional support of my family who never stopped believing in me and my project and who encouraged me not to give up when I thought I could go no further. Thank you Mami, Papi, Jacy, Geneviève and AJ. I love you all very much!



*Oh, thus be it ever, when freemen shall stand  
Between their loved home and the war's desolation!  
Blest with victory and peace, may the heav'n-rescued land  
Praise the Power that hath made and preserved us a nation!*

The National Anthem of  
the United States of America  
(Last Verse)

## 1. Introduction

Political situations of any kind always require a well thought out and convincing response. Political leaders are often the authors and almost always the bearers of this response. In the case of the United States of America the political leader is the President.<sup>1</sup> His political oratory is well studied and analyzed in minute detail. When I began to research for this study I noticed that the political rhetoric of U.S. Presidents is often special with regard to the creation of new notions. Notions that hold the promise to foster a new era, change society, and lastly, hold the potential to influence other nations and to become a role model with regard to political acting when the achievement of national unity is the highest priority. I was particularly fascinated by the presidential rhetoric of the three Presidents who I have selected for my study and whom stem from different eras as well as different political parties: Abraham Lincoln who was Republican, John F. Kennedy who was a member of the Democratic Party and Barack Obama who is a Democrat. Why have I chosen the political rhetoric of these three Presidents for my study? I have chosen the oratory of these three Presidents for the following reasons:

Firstly, I wanted to select Presidents from different time periods and political parties<sup>2</sup> in order to cover as much of American history as possible, while simultaneously focusing on a chronological development.

Secondly, what finalized my selection was the fact that all three Presidents faced, or face a context in which conflicts and crises are acute and require a thoughtful solution. This fact provides my study with an internal self-explanatory logic.

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<sup>1</sup> *The U.S. Government Printing Office Style Manual* advises to capitalize "President." Since regulations about the grammatical rule with regard to the capitalization of "President" are unclear, I have decided to follow this rule throughout my paper (see: [www.gpo.gov](http://www.gpo.gov) [18 September 2014]).

<sup>2</sup> In the course of this study, I will also point at parallels with other Presidents than the three selected for this dissertation.

Moreover, all three Presidents were and are confronted with severe situations of political emergencies which resulted in military action, even though all three Presidents prioritized peaceful solutions.

Additionally, Lincoln, Kennedy and Obama are considered excellent rhetoricians who have created and delivered convincing speeches.

Finally, the three Presidents provide an academically precious opportunity for a comparative analysis in order to show how cultural concepts applied in rhetoric can move a nation and offer a political solution in form of a rhetorical response.

Moreover, each one of the three Presidents faced various political challenges on his way to the White House and during his time in office. Lincoln and Kennedy were and in the case of Obama are more visionary with regard to the oratorical introduction of new social orders than other U.S. Presidents. What distinguishes these Presidents furthermore is the fact that all three were firsts: Lincoln was the first President who did not commit himself to a particular religious denomination, Kennedy was the first Catholic President and Obama is the first African American in office. Two concepts dominate the political oratory of these three Presidents: the concept of religion and the concept of race.<sup>3</sup> While the content of a response to a complex political situation needs to protect the basic principles of the United States, principles which were compiled during the founding of the country in 1776, and which are central elements with regard to the U.S.'s definition as a nation, the concepts of religion and race serve as tools in the oratory of the three Presidents. At this point, I would like to introduce the theory on which I have build this dissertation and that I have employed with regard to the methodology of my study and in particular with regard to the concept of religion: American civil religion as defined by Robert N. Bellah in his essay "Civil Religion in America" (1967). Robert Bellah describes American civil religion as a concept that is not static, but that moves and progresses through the influence of historical and political events. These events set American civil religion in motion<sup>4</sup> in various ways. The

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<sup>3</sup> Many scholars explain that the boundaries of race and ethnicity have been continuously shifting "over the past decade" due to the lack of consensus about what the boundaries really are (Bloch and Solomos 5-6). In many of the secondary sources that I have examined, both terms have been used as equivalents. I have chosen to focus on the concept of race, because I believe that it is different from ethnicity. Frye Jacobson supports my claim when he explains: "a late-twentieth-century understanding of 'difference'" has been transported "into a period whose inhabitants recognized biologically based 'races' rather than culturally based 'ethnicities'" (3). I believe that this understanding is still very dominant today. Moreover, in my paper, I am more interested in the aspect of categorization than in the question of cultural differences. However, I will use the term "ethnicity" in an explanatory manner at times.

<sup>4</sup> At this point the question arises, what was my intention when selecting the term "motion?" I believe that a concept is never static. This thesis was confirmed when I studied the concept of religion and the concept of race with regard to the oratory of Lincoln, Kennedy and Obama. Depending on the context, but also on the intention and the biographical background of the user of the concept, the conception can be redefined, changed or even fused with other concepts. Popular definitions for the term "motion"

same applies to the concepts of religion and race in the oratory of the three Presidents, as I will demonstrate in the course of this thesis. Religion and race do not remain motionless but are actuated through the respective context.<sup>5</sup> I am aware that in his later works,<sup>6</sup> Bellah did not progress the concept he introduced in “Civil Religion in America” but instead focused his research more on the development of individualism in American society and conflicting “Visions of the Role of Religion in American Society.” Therefore, one could now argue that the theory by Robert Bellah is outdated, since it was compiled in 1967. I will argue, however, that this theory is valid to this day. I will show this during the course of my paper. Generally, it was no coincidence that Bellah is writing in the context of Kennedy’s presidency – a fact that aids in my analysis of Kennedy’s oratory. Moreover, I argue, and I will provide further proof in the course of my study, that what Bellah outlines in his theory of American civil religion can also be used to describe Barack Obama’s campaign and presidency. This study ties in with an analysis of religion in the presidential rhetoric of John F. Kennedy and George W. Bush, while broadening the scope significantly by adding race.<sup>7</sup>

A second theory that I have employed with regard to my analysis of the race factor in the oratory of the three Presidents is a notion that I have developed based on American civil religion and that I am calling American civil race. Just as American civil religion is a hybrid concept that consists of elements from the various religious categories as well as political ideas, American civil race is a hybrid that consists of elements from the various racial categories, as well as political and cultural conventions and ideas. Like American civil religion, American civil race is not static but progresses and moves under the influence of social, political and historical events. As American civil religion has been created as a tolerant and all-inclusive idea within the U.S. society, American civil race has been developed with the same aim, but on the level of differences of origins as opposed to differences of philosophies.

Both American civil religion and American civil race strive to eliminate negative categorization, through either religious or ethnical affiliation that could result in abuse and discrimination, while promoting commonality, tolerance and equality. At the same time, individual ethnical identities or religious identification should be kept intact.

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are for instance: “The process of moving, an impulse” (see also <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/122693?rskey=xfJ7hh&result=1#eid> [18 June 2012]).

<sup>5</sup> This context can be manifold, e.g.: a political crisis, a natural catastrophe, an important historical event, etc.

<sup>6</sup> “Conclusion: Competing Visions of the Role of Religion in American Society” (1987), “The Kingdom of God in America: Language of Faith, Language of Nation, Language of Empire” (1988), “Religion and the Shape of National Culture” (1999), “Religion: Evolution and Development” (2001), *Religion in Human Evolution* (2011).

<sup>7</sup> In her monography *The Role of Religion in American Presidential Rhetoric: A Comparative Analysis of Speeches by John F. Kennedy and George Bush*, Sonja Schwarz explores the interconnectedness of religion and political speech in the U.S by example of the political oratory of Kennedy and Bush.

Each of the three Presidents that I have selected for my study put the emphasis of his political work on the persuasive power of their rhetoric. Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy and Barack Obama have used the concepts<sup>8</sup> of religion and race often and have adapted them to the various contexts and events during which a winning political speech was required. However, in general, the phenomena that result from both concepts often also cause a difference of opinion. While the social phenomenon that results from the concept of religion has equally the power to divide and to unite,<sup>9</sup> the phenomenon that is a consequence of the concept of race has thus far mostly created disunity.<sup>10</sup> Yet, Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy and Barack Obama have detected in both concepts a power to encourage and lead the nation out of a problematic political situation. By manipulating the negative factors and employing the resulting positive power, every one of the three Presidents creates his own unique approach with regard to each concept.

### *Religion in the Oratory of Lincoln, Kennedy and Obama*

For Lincoln, religion was closely connected to Christianity, and more exactly to Protestantism. Throughout his political career and his presidency, Lincoln experienced a personal development with regard to his use of religious language. While he was more careful at the beginning, his second inaugural address, in the words of Richard Cawardine (2008), “reflects Lincoln’s evolution as a religious thinker and his understanding of the power of religious ideas and institutions to inspire Americans in a struggle to which he himself attached a providential meaning” (239). Lincoln conceived of what I would call a sacred progression beginning with the Bible, followed by the Declaration of Independence and finalized with the U.S. Constitution and especially its article on justice. Moreover, Abraham Lincoln read religion through the eyes of a disciple of the enlightenment movement. He used and developed the concept of what Robert Bellah terms civil religion further. As a result, the Declaration of Independence together with the Constitution became his main pillars of “American civil religion.” And as a consequence, as I would like to claim, the concept of American civil religion puts the Bible and the Declaration of Independence on one level, which furthermore results in what I call a sacred progression. Lincoln had recognized early on, that religious language promised to be a powerful tool in his fight for peace, reconstruction and the reunion of

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<sup>8</sup> The term concept itself combines a number of characteristics which form a concept. In the next chapter, I will point at certain characteristics that create the concept of religion and the concept of race.

<sup>9</sup> The discrimination of the British crown against religious minorities was one of the reasons why the Colonies eventually decided to unite and to form the United States of America. Moreover, the intolerance against Catholic Irish immigrants in the U.S. represents another example for the dividing influence within the concept of race.

<sup>10</sup> Examples are for instance slavery or the Civil Rights Movement, as well as general racial discrimination.