God in the 2015-2016 Presidential Debates: 
Using American Civil Religion and Public Religion to Win Party Delegates

According to the formal political process in America, in order to be elected the President of the United States, a candidate needs electoral votes, which ideally reflect the desires of the American voting public. A recent Pew Research survey of a representative sample of voters discovered that 51% of adults “would be less likely to vote for a presidential candidate who does not believe in God.” In addition, 51% of adults say it is “very important” or “somewhat important” to have “someone in the White House who shares their religious perspective. This view is particularly common among Republicans, among whom roughly two-thirds say it is as least ‘somewhat important’ to them that the president share their religious beliefs.”

With this in mind, the conservative magazine *Christianity Today* published an article referencing the survey and cooed, “The message is clear: faith matters.”

The remainder of the article lists the religious affiliation of each of the candidates in the presidential race, in order to prepare its readers for evaluating the candidates during the debates and the up-coming election season (Figure 1).

Scholars who work at the intersection of religion and politics are most interested in answering questions about whether religious groups shape American politics and culture, yet they rarely examine politicians as political actors who are also religious practitioners. According to the *Christianity Today* article, all of the candidates are Christians except Bernie Sanders, who is “Jewish by birth but says he is not now involved in organized religion,” and Jim Gilmore, who had not publicly expressed his religious affiliation.

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3 Ibid.
interested in the religion of the next president and that the candidates themselves report their religious preferences to the media, there exists a lacuna in sociological scholarship regarding the intersection of personal religion and formal politics. The presidential candidates are viewed by voters on the public dais during broadcast debates as both political and religious actors, and as such, the political discourse on the platform presumably also contains religious language that speaks to the voting audience. The symbiotic relationship between the candidates and the voters points to the importance of analyzing whether statements made during the debates that used religious language should be understood in the context of civil religion, public religion, a personal disclosure made by a religious person, or merely a colloquialism.

In order to make this determination, I tabulated the occurrence of “God,” “church,” “religion” (to catch “religion” and “religious”), and “Christ” (to find variants such as “Christian”) in all of the Republican and Democrat debate transcripts through the New Hampshire primary. I also recorded the presence of other religious language that did not include the above terms, but I did not count references to “Islam” or “ISIS,” as these terms were not necessarily used with a religious connotation. I collected this data for each candidate. The results, sorted according to the total number of responses that included religious language, are shown in Figures 2 and 3.

For the Republicans, Huckabee, Kasich, Jindal, Carson, and Santorum all responded to questions during the debates with at least ten references to religion. With the exception of Jindal, all of these candidates were participants in the debates through the Iowa caucus. Of these men, only Huckabee worked at least one religious response into every debate. For the Democrats, the top contenders regularly made religious references. Most of the religious language was used in the first three debates; after January, Clinton and Sanders each made only one reference per debate.

To compare the responses across parties, a tabulation of the average number of religious references per debate is shown in Figure 4. This data shows that Democrats and Republicans
both deployed religious language during the debates in similar proportions; however, the use of religious language was not a determining factor in securing the most delegates at Iowa or New Hampshire. Jindal’s superlative use of religion could not garner him enough success in the polls to continue past the November debate. Clinton was the third most prolific user of religious language, yet Sanders beat her in the New Hampshire primary (see Figure 5). O’Malley ranked only slightly below Clinton in his use of religious language, yet he failed to secure a single delegate in the Iowa caucus and he subsequently dropped out of the race. Trump, who participated in seven of the eight debates, made only a single religious reference and only in the first debate, yet he came in second in the Iowa caucus and won the New Hampshire primary, earning eighteen delegates. Of the other top Republican contenders, Bush, Christie, and Cruz all ranked higher in their tally of religious references than Trump. Christie failed to secure any delegates and Bush gained only four. Cruz, the Iowa winner for the Republicans, was in the bottom two-fifths of users of religious language, yet he walked away with eleven delegates.

Given that religious language was not a guarantor of delegates in these primaries, why did all of the candidates who persisted at least until the Iowa caucus use religious language in the debates? The two options considered here are frequently used by scholars as frameworks for understanding the intersection between religion and politics: civil religion and public religion. Both of these theories offer the means for analyzing the religious and political discourse that occurs in the public sphere. In the case of the 2015-2016 presidential debates, however, neither is sufficient to explain the use of religious language by candidates of both parties. Whereas Democrats adapted civil religion by emphasizing religious tolerance and removing almost all religious terminology from their political discourse, Republicans augmented civil religious discourse with a type of public religion that encourages sectarian language and gives its leaders a bully pulpit.
**Adapting Civil Religion in the Twenty-First Century**

One possible explanation for the use of religious language during the recent presidential debates is that during solemn, public addresses, politicians strengthen their appeals to voters by invoking the language of American civil religion. In this scenario, what seems like religious language could alternately be interpreted as political discourse used to unify the nation, in this case to polarize voters for the election of the next president. An examination of the religious language used during the early 2015-2016 debates reveals that civil religion is a useful lens for analyzing the Democratic candidates’ discourse but is insufficient for the Republican Party.

In 1967 Robert Bellah identified a “well-institutionalized civil religion in America” that exists outside any particular church and is best understood as a “religious dimension” to American culture.\(^4\) Bellah examined presidential speeches and concluded that “What people say on solemn occasions need not be taken at face value, but it is often indicative of deep-seated values and commitments that are not made explicit in the course of everyday life.”\(^5\) Bellah asserted that the “set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals” comprising civil religion strongly linked American understandings of presidential authority with a “higher criterion” that transcended the political office.\(^6\) Presidents, and I contend this includes presidential candidates, employ religious language that emphasize “the obligation, both collective and individual, to carry out God’s will on earth. This was the motivating spirit of those who founded American, and it has been present in every generation since.”\(^7\) While the language of civil religion borrows heavily from Christianity, Bellah averred that “there was an implicit but quite clear division of function between the civil religion and Christianity.”\(^8\) The linguistic themes, including deliverance,
reconciliation, sacrifice, rebirth, and purity, have changed over time, but their function remains constant: to produce “national solidarity and to mobilize deep levels of personal motivation for the attainment of national goals.”

Bellah’s framework has been challenged repeatedly since the 1960s, but civil religion persists as a useful category of analysis for some scholars into the current decade. For example, Peter Gardella described twenty-first century American civil religion as a “system of symbols, actions, and ideas…[that] binds together groups of people.” This system is “unified by four values—personal freedom (often called liberty), political democracy, world peace, and cultural (including religious, racial, ethnic, and gender) tolerance.” Gardella specified typical symbols that have unified Americans, including the flag, formative texts like the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, and the founding fathers. Actions might include celebrating national holidays, such as Thanksgiving and Martin Luther King, Jr.’s birthday. Ideas include patriotism, the existence of certain inalienable human rights, and America as a moral exemplar to the world. While some scholars debate whether the Vietnam War tolled the death knell for civil religion, others like Gardella have added the Vietnam War and the site of the World Trade Center bombing to the list of unifying symbols.

Sociologist Rhys Williams expanded the boundaries of American civil religion to include cultural understandings of race and religion, saying that civil religion “is composed of understandings and practices that treat the sociopolitical collectivity as having sacred dimensions and finds both its collective identity and its history religiously meaningful.” In the first centuries of America’s history, civil religion implied “the inseparability of religion, race, and

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9 Ibid., 50.
11 Ibid., 3.
national identity—that is, white, Christian, and American.” According to Williams, more recent historical events have challenged that original conception, as American culture increasingly has become religiously plural and as new immigration patterns and civil rights activism have emphasized the nonwhite demographics of America’s citizens.

Evidence of these types of symbols and values are present in the transcripts of the debates for both parties. Democrats started the debate cycle with explicit references to standard symbols in American civil religion, including founding father John Quincy Adams, Franklin Roosevelt, and military service in the Vietnam War as a badge of honor. A common theme was making America better for the sake of the children. In November Martin O’Malley referenced Puritan John Winthrop’s providential expectation saying, “Our role in the world is to make ourselves a beacon of hope.” Taking advantage of the timing of the January debate, Hillary Clinton linked religion and politics through a personal reference to a day when “my youth minister took me to hear Dr. King.” Two candidates emphasized America as one of several moral leaders in the world, linking politics and transcendent values in a global context. The Jewish candidate Bernie Sanders apparently hoped to unify Americans and moral citizens around the globe when he referred to Pope Francis as a moral leader who was concerned with climate change and “the future of the planet.” Similarly, O’Malley described the person who occupies the office of President of the United States as “a leader of moral nations around this Earth.”

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13 Ibid., 239.
Republican candidates referred to the Revolutionary War, the Constitution, George and Martha Washington, John Adams, and especially Ronald Reagan. They repeatedly drew upon the image of the American dream, making America stronger (because the candidates agreed that the nation was deteriorating), and creating a better future for all Americans. In September John Kasich referenced Winthrop’s vision through Reagan’s agenda to “restore [America] to that great, shining city on a hill.” Republicans also heavily emphasized the need for moral leadership in the office of the president in order to maintain the moral “character of this nation,” as Carly Fiorina stressed in September. Marco Rubio stressed “the dignity of all people, human rights, the rights of all to live in freedom and liberty, and choose their own path in life,” as well as the need to inculcate “strong values” which are taught “in strong families and reinforced in you in strong communities.” Ben Carson noted the need for unity when he used the Preamble to the Constitution saying, “we the American people are not each other’s enemies, it’s those people who are trying to divide us who are the enemies.” Republicans also agreed that America needs to have a strong presence in the world, and when Jeb Bush declared “we sure as heck better be the world’s leader,” the audience erupted in cheers. Ted Cruz noted that “what ties Americans together is we are all the children of those who risked everything for freedom.”

Although both Democrats and Republicans employed typical symbols, they failed to use religious language in a manner that coheres tightly with civil religion. According to Bellah’s

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18 Reagan, and Franklin Roosevelt arguably have replaced George Washington as two partisan symbols that have been elevated to the stature of a nonsectarian, political deity in civil religious discourse.
20 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
conception of civil religion established by the founding fathers, the use of certain nonsectarian, religious terms is necessary. He notes, “neither Washington nor Adams nor Jefferson mentions Christ in his inaugural address; nor do any of the subsequent presidents, although not one of them fails to mention God.” The Democrats’ debate speeches do not comport with this model of civil religion. Of the twenty-eight uses of religious language by the Democrats, only four instances mention God, and all are used by Clinton in a single phrase that she repeated. She used the phrase three times in the initial debate: in her opening statement, in response to a question about economic success, and in the context of race relations Clinton expressed the hope that each American child could “live up to his or her God-given potential.” She repeated that exact phrase in her closing statement in the December debate. Clinton used the phrase one other time, in the February debate, but that time she omitted the word “God,” saying in her opening statement that she envisioned America as a place “where every child gets to live up to his or her potential.” None of the other Democrats used “God.” In marked contrast, all but three of the seventeen Republican presidential candidates used the term “God.” Only two of the nine contenders who earned delegates at the Iowa caucus (Trump and Paul) did not reference God, and all of the candidates (except Trump) who won delegates at the New Hampshire primary spoke the word “God” at least once during the debates. Furthermore, “God” was used a total of forty-six times by the candidates, constituting almost half of the 110 religious references made by the Republicans.

Even if God was not evenly mentioned across the platform, the remainder of the Democrats’ religious language was deployed in a nonsectarian manner. The twenty-four other instances included several mentions of “prayer” or “belief,” a statement about evil, and

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numerous comments regarding “religious” war with Middle Eastern countries. O’Malley mentioned visiting a mosque, Sanders repeated the phrase “soul of Islam” during several debates, and Clinton used “heaven” once. Several seemingly sectarian terms were also used, including Sanders’s reference to the Pope and one assertion of the need to aid “Christians” who were being persecuted in Syria, but the latter was framed in terms of immigration policy, not religion.

Despite the seeming conformance to Bellah’s guideline for the use of “God,” Republicans are notably out of conformance in their prolific use of other religious terms (such as “prayer,” “miracle,” “evil,” “Satan,” “faith,” “blessing” and “blessed”) in a conspicuously evangelical manner, casting doubt about whether their use of “God” is truly nonsectarian. There are instances when “God” was used in a nonsectarian or sometimes colloquial manner, such as when Kasich used human rights language that predates Clinton saying that people having “a right to their God-given purpose,”28 Huckabee asserts that America is “one nation under God,”29 and Rubio cavalierly stated, “but what happens, God forbid, if…”30 Much more prevalent, however, was the invocation of God’s name by self-proclaimed Christian politicians. For example, when Bush referred to God, the first time is in the context of his statement, “I got to act on my core beliefs. It’s part of who I am. Life is a gift from God.”31 As a Christian acting on his core, faith-driven beliefs, he most certainly meant that life is bestowed by the Christian God. Bush’s second use was the phrase, “the grace of God and the grace of forgiveness and the mercy…”; this explicitly references Christian theological ideas about the nature of God.32 Mike Huckabee, a Southern Baptist pastor, pined for an authentic use of the phrase, “God bless America,” in which Americans “unapologetically get on our knees before we get on our feet [as one of] the best

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29 Ibid.
solutions we’ve ever sought as a country.” One then wonders when he included the phrase “God bless you, and thank you for your support” in his closing statement whether he was offering a benediction or merely using a catchphrase from civil religion. Cruz, the son of Christian pastor, thanked the local attendees at the South Carolina debate for having “welcomed my dad to preach at your churches.” Overall, Republicans use “God” in sectarian and non-sectarian ways, and some candidates use the term both ways.

This tendency to assign multiple meanings to the signifier “God” is not surprising, given how often Republican candidates associate religious terms with political conservatism and the defining characteristics of the Republican Party. During the main debate on January 28, one moderator exclaimed, “The campaign has…turned into a battle for the soul of the Republican party.” In one sense, this could be understood as a take-off on the repeated use of the Democrats’ discussions about the battle for “the soul of Islam” in the war on terror, a phrase used by them in a nonsectarian manner. Alternately, the word “soul” could be tied to the insistence of many of the Republicans on the debate platform that their Party is both politically and religiously conservative. For instance in Des Moines, interviewer Chris Wallace noted that “almost 60% of Republican caucus-goers identify themselves as Evangelicals.” In the August undercard debate, interviewer MacCallum posed a question on terrorism and urged the respondent to “keep in mind that conservatives are increasingly concerned in this country with religious liberty.”

*Christianity Today* noted that faith matters to religiously conservative voters, and the Republican Party claimed to be a politically conservative party comprised of religiously conservative voters.

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33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
Over the course of the debates leading up to the New Hampshire primary election, no candidate risked being labeled a liberal or moderate Republican, but they disagreed on what it meant to be politically conservative. MacCallum introduced a topic for debate saying, “So it will come as no surprise that there is an idea out there that there is a civil war brewing within the GOP over the meaning of conservative and the question of who is electable. There are some in the GOP who are so outraged by Trump and Cruz that they say they would actually rather have Hillary Clinton in the White House.” He implied that Republican voters would only elect a conservative to the office of president and that two of the candidates were not perceived as conservative enough to qualify. At the next debate interviewer Muir broached the subject directly and asked three candidates “what it means to be a conservative.” Kasich linked religion and politics when he responded, “in America, conservatism should mean not only that some rise with conservative principles, but everybody has a chance to rise regardless of who they are so they can live their God given purpose.” Rubio offered a politico-economic definition: “Well, I think conservatism is about three things…limited government, especially at the federal level…free enterprise, which is an economic model…and it’s about a strong national defense.” Muir primed Trump before allowing him to answer, stressing the crucial connection between conservatism and the Republican Party. He asked, “Mr. Trump, you've heard the argument from many of the candidates on this stage that you're not a true conservative. Tell the voters watching tonight why you are.” Trump responded with a politically unorthodox, environmental definition: “Well, I think I am, and to me, I view the word conservative as a derivative I — of — of the word conserve.”

Regardless of the ambiguous use of the term, a number of candidates took advantage of the debate venue to link conservatism and sectarian religion. In his closing comments in October, Bobby Jindal stated,

““My message is to conservatives, this is our hour. Thanks to the insanity, the incompetence of the Democratic party, the American people are ready to turn our government over to us. It’s not enough to let just any Republican, however. The reality is the idea of America is slipping away. As Christians, we believe that the tomb is empty. As Americans, we believe that our best days are always ahead of us, and they can be again...I’ve got the courage to apply our conservative principles. I can’t do it alone. With your help, with God’s grace, we can save the idea of America before it’s too late.””

Jindal was the top user of religious language in the four debates in which he participated. For him, conservative Republicans are evangelical Christians who believe in a providential teleology and whose theology teaches that Christ has been resurrected and given power to affect change in present-day situations. Fiorina, who ranked fifth of all the Republicans leading up the Iowa caucuses in the use of religious language, communicated a link between conservatism (as antithetical to Democratic progressivism) and religion in her explanation of her first executive order as President. She said, “I am a conservative because I believe no one of us is any better than any other one of us. Every one of us is gifted by God, whether it is those poor babies being picked over [by abortion] or it’s someone whose life is tangled up in a web of dependence. Progressives don’t believe that…we have to undo a whole set of things that President Obama has done.”

For Fiorina, conservatives are also pro-life Christians who believe that God finds significance in every individual and equips each one with a gift for navigating this life on earth.

The Republicans’ repeated use of sectarian terms and the Democrats’ low commitment to use religious language at all present one challenge to the use of civil religion as a category of analysis. A second indication that civil religion is not a sufficient framework is evidenced in the

40 Ibid.
most prevalent twenty-first century theme in civil religion in these debates: terrorism. Both parties used this theme to unify Americans against an outside threat to the modern way of life and around an issue of national security. As Republican candidate Rand Paul succinctly stated, “The question is, how do we keep America safe from terrorism?” In the debates, terrorism was addressed through symbols such as the Cold War, the first Gulf War, the 9/11 attacks, the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, and events in Autumn 2015. Because of the timing of the debates, Republicans mentioned “the 14th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks,” Democrats marked the November terrorist bombings in Paris, and both parties noted the San Bernardino shootings and the American soldiers who were held hostage in Iran. For Democrats, the biggest threats to national security included nuclear attack from Iran, the Middle East chaos, climate change, and cyber attacks from China. In contrast, Republicans were almost exclusively concerned with “radical Islam.” Bush referred to the FBI’s ability to shut down the “un-American activities” of terrorists within the nation, and all Republican candidates engaged in discussions about how to respond to the latest external threat—ISIS. Although candidates from both parties deployed the term “Islam” in reference to the theme of terrorism, my analysis of the debate transcripts reveals a dichotomy in the Democrats’ and Republicans’ use of Islam as a symbol of terrorism in civil religion. Democrats used “Islam” in the political and military context of terrorism, while Republicans associated Islam with religious apostasy and cultural danger, implying a fatal challenge to the nation’s transcendent goals but also to their own sectarian, teleological vision.

Bellah noted that civil religion has been effectively invoked to “attack nonconformist and liberal ideas and groups of all kinds…[including] as a justification for the shameful treatment” of

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marginalized groups of people residing at home and abroad. Yet according to Gardella’s updated model of civil religion, religious tolerance, within the broader category of cultural tolerance, is now a tenet of civil religion. Similarly, Williams asserts that religious and racial tolerance are important components of American civil religion in the twenty-first century. Williams noted how Muslim terrorism and the election of the first black American president have “disrupted the implicit cultural triangle of race, religion, and national identity” in the civil religion narrative. The presence of Muslims in America (in light of the worldwide Islamic terrorist acts in the past twenty years) and a nonwhite national leader directly challenge the longstanding assumptions about American national identity that form the basis of civil religion. For Williams, “Civil religious discourse, that is, the assemblages of images, symbols, arguments, and beliefs that connect the nation (and often the polity) to the transcendent and its purposes, continues to abound in our political culture….but it is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore who is portrayed as included in the nation and who is identified for exclusion.” Ultimately Williams suggests that civil religious discourse is fluid and is currently being refined to incorporate new cultural knowledge regarding race, religion, and neoliberalism.

Based on the rhetoric employed during the presidential debates, however, religious tolerance and civil religion come into conflict in the arena of terrorism, revealing two distinct perspectives that fall along party lines. Democrats emphasized the need to respect the religion of Islam while repudiating ISIS’s militancy. This distinction was made explicit at the conclusion of the very first debate when O’Malley was asked how this debate differed from the Republican debates thusfar and he answered, “You didn’t hear anyone speak ill of another American because

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44 Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” 51.
45 Williams, “Civil Religion and the Cultural Politics of National Identity in Obama’s America,” 248.
46 Ibid., 254.
of their religious belief.” After the San Bernardino attack, Clinton identified a need to work more closely with Muslim-American communities regarding terrorism in American, “not demonize them, as the Republicans have,” which incited fear and bigotry in Americans by describing the Western world as being “war against Islam.” At the debate held the day after the attack on Paris by ISIS, the moderator asked the candidates about the difference between Islam, Muslims, jihadists, and radical Islam, in response to Rubio’s prior statement that “we are at war with ‘radical Islam.’” Clinton responded, “We are not at war with Islam or Muslims. We are at war with violent extremism…with people who use their religion for purposes of power and oppression…so barbaric and so vicious that it doesn’t seem to have any purpose other than lust for killing and power.” According to Clinton, the United States has been the victim of this “jihadi extreme terrorism” for decades. O’Malley responded, “I believe in calling it what it is, is to say radical jihadists…Muslim Americans in our country and throughout the world understand that this brutal and barbaric group is perverting the name of a great world religion.” Sanders repeatedly paraphrased King Abdullah II of Jordan’s assessment of the situation, saying that this was a military action that primarily concerned “the Muslim nations in the region” and was at its heart a “war for the soul of Islam” that could only be ended when the Muslim countries “lead the effort” to militarily eradicate ISIS. Regarding Muslim terrorism within national borders, Clinton said, “we must work more closely with Muslim-American communities…to hear from them about what they’re doing to try to stop radicalization.” For the Democratic candidates, terrorism was rooted in the radicalization of Muslims by the barbaric jihadists known as ISIS—not by civilized practitioners of a major world religion, was primarily a threat external to American borders, and

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50 Ibid.
should be resolved by Muslim nations, who had the greatest stake in the outcome of the Middle Eastern war.

In contrast, Republican candidates attacked “radical Islamic terrorists” like ISIS as religious and military bullies, and religion and politics were tightly enmeshed in Republican conceptions of terrorism. Specifically, they perceived Islam as a competing religious ideology that threatened the preservation of the Christian nation of America, a perspective that the Democrats did not appreciate because of differences in ideas about conflict resolution and theology. Lindsey Graham explained, “There's four things you need to understand about this war, it's a religious war, them against the world, if you don't fight them over there, they're coming here. If you don't hit them first, they're going to hit us.”52 The candidates agreed that negotiation would not resolve this conflict—military action was imperative. Graham’s plan was to “win a war that we can't afford to lose. I have a plan to destroy radical Islam because it has to be. These are religious Nazis running while President Obama has made one mistake after another and it's caught up with us.”53 When asked how he would fight ISIS, Jindal replied, “Well, to start with, unlike President Obama, I'll actually name the enemy that we confront. We've got a president who cannot bring himself to say the words "radical Islamic terrorism”…he loves to criticize America, apologize for us…How can we beat an enemy if our commander-in-chief doesn't have the moral honesty and clarity to say that Islam has a problem, and that problem is radical Islam.”54 When asked by the interviewer, “As the Islamic state continues to expand, slaughtering and crucifying Christians…should we accept refugees?” Huckabee replied, “I’ve been concerned that this administration has not done anything to help stop the slaughter of...

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In January he re-iterated, “We have a President who seems to be more interested in protecting the reputation and image of Islam than he is protecting us.” The candidates viewed America as a Christian nation that had to be preserved as such, and as Christians they also associated themselves with the worldwide Christian community. From this perspective, Islamic terrorism was a religious problem to be solved militarily by Americans.

For Republican candidates, political militancy took on religious overtones in light of conflicts between Christians and Muslims in the past millennium and the religious narratives that developed around those events. According to Jindal, “We need to do whatever is necessary to hunt down and kill these radical Islamic terrorists…They are burning, crucifying people alive, Christians and other Muslims…Our president loves to apologize for America, he goes to the National Prayer Breakfast, brings up the Crusades, criticizes Christians.”

Huckabee responded to a question on whether Muslims should be allowed to enter America’s borders, saying,

If it’s such a doggone good idea to bring people here that we really don’t know who they are and Obama thinks that we’re being un-Christian to not do it, I’ve got a suggestion. Let’s send the first wave of them to…the south lawn of the White House where we’ll set up a camp…I don’t want someone lecturing me about what it means to be a Christian that I should invite a potential terrorist into my backyard. On one hand, the left says separation of church and state. Let’s not have any discussion of religion, and then the left wants to tell me what it means to be a Christian. They need to figure out if they know more about being a Christian than I do, then tell me. They are no longer going to say separation of church and state, but, we have the most fundamental right above everything else — is not to protect the reputation of Islam. It is to protect Americans first and foremost. That is our job.

Republicans like Huckabee stated that Democrats were religious liberals who made exclusive claims to Christian truth and who crafted an argument for Muslim immigration policy based on both religious superiority (knowing how to love one’s neighbor) and Constitutional authority

(separating the immigrants’ religion from their political status). Whereas the Democrats accused Republicans of religious intolerance, the latter justified their viewpoint by framing terrorism as an abridgment of the First Amendment’s guarantee of religious liberty of Americans, who they presumed to be Christians.

This difference became clear when candidates discussed what they saw as a disparity between how Muslims’ and Christians’ rights are protected in the United States. Santorum was asked, “Do you believe in religious liberty for Muslims as well as Christians?” and he answered, “Of course I do…The fact of the matter is not all Muslims are Jihadists…But the reality is, all Jihadists are Muslims That’s a reality. And we have—we have to stop worrying about offending some people and start defending all Americans. Because we’re not right now.”59

When asked how to strike a balance between vigilance and discrimination, Jindal replied, “we don't discriminate anybody based on the color of their skin or their creed. I think the way you strike that balance, you say to Muslim leaders, they have got two responsibilities. One…They have got to denounce the individual [terrorists] by name, and say these are not martyrs…rather, they are going straight to hell. They are not going to enjoy a reward in their afterlife. Secondly, they have to explicitly embrace the same freedoms for everybody else they want for themselves.”60

Religious liberty, as guaranteed by the First Amendment, meant that no religious group received preferential treatment. On the other hand, conservative Christian Republican candidates presumed to have theological fore-knowledge that allowed them to determine which Muslims in the worldwide community would enter Heaven. Rubio prophesied an “apocalyptic Armageddon” if ISIS were allowed to continue its terrorist activities, highlighting the perceived,

59 Ibid.
on-going, religious and military battle between conservative Christians and Muslims that would eventually end with the destruction of the world, as predicted in the Bible.\textsuperscript{61}

Thus, Republicans relied on Bellah’s model of creating a national enemy to unite Americans, while Democrats emphasized religious and ethnic tolerance, aligning more with recent conceptions of civil religion in neoliberal states. Despite Williams’s optimism that civil religion is adapting to recent cultural events, Republican and Democratic presidential candidates have diverged on their conceptions of national identity in distinct ways regarding religion and national safety that cannot be resolved by a single civil religious narrative. In addition, the presidential candidates differed in the quality and quantity of religious language. Republicans employed sectarian language to communicate a religious affiliation with their constituents, in direct contrast with the tenets of nonsectarian, civil religion, while Democrats largely avoided religious terms altogether. Even with additional symbols and a cultural emphasis on values and updated beliefs, the presidential debates revealed an uneven application of civil religious discourse that was clearly differentiated along party lines. Democratic presidential candidates use language in ways that closely conform to adaptations of American civil religious theory, but Republicans only loosely conform. For these reasons, American civil religion is still a useful model, but it is no longer sufficient for describing how twenty-first century presidents and presidential candidates unify the nation’s citizens.

**Public Religion as the Vehicle for Religious Discourse in the Political Sphere**

Civil religion lacks a means to account for Republicans’ use of sectarian religious language in the public, political sphere. According to both *Christianity Today* and the Americans polled by the Pew Research Center, a candidate’s religious faith is a crucial component to his or her electability. During the debates representatives of the Republican Party

claimed that their party is overwhelmingly comprised of religiously conservative, evangelical constituents, as well as being politically conservative. Candidates on the debate platform were asked to account for both their political and religious conservatism for the audience, which was assumed to be Republican voters. This means that debate platforms became a public venue for political candidates, who publicly affiliated with Christian churches, to speak directly to their religious constituency, creating a new category of public religion.

In response to traditional theories about the secularization of religion, public religion has emerged to address the continued presence of religion in the public sphere. Sociologist José Casanova coined the term “public religion” to describe a two-fold phenomenon that occurred in the 1980s: religion “entered the ‘public sphere’ and gained, thereby, ‘publicity.’” Public religion is significant because when it emerges, it “challenges either the dominant structures or the dominant paradigms…the revitalization and the assumption of public roles by precisely those religious traditions” which are often considered “marginal and irrelevant to the modern world” and who no longer “accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity as well as theories of secularization had reserved for them.” Casanova was interested both in evangelical Christianity or “Protestant fundamentalism as a public religion and in its potential impact on the public sphere of American civil society,” and also in evangelicals’ agenda for the “reestabishment of Protestant morality and of the traditional American way of life.” Here Casanova considered how religion emerged into the public, especially political, sphere.

Casanova concluded that “the discoursive model of the public sphere is…incompatible with fundamentalism. The logic of open public discourse implies that modern societies, while protecting the free exercise of fundamentalism in the private sphere, procedurally cannot tolerate

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63 Ibid., 5.
64 Ibid., 157, 160.
fundamentalism in the public sphere…’true’ fundamentalists, who prefer not to compromise their ideas or to expose their fundamentals to public discoursive validation and to a probable ‘plausibility crisis,’ will most likely abandon the public square and return to their isolated hamlets, where they can protect the worth of their sectarian wares uncontested.”

Alexander Agadjanian expanded Casanova’s theory and used Russia as a case study to examine the phenomenon when “religion emerged from underground and ceased to be a private refuge. It rapidly entered the empty public space…[as an example of] exactly what José Casanova called ‘deprivitization’” in an exceptional way…Religious arguments, among others, were instrumentalized to create a new Russian nationalism.” In his case study, Agadjanian described how religion became a style of nationalist discourse used in the public sphere to unite Russians, who were familiar with religious terms but no longer practiced religion. In this case, religion was deprivitized and appropriated by the state for political purposes.

Jens Köhrsén applied Casanova’s theory to religious actors in the public sphere in Western Europe. For Köhrsén’s analysis, “only those public communications which apply a religious argument by referring to a supernatural entity or concept are religious.” He concluded, “Religious organizations, groups and individuals tend to communicate in a non-religious way in the political public sphere…religious actors adapt their public communication to the requirements of a secularized public sphere.” According to his findings, religious discourse becomes public only when “exceptional, incomprehensible events of major public impact occur in a society…that can hardly be grasped in rational terms.”

65 Ibid., 166.
68 Ibid., 282.
69 Ibid.
None of these treatments of public religion provides a satisfactory explanation of the phenomenon on the Republican Party debate platforms. Casanova examined evangelicals as *religious* actors in the public sphere; in contrast, my study looks at *political* actors who articulate their personal religious beliefs to garner electoral votes from an overwhelmingly evangelical audience. From Casanova’s perspective, religious actors risk too much exposure in the public sphere and quickly grow uncomfortable under the public gaze. Casanova’s conclusion is contradicted, however, when these same people are examined primarily as political candidates speaking to an audience that shares their faith, based on the frequency and type of sectarian God- and religious language used in the debates. Contrary to Agadjanian’s study, the Republican Party has not appropriated religious language and secularized it for political purposes; instead, the candidates propagate sectarian uses of religious discourse. Köhrsen examined religious actors representing religious organizations in the public sphere; he did not consider that these public actors presented a more holistic version of themselves as political, religious, and social actors (as family men and community leaders, for example). Evangelicals do not typically compartmentalize their roles, and hence it is not surprising that the Republican candidates, who are reputedly making a public appeal to at least 60% of their voting population, are presenting themselves as religious human beings, not just political candidates or religious actors.

Instead of building on Casanova’s theory of the deprivitization of religion that engages with religious actors briefly emerging into the political limelight, I propose examining political figures, who are already actors in the public sphere—in particular, Republican Party presidential candidates in the 2015-2016 debates leading up to the New Hampshire primary. These political actors, who publicly announced their affiliation with Christian churches, used their personal religion to affect political change, specifically in this case to persuade voters to cast their votes for a particular candidate. Furthermore, I contend that the debate platform, a public space in
which formal politics takes place, was the most logical place for these political candidates to use religious suasion because that venue reached the maximum number of voters at one time.

Eight Republican Party debates and only five Democratic Party debates were held before the primary election in New Hampshire on February 9, 2016, and the debates were structured in disparate ways. The Republican National Committee arranged the schedule such that the debate season began in August 2015, with a single debate every month through January. Additional debates were held four days before the Iowa caucus and three days before the New Hampshire primary. In August seventeen Republican candidates vied for the platform in the main debate. Ultimately, the seven candidates “with low poll rankings” were relegated to what became known as the “undercard” debate, described by the *Wall Street Journal* as “a second tier event that won’t get nearly as much attention” and by Bloomberg as “a kiddie-table consolation prize.”

True to the predictions, the main debate attracted about 24 million viewers, earning it the distinction for being “the most-watched nonsports event in cable-television history.” The undercard debate, which immediately preceded it, drew only six million viewers.

The Republicans used the two-tiered debate system through January 28. The first two debates drew approximately the same number of viewers, dropping by about 10 million viewers after the September debate. The subsequent television audience for the main debates remained steady at 11 to 18 million viewers. By the final January debate, after the Iowa caucus, there were only ten candidates participating in the debates, and they were still divided into two tiers.

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The February debate preceding the New Hampshire primary finally broadcast the seven top contenders on a single venue. After the primary, the field was eventually thinned to four candidates (Trump, Cruz, Kasich, and Rubio), based on the number of delegates earned by each and the men’s willingness to continue their bids for the presidency.

Public opinion played a decided role in determining which Republican candidates received the most television (or streaming internet) visibility. The candidates chosen for the debates and the division of those candidates into two tiers were determined from the results of national polls, which the chairman of the Republican National Committee Reince Priebus allegedly referred to as “the best information that can be used to stock the debate stage,” and they were selected by the media outlets broadcasting the debates. During the debates viewers were repeatedly invited to post questions for the candidates on Facebook and Google, live tweets were posted on television screens, and some of those questions were chosen by the debate moderators for discussion on the platform. Americans were also polled extensively after the debates to determine the winners. Despite concerns about the efficacy of the polling data—both the qualifications of those being polled and the statistical accuracy of the results—one thing was obvious: the national polling sources all agreed that Donald Trump overwhelming won every debate.73 Whether the high viewership is attributable to audience participation in formulating questions or to the drama on the platform that continually centered around Trump (even when he was absent), Americans were tuned in and turned on to the Republican debates.

The Democratic National Committee scheduled only five debates before the New Hampshire Primary, beginning two months after the Republicans. Similar to the contending party, the Democrats debated once per month. The field was much smaller, with only six

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candidates at the October debate vying for airtime. All of them were showcased in a single debate; there was no need to divide the group into two tiers, as with the Republicans. After the initial debate, three candidates withdrew their bids, leaving only three candidates—Clinton, Sanders, and O’Malley—and all three shared a single debate platform. In addition, all three participated in every debate until the Iowa caucus, after which O’Malley withdrew from the race. At the first debate, candidate Lincoln Chafee was the only person on stage who acknowledged Facebook’s part in organizing the debate until moderator Anderson Cooper’s final sentence, in which he thanked all the sponsors publicly—unlike the moderator at each Republican debate, whose opening words acknowledged the sponsors and announced the viewers’ opportunity to participate through social media. Social media was incorporated in only the first debate for the Democrats, offering viewers the opportunity to ask only three questions of their candidates, and no invitation to post questions was made during the publicly available portion of the debate.

Public opinion played a more diminutive role in the Democratic Party’s debates. The candidates participating in the debates were chosen by polling data, and the entrance requirements were low. Potential candidate Larry Lessig was precluded from the October debate by television sponsor CNN, who “required that the candidates have garnered at least 1 percent support in certain national polls.”

This percentage is low compared to the main Republican debate in December, which required polling support of “at least 3-5% nationally; at least 4% in Iowa; or at least 4% in New Hampshire” in polls conducted between October 29 and December 13. Nevertheless, according to Lessig this was more difficult to achieve that one might expect because his name was not mentioned in the polls themselves, since “the Democratic Party won’t

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recognize me as an official candidate.”

According to a *Time* interview, Lessig blamed financial reasons for the lack of official recognition, saying, “It’s a struggle for an outsider who is not a billionaire,” but without Party backing, public exposure in the polls became a moot point.

Even for the candidates who made it to the national stage, viewership was much lower during the Democrats’ debates. Viewers dropped dramatically from a high of 15.8 million during the first debate to only 4.5 million viewers in February. Notably, the viewers were not invited to participate in formulating questions for the Democrats’ debates via social media after the first debate, possibly negatively affecting public interest. In addition, the timing of the debates does not seem to be closely tied to the voters’ participation at the ballot box. The debate preceding the Iowa caucus was held four weeks prior, and the last debate before the New Hampshire primary occurred two-and-a-half weeks before the election.

The Republicans’ use of the debate platform as venue for enacting public religion is also apparent in their style of discourse, as the candidates from the two parties engaged with the American public in very different manners. The Republican candidates were well aware of the public nature of the debates and the political persuasion that was possible during the debates. They spoke directly to their audience and explicitly asked for their votes. In contrast, the Democratic candidates rarely addressed the viewers directly and stressed their competency to fill the presidential role instead of asking for their voters’ support.

This was particularly apparent in opening and closing statements. At the first Democratic debate, the moderator asked each candidate to “introduce themselves to our audience.” Chafee’s introduction included the phrases, “Americans will be electing…Voters should assess…I brought

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76 DelReal, “Candidate Larry Lessig Won’t Be at the First Democratic Debate. He Blames His Own Party.”
labor peace…I earned a reputation…I served on…I look forward to the discussion ahead. Thank you.” Jim Webb stated, “People are disgusted…They’re looking for a leader…I have a record of…I led…You may be sure that in a Webb administration, the highest priority will be working people.” Clinton said, “I have been proud and privileged…I think about…I’ve traveled…I’ve put forward specific plans…I believe in…I will do…” She did use the pronoun “we” when discussing raising the minimum wage and creating a fair tax system, but it is likely she referred Congress, not the voters. Sanders used a combination of detached language and inclusive pronouns and noted, “I think most Americans understand that…Millions of Americans are working…Our campaign finance system…we have a moral responsibility to…we should be putting money…” Again, these are goals that would be accomplished by the Congress, not the voters; the use of “we” seems to refer to politicians. O’Malley was the only one to speak to the American collective when he said, “And, like you, there is nothing we wouldn’t do…our public schools…our country…our middle class…our poor families…our economy isn’t money, it’s people. It’s all of our people, and so we must invest in our country…We are all in this together.”

The closing statements for that Democratic debate were slightly warmer and more inclusive, with some candidates using “you” as they addressed the audience for the final time. However, all the candidates ended with either a one-liner to sum up their goals as president or a plea for political or financial support. Chafee stated, “I’m running for president to end the wars. I want to be the peacemaker. I am a proven peacemaker.” Webb noted, “I know how to lead…I am ready to do that for you in the White House.” O’Malley gave a generic pep talk about how America could be even better in the future. Clinton said, “My mission as president will be to raise incomes…” and she ambiguously asked for viewers to “join me in this campaign” but

stopped short of asking for votes. Sanders stressed the many needs of the nation and asked for money for his campaign, instead of votes, saying “We are [fund-raising] the old-fashioned way…We are averaging $30 bucks apiece. We would appreciate your help.”

At the first Republican debate, candidates were introduced by name on the platform but were not allowed to give a personal statement until the close of the debate. Some candidates chose to mention their qualifications (similar to the Democrats) and distinguish themselves from the herd of candidates, but several used even this brief thirty seconds to begin asking for votes. Graham only obliquely canvassed the crowd: “our best days are ahead of us only if we work together, and I intend to put this country on a path of success by working together.” Jindal asked indirectly for votes saying, “I’m asking folks not just to join my campaign, but join a cause.” Similarly Fiorina stated, “I can win this job, I can do this job, I need your help, I need your support. I will, with your help and support.” Santorum ended with, “That’s why I ask for your support for president.” Pataki said, “I will deliver for the American people if I have the privilege of leading this country.” Other candidates were more direct. Rubio ended with, “And that’s why I’m asking for your vote. So we can make America greater…” Walker noted, “It’s not too late for America. That’s why I ask for your vote.” Bush closed with, “I humbly ask for your vote, whenever you’re gonna get to vote, whenever the primary is. Thank you all very much.”

Four of the candidates thanked the audience.

Religious language was often interwoven with these statements directed toward the viewers. On October 28 Jindal’s final comment was, “My message is to conservatives, this is our hour…With your help, with God’s grace, we can save the idea of America before it is too late.” On January 28 Huckabee closed with, “God bless you, and thank you for your support,” and Cruz invited the viewers to “examine our records, pray on it and I will be honored if you and

your family will come caucus for us on Monday night.” On February 6, Kasich ended with “God bless you” and Carson stated, “I am going to [restore America] with the help of God and you.”

In the Republican debates on numerous occasions, the voters were made interlocutors in absentia by both the moderators and the candidates. For example, when Fiorina was asked if Trump would be a good President, she responded, “That…is for the voters of this country to answer, and I have a lot of faith in the common sense and good judgment of the voters of the United States of America,” to which the audience responded with applause.\footnote{Republican Candidates Debate,} Cruz acknowledged the fact that voters put more stock in the candidates’ actions than in the promises made during the primaries because “the voters are savvier than that.”\footnote{Republican Candidates Debate, January 14, 2016.} Moderators described Carson’s flat tax plan as “something that is very appealing to a lot of voters,” and they asked for clarification of the candidates’ immigration policies because “Republican primary voters deserved to know.”\footnote{Republican Candidates Debate, December 15, 2015.} Again and again in the Republican debates, the moderators and candidates demonstrated their use of a public venue to reach a live audience when they spoke directly to the voters and made them part of the conversations on stage using a common religious language.

The Republican’s engagement with conservative religion went much deeper than God-language, as viewers and moderators asked the candidates direct and explicitly theological questions. These questions created a public forum to determine each political candidate’s position on key issues for religiously and politically conservative voters, as well as to gauge the candidates’ personal experience with evangelicalism. One way to think about the debate platform is as an extension of a church. While secularization theorists claim that religion has retreated into the private space of church buildings and is only public when religious people enter the political sphere, Republicans think about space differently. In a discussion about

\footnote{Republican Candidates Debate, September 16, 2015.}
\footnote{Republican Candidates Debate, January 14, 2016.}
terrorism, religious intolerance, and the surveillance of American mosques, Huckabee explained that places of worship are public places. He continued, “It does not violate [Muslims’] First Amendment rights to have someone go and listen to the sermons. You can go to any church in America, it’s a public place, and you can listen…the point is that these are public places, and folks are invited to come.” Like a church, the debate platform is a public space where people are invited to attend, either personally or electronically, to listen to messages given from a dais. Especially in the case of the Republican debates, the speakers are professing Christians who pepper political discussions with religious language.

As a place where information is disseminated, the debates are also a public place where a community of like-minded people gathers to gain wisdom from leaders, much like a church. In this case, the information is a combination of religious and political ideas, and the topics can range from life-changing to light-hearted. In the December debate, a Facebook user sought clarity regarding how to apply biblical teaching to immigration issues: “If the Bible clearly states that we need to embrace those in need and not fear, how can we justify not accepting refugees?” 84 In January Rubio was asked about a Time magazine article that “once called you ‘the Republican savior,’” to which Rubio responded, “there’s only one savior and it’s not me. It’s Jesus Christ who came down to earth and died for our sins.” 85 Candidates and interviewers on the platform were comfortable enough with conservative religion to even make jokes about it. Kasich was asked, in the context of Medicaid reform, “you say that when you meet Saint Peter at the Pearly Gates, he’s going to ask what you did for the poor…Senator Cruz is on the opposite side of this issue from you, so does that mean that you’re getting in and he isn’t?” 86

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86 Ibid.
instance, Rubio joked that God “has blessed the Republican Party with some very good candidates. The Democrats can’t even find one.” The audience laughed both times.

On August 6 during the main debate, the moderator chose to close the debate with Facebook user Chase Norton’s penetrating question, “I want to know if any of [the candidates] have received a word from God on what they should do and take care of first [if elected President].” The fact that this deeply personal question was allowed at the first debate and on the main stage speaks to the importance of religion to Republican voters. This question implied that the candidates had a personal relationship with God, that they spent time in prayer seeking God’s guidance, and that they believed they received answers from Him. Norton presumed that God would speak to the people He placed in positions of leadership, and he was perhaps looking for a religious sign regarding which candidate to support politically. The moderator chose an unusually large and diverse pool of five candidates to answer the question: Cruz (a Southern Baptist and the son of a pastor), Kasich (raised Catholic but converted to Anglicanism), Walker (Baptist and the son of a Baptist pastor), Rubio (raised Catholic, tried Mormonism, returned to Catholicism and was baptized as an adult), and Carson (a Seventh Day Adventist).

The responses were varied. Cruz openly stated, copying the language of the viewer, “I am blessed to receive a word from God every day in receiving the scriptures and reading the scriptures. And God speaks through the Bible.” This response elicited applause from the audience. Cruz continued to give a conversion testimony of how his father, an alcoholic, became a “pastor and evangelist.” Cruz also admonished viewers to be wary of politicians’ campaign promises and to rely on the scriptural promise in Matthew 7:16, “you shall know them by their fruit.” After describing how he has defended religious liberty, he concluded “And I will be proud to continue to do so as president of the United States,” and the audience responded with

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87 “Republican Candidates Debate,” August 6, 2015.
88 Ibid.
“cheering and applause.” Kasich responded by sharing his success story of being raised by humble immigrants, which elicited “cheering and applause.” He continued, “I do believe in miracles” but gave no context or further elucidation. Finally he gave what could be understood by the audience as a prophetic word from God: “I believe in terms of the things that I’ve read in my lifetime, the Lord is not picking us. But because of how we respect human rights, because that we are a good force in the world, he wants American to be strong…to succeed…to lead. And nothing is more important to me than my family, my faith, and my friends.” The audience again signaled its approval with “cheers and applause.” Walker continued the trend of personal responses by giving his own testimony: “I’m certainly an imperfect man. And it’s only by the blood of Jesus Christ that I’ve been redeemed from my sins. So I know that God doesn’t call me to do a specific thing, God hasn’t given me a list, a Ten Commandments, if you will, of things to act on the first day. What God calls us to do is follow his will.” When he concluded, the audience applauded.

The moderator then asked Rubio to respond to both this question and to “a woman who just came here to the stage and asked, ‘What about the veterans?’…So I put the question to you about God and the veterans, which you may find to be related.” Rubio responded by saying, “I think God has blessed us,…the Republican Party,…our country. This country has been extraordinarily blessed. And we have honored that blessing. And that’s why God has continued to bless us. And he has blessed us with young men and women willing to risk their lives and sometimes die in uniform for the safety and security of our people.” Neatly linking Christian belief with national security, Rubio laid out his plans for re-vamping the Veterans’ Administration, and the audience replied with “cheering and applause.”

Again the moderator complicated the question, this time asking Ben Carson, “a question to you about God and his role, but also, one of the issues that the public was very interested
in...race relations in this country...and what you would do as the next president to help heal that divide.” Carson did not answer using God-language like the previous respondents. Instead he spoke about how racism has divided Americans and the need for national unity, and he stated that “the bully pulpit is a wonderful place to start healing that divide.” Carson did not elaborate on his use of that term, and the debate concluded with closing statements. In the next debate, however, Carson repeated the term “bully pulpit,” explaining that he borrowed the concept from President Kennedy during the space race and that he had recommended it to President George W. Bush after the 9/11 attacks. For Carson, in times of national crisis the President of the United States could use his office “to galvanize everybody, business, industry, academia behind a national goal,” such as putting a man on the moon or convincing the “moderate Arab states...[to] turn over Osama bin Laden.”

Although Carson did not use any religious language, except possibly the word “pulpit,” his response sheds light on how Republican presidential candidates might see the role of public religion. According to Webster’s dictionary, a bully pulpit is “an important public position that allows a person to express beliefs and opinions to many people.” The United States’ President and the presidential candidates occupy an exceptional public position that affords them national attention. On the debate platform, they are given free license to express their beliefs and opinions to all of the American citizens who are tuned into the broadcast. Because the Republican debates were timed to correspond closely with primary elections, the candidates were able to maximize their effectiveness in spreading their messages to an audience that would be casting ballots within days. Americans reported to pollsters that they are most likely to vote for candidates with religious beliefs similar to their own. Since the Republican Party is thought to be comprised of a majority of evangelical voters, using religious language that resonates with those voters to express political opinions from the bully pulpit is an expedient way to galvanize
voters around particular candidates. When the debate platform is additionally viewed as a kind of church, the bully pulpit becomes a highly appropriate place from which to disseminate religious and political messages to an audience that has been conditioned by their sectarian churches to receive information in such a setting.

**Conclusion**

One candidate’s name is conspicuously absent from the discussion of the Republicans’ use of public religion: Donald Trump. While the rest of the candidates enhance their political discourse with religious references, attempting to sway the evangelical audience, why did Trump, who used the least amount of religious language—arguably none at all—perform so well in the Iowa and New Hampshire primaries? As recent news reports have demonstrated, Trump is an atypical Republican candidate who is accused of splitting the party, yet he has garnered a considerable portion of the ballot from the politically and religiously conservative voters that public religion was designed to capture. Even more surprising, Trump won the election in Alabama, South Carolina, Georgia, Arkansas, Tennessee, Virginia, Kentucky, Louisiana, and Mississippi—the evangelical Southeast and the traditionally conservative Bible Belt.\(^89\) Of the states with the highest concentration of evangelical Protestants, only Oklahoma voters preferred another candidate.

According to the *Washington Post*, Trump’s success can be attributed to “his personality and his politics.”\(^90\) Delivering a charismatic message in a simple way that is understood by his audience, Trump capitalizes on themes that have been frustrating American voters for decades. According to the newspaper, Trump is “hugely popular among people without college degrees,

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who have been left behind by economic progress in recent years.” His political opinions strike a chord with people who are opposed to immigration, who are frustrated with the elites who seem unable or unwilling to bring about positive social change, and who appreciate his candid speech. According to the Pew Research Center this description also comports with the demographics of evangelicals, who are middle-aged, white, with a high school or some college education, and not recent immigrants.

Surprisingly, there may also be religious reasons for Trump’s success. All of the Republican candidates except Gilmore were affiliated with Christian churches. At the most basic level, any of the candidates could resonate with evangelical Republican voters, who claimed to be looking for a candidate who shared their religious faith. Many of the candidates went to great lengths to be transparent about their personal beliefs and they transformed the debate platform into a medium for public religion. But perhaps the Republican Party overestimated the rigidness of religious conformity that the voting audience required. Trump claims to be a Presbyterian, which might be theologically close enough to more religiously conservative voters, especially compared to a Muslim or maybe even a Catholic. Once the voters were confident that the candidate was religiously compatible with them, their decision relied on issues like immigration and taxes, and on personal qualities such as charisma, trustworthiness and likeability.

In addition, the Republican Party may have overemphasized the importance of its evangelical constituents to the election of the next president. According to the Pew survey, only half of Americans contend that the religious affiliation of the next president is important to them. If half the nation is Republican, and only sixty percent of Republicans are evangelicals, then the number of voters who would be swayed by religious discourse is significantly smaller than the number of voters needed to elect a Republican president. And the category of “evangelical” has been changing, according to people who self-identify as evangelicals. As stated in a recent New
York Times op ed piece, “Donald Trump secured many votes from evangelical and born-again Christians on Super Tuesday, but that only led some church leaders to distance themselves from the term ‘evangelical.’” Four writers were invited by the Times to debate the topic and they explained their hesitancy to use the label. Russell Moore, of the Southern Baptist Convention, asked to be called a “gospel Christian” because the evangelical label “is at the moment subverting the gospel of Jesus Christ.” “What does it mean to be an evangelical today?,” asked Gabriel Salguero, Reverend and Founder of the National Latino Evangelical Coalition.

“Evangelicals are not a monolith…The term evangelical should not be reduced to a political category.” Alex McFarland, an evangelical writer and speaker, wrote, “Piety and pragmatism are not mutually exclusive. Many evangelicals are supporting Trump not because he is the best Christian but because he is the best leader to defend them.” Kirkland An, a Wheaton College student, stated, “It’s a theology, not a political stance. It’s hard to watch the term become more and more conflated with a broad political voting faction, especially one in support of Donald Trump.”

Thus for some voters, Trump’s association with the Republican Party challenges a long-standing belief that the Party was defined by its religious conservatism. They want to divest the politicians of the social capital associated with the term, suggesting that “evangelical” may become privatized at some point in the future. If the number of evangelical Republicans is statistically small enough, then even if they distanced themselves from Trump and voted for other candidates, their influence on the election of a candidate may have been inconsequential. According to the article, some evangelicals have privileged their desire for representation on key social issues over religious affiliation, further diluting the voting bloc.

Perhaps for Democrats and Republicans, religion is less important to civil religion and to the expression of national identity in the twenty-first century than it has been, but for different

reasons. Democrats emphasized religious and cultural tolerance over dogmatism, suggesting that there was little room on their platform for sectarian religious language, and the need for religious language of any kind diminishes as they adopt a neoliberal vantage point, as Rhys Williams pointed out. Republicans still valued sectarian religious language and they evaluated their political choices using a religious lens, but not exclusively. For them, religious discourse in the political arena, which can be understood as a form of public religion and an extension of the church, was an effective way for Republicans to discern their positions on issues such as terrorism and immigration during an election cycle, but religious language was not sufficiently persuasive. Neither of these perspectives on the intersection of religion and politics excludes the use of civil religious discourse in forming a national identity, but civil religion is not, nor has it ever been, a substitute for personal religion for a vast number of Americans.

It seems that Williams is correct in his assessment that cultural shifts create changes in national identity and in the ways in which that identity is expressed. In this case, political and religious affiliations are key markers used to distinguish Americans who share a national identity but who choose to express their personal identities as human beings in distinct ways. Those markers are accessed by political parties to coalesce particular groups of Americans and persuade them to respond in specific ways to issues of national importance, such as presidential elections. While civil religion no longer is a sufficient way to describe this phenomenon, it is still apt, especially when combined with the mechanisms of a version of public religion, in which political actors are also seen as religious leaders.
Appendix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Religious Affiliation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bush</td>
<td>Raised Episcopal, converted to Catholicism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carson</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chafee</td>
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<td>Clinton</td>
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<td>Huckabee</td>
<td>Southern Baptist</td>
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<td>Jindal</td>
<td>Raised Hindu, converted to Catholicism, &quot;describes himself as an 'evangelical Catholic&quot;&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kasich</td>
<td>Raised Catholic, converted to Anglicanism</td>
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<tr>
<td>O'Malley</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pataki</td>
<td>Raised Roman Catholic “but hasn’t advertised his religious credentials”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>Baptized Episcopal, attends Presbyterian</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perry</td>
<td>Evangelical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rubio</td>
<td>Raised Catholic, tried Mormonism but returned to Catholicism, was baptized as an adult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanders</td>
<td>“Jewish by birth but says he is not now involved in organized religion”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santorum</td>
<td>Catholic “but has become more devout and conservative over the past couple decades”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trump</td>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
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<tr>
<td>Walker</td>
<td>Baptist, son of Baptist pastor</td>
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<td>Webb</td>
<td>Episcopal</td>
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### Number of Religious References, Republicans

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**Figure 2. Republican Religious Language. Data collected by the author.**

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**Figure 3. Democratic Religious Language. Data collected by the author.**
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Figure 4. Average number of religious references. Data collected by the author.

### Number of Delegates Won in the First Two Primaries

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Figure 5. Delegates Won. Data from the AP.