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RELIGION, RHETORIC, AND THE PRESIDENCY

Remarks of Michael Gerson
Speechwriter and Policy Adviser
to President Bush

With Response by Carl Cannon
White House Correspondent,
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MICHAEL CROMARTIE: We couldn't think of anyone better in the country to talk about religion and the presidency than the president's own speechwriter. As many of you know, Michael Gerson has received high praise from people across the political spectrum for his speechwriting. We are delighted in light of his very busy schedule that he could join us today and talk to us about this topic. Thank you, Michael.

MICHAEL GERSON: I really haven't done much of this kind of speaking, so I thought I'd ease into it by talking about the non-controversial topic of religion in politics with a bunch of journalists. (Laughter.) And I took this invitation before the election, and it's just impossible to imagine how grim this event would have been if we had lost. (Scattered laughter.) Everyone would be – not everyone, but a certain number of people would have said we lost because the president talked like Billy Sunday, just as there are some people now that think he won because he talks like Billy Sunday, and I don't think either of those are accurate.

The election was divisive; it was divisive in my own family. My own little boy – my six-year-old, Nicholas – announced to me in the car not long before the election that he liked John Kerry for president. And I asked him why, and he said, “So you can be home on weekends,” which is tough.

My nine-year-old, who is a little more practical, said, “But how would we eat?” (Laughter.) And I said, “I think I can get a job. I might go to a think tank.” And he said, “Well, what's a think tank?” And I said, “Well, it's people who read and speak, and have meetings and things,” and Bucky – and this is true – said, “You mean they do nothing?” (Laughter.)

For some of you, I think it's useful for me to tell you a little bit about myself. I'm the head of speech writing and policy adviser, which really means I just get to go to the meetings I want to. I've got about six writers that work for me and researchers and fact-checkers and others, and we have anywhere from about one to three events a day for the president. The complicating factor of my daily life is the staffing process, because we write beautiful things and then it goes to every senior member of the White House, and they all get a chance to comment and change things, and sometimes we get good speeches out of that process.

I studied theology at Wheaton College in Illinois; worked for a religious non-profit, Prison Fellowship Ministries; went to the Hill and did policy and speechwriting, and was asked – surprisingly – by Steve Waldman to work at *U.S. News & World Report*, where I started off covering non-profits and ended up covering politics. And I'd done a lot of work on compassionate conservatism on the Hill.

And I got a call from then-Governor Bush in the spring of 1999 to meet him down at the National Governors' Association before he was a declared candidate. And when I went up to his room, he said right off the bat, “I want you to write my announcement speech, my convention speech and my inaugural, and I want you to move to Austin immediately.” So we moved to Austin.

And then the short version since then is that we've had the election crisis – the initial one, in 2000 – and then September 11th, and then the Afghan War, and then the Iraq buildup, and then the Iraq War, and then the aftermath of Iraq, and then bitter elections, you know, in this last one. And a couple of months ago I was told by my dentist that I had to have a wisdom tooth removed and that I would have to be completely immobilized for two days for the healing process. And I spent all month looking forward to the surgery. (Laughter.)

So it's a fascinating job, and it's a tremendous roller coaster. Before a speech, you feel like the most important person in the world, and after a speech you're just a writer and really don't matter very much. And you have experiences like I had, you know, going with the president to stay at Buckingham Palace, and I had a personal footman named Russell who I really miss. (Laughter.) And then almost immediately afterwards a Medicare speech that's a disaster, and it's your fault, and how could you be such an idiot. So it's that kind of job, which I think probably a lot of you understand.

I think it's perhaps useful to begin a discussion of rhetoric and religion by giving some actual instances of how the president has employed religious language. You know, it comes in certain categories generally when you work on it, and one of the great advantages of being a speechwriter is to quote the president and secretly know you're quoting yourself – (laughter) – so I'll do a little of that.

The **first** category in which we use these things is *comfort in grief and mourning*, and we've had too many of those opportunities: in the space shuttle disaster, 9/11, other things where people are faced with completely unfair suffering. And in that circumstance, a president generally can't say that death is final, and separation is endless, and the universe is an echoing, empty void. (Laughter.)

A president offers hope – the hope of reunions and a love stronger than death, and justice beyond our understanding. And let me just read a portion of what he said at the National Cathedral on September 14 in 2001 – just an example of how we use religious language.

“God's signs are not always the ones we look for. We learn in tragedy that his purposes are not always our own. Yet the prayers of private suffering, whether in our homes or in this great cathedral, are known and heard and understood.

“There are prayers that help us last through the day or endure the night. There are prayers of friends and strangers that give us strength for the journey, and there are prayers that yield our will to a will greater than our own.

“This world he created is of moral design. Grief and tragedy and hatred are only for a time. Goodness, remembrance and love have no end, and the Lord of life holds all who die and all who mourn.”

Having lived through these events, I know those words meant something to people. We've been criticized for them, but only after the fact.

In a **second** category, we sometimes employ religious language to talk about the *historic influence of faith on our country*. We argue that it has contributed to the justice of America, that people of faith have been a voice of conscience.

Here is the president at Goree Island in Senegal on July 8, 2003:

“For 250 years the captives endured an assault on their dignity. The spirit of Africans in America did not break. Yet the spirit of their captors was corrupted. Small men took on the powers and airs of tyrants and masters. Years of unpunished brutality and bullying and rape produced a dullness and hardness of conscience. Christian men and women became blind to the clearest commands of their faith and added hypocrisy to injustice. A republic founded on equality for all became a prison for millions. And yet in the words of the African proverb, ‘no fist is big enough to hide the sky.’ All the generations of oppression under the laws of man could not crush the hope of freedom and defeat the purposes of God.

“In America, enslaved Africans learned the story of the exodus from Egypt and set their own hearts on a promised land of freedom. Enslaved Africans discovered a suffering Savior and found he was more like themselves than their masters. Enslaved Africans heard the ringing promises of the Declaration of Independence and asked the self-evident question, then why not me?”

Part of presidential leadership is to give a narrative, a structure to the past. That's why presidents start speeches, “Four score and seven years ago.” Religion is an important part of that story, and we've tried to make that point.

A **third** category is when we talk about our *faith-based welfare reform*. This is rooted in the president's belief that government, in some cases, should encourage the provision of social services without providing those services. And some of the most effective providers, especially in fighting addiction and providing mentoring, are faith-based community groups.

I know this has been a controversial assertion. My only response is that it is – at least as we've practiced it – fundamentally pluralistic. We've welcomed all faiths and people of no faith, and have gotten some criticism from the right for that.

Also, it's not really new. This has been done with Catholic Charities and Lutheran Social Services and a lot of others for a long time, and our innovation was to try to go beyond those traditional institutions and get resources to grassroots organizations – often African-American organizations.

In making this case, we've consistently called attention to the good works of people motivated by faith. And here's the president in his first National Prayer Breakfast in February 2001:

“There are many experiences of faith in this room, but most will share a belief that we are loved and called to love; that our choices matter, now and forever; that there are purposes deeper than ambitions and hopes greater than success. These beliefs shape our lives and help sustain the life of our nation. Men and women can be good without faith, but faith is a force for goodness. Men and women can be compassionate without faith, but faith often inspires compassion. Human beings can love without faith, but faith is a great teacher of love.

“Our country, from its beginning, has recognized the contribution of faith. We do not impose any religion; we welcome all religions. We do not prescribe any prayer; we welcome all prayers. This is the tradition of our nation and it will be the standard of my administration. We will respect every creed, we will honor the diversity of country and the deepest convictions of our people.”

A **fourth** category are *literary allusions to hymns and scripture*. In our first inaugural, we had “when we see that wounded traveler on the road to Jericho, we will not pass to the other side;” or “there is power, wonder-working power in the goodness and idealism and faith of the American people” in the State of the Union.

I've actually had, in the past, reporters call me up on a variety of speeches and ask me where are the code words. I try to explain that they're not code words; they're literary references understood by millions of Americans. They're not code words; they're our culture. It's not a code word when I put a reference to T.S. Eliot's *Choruses From the Rock* in our Whitehall speech; it's a literary reference. And just because some don't get it doesn't mean it's a plot or a secret. (Laughter.)

I remember one incident in the last election when Frank Bruni – who is one of my favorite people; I really like and respect him – wrote on the front page of *The New York Times* that the president had said in an interview, actually – not a speech – that people should take the log out of their own eye before taking the speck out of their neighbor's eye. And Frank, writing on the front page of *The New York Times*, called this an odd version of the pot calling the kettle black. (Laughter.) Neither he nor his editors knew it was from one of the most famous sermons in history, and the part of the New Testament that's in red. (Laughter.) But actually, most Americans knew and the disconnect was not particularly – I don't think – the president's fault.

I'll say a couple of other things about that. It's not a strategy. It comes from my own background and my own reading of the history of American rhetoric. It's also not new. The image of a city on a hill, of course, doesn't come from pilgrim fathers; it comes from the teachings of Jesus, and “a house divided against itself cannot stand” falls in the same category. And many images of the civil rights movement were drawn from the exodus.

In political discourse, these images are given a lesser meaning, but they have an added literary resonance precisely because they have a deeper meaning. And I think that American public discourse would be impoverished without them.

A **fifth** category is a *reference to providence*, which some of the other examples have touched on. This is actually a longstanding tenet of American civil religion. It is one of the central themes of Lincoln's second inaugural. It's a recurring theme of Martin Luther King – "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice;" "we do not know what the future holds, but we know Who holds the future."

The important theological principle here, I believe, is to avoid identifying the purposes of an individual or a nation with the purposes of God. That seems presumption to me, and we've done our best to avoid the temptation.

Here is September 20th, 2001:

"Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty have always been at war, and God is not neutral between them."

Or the National Prayer Breakfast in 2003:

"We can also take comfort in the ways of providence, even when they are far from our understanding. Behind all of life and all of history there is a purpose, set by the hand of a just and faithful God."

Or the State of the Union in 2003:

"We Americans have faith in ourselves, but not in ourselves alone. We do not know, we do not claim to know all the ways of providence, yet we can trust in them, placing our confidence in the loving God behind all of life and all of history."

I don't believe that any of this is a departure from American history. I don't think it's disturbing because it's new. As others have pointed out, President Clinton referred to Jesus or Jesus Christ more than the president does, had a much more consistent use of what might be more sectarian references.

And if you look at the examples of history, it's a useful enterprise. On D-Day, most of you probably know, FDR did his announcement to the nation entirely in the form of a prayer. He said, "In the poignant hour, I ask you to join with me in prayer." He asked for victory, for renewed faith, and said, "with Thy blessing we shall prevail over the unholy forces of our enemy. Help us to conquer the apostles of greed and racial arrogance."

Or FDR's State of the Union address a month after Pearl Harbor:

“They know that victory for us means victory for religion, and they could not tolerate that. The world is too small to provide adequate living room for both Hitler and God. In proof of this, the Nazis have now announced their plan for enforcing their new, German pagan religion all over the world, a plan by which the Holy Bible and the cross of mercy would be displaced by ‘Mein Kampf’ and the swastika and the naked sword.

“We are inspired by a faith that goes back through all the years to the first chapter of Genesis: God created man in his own image. We on our side are striving to be true to that divine heritage. That is the conflict that day and night now pervades our lives. No compromise can end that conflict. There never has been, there never will be successful compromise between good and evil.”

We’ve attempted to apply a set of rules that I’ve done my best to keep. We’ve tried to apply a principled pluralism; we have set out to welcome all religions, not favoring any religions in a sectarian way. I think that the president is the first president to mention mosques and Islam in his inaugural address. The president has consistently urged tolerance and respect for other faiths and traditions, and has received some criticism for it.

We often in our presentations make specific reference to people who are not religious; we’ve done that right from the beginning. In our first prayer breakfast in February of 2001, we said an American president serves people of every faith and serves some of no faith at all. And there are plenty of other examples.

And as president, as a rule – and there may be exceptions but I don’t know what they are – he hasn’t spoken from the pulpit. We’ve never done anything comparable to the recent campaign when Senator Kerry spoke in churches and used a passage from the Book of James to question the president’s faith.

But I know that the kind of care that we try to take will not bridge all the disagreements on this topic. There seems to me a genuine disagreement in public life when it comes to religion and rhetoric. There is a view that pluralism requires silence; that religious language violates the truce of tolerance in America, and moral arguments rooted in faith are off limits in public life.

Often this is more of a distaste than an ideology. I’ll give you one example. At the Reagan funeral, I thought – given the disease that Reagan had died of – that it brought to mind for me the Apostle Paul’s “we see through a glass darkly but someday we’ll see our Savior face to face,” and that seemed like a good reference to Alzheimer’s. And we used it. And Tom Shales wrote, “George W. Bush chose to proselytize that Reagan is now in heaven playing cards with Jesus Christ.” This was a Christian funeral of a Christian man in a Christian cathedral, and although I wouldn’t have used the card analogy, that is in fact the Christian hope – (laughter) – that slow death and the suffering of a family are not all there is; that suffering is not the last reality; it’s the next-to-the-last reality.

There's also a deeper objective that I think would be worth discussing, that seems to assume that moral reasoning rooted in religious belief is somehow itself off limits. If you are for a certain right or belief because the Constitution said so, that is okay. If you're for certain rights because you believe the image of God is found in every human being based on a theological teaching, that is not. G.K. Chesterton, in a quote I like, called this a "taboo of tact or convention whereby a man is free to say this or that because of his nationality or his profession, or his place of residence, or his hobby, but not because of his creed about the very cosmos in which he lives."

I think these tendencies are misguided for a couple of reasons. As a writer, I think this attitude would flatten political rhetoric and make it less moving and interesting – to prevent the president from exercising rhetorical leadership in times of crisis. But even more, I think the reality here is that scrubbing public discourse of religion or religious ideas would remove one of the main sources of social justice in our history. Without an appeal to justice rooted in faith, there would have been no abolition movement, no civil rights movement, no pro-life movement.

Every society, it seems to me, needs a standard of values that stands above the political order, or the political order becomes absolute. Christianity is not identical to any political ideology. It has had great influence precisely because it judges all ideologies. It indicts consumerism and indifference to the poor; it indicts the destruction of the weak and the elderly; it indicts tyranny and the soul-destroying excesses that sometimes come from freedom. And that leads me to certain conclusions. When religious people identify faith with a single political party or movement, they miniaturize their beliefs and they're reduced to one interest group among many. When society banishes the influence of faith, it loses one of the main sources of compassion and justice.

And my view is summarized best by Martin Luther King, Jr., who said that the church should not be the master of the state or the servant of the state; it should be the conscience of the state.

There are clearly some dangers here at the crossroads of religion and politics. The danger for America is not theocracy. Banning partial birth abortion and keeping the status quo of hundreds of years on marriage are not the imposition of religious rule. But religious people can develop habits of certainty that get wrongly applied to a range of issues from economics to military policy. The teachings of the New Testament are wisely silent on most political issues, and these are a realm of practical judgment and should be a realm of honest debate.

The deeper danger of course is the faith itself. A political and politicized and judgmental faith seems to miss the point. I've been a Christian all my life, but I still don't feel competent to define it for others. I think, however, it has something to do with forgetting yourself and seeking the interest of other people. It has something to do with getting beyond petty fears and selfish ambitions and seeing God's kingdom at work – a kingdom that's not of this world. And when those kingdoms are confused, it is faith that suffers the most.

At any rate, I guess I'll stop there. I just wanted to set out some different categories we use so that we all can have an informed discussion on how we actually use language.

MR. CROMARTIE: Thank you very much, Michael. Next we have Carl Cannon. He's been at *National Journal* for six years covering the White House. He wrote one of the best pieces on the president and his faith in a *National Journal* cover story last January called "Bush and God." Many of you have covered the president, obviously. But I thought if we're going to have Mike Gerson talk about religion and rhetoric, it would be good to have a response from someone who has written a very rich history of the president and religion, which Carl has done. Thank you, Carl, for coming.

CARL CANNON: Thank you. I'd like to start by reading a prayer. (Scattered laughter). No, a real prayer. And in fact, I ask that you bow your heads. (Laughter.) I'm going to read the prayer.

"Oh mighty God, as we sit here at this moment, my friends in journalism and associates in the executive branch join me in beseeching that Thou wilt make full and complete our dedication to the service of the people in this throng and their fellow citizens everywhere. Give us, we pray, the power to discern clearly right from wrong and allow all our words and actions to be governed thereby and by the laws of this land. Especially we pray that our concern shall be for all of the people regardless of station, race, or calling. May cooperation be permitted with the mutual aim of those who, under the concepts of our Constitution, hold to differing political faiths, so that all may work for the good of our beloved country and Thy glory. Amen."

MR. CROMARTIE: Amen.

MR. CANNON: I don't know how many of you guessed, but that was the prayer that Dwight D. Eisenhower read in his first inauguration. He pulled that out of his pocket just like that. A friend of mine who did a documentary on Ike said that a lot of his aides didn't want him to do this, and a couple of them were appalled but they didn't say anything – the general was in those days a much harder person than George W. Bush to say no to. And he wrote that himself and he read it. I changed a couple of words. I added "journalists" – (laughter) – and I said "sit" where Ike said "stand." But other than that, that's the exact prayer.

Mike Gerson did not write that and President Bush did not deliver it in his first inaugural, and I doubt that Bush will do that on his own in the second. But God did make an appearance, if you remember, in the speech at President George W. Bush's inaugural and I'm going to – at the risk of having too much Gerson quoted today – I'm going to read it to you because it sort of takes us where we want to go.

There may be some redundancy with Michael, but then I'm going to go off on a departure point. I hope maybe we can ask him why the president doesn't do some of the things that I'm going to raise.

Anyway, Bush said, "America at its best is compassionate. In the quiet of American conscience, we know that deep, persistent poverty is unworthy of our nation's promise and whatever our views of its cause, we can agree that children at risk are not at fault. Abandonment and abuse are not acts of God, they are failures of love."

Later in that speech, President Bush quoted from a letter sent to Jefferson – do you remember this, Michael?

MR. GERSON: I do. (Laughter.)

MR. CANNON: By Jefferson's friend John Page of Virginia, who said to Jefferson, "We know the race is not to the swift nor the battle to the strong. Do you not think an angel rides in the whirlwind and directs this storm?" That was near the middle of the speech, if I remember right. And then continuing that point – picking up on that theme at the end, George W. Gerson said – (laughter) – "This work continues, this story goes on, and an angel still rides in the whirlwind and directs this storm. God bless you all, and God bless America."

I prepared a couple of things, but I'm going to quote a little more from Bush and a little more from previous presidents than Michael did. I'm struck by – and there are several of my friends here, like Elizabeth Bumiller, who cover the White House beat with me – but you can go to a conference on presidential rhetoric and people will not quote the president that they are critiquing. And so I agree with Mike that sometimes it is important, if we're going to talk about these words, that we quote them and have them in our minds.

A couple of weeks ago, George W. Bush ushered in Thanksgiving Day by noting that people across the nation were gathering with people they love "to give thanks to God for the blessings in our lives. We are grateful for our freedom, grateful for our families and friends, and grateful for the many gifts of America. On Thanksgiving Day, we acknowledge that all of these things, and life itself, come from the Almighty God."

Now, that's actually not typical of Bush. But it is typical of presidents on Thanksgiving Day – it's the one exception that George Washington started when he proclaimed, "November 26th shall be devoted by the people of these states to the service of that great and glorious Being who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be," and he went on in that vein for four more paragraphs.

But George Washington did not go on, as George W. Bush did, to add his decidedly secular thanks to firemen who perished in the line of duty, soldiers on the frontlines in Iraq and Afghanistan, the volunteers working at homeless shelters and other people every day performing worldly sacrifices – secular sacrifices that Americans do.

And so even on Thanksgiving Day, this president was inclusive in a way that American presidents haven't always been.

Michael and I both, without talking about it, decided to quote from the Franklin Roosevelt prayer – the D-Day prayer – so I won't repeat that. But I will say that this is how American presidents talk in wartime. The current president's father, during the first Persian Gulf War, matter-of-factly called on God's assistance, not just for the United States but for the other nations in the U.S.-led military coalition. He said, "So we ask his blessing upon us and every other member, not just of our armed forces but of our coalition armed forces, with respect for the religious diversity that is represented as these 28 countries stand up against aggression." Bush 41 said that at the National Prayer Breakfast – I believe it was January 31, 1991.

The prayer breakfasts are the grist of a lot of this scholarship on presidents. If reporters want to know when presidents are going over the line, we always go to the prayer breakfasts, because there are all these evangelicals in the room and Christian radio, and they tend to get carried away and so then we can nail them. (Laughter.) And all of the last presidents – 10 presidents, including George W. Bush – at the prayer breakfasts, you know, they get going pretty good.

I suppose some secular people might have been alarmed when the president said only a year after inauguration, "To me, God is real. To me, the relationship with God is a very personal thing. God is ever present in my life, sustains me when I am weak, gives me guidance when I turn to him, and provides for me, as a Christian, through the life of Christ, a perfect example to emulate in my experiences with other human beings."

And I think Mike would understand why a few of us raised our eyebrows when the president added, "So we worship freely, but that does not mean that leaders of our nation and the people of our nation are not called upon to worship because those who wrote the Declaration of Independence and the Bills of Rights, and our Constitution did it under the guidance of and with a full belief in God." That was Jimmy Carter's view, anyway; it's not George W. Bush. (Chuckles.)

And it was a third southern governor – (laughter) – Bill Clinton, not George W. Bush or Jimmy Carter – who deflected a question about his character by saying of his critics, "They may be able to attack my reputation, but God is the ultimate judge of people's character and he knows all the facts." In that way did President Clinton assure us that the good Lord was following the ins and outs of campaign finance law – (laughter) – because that quote is from 1996 and President Clinton, assured us that with its 'White House coffees' and the renting out of the Lincoln Bedroom, he hadn't run afoul of Scripture.

And here is one more quote from a president – this president's father again back during the Persian Gulf War: "One cannot be president of our country without faith in God and without knowing with certainty that we are one nation under God. God is our rock and our salvation, and we must trust him and keep faith with him."

In each of the examples I have chosen – the ceremonial proclamation, the wartime invocation of God’s aid for the soldiers in the field, the ruminations on personal faith – George W. Bush has been by any standard more inclusive and less overtly religious than his predecessors. He is the most ecumenical of presidents – probably the most ecumenical president we’ve ever had. Mike is right that Bush is the first president to use the word “mosques” during an inauguration. I don’t think this president *ever* mentions churches without also mentioning synagogues and mosques. Now this began with this president’s father, and Clinton did it too. But this president does it faithfully, if I may use that word. He always does that.

But if that’s a convention of modern presidents, Bush again goes further. He said flatly, as you know, that Muslims pray to the same God as Christians. Dr. Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention objected and said this was not right, and Bush had an awkward week there where all these liberal theologians came to his aid – people who don’t normally – (chuckles) – do that. And Land stood down.

But Bush bowed his head in prayer just three weeks ago at a Ramadan dinner with a Muslim cleric, Imam Faizul Khan of the Islamic Center in Washington, D.C., who said a prayer for our president. He asked God to grant him patience, understanding, vision, health, and the strength needed for tasks that lie ahead. And speaking in Arabic he added, “May the peace and blessings of God be upon you and every one of you here tonight.”

I think that well-known theologian from Independence, Missouri, Harry Truman, would have approved of Bush’s ecumenism. Truman rarely referred to communism without the adjective “godless” in front of it, but when he died, there was a paper found on his desk that said, in Truman’s own handwriting, “Jews, Mohammedans, Buddhists, and Confucians worship the same God as the Christians say they do. He is all seeing, all hearing, and all knowing.”

So when Bush sort of puts his toe in the water of offering his own theology, he finds himself in good historic company with previous presidents and modern liberal theologians – or at least some of them. But Bush goes further than that, even, further than Truman – probably not as far as Benjamin Franklin, but pretty far – when he goes out of his way to defend agnostics and atheists. The quote that Mike Gerson read to you is right, but Bush said that in a set piece. Bush does this on his own, however; he did it in an interview on *Larry King Live*, he did it in the press conference after winning reelection, and he volunteers this.

Bush says, “Of course a person who has no faith at all can be a great American.” Then you say, ‘Well, okay, he knows sort of what he’s up against. He may feel the need to say that.’ Besides, on *Larry King Live*, Laura was there and maybe Laura kicked him under the table. This has happened before. When he was governor, a reporter tried to trick him by asking him if he thought Jews go to heaven. And this newly minted Christian said, no, he didn’t think so. And Barbara, his mother, reportedly called him and

straightened him out and said that it wasn't up for him to decide who went to heaven; it was up to God. Personal apology is not his sort of normal impulse, he did allow as that maybe she had dressed him down properly.

But Bush said the same thing at a prayer breakfast. These prayer breakfasts that I'm mining for quotes – when I was doing this piece that Michael Cromartie held up, I found, I thought, a particularly good passage. It was from the National Hispanic Prayer Breakfast, which got a little less ink. I was afraid that he was going to give his speech in Spanish; he didn't. He said a few words in Spanish but then he spoke in English. And he said this: “Since America's founding, prayer has reassured us that the hand of God is guiding the affairs of a nation. We've never asserted a special claim on his favor, yet we've always believed in God's presence in our lives” – which is what Michael was talking about.

But then Bush went on and he said, “We've never imposed any religion,” and that's really important to remember, too – what he says to these Spanish preachers. “We welcome all religions in America – all religions,” then adding, “We know that men and women can be good without faith; we know that.” So here's a prayer breakfast and this president, when he's first in office, is going out of his way to be inclusive.

And yet – and yet –

That's the record, but he's been criticized over his faith – or supposed excesses of it – really since he's been in office. It's been continual. It's cited in interviews, you can get it in man-on-the-street interviews – we all got them during the campaign – and it's on left-wing websites. It's what liberals fear the most about Bush. They use this word “theocracy,” the image of Bush as a rabid, intolerant, narrow-minded religious nut, really – so much so that *Saturday Night Live*, apropos of nothing – there was no news peg – introduced their show one night a couple of years ago by having Bush speak in tongues, and then they said, “From New York, this is *Saturday Night Live*.”

So that's the image, and the question I think I want to pose to Mike Gerson – and once we get to the Q and A, I'm sure you'll direct your questions to him and not to me – is where this comes from, and if there is any responsibility on their side for it. I think Mike hinted at a couple of things that we journalists on our side bear responsibility for – the ignorance of Christian traditions and Christian language. There's a very inexcusable literary ignorance that he gave you two good examples of.

In academia – and it's not just, you know, the poor newspaper writer who's turning out a story a day from the road – but in academia it's the same thing. There's an unfamiliarity with the basic cultural touchstones, and not just that one, but other ones – “Walk a mile in my shoes” – and you'll say these things, and you'll be there at the press section, and people will say, “Gee, where does that come from?” So that's not Bush's fault.

But it reminds me of something. When Eisenhower pulled out that prayer that I started with, he wasn't criticized for that, but he got some criticism as his presidency

progressed from what we would call now the “religious left,” although that term wasn’t generally used. And the idea was that Ike had this Hallmark-card kind of faith. What I am lauding Bush for, Ike was criticized for, which is that it’s a faith without much substance to it. What does it mean? It’s these kind words and stuff, but is he really a man of faith? How does it animate him? The things we fear about Bush, people wondered whether Ike had them – whether his faith had any meaning.

Ike had never been a member of a church, and in 1952 when he began to run for president, he called up Billy Graham and asked him if he should join a church. And Graham told him yes and suggested the Presbyterian Church, and that’s how Ike became a Presbyterian.

But William Lee Miller, writing for a liberal magazine, then called *The Reporter* – you may know him, some of you; he’s now a presidential scholar at the University of Virginia – but then he was a journalist with a degree in philosophy, and he began writing about Ike’s sort of cheap grace, and he was offended by it. Again, what we – if you want to defend Bush – what you boast about now, he was attacking Ike for. And he ended up writing a book about it, *Piety on the Potomac*. It was a series of essays and they put it in that book. And one of the lines from it was, “The greatest demonstration of the religious character of this administration came on July 4th, in which the president told us to spend as a day of penance and prayer. And he himself caught four fish in the morning – (laughter) – played 18 holes of golf in the afternoon, and spent the evening at the bridge table.” (Laughter.) So that’s one factor.

There’s another factor and we’re all aware of it, and Mike only alluded to it, but I think we should talk about it more. That is, that criticizing Bush’s faith is a way of criticizing his policies. And it’s not just an attack by proxy. Some of it is just normal partisanship. Jim Wallis, the editor of *Sojourners Magazine*, whom many of you know, was meeting with Al Gore during 2000 – he thought Gore was going to win the election – and talking about faith-based programs. And Jim says flatly now – admits it if you’ll ask him – that a lot of the people who criticized Bush’s faith-based plan and have continued to, he expected and knew would be at a press conference announcing Gore’s faith-based program. So there’s a partisanship. Let’s call that maybe the second reason, which is the normal partisanship that goes on in Washington.

But the third reason is this idea of these policies. And it’s deep and it won’t go away. And it comes from a couple of places. One of them is people who just abhor Bush’s policies so much that they end up blaming them on his faith. Another wrinkle is that they detest his policies so much, they think he can’t be a serious Christian – that he’s a hypocrite.

There’s a petition going around signed by 200 theologians, and I want to read you a line from it. It’s called “Confessions of Christ in a World of Violence” and it asks the question of what it means to confess Christ in a world of violence. And a couple of the lines in it will give you a flavor for where it’s coming from: “Faithfully confessing Christ is the church’s task, and never more so than when its confession is co-opted by

militarism and nationalism.” Another sentence says, “The roles of God, Church, and Nation are confused by talk of American mission as a divine appointment to rid the world of evil.”

And then, of course, the social issues, too – abortion, embryonic stem cell research, gay marriage. And I guess I would disagree with Mike on this one point. He said that the failure to enact gay marriage and continued restrictions on embryonic stem cell research are not evidence of – I don’t want to mischaracterize what you said, but of –

MR. GERSON: Theocracy.

MR. CANNON: Yeah, of a theocracy. But really the opponents to those things cite the Bible. This is what they do. It’s the central thrust of their argument. Jerry Falwell said recently, quote, “The people that hate George Bush hate him because he’s a follower of Jesus Christ, says so, and applies the faith in his day-to-day operations.” Now, I submit to you, with friends like Falwell, none of us need any enemies. But this is the crux of it. They believe this about Bush and they’re opposed to his policies.

How principled is the opposition? That’s not for me to say. These theologians who sign this paper are clearly objecting to the war in Iraq. I don’t think they would frame it quite the way they framed it, if they weren’t maybe coming from the Democratic side. Joan Campbell Brown of the National Council of Churches said when Bush invoked his minimalist Jesus Christ reference in the debates in 1999, he was asked, I think, who is your most influential political philosopher. And he said, “Jesus Christ” – sort of blurts it out like that. And the moderator – you could tell he didn’t think it was really responsive and he sort of invited Bush to amplify on that. And the governor could have said a lot of things. He could have said, “Look, love thy neighbor is still a radical doctrine. I mean, this – believe me.” He didn’t say anything like that. He said, “Well, it’s Jesus Christ because he touched my heart.” And again was asked to amplify it and basically refused. I don’t remember exactly what he said, but it was like –

E.J. DIONNE, JR.: If you haven’t experienced it, you wouldn’t understand.

MR. CANNON: Yeah, it was like he basically said, “It’s a black thing, you wouldn’t understand.” (Laughter.) Basically.

And so Joan Campbell Brown responded to that and said, “Well, where you have to be careful is where it slips from ‘this is my personal position’ into ‘this is how it would affect my political decisions.’ ” In other words, Bush’s faith is okay as long as it doesn’t result in him actually doing anything about it. This is what Mike alluded to when he said that one of the problems the left has with Bush is they think he really *believes* all this. Marvin Olasky makes that same point. I think that’s true.

I also think that we have to ask, what would be our reaction as journalists if Bush said out loud that he found support for opposition to abortion in the Bible – if Bush said this directly? That’s what Lincoln did with slavery. In Lincoln’s second inaugural

address he said, “Both sides pray to the same God and read the same Bible.” But then Lincoln said in his next sentence that he thinks the South’s reading of the Bible is a perversity and he says why: “It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God’s assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces. But let us judge not that we be not judged.” This is the torch that President Johnson was carrying exactly 100 years later when speaking about civil rights legislation. He said, “It is rather our duty to do His divine will. But I cannot help believe that he truly understands and that he really favors the undertaking we are beginning here tonight.”

And so you wonder: what would we say if Bush then invoked God’s agency in the No Child Left Behind Act? And I don’t actually have to wonder; I know it. I got an e-mail from a guy who is very close to Kerry – he was on the Kerry campaign when I was doing this piece. And I asked him why liberals hate Bush for his faith. And he said – he e-mailed me back and said, “Bush is a fundamentalist who believes what he says he believes on the basis of revelation and faith. As a consequence, neither facts, logic, nor experience are capable of influencing him because he already knows the truth. Such divine certainty applied to the presidency results in policies in which faith-based initiatives, tax cuts will stimulate the economy, create jobs; invading Iraq will bring democracy – all that has done tremendous damage to the country and will continue to do so.” And he goes on in this way.

And in concluding, what I’ll say then is that the Bush people know this. They know that they engender this response from liberals. They know that it’s mostly at heart about issues. And what they don’t do, in my opinion – and with this I’ll turn it over to Michael – is speak about it in this way that we’re speaking about it here. Mike Gerson will write a beautiful and inclusive thing and Bush will deliver it, or Bush will say on his own as he did on *Larry King Live* that, you know, of course persons who don’t have any faith at all can be great Americans. But he doesn’t really engage the debate. He doesn’t talk to these liberals who say, “Look, your programs are going to hurt the poor.” He doesn’t speak; he doesn’t really enter the fray.

And so the last point I’ll make is that while I think Bush is blameless of many of the things he’s accused of and historically speaking is on very safe ground, and that a lot of these fights are legitimate fights over policy, and some of them are partisan – that this president leaves people wanting. Millions of them don’t quite get his faith and they’d like to hear more about it.