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Using religious discourse to construct reality: President George W Bush and Osama Bin Laden

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USING RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE TO CONSTRUCT
REALITY: PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH
AND OSAMA BIN LADEN

by

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Bachelor of Science
Syracuse University
1993

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

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Hank Greenspun Department of Communication
Greenspun College of Urban Affairs**

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ABSTRACT

Using Religious Discourse to Construct Reality: President George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden

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This thesis examines and compares the religious discourse used by President George W. Bush in his September 20, 2001, address to a joint session of Congress and by Osama bin Laden in his taped statement that aired on *Al Jazeera* television on October 7, 2001. As leaders of societies who both believe they are God's chosen people with a mission, both men relied on the religions of their respective nations to create a reality whereby one was good and the other evil. To illustrate how Bush and bin Laden achieve this, I apply the social construction of reality theory as it was originally presented by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann in the 1960s. I conclude that religious discourse allowed Bush and bin Laden to, in the words of Berger and Luckmann, "nihilate" each other rhetorically and to create and maintain their own constructions of reality—their own "symbolic universes."

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Images of September 11th are indelible: the plane colliding into the World Trade Center's second tower, terrified New Yorkers jumping to their deaths and running for their lives, rescuers breaking down after losing many of their own, pictures of missing loved ones posted outside hospitals. As Americans struggled to grasp fully what happened, we also struggled to understand why it happened—why the terrorists hated us. Over time, we discovered that the reasons provided by American leaders were very different from the reasons provided by many Islamic extremists.

President George W. Bush, in his address to a joint session of Congress on September 20, 2001, said the terrorists and their followers hated America because they were tyrannous and fanatical:

They hate what they see right here in this chamber, a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms, our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other. They want to overthrow existing governments in many Muslim countries, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan. They want to drive Israel out of the Middle East. They want to drive Christians and Jews out of vast regions of Asia and Africa.

These terrorists kill not merely to end lives but to disrupt and end a way of life. With every atrocity they hope that America grows fearful, retreating from the world and forsaking our friends. They stand against us because we stand in their way.

As the speech continued, Bush tried to rally Americans behind a “war on terror,” telling us “the outcome is certain” because “God is not neutral” between “freedom and fear, justice and cruelty.”

The day the United States began bombing Afghanistan, on October 7, 2001, a videotaped statement from Osama bin Laden appeared on *Al Jazeera*, the Arabic television network based in Qatar, and then later on CNN. In his speech, bin Laden said the 9/11 attacks were retribution, primarily for American foreign policy:

A million innocent children are dying at this time as we speak, killed in Iraq without any guilt. We hear no denunciation, we hear no edict from the hereditary rulers. In these days, Israeli tanks rampage across Palestine, in Ramallah, Rafah and Beit Jala and many other parts of the land of Islam, and we do not hear anyone raising his voice or reacting. But when the sword fell upon America after 80 years, hypocrisy raised its head up high bemoaning those killers who toyed with the blood, honor and sanctities of Muslims.

The least that can be said about those hypocrites is that they are apostates who followed the wrong path. They backed the butcher against the victim, the oppressor against the innocent child. I seek refuge in God against them and ask him to let us see them in what they deserve.

Bin Laden was referring to American sanctions against Iraq, American support for Israel, and the defeat of the Ottoman Empire by Allied forces at the end of World War I. He went on to warn that “America will not live in peace before peace reigns in Palestine, and before all the army of infidels depart the land of Muhammad,” referring to Mecca and Medina—two of Islam’s holiest places located in Saudi Arabia, where American troops have been stationed since the first Persian Gulf War. Bin Laden expressed his battle with the United States as one between “the faithful” and “the infidels.”

While bin Laden praised the 9/11 attackers and implicated the hypocrisies of American foreign policy, President Bush condemned the attackers and said nothing about American foreign policy, pointing instead to religious extremism and to the enemy’s hatred of freedom. Both leaders expressed their perception of the situation through religious discourse, often in terms of good and evil, claiming God was on their side and would help them serve justice. According to Bush, justice would be served by capturing bin Laden, dismantling his Al Qaeda network, and attacking Afghanistan. According to bin Laden, justice was served by the terrorist attacks and would be served again through future acts of terror if necessary.

How is it that the same events could be interpreted and/or portrayed in such different ways? How is it that religion could be used to justify violence and murder? Obviously the answers to those questions are complex and debatable. My hope is to begin to explore them by examining President George W. Bush’s address to a joint session of Congress on September 20, 2001 and Osama bin Laden’s videotaped statement broadcast on *Al Jazeera* television on October 7, 2001 (a translation of his statement conducted by

Reuters and printed in the New York Times)¹. The primary question I seek to answer is: how did Bush and bin Laden use religious discourse to construct and maintain their respective societies' version of reality and to confront each other's version of reality? I argue that the two men attempted to legitimate their own societies by rhetorically "nihilating" the other's societies (Berger and Luckmann).

I believe this topic is important to study for multiple reasons. First, religion has been used to justify murder and/or acts of aggression throughout history. It has also been the basis of many political institutions and cultural identities. There is no denying that religion is powerful and affects all of us—as nations and as individuals—in some way. But as Huston Smith wrote in The World's Religions, "Religion is not primarily a matter of fact; it is a matter of meanings" (10). Thus, if we want to understand how religion can be so powerful, we need to understand how religious meanings are constructed.

This is where communication comes in, leading to the second reason why this research topic is important. Without communication, we cannot construct meanings and pass them along to others. Yet, few studies examine the relationship between religion, communication and social constructions. In the book Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture, contributor Robert A. White argued that studies of religion are weakest "in their lack of a sense of the communicative process through which sacred and secular symbols are created and recreated" (44-45).

This study is an attempt to help fill that gap in communication research. It is also an

¹ It is important to note that translating is a complex art and, inevitably, meanings are lost in the process. I examined several different translations of bin Laden's speech, including that of CNN and the BBC (their Internet sites). While there were differences in terms of exact language, the essence and the basic arguments of bin Laden's statement were the same in each translation. I chose the translation printed in the New York Times for two reasons: (1) journalists and scholars consider the newspaper to be one of the most credible news organizations in the nation; and (2) a transcript of Bush's speech was also printed in the paper, allowing for consistency.

attempt to reinforce the value of the social construction of reality theory. According to the theory, there is no such thing as a single reality or an objective truth. Reality is created through communication; it depends on who is doing the talking. Much of the recent communication research using the social construction theory has focused on mass media, especially news. But those studies were generally more descriptive than analytical, explaining what kind of reality was created without really addressing how it was created (recall White's comments about the communicative process). In so doing, I believe those studies diluted the social construction of reality theory. In this study, I return to the original theory as it was presented by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their 1966 book The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge and in Berger's 1967 follow up, The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion, wherein he applied social construction to religion. The theory is detailed in Chapter 3.

The literature on social construction is summarized in Chapter 2, along with a discussion of the issues surrounding the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Islam and America's civil religion. It is important to clarify that this study is not a comparison of Islam and America's civil religion, nor is it a comparison of Bush's and bin Laden's individual faiths. This study is a comparison of how two leaders construct reality using the symbolic language and concepts of their respective culture's religions. In order to make such a comparison, it is necessary to explain the foundations of each religion.

In 1966, Robert N. Bellah argued that America had a civil religion. Since then, this concept has been widely accepted—although not without debate and modification. The basic concept still stands: the United States is God's chosen nation and has a mission to

fulfill his will—to uphold, if not also to spread, the democratic values of justice and freedom. America’s civil religion is non-denominational but certainly centered around Judeo-Christian and/or Biblical concepts and manifested in our beliefs, symbols and rituals. It is manifested most clearly in presidential rhetoric.

Similarly, Islam is a “political and ideological force” in Arab countries (Tamaddonfar 141). Like Christianity, Islam has different branches; however, there are some general beliefs and rituals that bind all Muslims together. Muslims believe in God, angels, a judgment day and resurrection. They are supposed to surrender themselves to God, pray five times a day, donate money to charity, fast during *Ramadan* and make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once. The prophet Muhammad is the founder of Islam and the Quran is its Holy Book. Muslims believe the Quran is the word of God. According to religious scholar Karen Armstrong, the Quran gives Muslims a historical mission to create a community of equality and respect for all. Whether or not the Quran calls for violence is the subject of much debate.

Osama bin Laden has used the Quran to justify his war against the West. He practices an extreme form of Islam called Wahabbism, which advocates the elimination of all threats to Islam and of all outside or foreign influences that seem to have diluted Islam. According to Armstrong, Wahabbism is “not unlike Puritanism in Christianity” (par. 13). In parallel, President Bush is a “fervent” Christian (Fineman 25) and has recently been portrayed in the news media as one of the most blatantly religious presidents in American history—one whose decisions are based on his belief in a higher calling (Fineman, Lears, Woodward). While it is typical for American presidents to turn to civil religious rhetoric during times of crisis, Bush has taken the discourse a step

further since 9/11. As reporter Jackson Lears wrote in the New York Times, Bush “has presented himself as the leader of a global war against evil” (par. 2).

As will be evident in later chapters, there are both similarities and differences between Bush and bin Laden’s faiths and/or between Islam and America’s civil religion. But three points need to be made here: (1) both leaders have used religious discourse to help their respective societies make sense of the world; (2) both leaders claim a different group (their own) as God’s chosen ones; and (3) both leaders’ respective societies are perceived to be a threat to the other’s existence.

Bush’s address to a joint session of Congress on September 20, 2001 and bin Laden’s taped statement broadcast on *Al Jazeera* on October 7, 2001 were chosen because both presented different versions of reality and because both used religious discourse to do so. Both speeches were seen by worldwide television audiences and both received a significant amount of news coverage around the globe. New York Times reporter Susan Sachs wrote bin Laden’s taped statement “mesmerized many Muslims with its religious and historical imagery” (par. 1). According to Dawn, a Pakistani newspaper and Internet site geared towards English speaking Muslims, bin Laden’s “first public comments since the Sept. 11 attacks” (par. 5) “struck a chord” in the Middle East (par. 8). Bush’s September 20th address struck a chord here in the United States. A Washington Post-ABC News poll taken immediately after the speech “found that 91 percent of Americans currently support the way Bush” handled the terrorist attacks and “of those who listened to the president, eight in 10 said it made them feel more confident in the country’s ability to deal with the crisis” (Morin and Deane par. 2-3). Apparently both men used the right

words in the right way to present different versions of truth. How they did so is explicated in Chapter 4.

By analyzing Bush's and bin Laden's speeches and by exploring the relationship between religion, communication, and social construction, I will illustrate how Bush and bin Laden used religious discourse to construct and maintain their respective societies' versions of reality and to nihilate the other. In the process, I hope to further our understanding of why religion can be so powerful, of how religion is communicated and of how the social construction of reality theory works.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Because few recent studies compare religious and/or political perceptions of reality focusing on communicative processes, it was necessary to review a broad body of research from a variety of disciplines, including sociology and psychology, political science, religious studies, and communication. This chapter surveys the literature on the social construction of reality theory by discipline before summarizing the significant works on America's civil religion, Islam, and the relationship between religion and politics.

Social Construction of Reality Theory

According to the social construction of reality theory, human beings create reality (usually without realizing it) through communication and interaction with others, and then take their constructions as fact and/or objective truth. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann developed the theory in the 1960s in their book The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge. They wrote, "The world of everyday life is not only taken for granted as reality by the ordinary members of society in the subjectively meaningful conduct of their lives. It is a world that originates in their thoughts and actions, and is maintained as real by these" (19-20).

Berger and Luckmann developed the social construction of reality theory from the work of Marx, Nietzsche and various historicists. They credited Marx for its “root proposition—that man’s consciousness is determined by his social being” and for its key concepts: “‘ideology’ (ideas serving as weapons for social interests) and ‘false consciousness’ (thought that is alienated from the real social being of the thinker)” (5-6). They cited Nietzsche’s “anti-idealism” and “mistrust” of social structures like language (7). They also wrote about their theory’s roots in historicism, which is the philosophy that historical events are beyond human control. Berger and Luckmann stressed “the relativity of all perspectives on human events” (7) and emphasized the work of historicist Karl Mannheim, who claimed human thought is not “immune to the ideologizing influences of its social context” (9). Thus, social constructions of reality reflect the past, but also change over time. They are created in the process of human socialization. They are influenced by both ideology and language. They are maintained by what Berger and Luckmann called “conceptual machineries”: theories and/or concepts that allow humans to organize and make sense of the world, such as mythology, theology, science, therapy and nihilation (104-116).

Berger went on to write The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion, a book that extended the social construction of reality theory and applied it to religion. He defined religion as “the establishment, through human activity, of an all-embracing sacred order, that is, of a sacred cosmos that will be capable of maintaining itself in the ever-present face of chaos” (51). Berger argued that humans constructed religion to help them make sense of the world, each other and themselves. To him, “the socially constructed world is, above all, an ordering of experience” (19); the ultimate

paradox being that religion, which “constitutes an immense projection of human meanings into the empty vastness of the universe,” returns “as an alien reality to haunt its producers” (100). In other words, humans create the very God(s) who will punish them. Throughout The Sacred Canopy, Berger discussed ways in which religion has constructed and maintained the various realities embraced by different cultures and/or societies.

Since The Sacred Canopy and The Social Construction of Reality were published, other researchers have altered Berger and Luckmann’s social construction of reality theory. How it is used seems to depend on the discipline in which it is applied. In his book Theories of Human Communication, Stephen W. Littlejohn focused on three specific overlapping angles of social construction from the interpersonal perspective: the self, emotions, and accounts. The social construction of self emphasizes “the ways in which individuals account for and explain their own behavior in particular episodes” and continues on to “the social group or community, [that] through interaction, creates ‘theories’ to explain the experience of reality” (191). According to Littlejohn, adherents of the social construction of emotion believe our individual explanations and theories are guided by our emotions, which “consist of internalized social norms and rules” that “are learned socially within a culture” (194). In other words, the only reason we know when and how to be sad, angry or joyful is because others teach us these things as we grow up.

Emotions could be used to justify behavior, which makes them accounts. In explaining the social construction of accounts, Littlejohn discussed Cody and McLaughlin’s three types of accounts: concessions, excuses and justifications (195-196). He then addressed John Shotter’s theories on the relationship between accounts and

moral responsibility, which focuses on the individual's relationship to the group and on the inextricable link between human experience and communication (196-197).

While Littlejohn's book, Theories of Human Communication, illustrated different ways in which the social construction of reality theory has been applied to interpersonal communication, a broader picture of the variability of the social construction of reality theory is found in Kenneth Gergen's book Social Construction in Context. As a psychologist and one of today's leading social constructionists, Gergen delved into the many "dialogues" of social constructionism, arguing they "function in three significant ways—as *metatheory*, as *social theory* and as *societal practice*" (2). Calling social constructionism a theory about theory, Gergen argued that the constructionist could not make claims of truth or knowledge in his/her research. The theory is based on the idea that there is no single objective truth; thus, even the constructionist's claims are questionable and Gergen believed this to be "an impediment to all philosophies of knowledge" (2). But he went on to argue why social constructionism could function as "an empirically viable theory of social life":

if a plausible case can be made for the social constitution of scientific knowledge on the metatheoretical level, then such a case can also be made for the generation of knowledge of all domains—in government, the justice system, the business world, medicine, religion, communities, the family, therapy, and so on. (2)

Gergen believed social constructionism could be applied to all these domains to help us understand how we know what we know. In terms of the third dialogue, the "societal practice" function, Gergen touched on the wide range of methodological tools used in

qualitative research, noting methodological practices that emphasized “dialogue, co-construction, collaboration, community building, narrative and positive visioning” (3). Decades of analyses using the social construction theory in a variety of functions and disciplines have “demonstrated how claims to the true and the good are born of historical traditions, fortified by social networks, sewn together by literary tropes, legitimated through rhetorical devices and operated in the service of particular ideologies to fashion structures of power and privilege” (170). Overall, Gergen believed constructionist scholarship should illuminate how ideology and language make up what many people just accept as objective knowledge. His book Social Construction in Context did that, focusing primarily on psychology, science and higher education.

Jacob A. Belzen’s article, “Religion as Embodiment: Cultural-Psychological Concepts and Methods in the Study of Conversion Among ‘*Bevindelijken*’,” drew on social constructionism to explain the *Bevindelijken* (a religious group in the Netherlands) concept of conversion. Belzen did not collect his research in any standardized way; instead, he used a variety of methods: observations, conversations, interviews, and analyses of *bevindelijk* newspapers, novels, and documents (par. 22). He used social constructionism because the theory allows the researcher to “give appropriate attention to the fact that humans are cultural beings” and because the theory lends itself to studying “the contingent flow of continuous communicative interaction with human beings” (par. 24-25).

Belzen found that theologically, the *Bevindelijken* are not all that different than mainstream Protestants. However, “their ‘operationalization’” and “their experience of Protestant (i.e., Calvinist) principles in daily life” are unique (par. 16), and their “habitus

is itself structured by social practices” (par. 33). Such practices make the *Bevindelijken* recognizable: “they usually dress in black, or at least in very dark clothes; women may not wear slacks; they avoid the use of makeup, wear their hair in a bun; working on Sundays is taboo (as is riding a bicycle or going out visiting, and the like)” (par. 11). Additionally, the *Bevindelijken* reject things like medical insurance and birth control, claiming illness and pregnancy are God’s will and not to be tampered with (par. 11-20). Social activities are centered around conversion and/or progress along the spiritual path (par. 12-20). Belzen’s article was long on description, but short on analysis; however, he did try to make the case that a study of the human psyche needs to take into account “the embeddedness of human beings in history, society and culture” (par. 23). He then went on to argue more attention needs to be given to the role of human embodiment in the study of the psychology of religion.

Another study examining religion from a cultural perspective was Jo-Ann Harrison’s “School Ceremonies for Yitzhak Rabin: Social Construction of Civil Religion in Israeli Schools.” Harrison’s article focused on Memorial Day observances for Yitzhak Rabin in Israeli schools, using a variety of qualitative research methods: examining documents held in the Rabin Center’s archive about school ceremonies that occurred between 1995 and 1998, observing school ceremonies in 22 schools in 1999, and interviewing students, principals and ceremony organizers (119). Harrison described what occurred during the school ceremonies and discussed what she called “shared themes,” finding both similarities and differences in the shared themes that were emphasized in general/public schools versus those emphasized in state religious schools. She said that in both groups of schools, the “memorial services for Rabin paid homage to the rule of law, non-violent

resolution of disputes, and tolerance among Jewish Israelis”—values which “correspond to the blend of Zionist and democratic beliefs” (130). But the differences in shared themes “constructed alternative understandings of national events and alternative visions of present and future civic identities”:

The General schools proclaimed Democracy and the pursuit of peace with Israel’s Arab neighbors as sacred values and framed the assassination [Rabin was assassinated in 1995 by a religious right-wing student] as a political attack on democracy. In contrast Religious schools emphasized solidarity and unity of the Jewish people and fulfilling Jewish moral commandments, and framed the assassination as an immoral act. (130)

While Harrison described the realities constructed during the school ceremonies, she did not take the next step of discussing what the shared themes revealed about Israel’s civil religion—which is unfortunate because there is significant debate about what constitutes Israel’s civil religion (115-117).

The debate about Thomas Jefferson’s relationship with Sally Hemings was the focus of an article by Venetria K. Patton and Ronald Jemal Stevens. They concluded most white scholars denied the former president’s romantic/sexual relationship with his slave (often on the grounds of Jefferson’s alleged moral character), while most black scholars believed the relationship existed and the paternity of Heming’s children proven. In their article “Narrating Competing Truths in the Thomas Jefferson-Sally Hemings Paternity Debate,” Patton and Stevens combined social construction with Walter Fisher’s concept of narrative to argue that throughout history, there has been a master narrative about Jefferson: he is “cast as a God-like figure, as one of the Founding Fathers and great

presidential figures in United States history whose personal life history is beyond reproach”; and because he has been consistently portrayed as a great moralist, intellectual and historical figure, “the master narrative has no room for interracial fornication” (12). Patton and Stevens explained how blacks are more willing to “assume the worst of slave masters” and have come to expect hypocrisies regarding “professed ideologies and civil conduct”:

hypocrisies ranging from the Declaration of Independence allowing for the institution of slavery, the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, the Dred Scott Decision, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, lynchings and Jim Crow segregation, *Brown v. Board of Education*, on down to more recent decisions such as *Hopwood v. Texas* and Proposition 209. (11)

Patton and Stevens wanted the reader to understand that history is not Truth with a capital “T.” They argued academia and scholarly publications are rhetorical artifacts that can reinforce the dominant power structure and discredit other versions of reality.

Jerry Lembcke also looked at the reinforcement of a dominant power structure in his article “The ‘Right Stuff’ Gone Wrong: Vietnam Veterans and the Social Construction of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.” In examining the roles that the Nixon administration, mental health professionals, and the New York Times played in the construction of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) suffered by Vietnam veterans, Lembcke drew from multiple disciplines: political science, sociology, psychology, and communication. He traced the origins of PTSD, claiming the White House needed “to discredit the anti-war movement generally and anti-war veterans in particular”—which thus “provided the

context in which the news media began constructing the image of the dysfunctional veteran" (par. 4).

Lembcke claimed "the very content of PTSD was itself shaped by the spin given veteran's homecoming experiences by the news":

The image of the woebegone veteran besieged by the anti-war movement and bedeviled by his war experiences was largely created by the news media at the time of the 1972 nominating conventions. In the absence of evidence, indeed in the face of some evidence to the contrary, the news media nevertheless promulgated the image of traumatized veterans, and that image shaped mental health professionals' sense of what it was they were looking for. (par. 77)

Lembcke argued that this constructed image benefited the Nixon Administration and affected the way Americans would remember the Vietnam War:

the image of traumatized Vietnam veterans functioned to discredit the antiwar movement and increase the tension between liberal and radical factions within the anti-war movement. The construction of a fictive hostility between the anti-war movement and Vietnam veterans originated in the obsession of the Nixon-Agnew Administration with internal enemies and its need to discredit anti-war veterans as impostors. Later, the press and psychiatric professionals collaborated on the construction of posttraumatic stress disorder, which provided a more humanistic way of framing how Americans thought about Vietnam veterans and their homecoming experiences.

In the long run, the PTSD framing asked us not to remember the war itself, but the men who fought it. In some ways that shift in memory seemed slight but its effect is profound; when the most indelible image in peoples' minds is that of the victimized veteran, it is almost impossible for them to entertain images of the United States as the aggressor in that war.

(par. 78-79)

Lembcke argued, "we need to understand PTSD as much as a cultural and political category as a mental health category and that the content of PTSD—alienation, survivor guilt, and flashbacks—were derived from popular culture" (par. 4). His article illustrated how three major American institutions—science, the White House, and the news media—played off each other to construct PTSD.

The news media has been a frequent subject of social construction research over the last two decades. A study that did an excellent job of clearly illustrating how the social construction of reality theory works is Dan Nimmo and James E. Combs's examination of the way the major networks portrayed the 1979 Three Mile Island (TMI) nuclear crisis and the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear crisis. Nimmo and Combs concluded the three major television networks had very distinctive ways of covering Three Mile Island, and repeated those coverage styles with Chernobyl. With "CBS Evening News," the TMI coverage focused on "factual information" and had stories that "typically consisted of interviews with energy officials, scientists, and technicians" (Nimmo and Combs 38-39). The underlying theme was that as long as the managers were in charge of the crisis, everything would be all right. The emphasis on facts was repeated in CBS's Chernobyl coverage; but according to Nimmo and Combs, "CBS Evening News" countered the

Soviet official version “with assessments of non-Soviet ‘experts’” (39). This portrayal that “managers outside the Soviet Union were coping with crisis (an international management class) for which Soviet managers were accountable” was labeled “the managerial style” by Nimmo and Combs (38-39).

In contrast, they argued ABC used a “victimage style.” With TMI, the newscast suggested “there was much to fear—radioactivity, toxic gases, poisoned milk, polluted water, hydrogen explosions, core meltdown, evacuations over clogged highways, and threatening wind currents” (Nimmo and Combs 40). Field crews went “to the townspeople, villagers, and schoolchildren. Human reaction to the event was the story, rather than the event itself” (Nimmo and Combs 40). With Chernobyl, ABC could not go to the scene; however, according to Nimmo and Combs, the network still told a “tale of victimage” through four major themes: “Soviet citizens were not being told the real dangers”; “an uncaring Soviet bureaucracy had cut costs in its nuclear program”; “fissionable materials” had been released into the air and were “threatening unsuspecting citizens”; and lack of optimism “that the managers would extinguish the fire” before disaster struck (40-41).

“NBC Nightly News” used a “show-and-tell style” (Nimmo and Combs 41). According to Nimmo and Combs, the network used a “combination of didactic anchors and feature-oriented correspondents” with TMI, which “made for an assuring, nonthreatening series of accounts” (41). NBC crews talked to both experts and everyday people affected by the event. Their coverage of Chernobyl was similar. In sum, Nimmo and Combs argued the three major networks constructed three different versions of reality for both nuclear crises: “CBS portrayed a world in which making sense of things means

finding the managers; ABC looked to the beleaguered masses; and NBC said look and listen for all is not lost” (42). Nimmo and Combs took the same approach in their examination of how the networks covered the *Challenger* explosion and America’s celebrations during the July 4, 1986 unveiling of a restored Statue of Liberty. Their study revealed the power of the news media to shape facts—to take one event and create different versions of reality.

Another study using social construction theory to analyze news content was Tsan-Kuo Chang and Jian Wang’s comparison of television newscasts on China’s CCTV and America’s ABC. Chang and Wang taped the newscasts that aired on both stations from June 15, 1992 through July 15, 1992, and then analyzed the stories both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Quantitatively, both ABC (69.9%) and CCTV (57.1%) tended to focus more on domestic news than other types of news. Compared to ABC, however, CCTV devoted more attention to international and foreign policy news (42.1% vs. 29.4%). Qualitatively, the nature and scope of domestic or foreign news on the two networks varied noticeably, depending on whether the story was situated in a national or international setting. (par.

26)

Chang and Wang concluded “the worlds created by ABC and CCTV apparently were molded according to the logic of views from ‘here and there’ that are bound up with the social location of the respective news organization” and went on to write, “the selection and presentation of news on the two networks depend not so much on the properties of

the event or issue itself, but rather on its position in the broader social structure relative to its external context” (par. 1).

Jeremy H. Lipschultz and Michael L. Hilt used social construction theory to analyze local television news coverage of three executions in Nebraska. They taped late night newscasts and special coverage of the executions that aired on four stations in Omaha. Lipschultz and Hilt concluded the stations were very similar in the way they covered each event and all used routine sources. For the first two executions, the newscasts focused on the conflict between death penalty proponents and opponents, emphasizing “opponents’ silent candlelight vigil, and proponents’ signs and ‘carnival-like atmosphere’” (248). But Lipschultz and Hilt argued coverage of the third execution, which was more “subdued” (held during the day instead of late at night and with fewer demonstrators who were more widely geographically separated from their opponents), portrayed the event as “more complex” and “less intense” than the other executions (248). The researchers concluded, “television helps construct a reality about the death penalty and public attitudes towards it, but the state has the power to manipulate events. Given the nature of source selection and local television news routines, the dramatic coverage of the three executions may seem unavoidable,” but it failed “to provide viewers with meaningful insight into the capital punishment issue” (250).

Another article that criticized the news media, though more harshly than Lipschultz and Hilt, was Sina Ali Muscati’s “Arab/Muslim ‘Otherness’: The Role of Racial Constructions in the Gulf War and the Continuing Crisis with Iraq.” By “analyzing the media’s structure, interests and techniques for conveying news,” Muscati examined its role “in contributing to the racialization and demonization of Arab/Muslims” during the

Persian Gulf War of 1991 (131). Muscati described the war first as most Americans saw it in the Western news media and second as what we did not see—primarily the human toll and the Arab/Muslim perspective. She also cited newspaper and magazine headlines that portrayed Arabs and Muslims as “a threatening ‘other’” (133). Examples included “The Red Menace is Gone. But Here is Islam” in the New York Times and “The Muslims are Coming! The Muslims are Coming!” in The National Review (133-134). Muscati addressed the centuries-long religious battle between Christians and Muslims and the role politicians have played in the religious and historical polarization of East and West. In an effort to “illuminate the reality of events surrounding the Gulf War” (132), Muscati also wrote about U.S. foreign policy and “double standards in the Gulf” (142). Her points were well supported and documented, although she did not discuss a specific research methodology or theory. Still, Muscati’s article was an excellent illustration of Nimmo and Comb’s assertion that “for any situation there is no single reality, no one objective truth, but multiple, subjectively derived realities” (Nimmo and Combs 4).

Few studies of news media content have examined religious news. But in their article “A Rhetorical Profile of Religious News: Time, 1947-1976,” Roderick P. Hart, Kathleen J. Turner and Ralph E. Knupp attempted to delve into the relationship between news magazine coverage of religion and perceptions of religion in America. The researchers selected 648 magazine articles from Time magazine for content analysis. The articles were coded by date and structure and in terms of “denominational focus”, “topical focus”, “conflict orientation”, “presentational focus”, “role orientation”, “gender orientation” and “theological orientation” (60). Using quantitative methodology through a broader constructionist lens, Hart, Turner and Knupp found that Time portrayed

religion “as more concerned with institutional matters (34.7 percent) than with pastoral matters (13.8 percent);” additionally, “laypersons” were “featured less than eight percent of the time, and religious men”... “seven times as often as religious women”— numbers Hart, Turner and Knupp took as a depiction of religion as “an ecclesiastical enterprise enjoyed by only a select few” (60). They concluded that Time depicted religion “as an essentially Euro-American matter in the vast majority of the cases: about 80 percent of the religion articles involve only about 25 percent of the world’s inhabitants;” and “only five percent venture outside the Judeo-Christian tradition” (60).

Judith M. Buddenbaum found a similar Christian bias in her research on three major newspapers: the New York Times, the Minneapolis Star and the Richmond Times-Dispatch. She did a content analysis of religion stories that ran during the summer of 1981 and concluded, “Although religion news no longer seems to be synonymous with local news, this study found it still means primarily news of Christians and Christian organizations—and particularly news from the Protestant churches. More than half the stories in each paper were about Protestants” (603).

Studies like the ones conducted by Buddenbaum and by Hart, Turner and Knupp seem to be few. In the edited book Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture, Robert A. White argued that scholars need to examine “the presentation of the religious and the sacred in the public sphere”—especially the relationship between media and religion and how that relationship works in the construction of cultures (60). As stated in the introduction to this thesis, White claimed that religious studies are weakest “in their lack of a sense of the communicative process through which sacred and secular symbols are created and recreated” (44-45). While future research needs to look more at the ways in

which religious ideas are communicated and/or presented, White suggested scholars have gotten much closer to this ideal in recent years: “religious studies and media studies have freed themselves from the reductionist functions of social integration and modernization largely by aligning themselves with the cultural sciences,” and “both religious studies and studies of public communicative discourse start with the awareness that humans *create* the conceptions of their past and future history” (40-41).

America’s Civil Religion

The United States offers one of the clearest examples of how a society has created the conceptions of its past and future through religion and public discourse. Robert N. Bellah articulated it well in his ground breaking Daedalus article “Civil Religion in America”:

the separation of church and state has not denied the political realm a religious dimension. Although matters of personal religious belief, worship, and association are considered to be strictly private affairs, there are, at the same time, certain common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share. These have played a crucial role in the development of American institutions and still provide a religious dimension for the whole fabric of American life, including the political sphere. This public religious dimension is expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that I am calling the American civil religion.

(3-4)

To make his case, Bellah looked at presidential inaugural speeches throughout American history. However, his article was centered around John F. Kennedy’s 1961 inaugural

address because Kennedy's references to "the religious dimension in political life" provided two things: "a grounding for the rights of man [sic] which makes any form of political absolutism illegitimate" and "a transcendent goal for the political process" (4). As many scholars have done since, Bellah noted that the perception of having an obligation (as individuals and as a nation) to fulfill God's will is an American tradition—one that began with our nation's founders and continued through American Protestantism.

Bellah took excerpts from the founders' documents and speeches to prove they were influenced by religion and went on to point out that while the nation's civil religion has clear Christian ties, it is not Christianity:

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 God of the civil religion is not only rather "unitarian," he is also on the austere side, much more related to order, law, and right than to salvation and love. Even though he is somewhat deist in cast, he is by no means simply a watchmaker God. He is actively interested and involved in history, with a special concern for America. Here the analogy has much less to do with natural law than with ancient Israel; the equation of America with Israel in the idea of "American Israel" is not infrequent. (7)

Bellah believed the civil religion initially focused on the analogy between the American revolution and the Jewish Exodus, but with the Civil War came comparisons to Jesus and the New Testament: "a new theme of death, sacrifice, and rebirth" (10).

In his book The Broken Covenant, published eight years after the Daedalus article, Bellah further elaborated. The origins of America's civil religion go as far back as the 17th century, he argued, when John Winthrop gave a sermon called "A Modell of Christian Charity." As they crossed the ocean towards America, Winthrop told his fellow Puritans they had entered a covenant with God; "he turned the ocean-crossing into a crossing of the Red Sea and the Jordan River and he held out the hope that Massachusetts Bay would be a promised land" (15).

Bellah and Phillip E. Hammond continued elaborating on the history of America's civil religion in their book Varieties of Civil Religion. They argued the idea that Americans were God's chosen people came from two streams of thought: "One current—generated by the Puritans—believed America was renewing a covenant with God. The other current—originating in the deists or 'philosophes'—were fashioning a social contract based on divine law. Both thus imagined God to be intimately involved in national affairs" (65). God's involvement was not mediated by church, sacrament or saint (66). Bellah and Hammond did not say who then acted as mediator, but Bellah's original research suggested U.S. Presidents do. As will be seen later in this chapter, Roderick P. Hart has argued America does indeed have saints, priests, holy places and sacraments.

In Varieties of Civil Religion, Bellah and Hammond also addressed freedom of religion. "In exchange for the right to believe as they wanted, Americans relinquished any church's monopoly on religious symbols and shared them with government" (67). Thus, churches are not an arm of the state and the state is not an arm of the churches. Rather than competing with the government for power, churches have competed with

each other and left politicians free to use religious symbols (68-71). The ideology beneath the "alliance" between religion and politics in America was summarized in four points: "(1) There is a God (2) whose will can be known through democratic procedures; therefore (3) democratic America has been God's primary agent in history, and (4) for Americans the nation has been their chief source of identity" (41-42). In explaining the history of the American religious situation and comparing it with the counterparts in Japan, Mexico and Italy, Bellah and Hammond attempted to clarify the debate that began with the Daedalus article. As Bellah put it in the book's introduction, the debate centered "more on form than content, definition than substance" (vii).

Hart added to the debate in 1977 with his book The Political Pulpit, which focused on the rhetorical dimension of civil religion. His comments about Bellah's work are helpful for understanding civil religion:

In attempting to account for the emergence of our national faith, Robert Bellah burrows for his rationale deep within the human condition when he argues that a society must make its ideals sacred through appropriate symbolism and develop its own metaphysic if it is to function with maximum emotional efficiency. Our national ethos, according to Bellah, is one which needs to explain itself in grand and idealistic fashion. (33)²

Hart believed Bellah's perspective focused on the idea that the U.S., like many other nations, had a distinct "need to create a galaxy of symbols with which to articulate its

² This is similar to Berger's argument in The Sacred Canopy. He wrote humans have a "craving for meaning that appears to have the force of instinct. Men [sic] are congenitally compelled to impose a meaningful order upon reality" (22). That meaningful order, according to Berger, comes through social interaction and/or social construction (19). He claimed religion is "one of the most effective bulwarks against anomy" (87) because it gives the world order and cosmological meaning, which leads to a sense of stability (25, 133-134).

collective goals as a people, its most fundamental and demanding values, its heritage and its destiny” (33-34). American presidents (whose rhetoric Bellah studied) were equated with priests. Additionally, Hart wrote, “Americans needed their prophets (e.g., Benjamin Franklin), their patriarchs (Washington), their martyrs and their redeemers (Lincoln),” as well as their “holy places (the White House),” “amulets (Nixon’s lapel flags),” “saints (Norman Vincent Peale),” “sinners (the Berrigans),” “baptisms (the first grader’s pledge of allegiance),” and “confirmations (often administered by military chaplains)” (34).

Hart also addressed the criticism surrounding Bellah’s concept. The most significant came from John Wilson, who argued Bellah should have used the phrase “civic piety” rather than “civil religion.” Hart wrote:

Employing a purist’s understanding of the construct *religion*, Wilson argues that the refrains Bellah found imbedded in presidential discourse do not “manifest the kind of interrelatedness, institutionalization, and coherence of expression which would warrant identifying them as positive evidence for a developed and differentiated religion” in the strictest sense of that word. (35)

Citing Bellah’s 1973 article in the Anglican Theological Review, Hart argued Bellah’s response to criticism like Wilson’s was that he (Bellah) was “arguing analogically” (36).

Bellah stood by the use of his term in his book Varieties of Civil Religion, claiming “more neutral terms such as ‘political religion’ or ‘religion of the republic’ or ‘public piety’ would not have churned up the profound empirical ambiguities ‘civil religion,’ with its two thousand years of historical resonance, inevitably did” (Bellah and Hammond 4). He added that America’s founders had read theorists like Plato,

Tocqueville, Machiavelli, and Rousseau (the latter of whom was the first to use the term “civil religion”) and were concerned about the problematic relationship between religion and government. “The difficulty arises because for most of those two thousand years there has been a profound antipathy, indeed an utter incompatibility between civil religion and Christianity” (Bellah and Hammond 4).

But Hart argued—based on Thomas O’Dea’s list of “the most common tasks accomplished by traditional religious organizations”—that “American civil religion occasionally performs some of the functions of traditional religion” (36-37). He went on to explain that few American’s would consider civil religion a threat to their individual Christian faiths. “At best, the American civil religion is a political version of Unitarianism” (38). It is important to note that Bellah’s concept is itself a social construction “for the purpose of explaining certain human events” (Hart 42). Still, few scholars seem to “have questioned Bellah’s theoretical starting point—that the religious refrains in presidential speeches can best be understood as manifestations of a civil religion in America” (Hart 39).

In “Manifest Destiny Adapted for 1990s’ War Discourse: Mission and Destiny Intertwine,” Roberta L. Coles delved into a different aspect of civil religion. She argued there are “two strands of dichotomous typologies in the study of civil religion in America” (406), one of which breaks civil religion into conservative and liberal categories:

conservative civil religion focuses on the concept of America as the chosen nation, tends to use the founding documents (the Constitution and Declaration of Independence) as religious texts, sanctifies the economic

order, legitimates the system and actions of the government, and sees the American way of life as unique and desirable. Rhetors who fall into this category tend to be acting, according to Marty (1974), in a “priestly” role, celebrating the nation’s roots.

Liberal civil religionists, on the other hand, de-emphasize the chosen nation concept, instead viewing all nations as warranting God’s equal concern. These rhetors see America not so much as chosen, but rather blessed. They tend to act more as prophets (Marty 1974), rather than priests, calling judgment on national idolatry, stressing global issues, peace and justice, and acting on behalf of all nations. (407)

The second strand of civil religion studies, which Coles labeled “mission by example” and “mission by intervention,” focuses on the myth of Manifest Destiny (407-408).

She then used the classifications to analyze speeches given by President George H. W. Bush during the Persian Gulf War and President Bill Clinton during the Kosovo conflict. Both used civil religion, but in different ways. Coles concluded, “Bush leans to the priestly mode because he elaborates on the superior nature and sole leadership qualities of the United States”; but Clinton “leans toward the prophetic conception” and mission by example believing “America has been blessed,” but also acknowledging “the human role in garnering that prosperity” (419).

Coles noted that Bellah approached civil religion “as a positive belief system that calls upon the nation to live up to a transcendent standard of morality and behavior” (406). Others, however, see it as more negative. “Will Herberg (1960) argued that American civil religion essentially was idolatrous worship of itself, merely propagating

an ethnocentric American way of life around the world. Likewise, Robert Jewett (1973) called American civil religion just another form of jealous nationalism” (Coles 406).

While Sacvan Bercovitch did not specifically use the phrase “civil religion” in his book The American Jeremiad, he did talk about American ideology and its religious dimensions, making evaluations similar to those noted in Coles’ article: “Only in the United States has nationalism carried with it the Christian meaning of the sacred. Only America, of all national designations, has assumed the combined force of eschatology and chauvinism” (176). Bercovitch went on to say that “of all symbols of identity, only America has united nationality and universality, civic and spiritual selfhood, secular and redemptive history, the country’s past and paradise to be, in a single synthetic ideal” (176).

Whether you call it chauvinism, nationalism or ethnocentrism, there is no denying the widespread emphasis on civil religion in American politics. In his article “‘Myth of Origin,’ Civil Religion and Presidential Politics,” Raymond F. Bulman gave specific examples. First President Woodrow Wilson who, during World War I, “saw America as having a divine destiny to save the world” (par. 11). Later, “President Dwight D. Eisenhower spoke of the United States as a ‘shrine or instrument of God’” (par. 11). When trying to explain the Iran-Contra issue, the Reagan administration “exemplified the patriotic and nationalistic themes that belong to the myth of destiny—the American myth of origin” (par. 12). Karlyn Kohrs Campbell took President Nixon to task for feeding the destiny myth in his Vietnamization speech (56-57).

According to Coles, there are several reasons why civil religion rhetoric is often used during war-time or moments of crisis. First, it provides unity as it “attempts to provide a

sacred canopy to a diverse community and gives meaning to the community's existence" (Coles 403). Second, American civil religion serves "to dress" our practical interests (or as Bulman referred to it, our unholy goals) "in transcendent clothing"—especially for acts of war and/or intervention, "where the potential for sacrifice must be outweighed by an emotive appeal to sympathy, justice, duty and mission" (Coles 404). Vietnam, Reagan's invasion of Grenada, and both Persian Gulf wars are recent examples of American acts of aggression justified by civil religion.

But as Clyde Wilcox and Ted Gerard Jelen argued, "civil religion does more than rally Americans behind wars and policies" (295). Their edited book Religion and Politics in Comparative Perspective: The One, the Few, and the Many, offered support for Bellah's concept:

it increases support for the political system more generally: children who view the nation in transcendent terms are more likely to have positive attitudes toward political authority (Smidt 1982). Yet civil religion does more than reify the state, it also has a prophetic element. Indeed, those who see America as God's chosen people are often especially critical of government policies that might seem to be inconsistent with their interpretations of God's will. (295)

Whether or not one agrees with such a depiction of the religious dimension in American politics, there is no denying that there is a relationship between the two. Wilcox and Jelen explained that although the United States advocates religious freedom and the separation of church and state, religious groups have had significant influence on

American politics; and while it is a predominantly Christian nation, the U.S. is “characterized by a remarkable level of religious diversity and devotion” (309).

Islam

As one can gather from its title, the book Religion and Politics in Comparative Perspective: The One, the Few, and the Many covered more than just the American situation. In the chapter titled “Islamism in Contemporary Arab Politics: Lessons in Authoritarianism and Democratization,” Mehran Tamadonfar specifically addressed Islamism in Egypt, Algeria and Lebanon and offered insight into the more general, and often inextricable, relationship between Islam and politics in Arabian countries:

Arab leaders have had to contend with Islam as a political and ideological force ever since Mohammad’s temporal rule. The demands and requirements of Islam and Islamism have always shaped Arab political systems, processes, and policies, regardless of the type of regime in power. Islam has historically been subject to a cyclical pattern of political quietism and activism. The periods of activism have been marked by intense and often violent struggles for political dominance of Islam, whereas the quietist periods were marked by retreat and subjugation to established orders. (141)

In comparing the relationship between Islam and politics in Egypt, Algeria and Lebanon, Tamadonfar made the case that historical events, the influences of other nations and the subsequent social and economic conditions in each country had a tremendous impact on that relationship.

Islam: A Short History, written by Karen Armstrong, traced the religion from the days of Muhammad's revelations to the new (Christian) millennium. Her portrayal of the relationship between Islam and politics illuminated the similarities between Muslims and Americans:

Their sacred scripture, the Quran, gave them a historical mission. Their chief duty was to create a just community in which all members, even the most weak and vulnerable, were treated with absolute respect. The experience of building such a society and living in it would give them intimations of the divine, because they would be living in accordance with God's will. A Muslim had to redeem history, and that meant that state affairs were not a distraction from spirituality but the stuff of religion itself. The political well-being of the Muslim community was a matter of supreme importance. (xi)

This is an echo of America's civil religion with an important reversal. Instead of America being "God's primary agent in history," the Muslim community becomes the primary agent. As Bernard Lewis wrote in his new book The Crisis of Islam, "Christians and Muslims shared a common triumphalism" that is unique when compared to other religions: they both "believe that they alone are the fortunate recipients and custodians of God's final message to humanity, which it is their duty to bring to the rest of the world" (5).

But Lewis, Armstrong, Tamadonfar and John L. Esposito stressed that not all Muslims are alike and Islam is not as one-dimensional as many people think.³ In his book The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?, Esposito argued American media and policymakers “have too often proved surprisingly myopic, viewing the Muslim world and Islamic movements as a monolith and seeing them solely in terms of extremism and terrorism,” which “fails to do justice to the complex realities of the Muslim world and can undermine relations between the West and Islam” (3). Because “Muslims are a majority in some 56 countries ranging from Africa to Southeast Asia” (Esposito 2), it is not possible to do justice to Islam’s diversity in this study; however, a summary of the religion’s basic tenets is in order.

According to Huston Smith, in his book The World’s Religions, the meaning of the word “Islam” is exactly what the religion “seeks to cultivate”: “life’s total surrender to God” (222). Muslims believe the word of God was revealed to the prophet Muhammad while he was seeking solitude and spirituality in a mountain cave on the outskirts of Mecca. As Smith put it, Muhammad received “the same command that had fallen earlier on Abraham, Moses, Samuel, Isaiah, and Jesus”: “a voice falls from heaven saying, ‘You are the appointed one’” (225). The Quran is the sum of the voice Muhammad heard for more than twenty years, beginning in 610.

³ Obviously American religion is not one-dimensional either. The vast majority of Americans practice and/or believe in some form of Christianity, which has three major divisions (Protestantism, Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy) and hundreds of denominations and sects. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the basic tenets of America’s civil religion began with the Puritans (who were Christian). As Coles and other scholars have noted, there are different dimensions of American’s civil religion as well: conservative and liberal, priestly and prophetic, positive and negative. So one could also argue that Americans are not as one-dimensional as many Muslims might think. However, that point has not been argued in the literature I have read.

The Quran is sometimes described as a continuation of the Old and New Testaments, but different in that “God speaks in the first person. Allah describes himself and makes known his laws” (Smith 235). The power of the Quran has to do with more than just its content however and Smith explained that “the rhythm, melodic cadence, the rhyme produce a powerful hypnotic effect” (234). Smith went on to argue the impossibility of overemphasizing the Quran’s importance to Islam:

With large portions memorized in childhood, it regulates the interpretation and evaluation of every event. It is a memorandum for the faithful, a reminder for daily doings, and a repository of revealed truth. It is a manual of definitions and guarantees, and at the same time a road map for the will. Finally, it is a collection of maxims to meditate on in private, deepening endlessly one’s sense of the divine glory. (235)

Faith in the Quran and God’s other books is one of the major principles of Islam.

According to religious scholar Warren Malcolm Clark’s book Islam for Dummies,⁴ God’s other books include Mosaic Law, the Psalms of David, and the Gospel of Jesus (50-52).

Muslims also believe in God’s messengers and angels and in heaven and hell (Clark 50-54). Different branches of Islam adhere to different versions of the exact process of death, resurrection and the final judgment; however, most Muslims believe that “at the time of death, the book in which each persons deeds were recorded during their lives was

⁴ While the “Dummies” series is not generally considered to be a scholarly source, I believe it is credible and informative. Clark, the author, is a Professor of Religion Emeritus at Butler University and earned his degrees from Harvard and Yale. His book is one of the few that explains Islam’s basic concepts and values. I found it a necessary read in order for me to get past the social constructions of Islam (most frequently associated with terrorism and/or extremism) created by American media and politicians.

affixed to their necks” and, once the resurrection occurs, “those destined for heaven receive the book in their right hands; those destined for hell receive it in their left hands” (Clark 70-71). Smith concurred: “the belief that unites all Muslims concerning the afterlife is that each soul will be held accountable for its future with its actions on earth thereafter dependent upon how well it has observed God’s commands” (242).

But the most important theological doctrine in Islam is the belief in a single God, expressed in what Smith called the “electrifying cry”: “*La ilaha illa 'llah!* There is no god but God!” (225). Believing Jesus was a prophet, but not the son of God, Muslims reject the Christian Trinity and/or any implication of polytheism:

The greatest sin in Islam is “association” (*shirk*), a term that occurs frequently in the Qur’an in reference to the citizens of Mecca who continued to worship other gods. To be guilty of “association” is to be subject to the penalty of death in this world and spending eternity in hell in the next world (although ultimately God is capable of forgiving even the worst sinners should he choose to do so). To accuse somebody of *shirk* is the worst accusation one can make against a fellow Muslim and a term of derision applied to non-believers. The person who is guilty of *shirk* is a non-believer, a *kafir*. (Clark 49)

Believing in other gods is not the only way to commit this sin. Giving one’s loyalty to “money, power, or possessions” (over God) is also a form of *shirk* (Clark 38).

A Muslim’s loyalty to God is reflected in the first of the Five Pillars of Worship: the *shahada*. This is a statement of one’s faith that is said regularly: “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is His Prophet.” The second pillar is prayer, or *salat*. Muslims are

supposed to pray five times a day “to keep their lives in perspective” and “give thanks” for their lives (Smith 244). Charity is the third act of worship that Muslims are supposed to perform. The Quran says they must pay a tax of approximately 2.5% to help the needy. Fasting for Ramadan is the fourth pillar. Muslims are not supposed to eat, drink, smoke or have sex during this time; they are also supposed to think about God. The last pillar is *Hajj*: the pilgrimage to Mecca. Every Muslim is supposed to make the trip at least once in his/her life, as long as s/he is physically and economically able to do so. Huston Smith said the pilgrimage is more than an expression of a Muslim’s devotion to God; it’s also an expression of the Islamic belief in equality: “upon reaching Mecca, pilgrims remove their normal attire, which carries marks of social status, and don two simple sheet-like garments. Thus everyone, on approaching Islam’s earthly focus, wears the same thing. Distinctions of rank and hierarchy are removed” (246).

Such acts of worship and theological beliefs suggest Islam is a peaceful religion. Yet Westerners often associate it with violence, terrorism, and extremism. According to Muslim scholars however, the Quran does not advocate war and other acts of force. In her Time magazine article “The True, Peaceful Face of Islam,” Karen Armstrong wrote that in the Muslim Holy Book, “the only permissible war is one of self-defense”:

Warfare is always evil, but sometimes you have to fight in order to avoid the kind of persecution that Mecca inflicted on the Muslims (2:191; 2:217) or to preserve decent values (4:75; 22:40). The Koran quotes the Torah, the Jewish scriptures, which permits people to retaliate eye for eye, tooth for tooth, but like the Gospels, the Koran suggests that it is meritorious to forgo revenge in a spirit of charity (5:45). (48)

Smith made similar arguments: "According to prevailing interpretations of the Koran, a righteous war must either be defensive or to right a wrong. 'Defend yourself against your enemies, but do not attack them first: God hates the aggressor' (2:190)" (255).

The obvious questions then become: 1) what about *jihad*? and 2) what about all the recent acts of violence and/or terrorism made in the name of *Allah* and/or Islam? In Time, Armstrong wrote, "the primary meaning of the word *jihad* is not 'holy war' but 'struggle.' It refers to the difficult effort that is needed to put God's will into practice at every level—personal and social as well as political" (48). She went on to quote Muhammad talking to his men after a battle: "'We are returning home from the lesser jihad [the battle] to the greater jihad,' the far more urgent and momentous task of extirpating wrongdoing from one's own society and one's own heart" (48).

Clark partially concurred with Armstrong. He argued the word *jihad* "is used in some places in the Qur'an without military connotation. But in other texts, *jihad* does include warfare, and certainly war on behalf of God is prominent in the Islamic tradition" (Clark 141). Both Clark (282) and Esposito (30) made note of the Islamic differentiation between *jihad* of the heart, tongue (words), actions and sword (282). That of the sword is the primary issue here. According to Esposito, "Islamic law stipulates that it is a Muslim's duty to wage war against polytheists, apostates, and People of the Book [Jews and Christians] who refuse Muslim rule, and those who attack Muslim territory" (31). Clark elaborated on this:

In classical Islam, the caliph was obligated to wage war to bring non-Muslim areas under the rule of God's law. With the fragmentation of Islam into a number of states, Islamic tradition held that jihad of the sword

in defense of Islam was required of every Muslim male. While some limit defensive jihad to cases of invasion of a Muslim state, others understand defensive jihad much more broadly. (282)

According to Clark, there is no “distinction between internal and external (greater and lesser) *jihad*” for “Radical Islamists” who “call upon all Muslims to take military or violent action against those they consider unfaithful Muslims, as well as non-Muslims” (282).

Osama bin Laden

Osama bin Laden has declared several wars against the United States since the 1990's. To understand why, it is helpful to turn to an interview bin Laden gave in May 1998, where he answered questions from some of his followers and from ABC News reporter John Miller. When asked the meaning of his “call for Muslims to take arms against America,” bin Laden claimed it was America who “spear-headed the crusade against the Islamic nation, sending tens of thousands of its troops to the land of the two Holy Mosques over and above its meddling in its affairs and its politics, and its support of the oppressive, corrupt and tyrannical regime that is in control” (par. 2-3). He brought up American support for Israel several times and accused the United States of ripping “us of our wealth and of our resources and of our oil. Our religion is under attack. They kill and murder our brothers. They compromise our honor and our dignity and dare we utter a single word of protest against the injustice, we are called terrorists” (par. 6). Because it was directed “at the tyrants and aggressors and the enemies of Allah, the tyrants, the traitors, who commit acts of treason against their own countries and their own faith and

their own prophet and their own nation,” bin Laden said his terrorism was “commendable” (par. 5). He believed his terrorism was justified, telling John Miller “Allah has ordered us to make holy wars and to fight to see to it that His word is the highest and the uppermost and that of the unbelievers the lowermost. We believe that this is the call we have to answer” (par. 20).

According to Lewis, bin Laden and his terrorist group, Al Qaeda, are blasphemers because they sanctified “their action through pious references to Islamic texts, notably the Qur’an and the traditions of the prophet” (138). But they were “highly selective in their choice and interpretation of sacred texts” (Lewis 138). Lewis wrote that the 9/11 terrorist attacks had “no justification in Islamic doctrine or law and no precedent in Islamic history” (154).

In his book, The Crisis of Islam, Lewis explained how bin Laden and his followers are one of several different “extremist groups” who claim to “represent a truer, purer and more authentic Islam than that currently practiced by the vast majority of Muslims” (138). Their version of Islam is called Wahabbism. Armstrong called it “an 18th century reform movement not unlike Puritanism in Christianity”—one which advocates getting “back to the source of the faith” and getting “rid of accretions and additions and all foreign influence” (Beliefnet par. 13). Clark explained how that reform movement was the result of an alliance between a Muslim scholar, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and a local tribal chief, Muhammad ibn Saud: “ak-Wahhab advocated imposing an intolerant and puritanical form of Islam on the population” and “Ibn Saud conquered most of Arabia” (287). The Ottoman Empire destroyed that Saudi state in the 19th century, but it

returned a century later as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia with the support of the Wahabbis.

In her book Islam: A Short History, Armstrong wrote about the official view of the newly formed Saudi Arabian government:

a constitution was unnecessary, since the government was based on a literal reading of the Quran. But the Quran contains very little legislation and it had always been found necessary in practice to supplement it with more complex jurisprudence. The Saudis proclaimed that they were the heirs of the pristine Islam of the Arabian peninsula, and the *ulama* [traditional legal and religious scholars] granted the state legitimacy; in return the kings enforced conservative religious values. (161)

Those conservative religious values include shrouding women, banning alcohol and gambling, and enforcing “traditional punishments, such as the mutilation of thieves” (Armstrong 162). New Republic reporter Tarek Masoud wrote that Saudi Arabia’s “public schools follow Islamic curricula dictated by Wahabi clerics” and “businesses close five times daily for prayer” (par. 2).

Bin Laden was born in Saudi Arabia and grew up in a wealthy family. According to Clark, they were also “pious” and bin Laden’s father “was strongly committed to the Palestinian cause” (293). When helping the rebels of Afghanistan defeat the communists during the 1980s, bin Laden was actually a U.S. ally. But after he “offered to raise troops to defend Saudi Arabia when Iraq invaded Kuwait” and his home country sought help from the United States instead, bin Laden “felt betrayed” (Clark 294). As Esposito explained, he then went “on a collision course with his government” and America:

He bitterly criticized the House of Saud for permitting a foreign, non-Muslim military presence in the homeland of Islam's two most sacred sites, Mecca and Medina. Stripped of his Saudi citizenship, he moved to Sudan in 1994 and became more active in Islamist causes in the broader Muslim world. In 1996 Sudan asked him to leave in response to American charges that Bin Laden used Sudan as a base for his involvement in international terrorism. (278)

After being forced to leave Sudan, bin Laden returned to Afghanistan.

In her Time magazine article "Why the Hate?" Lisa Beyer explained that American support for Israel—"politically (notably at the U.N.), economically (\$840 million in aid annually) and militarily (\$3 billion more, plus access to advanced U.S. weapons)"—is "the greatest single source of Arab displeasure with the U.S." (45). This displeasure helps bin Laden.

Referring to his taped statement that was broadcast on October 7, 2001, New York Times reporter Susan Sachs wrote that bin Laden's "championing of the Palestinians and his flowery contempt for the United States" (par. 4) helped him mesmerize many Muslims (par. 1). Apparently it was not just what bin Laden said, but also the way he said it. Sachs referred to the "religious and historical imagery" (par. 1). Dawn, a Pakistani based news source geared towards English speaking Muslims, quoted a Middle East expert in London as saying bin Laden "'is a first-class speaker'" who "'left millions of dollars to live in a cave. That tells you about the depth of his belief in what he is doing. This certainly comes across in his statement. People believe him more than any Arab leader'" (par. 8). As Newsweek reporter Evan Thomas wrote, many Islamic

extremists view bin Laden as a hero or “as a modern-day Saladin, the Islamic warrior who drove out the Crusaders a millennium ago” (42). Bin Laden looked the part of a modern day warrior on the tape. In his New York Times article, reporter John F. Burns described bin Laden as “wearing a mottled camouflage combat jacket over traditional Arab dress, with a white, long-tailed turban. Beside him was a Kalashnikov rifle” (par. 10).

The United States views bin Laden as a murderer rather than a warrior. He is one of the CIA’s most wanted men, blamed for the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the 2000 attack on the USS Cole off the coast of Yemen and the 1998 American embassy bombings in Africa. But just as there are different perceptions of bin Laden, there are different perceptions of President Bush.

President George W. Bush

According to Newsweek reporter Howard Fineman, many Muslims believe President Bush is “sinister” as well: “a new Crusader, bent on retaking the East for Christendom” (25). Much of this came out of Bush’s April 2003 invasion of Iraq. However, as Jackson Lears pointed out in his New York Times article “How a War Became a Crusade,” the president’s religious rhetoric began long before that:

From the outset he has been convinced that his presidency is part of a divine plan, even telling a friend while he was governor of Texas, “I believe God wants me to run for president.”

This conviction that he is doing God’s will surfaced more openly since 9/11. In his State of the Union addresses and other public forums, he has

presented himself as the leader of a global war against evil. As for a war in Iraq, “we do not claim to know all the ways of Providence, yet we can trust in them.” God is at work in world affairs, he says, calling for the United States to lead a liberating crusade in the Middle East, “the call of history has come to the right country.” (par. 1-2)

Fineman echoed Lear’s sentiments, calling the president “the most resolutely ‘faith-based’ in modern times, an enterprise founded, supported and guided by trust in the temporal and spiritual power of God” (Fineman 25). Fineman traced Bush’s religious past, explaining how he was raised primarily Presbyterian, joined his wife’s Methodist church in 1977 and then, in the mid-eighties (when he gave up alcohol), joined a relatively small, non-denominational self-help group in Texas called Community Bible Study (26-28). It was around the same time that Bush seriously got involved in Texas politics and saw the power of the growing alliance between the religious right and the GOP.

In that same issue of Newsweek, reporter Kenneth L. Woodward wrote President Bush’s recent “invocation of ‘Providence’ and ‘God’s will’ for the world echo Calvinist theology” (29). However, Woodward went on to note that Bush’s words are the “Biblically derived language of the American civil religion,” which is “rhetoric that our leaders have always used to link the nation’s purposes to those of a transcendent God—especially in times of war” (29).

War or no war, president or not president, Bush is a religious man. In his autobiographical book A Charge to Keep, published in 1999, Bush was very clear about

his Christianity. He credited Reverend Billy Graham and his own new-found sobriety for helping his “faith” take on “new meaning” in the mid-eighties:

It was the beginning of a new walk where I would recommit my heart to Jesus Christ.

I was humbled to learn that God sent His Son to die for a sinner like me. I was comforted to know that through the Son, I could find God’s amazing grace, a grace that crosses every border, every barrier and is open to everyone. Through the love of Christ’s life I could understand the life-changing powers of faith. (136)

Bush wrote how he “began reading the Bible regularly” (136) and “learned the power of prayer” (138). He added that while his spirituality gives him “focus and perspective,” he knows “faith can be misinterpreted in the political process” (138). Bush wrote, “Faith is an important part of my life. I believe it is important to live my faith, not flaunt it” (138)

The discussion of Bush’s religiosity has primarily been in the news media. So far, the only scholarly source I have found comes from the Australian Journal of Politics and History. There, Graham Maddox wrote that “Bush’s stark contrast between the claimed righteousness of his own cause and the alleged evil of his chosen enemies presents a narrow and judgmental version of Christianity, pronounced with a dogmatism not far removed from the rhetoric of the terrorists themselves” (411).

If that is true, the news media and the American public did not seem to notice. The day after Bush’s September 20, 2001 address, Washington Post reporter Jim Hoagland wrote the president managed “to help many troubled Americans sleep again that night” (par. 3). And, as noted in Chapter 1, a Washington Post-ABC News poll taken

immediately after the speech “found that 91 percent of Americans currently support the way Bush” handled the terrorist attacks and “of those who listened to the president, eight in 10 said it made them feel more confident in the country’s ability to deal with the crisis” (Morin and Deane par. 2-3).

Conclusion

Some of the similarities and/or parallels between Bush and bin Laden should now be apparent. Both use religious rhetoric to justify acts of aggression or violence. They are both openly religious men who adhere to a fundamentalist version of their faith. They both consider the other to be evil.

There are also similarities between Islam and America’s civil religion. Both advocate an obligation to fulfill God’s will. Both portray their followers as God’s chosen people who should bring others to their way of life. Both have themes of mission by intervention, individual or present day sacrifice for the greater present and/or future good, and the supposed importance of equality and/or justice. Both portray God as a great orchestrator of historical events with deep concern for the future. And both Islam and America’s civil religion combine religion and politics— creating an ideological force most often used at times of war. Hopefully, the research conducted for this thesis will also show that as theodicies and/or as tools for maintaining their respective societies, the religions function similarly.

The differences between the two religions are in the details. Islam is more theological and ultimately advocates complete surrender to God, giving specific rules as to how an individual should live. America’s civil religion does not offer such rules

and/or guidelines. And while it focuses on the nation as an American's chief source of identity, Islam focuses on the religion. Part of this is because there are many different Muslim countries and/or societies around the world, but there is only one United States and/or American civil religion. The purpose of this thesis is not to compare the two religions, but to illustrate how two leaders used the religions to maintain their respective realities and to rhetorically nihilate their enemies.

In this chapter, I have reviewed the literature on both religions and on the social construction of reality theory. White's assertion that, presently, both studies of religion and studies of public communication are conducted through a constructionist framework ("the awareness that humans *create* the conceptions of their past and future history") suggests the social construction of reality theory is an ideal way to analyze religious rhetoric used in public discourse. But as he pointed out, there needs to be more attention paid to the communicative process. This is one of the research gaps made apparent in this literature review.

Another gap in research using the social construction of reality theory is its lack of consistency in application. Many of the studies were more descriptive than analytical, failing to show *how* the different realities were constructed. For this reason, in the following chapter I will detail the social construction reality theory, its various components, and the reasons why this theory is the most appropriate one to use in this critical study.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

One of the better summaries of the social construction of reality theory was written by Nimmo and Combs in their book Mediated Political Realities. They broke the theory down into three main points: “(1) Our everyday, taken-for-granted reality is a delusion; (2) reality is created, or constructed, through communication—not expressed by it; (3) for any situation there is no single reality, no one objective truth, but multiple, subjectively derived realities” (3-4). While this is a good encapsulation of the social construction of reality theory, it does not explain how it works—*how* reality is constructed. For this, it is necessary to go back to the original articulation of the theory given by Berger and Luckmann in their book The Social Construction of Reality, as well as Berger’s later extension and application of the theory to religion in The Sacred Canopy. Using these two sources, this chapter will detail the social construction of reality theory and explain why it is the best method of analysis for this study.

Before breaking the theory down into its essential components, it is necessary to summarize its underlying, basic assumptions. The two initial premises are (1) human beings are inherently unstable and thus, they have a biological need to create order and meaning out of the world around them, and (2) human beings are inherently social animals. Berger summed it up well: “Man cannot accept aloneness and he cannot accept meaninglessness” (56). Because of this, humans live with the constant fear of anomy.

Berger and Luckmann claimed humans construct society to keep anomy at bay, but then forget they created it. Thus, “society appears to common sense as something quite different, as independent of human activity and as sharing in the inert givenness of nature” (Berger 7-8).

This might suggest that the theorists believed human beings are also inherently passive, if not down right dumb. The implication becomes stronger when you look at sentences like, “human beings are frequently sluggish and forgetful” or “human beings are frequently stupid” in The Social Construction of Reality (70) and “since society is encountered by the individual as a reality external to himself, it may often happen that its workings remain opaque to his understanding” in The Sacred Canopy (11). But Berger went on to write:

The individual is not molded as a passive, inert thing. Rather, he [sic] is formed in the course of a protracted conversation (a dialectic, in the literal sense of the word) in which he is a *participant*. That is, the social world (with its appropriate institutions, roles, and identities) is not passively absorbed by the individual, but actively *appropriated* by him [sic]. (18)

Berger called the individual a “*co-producer* of the social world” and of himself/herself (18).

So Berger and Luckmann did not believe that human beings simply exist in a puppet-like state, reacting to the social world around them. They believed humans create their world and actively participate in its maintenance (primarily through communication); but, at the same time, humans fail to truly grasp their role as society’s creators and

maintainers. The most concise and comprehensive explication of this concept came at the very end of The Social Construction of Reality:

Man [sic] is biologically predestined to construct and to inhabit a world with others. This world becomes for him the dominant and definitive reality. Its limits are set by nature, but once constructed, this world acts back upon nature. In the dialectic between nature and the socially constructed world the human organism itself is transformed. In this same dialectic man produces reality and thereby produces himself. (183)

This idea that the relationship between society and human beings is a dialectical one is at the heart of the social construction of reality theory.

Berger and Luckmann broke the dialectical process down into three parts: externalization, objectivation and internalization. If a society exists, we know these three moments have taken place. As Berger wrote in The Sacred Canopy, "every human society is an edifice of externalized and objectivated meanings, always intending a meaningful totality" (27). It is important to note that externalization, objectivation and internalization are not separate and/or temporal; they occur simultaneously and/or circularly.

Externalization has to do with that which we can see. In The Social Construction of Reality, externalization is characterized by the following statement: "*society is a human product*" (61). But I believe Berger was clearer in The Sacred Canopy: "Externalization is the ongoing outpouring of human being into the world, both in the physical and the mental activity of men" (4). Examples cited in The Sacred Canopy include tools, language, the family, the economy and government. Berger wrote that these products

“provide the firm structures for human life that are lacking biologically” (6) and reflect “the essential sociality of man” (7).

When externalized products become fact to us, when they become “objective reality,” objectivation has occurred (Berger and Luckmann 58-61). Money is an ideal example. Humans seem to have forgotten that they created it and have given it tremendous power. However, as Berger explained, objectivity characterizes “non-material” products as well:

Man invents a language and then finds that both his speaking and his thinking are dominated by its grammar. Man produces values and discovers that he feels guilt when he contravenes them. Man concocts institutions, which come to confront him as powerfully controlling and even menacing constellations of the external world. (9)

Thus, objectivation is characterized by the statement “*society is an objective reality*” (Berger and Luckmann 61).

When we give those objectivated products meaning and allow those meanings to make up part of our identities, we are internalizing. Berger and Luckmann described this third moment as that in which “*man is a social product*” because “the objectivated social world is retrojected into consciousness in the course of socialization” (61). Not only do we no longer see institutions as something we created, we take those institutions and their programs as “subjectively real as attitudes, motives and life projects. The reality of the institutions is appropriated by the individual along with his roles and his identity” and “the structures of this world come to determine the subjective structures of consciousness itself” (Berger 15-17). Berger summed it up well when he wrote that for the individual, internalization means institutions are seen “as *data* of the objective world outside

himself” as well as “*data* of his own consciousness” (Berger 17). Internalization occurs through the process of socialization and is “deemed successful” if the constructed reality is “apprehended as inevitable” (Berger and Luckmann 147).

Berger and Luckmann argued institutions could not exist without externalization, objectivation and internalization. Thus, any social construction of reality could not exist without these three steps because, according to Berger and Luckmann, the foundation of any social construction of reality is institutionalization. The theorists explained that institutions let us know what actions are to be performed when and by whom, which means they “imply historicity and control”:

Reciprocal typifications of actions are built up in the course of a shared history. They cannot be created instantaneously. Institutions always have a history, of which they are products. It is impossible to understand an institution adequately without an understanding of the historical process in which it was produced. Institutions also, by the very fact of their existence, control human conduct by setting up predefined patterns of conduct, which channel it in one direction as against the many other directions that would theoretically be possible. (Berger and Luckmann 54-55)

Obvious examples of institutions would be systems of government and/or nationhood, religion, education and science—all of which have a history in any given society and all of which exert some form of social control.

In order for institutions to maintain their existence by transmitting their realities from generation to generation, the process of legitimation is required. Berger called

legitimations the “answers to any questions about the ‘why’ of institutional arrangements” (29). Through the process of legitimation, the institutional world “can be ‘explained’ and justified” (Berger and Luckmann 61). Roles are dictated in the process, as individuals become aware of what actions they should take and what attitudes they should have. Legitimations are especially important when institutional systems are threatened and/or during events of what Berger and Luckmann call “anomic terror”:

All social reality is precarious. All societies are constructions in the face of chaos. The constant possibility of anomic terror is actualized whenever the legitimations that obscure the precariousness are threatened or collapse. The dread that accompanies the death of a king, especially if it occurs with sudden violence, expresses this terror. Over and beyond emotions of sympathy or pragmatic political concerns, the death of a king under such circumstances brings the terror of chaos to conscious proximity. (103)

The specific example given by Berger and Luckmann was the assassination of John F. Kennedy. The September 11th terrorist attacks would be another example for Americans. For Muslims, it is possible to go as far back as the Crusades for an example. But more recent events that brought along the terror of chaos (or at least, the fear of that terror) for Arab-Muslims include the formation of the state of Israel and American support for Israel, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and—especially for Osama bin Laden and his followers—United States military presence in Saudi Arabia. According to Berger and Luckmann, such events would “have to be followed at once with the most solemn reaffirmations of the continuing reality of the sheltering symbols” (104). President

Bush's September 20th address to a joint session of Congress and Osama bin Laden's taped statement that aired October 7, 2001 were both reaffirmations of their respective society's version of reality. The speeches were legitimations.

The primary instrument of legitimation and/or socialization is language. In The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge, Berger and Luckmann explained how language makes symbols part of everyday life:

Language is capable not only of constructing symbols that are highly abstracted from everyday experience, but also of "bringing back" these symbols and presenting them as objectively real elements in everyday life. In this manner, symbolism and symbolic language become essential constituents of the reality of everyday life and the commonsense apprehension of reality. (40-41)

Humans need language to help them communicate. Language is made up of symbols and the ways in which we use those symbols gives them meaning. Thus, communication creates reality.

It also, in Berger and Luckmann's words, "typifies experience" (39). In other words, language helps us label, organize and/or categorize the world we live in. Berger wrote, "Language nominalizes by imposing differentiation and structure upon the ongoing flux of experience. As an item of experience is named, it is *ipso facto*, taken out of this flux and given stability as the entity so named" (20). In this way, language is one of the ultimate examples of objectification. When the same words are used repeatedly in the process of conversation, the language and the meanings it provides become internalized. Thus, as members of a society who communicate with each other (be it one-on-one conversations,

a politician speaking to a room full of a hundred people, or a journalist communicating with millions who read his/her article), we all help maintain the given reality constructions. Berger and Luckmann elaborated on this concept: "The significance of this can be further differentiated in terms of what is meant by a 'common language'—from the group-idiosyncratic language of primary groups to regional or class dialects to the national community that defines itself in terms of language" (154).

While language is the primary method by which legitimation occurs, religion, Berger argued, is the most powerful instrument of legitimation:

Religion legitimates social institutions by bestowing upon them an ultimately valid ontological status, that is, by *locating* them within a sacred and cosmic frame of reference. The historical constructions of human activity are viewed from a vantage point that, in its own self-definition, transcends both history and man. (Berger 33-34)

Through religious legitimation, the fact that institutions were created by humans becomes hidden or lost. As Berger put it, "the humanly constructed nomoi are given a cosmic status" (36). Berger believed that religion linked humanly defined reality "to ultimate, universal and sacred reality" (Berger 35).⁵

Because they are all inclusive, religious legitimations fall into what Berger and Luckmann consider to constitute the fourth level of legitimation: symbolic universes, which are "bodies of theoretical tradition that integrate different provinces of meaning and encompass the institutional order in a symbolic totality" (95). In The Social

⁵ Berger defined religion as "the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established" and sacred as "a quality of mysterious and awesome power, other than man and yet related to him" (25). By this definition, America's civil religion and all branches of Islam are religions.

Construction of Reality, symbolic universes were described as “nomic” because signification is used to help human beings organize, label, and/or categorize the world around them (97). As Berger and Luckmann explained, symbolic universes have a degree of “meaningful integration”:

all the sectors of the institutional order are integrated in an all-embracing frame of reference, which now constitutes a universe in the literal sense of the word because *all* human experience can now be conceived as taking place *within* it. The symbolic universe is conceived of as the matrix of *all* socially objectivated and subjectively real meanings; the entire historic society and the entire biography of the individual are seen as events taking place *within* this universe. (96)

Thus, the symbolic universe also explains and/or justifies what Berger and Luckmann called “marginal situations,” which are threats to “taken for granted routinized existence in society” (98). Marginal situations intensify our anomic fears. Death is one of the worst marginal situations we can experience.

In both American culture and Islamic culture, death is made meaningful and/or more comprehensible through religion. An example Bellah used in his Daedalus article was the Civil War, which killed thousands of Americans, divided the nation and “raised the deepest questions of national meaning” (Bellah 9). Bellah cited Lincoln’s speeches, especially the Gettysburg Address, to argue that, “with the Civil War, a new theme of death, sacrifice, and rebirth enters the civil religion” (10). He even went so far as to equate, symbolically, Lincoln and the Gettysburg Address with Jesus and the New Testament (10-11). Similarly, in Islam, to die during war is what Esposito called “the

highest form of witness to God and to one's faith. The very Arabic word for martyr (*shahid*) comes from the same root as the profession of faith (*shahada*). As in Christianity, the reward for martyrdom is paradise" (31). During times of crisis, religious legitimations come to the forefront—especially when "a society must motivate its members to kill or risk their lives" (Berger 44).

War, according to Berger and Luckmann, occurs when a symbolic universe becomes problematic—when it is no longer taken for granted (105-116). There are varying degrees to which this might happen, the first of which is internal in a given society: "deviant versions of the symbolic universe come to be shared by groups of 'inhabitants'" (Berger and Luckmann 106). The example given in The Social Construction of Reality is heresy, which, historically, "has often been the first impetus for the systematic theoretical conceptualization of symbolic universes" (107). Berger and Luckmann looked specifically at "the development of Christian theological thought as a result of a series of heretical challenges to the 'official' tradition":

the precise Christological formulations of the early church councils were necessitated not by the tradition itself but by the heretical challenges to it. As these formulations were elaborated, the tradition was maintained and expanded at the same time. Thus there emerged, among other innovations, a theoretical conception of the Trinity that was not only unnecessary but actually non-existent in the early Christian community. (107)

The symbolic universe is adapted to keep alternative symbolic universes within a society at bay.

However, a bigger problem (and the one most pertinent to this thesis) occurs when the threat is external—when two different societies with two different versions of reality confront each other. Here, there is “another society that views *one’s own* definitions of reality as ignorant, mad or downright evil;” thus, the inevitability of one’s own symbolic universe is called into question (Berger and Luckmann 108). Berger and Luckmann wrote, “the alternative universe presented by the other society must be met with the best possible reasons for the superiority of one’s own. This necessity requires a conceptual machinery of considerable sophistication” (108).

By “conceptual machineries,” they basically mean tools and/or forms of legitimation used to maintain the symbolic universe in question (109). Berger and Luckmann went on to address some of the more obvious conceptual machineries: mythology, theology, modern science, therapy and nihilation (110-116). The one I believe was used by both President Bush and Osama bin Laden is nihilation, which conceptually liquidates “everything *outside* the same universe” (Berger and Luckmann 114). Berger and Luckmann described it “as a kind of negative legitimation” because “legitimation maintains the reality of the socially constructed universe; nihilation denies the reality of whatever phenomena or interpretations of phenomena do not fit into that universe” (114). One way to do this is to give the “deviant phenomena” a “negative ontological status;” so in this scenario, the “other” is looked at as “less than human, congenitally befuddled about the right order of things, dwellers in a hopeless cognitive darkness” (Berger and Luckmann 114-115). The idea here is that the other’s conception(s) should not be taken seriously. Another way to nihilate is “to account for all deviant definitions of reality in terms of concepts belonging to one’s own universe. In a theological frame of reference,

this entails the transition from heresiology to apologetics" (Berger and Luckmann 115).

In this situation, the other's version of reality is not brushed off as irrelevant; instead, it is "grappled with theoretically in detail" and "translated into more 'correct' terms, that is, terms deriving from the universe" the other negates (Berger and Luckmann 115).

As Berger explained, religion lends itself quite easily to the process of nihilation: whoever denies a society that is religiously legitimated "takes on the quality of evil as well as madness. The denier then risks moving into what may be called a negative reality—if one wishes, the reality of the devil" (39). Working hand in hand with nihilation is Berger's concept of "dichotomization," which breaks reality into two spheres: the sacred cosmos and chaos (26-27). Berger explicated this concept in The Sacred Canopy:

The sacred cosmos, which transcends and includes man [sic] in its ordering of reality, thus provides man's ultimate shield against the terror of anomy. To be in a "right" relationship with the sacred cosmos is to be protected against the nightmare threats of chaos. To fall out of such a "right" relationship is to be abandoned on the edge of the abyss of meaninglessness. (26-27)

This "abyss of meaninglessness" is chaos. It is where a society is rhetorically and/or conceptually placed when it is nihilated.

It is easy to see how conflicting universes pose a power struggle that begins with conflicting ideas—ideas which are expressed in language and action. Thus, the war of thoughts becomes a war of words and, often, an outright war. This has been the case between Christians and Muslims for centuries. Both groups were examples of what

Berger, in The Sacred Canopy, described as an entire society serving “as the plausibility structure for a religiously legitimated world,” where “all the important social processes within it serve to confirm and reconfirm the reality of this world” (48). By the term “plausibility structure,” Berger meant the social “base” required for a world to continue its existence “as a world that is real to actual human beings” (45). Berger argued that societies where the social foundation is based on religion could continue to exist as long as the social processes were not interrupted (45) and as long as the “particular religious system could maintain its monopoly on a society-wide basis” (49).

It is inevitable, however, that social processes will be interrupted at some point. It is also inevitable that all human beings—as individuals and as societies—will encounter a marginal situation of some sort, resulting in anomy. As discussed above, death (and/or illness) is an example of an anomic event in an individual’s life. For an entire society, an anomic event might be a natural disaster or a war. When such events are legitimated with religion—when someone tells you your deceased parent has “gone to a better place” or that a devastating tornado “is God’s will”—you have what Berger called a “theodicy.” A theodicy provides meaning. It answers the “why?” that we all ask when something horrible happens, and it does so in religious terms.

According to Berger, all theodicies have an underlying fundamental attitude: “the surrender of self to the ordering power of society” (54). A society’s “ordering power” is its symbolic universe, which “entails a transcendence of individuality” (Berger 54). As Berger explained in The Sacred Canopy, this “surrender of self” attitude is especially prevalent in Biblically based religions, which rely on “masochism”:

the problem of theodicy becomes unbearably acute when the other is defined as a totally powerful *and* totally righteous God, creator of both man and universe. It is the voice of this terrible God that must now be so overwhelming as to drown out the cry of protest of tormented man, and, what is more, to convert that cry into a confession of self-abasement *ad maiorem Dei Gloriam*. The Biblical God is radically transcendentalized, that is, posited as the totally other (*totaliter aliter*) *vis-à-vis* man. In this transcendentalization there is implicit from the start of the masochistic solution *par excellence* to the problem of theodicy— submission to the totally other, who can be neither questioned nor challenged, and who, by his very nature, is sovereignly above any human ethical and generally nomic standards. (73-74)

The solution comes when we take the blame away from God and put it on ourselves— human sin. Death and suffering are thus “transcended, to the point where the individual not only finds these experiences bearable but even welcomes them” (Berger 56).

Because all theodicies involve surrendering the self, all theodicies are, to a certain extent, masochistic; thus, all theodicies are, to a certain extent, “irrational” (Berger 55-80). The degree of irrationality though, is what separates one type of theodicy from another. Falling in the middle of Berger’s rational and irrational theodicy scale is the “messianic-millennarian complex,” where the “suffering and the injustice of the present” are explained with reference to their future nomization—a better future (69). As Berger explained, a messianic-millennarian theodicy is irrational “to the extent that the divine action about to intervene in the course of events requires or allows human co-operation”

and rational “to the extent that it involves a coherent theory of history” (69). By confronting “the individual as a meaningful reality that comprehends him [sic] and all his experiences,” a theodicy helps people make sense of their lives in a way that fits with the symbolic universe (Berger 54). Such a phenomenon reveals what Berger called the “alienating power” of religion because the “social world and socialized self confront the individual as inexorable facticities analogous to the facticities of nature” (85).

As Berger wrote, a basic assumption of all religions is that “an other reality somehow impinges or borders upon the empirical world” (88). At this point, researchers can only study and/or attempt to prove what exists in this world because trying to prove that there is a God (or Gods) or that certain events are controlled by this Higher Power is not feasible. In Berger’s words, “‘Other worlds’ are not empirically available for the purposes of scientific analysis” (88). But it is possible to study human constructions of those other worlds. Indeed, Berger argued that those other sacred and empirically unavailable worlds “must be analyzed as are all other human meanings, that is, as elements of the socially constructed world” (89).

I believe his insights support my assertion that the social construction of reality theory is the best method to study President Bush’s September 20th address and Osama bin Laden’s taped statement. Both speeches use religious legitimations to maintain the existence of their respective worlds and to nihilate the other. Because so much religious rhetoric is used, both artifacts lend themselves to an analysis of language—a major part of the social construction of reality theory. By applying this theory to both speeches, I will be able to show how multiple realities were created.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS

On the morning of September 11, 2001, the United States was facing a crisis like none it had ever experienced: three American planes had been hijacked and crashed into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and an empty field in Pennsylvania. The common question for most of us was, “why is this happening?” Perhaps that question was initially asked from a theological and/or spiritual standpoint, but Americans also wanted tangible answers. They wanted to know why Osama bin Laden and his followers hated us so intensely. President George W. Bush explained why on the night of September 20, 2001 in a speech given to a joint session of Congress and broadcast live around the world. Osama bin Laden gave his version of why just two and a half weeks later, the day the United States started bombing Afghanistan. His taped statement aired on *Al Jazeera*, the Arabic television network based in Qatar, on October 7, 2001.

The reasons bin Laden gave for the 9/11 attacks were very different from those given by President Bush. The two leaders constructed two different realities in their speeches. However, as this chapter will illustrate, they both used the same tactics to create those realities. By applying the social construction of reality theory to Bush and bin Laden’s speeches, I will show how both men used religious discourse to nihilate the other and to legitimate the existence of their respective societies. For both speeches, I use a transcript printed in the New York Times. It is important to note that Bush’s speech is significantly

longer and therefore lends itself to a longer analysis. The transcript of his address, printed on page B4 on September 21, 2001, takes up five columns that are approximately 1 ¾ inches wide and almost 9 inches long. The transcript for bin Laden's taped statement, translated by Reuters, was printed on page B7 on October 8, 2001.⁶ It fills just two columns that are 2 ¾ inches wide and less than five inches long. Despite the differences in length, there are significant similarities in content. I will explicate those similarities by examining Bush and bin Laden's use of language, theodicy and dichotomization—all of which culminate in a rhetorical act of nihilation. This analysis is not a comparison of Islam and America's civil religion. It is a comparison of two speeches and the way religious discourse is used to create two different realities in those speeches.

President George W. Bush's September 20th

Address to a Joint Session of Congress

President Bush's address centered around four questions: "who attacked our country?", "why do they hate us?", "how will we fight and win this war?", and "what is expected of us?" Through this question and answer structure, Bush tried to help Americans make sense of what happened on 9/11 and to explain what was about to happen as the United States embarked on its "war on terror." From the beginning of the speech he set a tone of determination and vengeance:

⁶ As noted in Chapter 1, various translations of bin Laden's statement were available through various media organizations. After examining several, I chose the translation printed in the New York Times because of the newspaper's credibility and because it also printed a transcript of Bush's speech, thus allowing for consistency. Admittedly, some meanings and/or nuances are lost in any translation; however, because I do not speak Arabic (nor do most of my readers), a translation is the only option for this study.

My fellow citizens, for the last nine days, the entire world has seen for itself the state of our union, and it is strong.

Tonight we are a country awakened to danger and called to defend freedom. Our grief has turned to anger and anger to resolution. Whether we bring our enemies to justice or bring justice to our enemies, justice will be done.

Bush immediately framed the crisis in terms of the American values inherent in our civil religion: justice and freedom. The word “freedom” was foregrounded, as it was used a total of thirteen times in the speech. According to Bush, it was “enemies of freedom” who “committed an act of war against our country”—who left “a world where freedom itself” was “under attack.” Saving freedom, he said, was up to America. As I will argue below, Bush portrayed the United States as a savior, the one nation capable of protecting freedom and protecting the world.

He emphasized that the war was “not just America’s fight.” The president claimed, “This is the world’s fight, this is civilization’s fight, this is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom.” There were two significant implications in those three basic claims. First, nations who did not believe in progress, pluralism, tolerance and freedom were *uncivilized*. Second, these American values were desired by nations throughout the world. The words used to label those four values—along with other words such as “justice,” “courage” and “liberty”—represent what Berger and Luckmann referred to as our “sheltering symbols” (104). Sheltering symbols are the elements of a society’s symbolic universe, which, in our case, culminate in our civil religion. Symbolic universes “are social products with a history” and they provide “a

comprehensive integration of all discrete institutional processes” (Berger and Luckmann 95-103). The example Berger and Luckmann gave of how institutional processes are integrated into a symbolic universe is quite fitting here: “the political order is legitimated by reference to a cosmic order of power and justice, and political roles are legitimated as representations of these cosmic principles” (103).

The “cosmic order” and “cosmic principles” Berger and Luckmann wrote about can be seen in America’s symbolic universe in the notion that the United States has a mission to carry out God’s will. Bush articulated this notion when he claimed that the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing “war on terror” had allowed us to find “our mission and our moment”: “The advance of human freedom, the great achievement of our time and the great hope of every time, now depends on us. Our Nation, this generation, will lift the dark threat of violence from our people and our future.” The president elaborated on this mission, reiterating our religious and/or ideological tradition:

The course of this conflict is not known, yet its outcome is certain.

Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war. And we know that God is not neutral between them.

Fellow citizens, we’ll meet violence with patient justice, assured of the rightness of our cause and confident of the victories to come. In all that lies before us, may God grant us wisdom and may he watch over the United States of America.

The God of Bush’s speech fits with the God of America’s civil religion. According to Robert N. Bellah, God is “related to order, law, and right,” actively “interested and involved in history” and politics, with a “special concern for America” (1967 7). The

God of Bush's speech also fits with what Berger called one of the "most ancient" forms of religious legitimation: "the conception of the institutional order as directly reflecting or manifesting the divine structure of the cosmos," one which "transcends both history and man" (34).

Because of the president's deep religiosity and because the United States was facing a crisis or, as Berger and Luckmann would call it, a "marginal situation" unlike any the nation had ever experienced, it was inevitable that America's civil religion would be used in Bush's speech to help alleviate the feelings of fear and anomy left by the 9/11 attacks and to help justify the war against Afghanistan. As Berger explained, "religious legitimations almost invariably come to the front" whenever a society faces "massive threats to the reality previously taken for granted" and "whenever a society must motivate its members to kill or risk their lives, thus consenting to being placed in extreme marginal situations" (44).

It is also during such times that theodicies, which are a form of religious legitimation, are established and/or re-established. As Berger explained, theodicies use religion to help us understand why a tragedy occurred and to help us have faith in the idea that our pain and confusion will eventually subside. He argued, "When the proper time comes (typically, as a result of some divine intervention), the sufferers will be consoled and the unjust will be punished. In other words, the suffering and the injustice of the present are explained with reference to their future nomization" (68). References to that future nomization came at least three times in Bush's speech: first, when he told us to "feel confident in the victories to come" because "God is not neutral" between "freedom and fear, justice and cruelty"; second, when he asked us to pray for "the victims of terror and

their families, for those in uniform and for our great country” because “prayer has comforted us in sorrow and will help strengthen us for the journey ahead”; and third, when he said, “even grief recedes with time and grace.”

Theodicies that promise a better future make up what Berger called the “messianic-millennarian complex” (69). Berger believed such a theodicy to be both rational and irrational: “rational to the extent that it involves a coherent theory of history” and irrational “to the extent that the divine action about to intervene in the course of events requires or allows human co-operation” (69). The irrational dynamic was evident in President Bush’s speech in his references to God. But it was not just because of divine will that America would fulfill its “mission” to save freedom and, while doing so, feel “assured of the rightness” of the cause; it was also because of our own efforts and actions. Throughout the speech, Bush discussed what America and the people of America would do to fight Afghanistan. He said our military would make “isolated strikes,” as well as “dramatic strikes visible on TV and covert operations secret even in success.” Bush claimed, “we will starve terrorists of funding, turn them one against another, drive them from place to place until there is no refuge or no rest.” He outlined what we would do to protect our nation against terrorism: create the Office of Homeland Security and “dramatically expand the number of air marshals on domestic flights and take new measures to prevent hijacking.” President Bush claimed, “As long as the United States of America is determined and strong, this will not be an age of terror.” He went on to predict, “We will rally the world to this cause by our efforts, by our courage. We will not tire. We will not falter and we will not fail.” We would act. We would cooperate with God.

While the irrational dynamic of the theodicy was evident in the concept of divine intervention driving human action, the rational dynamic of the theodicy was also evident in the president's references to God. To say "*we know* God is not neutral" is to suggest a history of God making His preferences known. Bush's statement reflected the coherent theory of history offered by America's civil religion. Since the Puritans' arrival in the seventeenth century, God has always preferred the American way over any other nation's way.

There were other historical references in Bush's speech, such as when he talked about the future of the terrorists' ideology in terms of the past:

We have seen their kind before. They are the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the 20th century. By sacrificing human life to serve their radical visions, by abandoning every value except the will to power, they follow in the path of fascism, Nazism and totalitarianism. And they will follow that path all the way to where it ends: in history's unmarked grave of discarded lies.

The president didn't need to say that it was the United States who helped put those "murderous ideologies" in "history's unmarked grave of discarded lies," as our war-time accomplishments are a well-known part of our history.

Another historical reference was Bush's state of the union analogy: "In the normal course of events, presidents come to this chamber to report on the state of the union. Tonight, no such report is needed. It has already been delivered by the American people." The president went on to talk about "the courage of passengers who rushed terrorists to save others," the "endurance of rescuers" and "the decency of a loving and

giving people who have made the grief of strangers their own.” He concluded the analogy by saying, “My fellow citizens, for the last nine days, the entire world has seen for itself the state of our union, and it is strong.” In all, the coherent theory of history offered by President Bush was one of America’s accomplishments, of America’s superiority, and of America’s supposed contract with God.

In addition to reiterating our history, Bush’s discussion of “the state of our union” reflected what Berger called the “fundamental attitude” of all theodicies: “surrender of the self to the ordering power of society” (54). For America, that ordering power was civil religion and the institution of nationhood. The unity of our nation was emphasized in subtle ways by Bush’s use of pronouns. He said “our” a total of forty-three times. It was “our war on terror” and “our response,” which would be carried out by “our military.” The pronoun “we” was used more than fifty times, most noticeably in repetition in the second half of the speech: “we will come together to improve air safety”; “we will come together to promote stability and keep our airlines flying”; “we will come together to give law enforcement the additional tools it needs”; “we will come together to strengthen our intelligence capabilities to know the plans of terrorists before they act”; “we will come together to take active steps to strengthen America’s economy and put our people back to work.”

There was also an underlying “surrender of the self to the ordering power of society” when Bush talked about the economy—an institution of its own and another of America’s sheltering symbols:

I ask your continued participation and confidence in the American economy. Terrorists attacked a symbol of American prosperity. They did

not touch its source. America is successful because of the hard work and creativity and enterprise of our people. These were the true strengths of our economy before Sept. 11 and they are our strengths today.

In truth, not every American thought so highly of the state of the nation's economy, as it was already on a downhill slide before the attacks. But any talk of problems with one of America's major institutions and/or sheltering symbols—problems unrelated to the enemy—would have taken away from Bush's attempt to reinforce the nation's symbolic universe; and any talk of individual opinions or disagreements about the economy or any other symbol of America, would have taken away from the feeling of unity the president was trying to create.

The surrender-of-self attitude was seen most clearly in Bush's references to God and America's mission. The basic assumption was that we had no choice but to defend freedom and save the world, especially if we wanted to be on God's side. Had the 9/11 attacks not happened, we would not have "found our mission and our moment." But that "mission" and "moment" meant we had to go to war and risk more American lives. President Bush told the United States military to "be ready" and he warned us that the "war on terror" would not be like previous wars, such as "the air war above Kosovo" where "no ground troops were used and not a single American was lost in combat." The implication was that fulfilling our mission and being in the right relationship with God was more important than losing more Americans, which would be the literal surrender-of-self to death.

Because of the speech's underlying attitude of self-surrender and because of its use of religion to explain why the crisis happened in the first place, it is clear that a theodicy

was at play. We know it was a “messianic-millennarian” theodicy because of three elements: one, the “irrational” concept of a divine entity motivating human action; two, the “rational” integration of a “coherent theory of history;” and three, the promise of a better and/or more stable future.

Berger argued all religions attempt to give a society an “all-embracing, sacred order” (39). Going against that order, one risks “plunging into anomy” and making “a compact with the primeval forces of darkness” (Berger 39). The term Berger used to label that anomy and darkness was “chaos”—one of the primary dichotomies of the sacred (26). This dichotomization was evident in President Bush’s address every time he made a distinction between civilized and uncivilized nations. As already discussed, one of those moments came when Bush called the war “civilization’s fight”—“the fight of all those who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom.” Another, much more straightforward distinction, came just minutes later: “The civilized world is rallying to America’s side. They understand that if this terror goes unpunished, their own cities, their own citizens, may be next. Terror unanswered can not only bring down buildings, it can threaten the stability of legitimate governments.” Lack of stability and legitimacy suggests chaos.

Another example of dichotomization occurred when Bush gave the world an ultimatum: “Every nation in every region now has a decision to make. Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime.” The implication was if you are not on our side, you are on the wrong side. As Berger explained, “to be in a ‘right’ relationship with the sacred cosmos is to be protected

against the nightmare threats of chaos. To fall out of such a 'right' relationship is to be abandoned on the edge of the abyss of meaningless" (26-27).

President Bush's attempt to divide the world into two camps— 1) the good, representing the sacred and led by the U.S., and 2) the evil, representing chaos and led by Osama bin Laden, Al Qaeda, and Afghanistan's Taliban regime—was reflected in the language he used for the so-called "enemies of freedom." Mostly, they were referred to as "terrorists." The words "terrorists," "terrorism," and "terror" were used more than thirty times in the speech. But Bush also called them "murderers" who "plot evil and destruction." He told Americans the enemy's beliefs were "radical" and "a fringe form of Islamic extremism" that was "rejected by Muslim scholars and the vast majority of Muslim clerics;" thus, we should not take their religious claims—"their pretenses to piety"—seriously. President Bush called their beliefs "lies," claiming they were similar to other "murderous ideologies" like "fascism and Nazism and totalitarianism." He spoke of the terrorists' directive "to kill Christians and Jews, to kill all Americans, and make no distinctions among military and civilians, including women and children." This description instantly categorized the enemy as uncivilized, savage-like and less than human because Americans generally argue against killing civilians, women and children.

The language Bush used to label and/or define the enemy took the dichotomization of religious legitimation a step further to what Berger and Luckmann called "nihilation" (110-116). Bin Laden, Al Qaeda, and the Taliban were portrayed as evil, mad and/or inhuman. Their concept of reality was denied. It was also corrected and accounted for in terms of America's reality. For example, when the president explained why the terrorists hate us: "They stand against us because we stand in their way" and "They hate what they

see right here in this chamber, a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms, our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.”

Those freedoms were juxtaposed with life in Afghanistan, where, as Bush put it, “we see Al Qaeda’s vision for the world”: “Afghanistan’s people have been brutalized. Many are starving and many have fled. Women are not allowed to attend school. You can be jailed for owning a television. Religion can be practiced only as their leaders dictate. A man can be jailed in Afghanistan if his beard is not long enough.” In the process of describing the Taliban’s oppression, President Bush made America out to be the shining light in Afghanistan’s world of darkness: “The United States respects the people of Afghanistan. After all, we are currently its largest source of humanitarian aid. But we condemn the Taliban regime. It is not only repressing its own people; it is threatening people everywhere by sponsoring and sheltering and supplying terrorists.” So the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and Osama bin Laden were the world’s threat and the United States the world’s redeemer. According to Bush, they were “traitors to their own faith,” committing “evil in the name of Allah” and therefore blaspheming “the name of Allah.” The United States, however, had “respect” for Islam and allowed it to be “practiced freely by many millions of Americans.”

The president’s speech relied on the presumption that the United States never did anything to fuel the enemy’s anger: the “enemies of freedom” attacked us because they were crazy, evil and tyrannous. Bush evaluated bin Laden’s version of reality by America’s standards, elaborating on our nation’s superiority and goodness. He also used language that defined the enemy as dark and evil—thus giving them a “negative

legitimation” and/or “inferior ontological status” (Berger and Luckmann 114-115) while, at the same time, giving the United States a “valid ontological status” (Berger 33). For these reasons, Bush’s speech was a rhetorical act of nihilation, allowing him to rhetorically confront an external threat: a society having a totally different view of reality. The speech also allowed him to legitimate the institution of nationhood and to maintain America’s symbolic universe, i.e., America’s civil religion.

Osama bin Laden’s Taped Statement

Two and a half weeks later, Osama bin Laden attempted to legitimate the Islamic nation and/or to maintain his society’s symbolic universe, the Wahabbi version of Islam. The threat to his universe was America, and he too confronted his threat rhetorically through nihilation. To illustrate how bin Laden did so, it is first necessary to take a look at the sheltering symbols that made up his nation’s symbolic universe.

The tone of bin Laden’s speech was, like Bush’s, one of determination and vengeance. However, bin Laden’s religious discourse also gave his statement a tone of thankfulness. His first sentence was, “Here is America struck by God Almighty in one of its vital organs, so that its greatest buildings are destroyed. Grace and gratitude to God.” He went on to explain, “God has blessed a group of vanguard Muslims, the forefront of Islam, to destroy America. May God bless them and allot them a supreme place in heaven, for he is the only one capable and entitled to do so.” Bin Laden used the word “God” a total of ten times in his statement. In comparison, Bush used God’s name just three times (one of which was in reference to the song “God Bless America”); however, the belief in God was implied in other parts of the president’s address, such as

when he talked about “prayer” and “grace.” At one point in his speech, bin Laden made an appeal that sounded similar to Bush’s request for God to “grant us wisdom” and “watch over the United States of America;” bin Laden said, “May God shield us and you from them [the “infidels”].”

After God, the most important figurehead and sheltering symbol in Islam is Muhammad, to whom bin Laden referred twice: “the Peninsula of Muhammad, peace be upon him” and “the land of Muhammad, peace be upon him.” He spoke of the Middle East as the “land of Islam” and rhetorically united Islamic-Arabic nations with the phrase “our Islamic nation.” Geographical locations like Mecca, Medina and Palestine hold historical and religious significance for Muslims; thus, they are sheltering symbols in bin Laden’s symbolic universe. Muhammad, God and the notion that his “Islamic nation” has a mission to carry out God’s will are also elements of his symbolic universe. When bin Laden asked God to “shield” his nation from the enemy and when he said God “blessed” the Muslims who attacked America, he suggested God was on his nation’s side. God’s preference for Islam was also implied in bin Laden’s last words: “God is the greatest and glory be to Islam.” Bin Laden believed God wanted him to spread Islam in its purest form, while Bush believed God wanted him to spread America’s civil religion—America’s version of freedom, justice and democracy. In both cases, the political and/or institutional order was, as Berger explained, legitimated by reference to “a cosmic order” (103), albeit that “order” was viewed differently by Bush and bin Laden.

Given the nature of bin Laden’s religious beliefs and his past rhetoric, it was not unexpected that he would make so many religious references. However, as explained

above, religious legitimations are also used when members of a society are placed in “extreme marginal situations” (Berger 44). Bin Laden and his followers believe Muslims have been facing such situations for decades: “What America is tasting now is only a copy of [sic] we have tasted. Our Islamic nation has been tasting the same for more [sic] 80 years, of humiliation and disgrace, its sons killed and their blood spilled, its sanctities desecrated.” The breakup of the Ottoman Empire occurred approximately 80 years ago. Western nations, led primarily by Great Britain, colonized the area. Later in the speech, bin Laden made another reference to “80 years,” evoking Iraq and the Palestinian conflict:

A million innocent children are dying at this time as we speak, killed in Iraq without any guilt. We hear no denunciation, we hear no edict from the hereditary rulers. In these days, Israeli tanks rampage across Palestine, in Ramallah, Rafah and Beit Jala [cities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip] and many other parts of the land of Islam, and we do not hear anyone raising his voice or reacting. But when the sword fell upon America after 80 years, hypocrisy raised its head up high bemoaning those killers who toyed with the blood, honor and sanctities of Muslims.

Throughout the speech, bin Laden continued to refer to the children of Iraq and to the Palestinian conflict, two crises or marginal situations for his nation of Islam.

The other marginal situation for bin Laden and his followers was war, and as Berger explained, religious legitimations are forefronted “whenever a society must motivate its members to kill or risk their lives” (44). By the time bin Laden’s taped statement aired on *Al Jazeera*, his society was actually involved in two different wars. The first was

America's "war on terror," which officially began in Afghanistan hours before bin Laden's statement was broadcast. The other war, the *Jihad*, began years earlier, when bin Laden started making official appeals for Muslims to wage a holy war against the United States. He made that appeal again on October 7, 2001, ordering "every Muslim" to "rise to defend his religion."

Clearly bin Laden and his followers believed America posed a serious threat to their society. They also believed, according to bin Laden's statement, that they had been facing one tragedy after another: the breakup of the Ottoman empire and the colonization of the area, the formation of Israel, American support of Israel in the Palestinian conflict, American sanctions against Iraq, the United States military presence in some of Islam's most sacred areas, and America's war against Afghanistan. But bin Laden suggested that Muslims would soon see an end to all their suffering, as well as more punishment for those who caused that suffering. He said, "The wind of faith is blowing and the wind of change is blowing to remove evil from the Peninsula of Muhammad." He continued: "I swear to God that America will not live in peace before peace reigns in Palestine, and before all the army of infidels depart the land of Muhammad, peace be upon him." The threatening tone echoed President Bush's declamation: "Whether we bring our enemies to justice or bring justice to our enemies, justice will be done."

Like Bush, bin Laden explained his society's present suffering and injustices by pointing toward a future nomization. Thus, he too re-established a theodicy. For bin Laden and his followers, the future nomization would come once America was defeated and removed from Islamic territory. Those Muslims who died in the process of fighting the United States would find an even better nomization in the after-life, "a supreme place

in heaven.” As John L. Esposito wrote in his book The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?, “to die in battle is the highest form of witness to God and to one’s faith” and “as in Christianity, the reward for martyrdom is paradise” (31).

At least five times in bin Laden’s statement, we see the belief in a divine being that will intervene in life on earth: first, in bin Laden’s claim that it was “God Almighty” who “struck” America; second, in his immediate “gratitude” and “thanks” to God for that attack; third, in his claim that “God has blessed a group of vanguard Muslims” to “destroy America”; fourth, when he said, “I seek refuge in God against them and ask him to let us see them in what they deserve”; and fifth, in his request for God to “shield” Muslims from the Americans. In these statements we also see reflections of the belief that it is God who allows human action. Islam, in fact, requires human intervention. As Esposito explained, “Islamic law stipulates that it is a Muslim’s duty to wage war against polytheists, apostates, and People of the Book who refuse Muslim rule, and those who attack Muslim territory” (31). Whether it is a war of words or a war of weapons depends on the interpretation of Islamic law. In comparison, United States law does not stipulate that it is an American’s duty to wage war against those who defy American rule and/or ideology (war time drafts being the exception); however, scholars like Roberta L. Coles and Raymond F. Bulman believe America’s civil religion advocates and/or justifies war, intervention and expansion. Both civil religion and Wahabbism advocate a combination of divine and non-divine action to maintain their respective symbolic universes; thus, they both contain the irrational side of Berger’s messianic-millenarian theodicy.

Berger’s rational dynamic—the “coherent theory of history”—was more subtle in bin Laden’s speech than it was in Bush’s (69). Not once did bin Laden brag about the glory

days of Islam. Instead, he used historical references that allowed him to portray the United States as the root of evil and chaos: America's dropping of two atomic bombs in Japan, the first Persian Gulf War, and America's sanctions against Iraq. The only implication of Islam's coherent theory of history was in bin Laden's suggestions that his nation was God's chosen nation. While the historical dynamic of the messianic-millennarian theodicy was not blatant in bin Laden's speech, it is a significant part of his symbolic universe. As Berger explained, "within the orbit of the Biblical tradition (that is, the Jewish-Christian-Muslim orbit)" there is a "pervasive stress on the historical dimension of divine action"—especially in times of "acute affliction" (68-69). The idea of having a mission to fulfill God's will, which Islam has, reflects this dimension.

Berger believed that the basic underlying attitude of all theodicies was the surrender of self. In general, Islam is a theodicy because, as Huston Smith wrote in The World's Religions, the word "Islam" means "life's total surrender to God" (222). This concept is taken to the extreme by bin Laden and his followers. As the Al Qaeda leader told ABC News reporter John Miller in 1998, "I am one of the servants of Allah. We do our duty of fighting for the sake of the religion of Allah" (par. 47). This attitude of self-surrender was evident in bin Laden's October 2001 statement when he proclaimed "I seek refuge in God" and when he ordered "every Muslim" to "defend his religion"—a religion that has been the primary source of identity. We hear this self-surrender in the lack of any sense of individuality in labels such as "our Islamic nation," "the land of Islam," "the Peninsula of Muhammad" and "the land of Muhammad." The lack of individuality was also evident when bin Laden called his people "the group that resorted to God, the Almighty, the group that refuses to be subdued in its religion." God and Islam are the ordering

powers of bin Laden's society. Like Bush, bin Laden stressed unity and surrender to a higher power. In Bush's speech, the unity was that of all Americans. In bin Laden's speech, the unity was that of all Muslims. But in both cases, a divine entity was called upon to guide them, to protect them and to provide a better future. Thus, both speeches re-established a theodicy.

Both Bush and bin Laden broke the world into two distinct parts: good versus evil or, in Berger's terms, "sacred" versus "chaos" (26). This dichotomization was portrayed in Bush's speech in three different ways: first, as the civilized versus the uncivilized; second, as the champions of freedom versus the "enemies of freedom"; and third, as the United States and its supporters versus the terrorists and their supporters. The dichotomization was portrayed in bin Laden's taped statement as "the camp of the faithful" versus "the camp of the infidels." As noted above, a function of the historical references in bin Laden's speech was to place the "infidels" in a world of chaos and darkness. According to him, the United States killed a "million innocent children" in Iraq "without any guilt," as well as "hundreds of thousands, young and old" in Japan. He also accused the Muslim nations who had condemned the 9/11 attacks—the "hypocrites" and the "apostates"—of backing "the butcher against the victim, the oppressor against the innocent child." Bin Laden blamed the United States for the chaos in his society: it was America and America's supporters who allowed "Israeli tanks" to "rampage across" the "land of Islam," who went into "an uproar" when Muslims "stood in defense of their weak children, their brothers and sisters in Palestine and other Muslim nations," who "toyed with the blood, honor and sanctities of Muslims." It was also America who,

according to bin Laden, “turned even the countries that believe in Islam against us.” The Americans were the leaders of “the wrong path.”

Dichotomizing the situation and rhetorically placing America on the side of chaos and darkness helped bin Laden give his enemy a negative ontological status. In other words, it helped him nihilate the American reality created by Bush. Using the terms of his own symbolic universe, bin Laden corrected America’s version of reality, calling the United States “infidels” five times and labeling us “the modern world’s symbol of paganism.” He also described America as “the butcher,” “the oppressor,” “killers” and “evil.” Just as Bush exhorted us to not believe the enemy’s lies, bin Laden exhorted his people to not believe America’s lies: “They have been telling the world falsehoods that they are fighting terrorism. In a nation at the far end of the world, Japan, hundreds of thousands, young and old, were killed and this is not a world crime. To them it is not a clear issue. A million children in Iraq, to them this is not a clear issue.” To understand more exactly bin Laden’s meaning, it is helpful to go back to an answer he gave during his 1998 interview with ABC’s John Miller:

Through history, American has not been known to differentiate between the military and the civilians or between men and women or adults and children. Those who threw atomic bombs and used the weapons of mass destruction against Nagasaki and Hiroshima were the Americans. Can the bombs differentiate between military and women and infants and children? (par. 24)

He went on to say, “the worst terrorists are the Americans” (par. 24). In that same ABC interview, bin Laden answered questions from some of his followers. When one of them

asked bin Laden about being labeled a terrorist in the media, the Al Qaeda leader differentiated between American terrorism and the terrorism he practiced, saying his “is of the commendable kind for it is directed at the tyrants and the aggressors and the enemies of Allah, the tyrants, the traitors” (par. 5). He explained, “terrorizing those and punishing them are necessary measures to straighten things and to make them right” (par. 5). In essence, bin Laden believed that he and his followers were serving justice. This attitude was reflected in his October 2001 statement when he said the 9/11 attacks had given America “a copy of what we have tasted.”

According to bin Laden, those attacks were an act of God and an act of retribution for America’s foreign policy decisions. According to Bush, the attacks were a result of our enemy’s iniquity and tyranny. Both men presented different reasons for 9/11 and both men denied the other’s version of reality. This is how Berger and Luckmann’s concept of nihilation works: it “denies the reality of whatever phenomena or interpretations of phenomena do not fit” into one’s symbolic universe (114). This is also an example of what Nimmo and Combs meant when they wrote that “for any situation there is no single reality, no one objective truth, but multiple, subjectively derived realities” and those realities are “created, or constructed, through communication” (3-4).

For both Bush and bin Laden, those realities were constructed through communication that reflected their symbolic universes—language that reflected their respective religions. The words, values and/or ideologies, rituals, people and locations associated with those religions constitute each society’s sheltering symbols. For Bush and the United States, some of those sheltering symbols include freedom, justice, progress, pluralism and the notion of being God’s chosen nation with a mission to carry

out God's will. Our symbolic universe conflicts with bin Laden's symbolic universe because one of his society's sheltering symbols is the notion that the Islamic nation is God's chosen one with a mission, and only one society can be the chosen. In addition to God and faith, other sheltering symbols for bin Laden's society include Muhammad and Islamic holy cities such as Mecca and Medina. Neither bin Laden nor Bush had to explain or define the sheltering symbols used in their speeches, because their intended listeners already understood—the meanings of their society's sheltering symbols had long been internalized.

There was, however, a need for each leader to repeat those sheltering symbols, which both men did. As Berger and Luckmann explained, any event that forces a society to confront anomy or chaos must "be followed at once with the most solemn reaffirmations of the continuing reality of the sheltering symbols" (104). For the United States, that event—that marginal situation—was 9/11. The ensuing "war on terror" was another. For bin Laden's Islamic Nation, there were numerous marginal situations since the break up of the Ottoman Empire, but the most immediate was war. Both societies had been thrown into what Berger called "the nightmare threats of chaos" (26). However, both leaders tried to convince their listeners that their respective nations would not be "abandoned" there, that they would not be left "on the edge of the abyss of meaninglessness," (Berger 27) because they had a sacred contract or mission and because God was watching over them.

When such religious legitimations are repeated and internalized, the fact that each nation was created by human beings gets lost to the idea that each nation was created by some sort of "cosmic order" (Berger 103). The belief in this cosmic order, along with its

corresponding “cosmic principles” (Berger 103), was used by both bin Laden and Bush to explain the marginal situations their societies were facing. In other words, both men reiterated the theodicies of their respective nations to answer questions as to why the anomic phenomena were happening. All theodicies have a fundamental attitude that Berger defined as the “surrender of the self to the ordering power of society” (54). In Bush’s society, that ordering power was America’s civil religion and the institution of nationhood. In bin Laden’s society, that ordering power was the Wahabbi version of Islam and the institution of nationhood. Both leaders gave speeches reflecting that surrender-of-self attitude—mostly by reiterating their missions and the need to fight evil for God, even if that meant losing more lives in war.

Both leaders also turned to the messianic-millenarian aspect of their theodicies, promising a better future. According to bin Laden’s speech, that better future could be in heaven or it could be here on earth once “evil” was removed “from the Peninsula of Muhammad” and once “peace reigns in Palestine.” According to Bush’s speech, that better future would come once terrorism was defeated and once our lives returned back to “normal.” In both speeches, there was a divine entity that relied on human action to ensure a better future. This was what Berger called the “irrational” dynamic of the messianic-millenarian theodicy (69). The “rational” dynamic, the coherent theory of history (Berger 69), was more evident in Bush’s speech than in bin Laden’s. Bush relied heavily on the coherent theory of history to reiterate his nation’s superiority, dedicating a significant portion of his address to maintaining, rhetorically, America’s symbolic universe. In contrast, bin Laden spent very little time discussing Islam’s superiority. The notion that his Islamic nation was chosen and had a mission to fulfill God’s will was

implied, rather than stated outright as it was in Bush's speech. Instead, bin Laden spent the majority of his taped statement placing the United States in a world of chaos and evil.

The polarities of good and evil, of the sacred and chaos, were reinforced in both speeches. This dichotomization works hand in hand with nihilation. In order to give their enemies a "negative legitimation" and/or "inferior ontological status" (Berger and Luckmann 114-115), Bush and bin Laden had to rhetorically place each other in the wrong relationship with God, place each other in a world of darkness. Their tactics were similar. Bush claimed bin Laden and his followers were evil—they were terrorists, murderers and liars; while bin Laden claimed the United States was evil—we too were terrorists, killers and liars. Both men turned to God and the cosmic order of their symbolic universes as evidence that they were in the right relationship with God and as evidence that their version of reality was the truth. In sum, both Bush and bin Laden used religious discourse to nihilate the other and maintain their own symbolic universes—they constructed two different versions of reality using the same communication tactics.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The 9/11 attacks were just one of many instances over the history of the world where people have been murdered in the name of God. While I am a spiritual person, I have had trouble grasping how humans could kill over someone or something whose existence has yet to be proven (“scientifically” speaking). As Huston Smith wrote in The World’s Religions, “religion is not primarily a matter of fact, it is a matter of meanings” (10). An exploration of how those meanings originally came about would probably be more suitable for the disciplines of religion or history. However, an exploration of how those meanings are carried on is quite suitable for a communication study. According to Robert A. White, research on religion has lacked a sense of “the communicative process through which sacred and secular symbols are created and recreated” (44-45). This thesis was an attempt to fill that gap. More specifically, I wanted to understand how two leaders used religious discourse to construct and maintain their respective society’s version of reality and how they used religious discourse to confront each other. I also wanted to illustrate the value of the social construction of reality theory in communication research. In this chapter, I will summarize my conclusions, address some of the limitations of my study, discuss its significance, and suggest other research possibilities.

I analyzed two rhetorical artifacts: President George W. Bush's September 20, 2001 address to a joint session of Congress and Osama bin Laden's taped statement that aired on *Al Jazeera* television on October 7, 2001. These two speeches were chosen because they both used religious discourse to present different versions of reality. The speeches are worthy of scholarly attention because they were delivered by the leaders of two societies in conflict with each other, because they were seen by worldwide television audiences and received significant news coverage, and because they constituted what Peter Berger would call a "collectively recognized universe of discourse" (13).

A collectively recognized universe of discourse would be the language of a society's symbolic universe. The language of a society's symbolic universe would comprise part of its sheltering symbols. Other sheltering symbols might include geographic locations, people, rituals, values and/or ideologies, and institutions. America's civil religion and the Wahabbi version of Islam are dominant aspects of Bush and bin Laden's symbolic universes. Those symbolic universes had become particularly vulnerable at the time of Bush and bin Laden's speeches. For America, the marginal situations or anomic events threatening the symbolic universe were the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing war against Afghanistan. That war was also a marginal situation for bin Laden's Nation of Islam, along with the holy war Muslims were supposed to be waging against the United States, and previous events, such as the United States' military presence in Saudi Arabia, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and American support for Israel. As Berger and Luckmann explained, such events "have to be followed at once with the most solemn reaffirmations of the continuing reality of the sheltering symbols" (104).

Those reaffirmations came in President Bush's September 20th address and in bin Laden's taped statement. The speeches were legitimations, which Berger defined as "socially objectivated 'knowledge' that serves to explain and justify the social order" (29). Legitimations answer "the 'why' of institutional arrangements," but their "essential purpose" is "reality-maintenance" (Berger 29-32). Berger wrote that "the historically most widespread and effective instrumentality of legitimation" has been religion because "it relates the precarious reality constructions of empirical societies with ultimate reality" (32). Berger explained the "efficacy of religious legitimation" by offering a "recipe" of society building:

Let the institutional order be so interpreted as to hide, as much as possible, its constructed character. Let that which has been stamped out of the ground *ex nihilo* appear as the manifestation of something that has been existent from the beginning of time, or at least from the beginning of this group. Let the people forget that this order was established by men and continues to be dependent upon the consent of men. Let them believe that, in acting out the institutional programs that have been imposed upon them, they are but realizing the deepest aspirations of their own being and putting themselves in harmony with the fundamental order of the universe.

(33)

Religion gives the fundamental order of a universe a "valid ontological status," or a "sacred and cosmic frame of reference" (Berger 33). In Chapter 2, I explained what those cosmic frames of references were for Bush and bin Laden's respective societies. Here I will give a brief recapitulation.

America's civil religion goes as far back as the 17th century, when John Winthrop told his fellow Puritans, as they sailed across the ocean towards America, that they had entered a covenant with God. As Robert Bellah wrote in The Broken Covenant, Winthrop "turned the ocean-crossing into a crossing of the Red Sea and the Jordan River and he held out the hope that Massachusetts Bay would be a promised land" (15). The Puritans' belief that they had a covenant with God, and the belief of the "deists or 'philosophes'" that Americans were "fashioning a social contract based on divine law," culminated into the notion that Americans were God's chosen people (Bellah and Hammond 65-66). Along with this "chosen" status, goes a mission to fulfill God's will. This "religious dimension," according to Bellah, provides "a transcendent goal for the political process" (1967 4). The Declaration of Independence is considered one of America's sacred texts (Bellah, Coles). In this document, the representatives appeal "to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions" and state "a firm reliance on the Protection of Divine Providence." They also state "that all men are created equal," being "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights," which are entitled to them by "Nature's God."

America's Declaration of Independence bears similarities with the Quran. As Karen Armstrong explained in her book Islam: A Short History, the Quran gave Muslims "a historical mission," which was mainly to "create a just community in which all members" were to be "treated with absolute respect. The experience of building such a society and living in it would give them intimations of the divine, because they would be living in accordance with God's will;" thus, "state affairs" were "the stuff of religion itself" (xi). Mehran Tamadonfar wrote that "the demands and requirements of Islam and Islamism

have always shaped Arab political systems, processes, and policies, regardless of the type of regime in power” (141). To bin Laden, Islam does not shape politics, Islam *is* politics.

In his and Bush’s societies, there is a fusion of politics and religion. Both symbolic universes depend on a messianic-millenarian theodicy that “involves a coherent theory of history” and a divine entity that will “intervene in the course of events,” requiring and/or allowing “human co-operation” (Berger 69). Both leaders claim that with hard work and God’s help, their society’s present suffering will end. The key concept in both theodicies and in both symbolic universes is that of being God’s chosen nation—a nation with a mission and a nation created not by humans, but by the sacred. Because there can only be one “chosen” group, Bush and bin Laden’s symbolic universes clashed.

In some marginal situations, religious legitimations that simply maintained the symbolic universe would be enough. But Bush and bin Laden both believed their societies were facing an external threat: each other. According to Berger and Luckmann, “an alternative symbolic universe poses a threat because its very existence demonstrates empirically that one’s own universe is less than inevitable” (108). It can be “shocking” to “confront another society that views *one’s own* definition of reality as ignorant, mad or downright evil” (Berger and Luckmann 107-108).

Bush and bin Laden handled this threat with rhetorical nihilation: they used the terms of their own symbolic universes to correct the “deviant” versions of reality; they accused each other of telling lies; and they used dichotomizing language to make the other seem evil or, as Berger and Luckmann put it, “less than human, congenitally befuddled about the right order of things, dwellers in a hopeless cognitive darkness” (114-115). According to Bush, America’s enemies were “enemies of freedom,” “terrorists,” “murderers” who

“plot evil and destruction;” and the enemies’ beliefs were “lies”—“radical” and “a fringe form of Islamic extremism.” According to bin Laden, Islam’s enemies were also “evil.” He called Americans “infidels,” “killers,” and “the modern world’s symbol of paganism;” the United States was “the butcher” and the “oppressor.” Such dichotomizing language allowed both leaders to nihilate the enemy rhetorically and it helped each leader’s followers make sense of the chaos around them. As Berger wrote, “language nomizes by imposing differentiation and structure upon the ongoing flux of experience. As an item of experience is named, it is *ipso facto*, taken out of this flux and given stability as the entity so named” (20).

A word used in both speeches was particularly interesting; that word was “terrorism.” Bush uttered a version of this word more than thirty times in his speech, never clearly explaining what it meant—defining “terrorism” by making it synonymous with the 9/11 attack and/or the people who carried out that attack. Bin Laden seemed to throw this back in Bush’s face by claiming, “they have been telling the world falsehoods that they are fighting terrorism,” and then going on to cite America’s dropping of the atomic bomb on Japan and the death of “a million children in Iraq” because of United States sanctions. Were these acts of terrorism on the part of the United States? According to the definition of “reprehensible” terrorism that bin Laden offered during his ABC interview—“terrifying an innocent person and terrorizing him”—the answer is yes (par. 5). Also according to this definition, bin Laden committed “reprehensible” terrorism against the United States. While Bush did not offer a clear definition of terrorism in his speech, Executive Order 13224 (regarding terrorist financing) does:

Terrorist activity involves a violent act or an act dangerous to human life, property, or infrastructure; and appears to be intended—a) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; b) to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or c) to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, kidnapping, or hostage-taking. (par. 19-24)

Under this definition, the 9/11 attacks would qualify, as would the dropping of the atomic bomb on Japan and sanctions against Iraq. But if Bush called Americans “terrorists” or if he called bin Laden a “freedom fighter” (which some of bin Laden’s followers believe him to be) he would be explaining the chaos of 9/11 in a way that conflicted with our symbolic universe—he would have created a different version of reality. This is the nomizing power of language.

Because the language of a society’s symbolic universe is internalized, it does not need to be defined. Thus, Bush did not explain abstract (yet highly symbolic) words such as “freedom” and “justice;” nor did bin Laden explain what he meant by “the land of Muhammad” or “the honor and sanctities of Muslims.” Both leaders used the language of their society’s religions—of their symbolic universes. They also reinforced the idea that they are God’s chosen nations. However, bin Laden did not spend as much time as Bush did in maintaining his symbolic universe. Instead, he used more of his speech to nihilate the United States.

In summarizing the answers to my primary research question, Bush and bin Laden used religious discourse to confront each other by nihilating each other with dichotomizing language that placed the enemy in a world of chaos and evil; the

dichotomizing language also helped maintain their respective versions of reality by aligning themselves with God and thereby reinforcing both their symbolic universes and their theodicies. Because both leaders needed to explain the marginal situations they were facing in ways that fit with their individual societies' symbolic universes, there was no way they could offer the same version of reality.

While the differences in the symbolic universes account for the different versions of reality, the similarities in the symbolic universes—primarily the chosen status and the idea of having a mission to fulfill God's will—might account for the power of religion. As Berger explained, "The fundamental 'recipe' of religious legitimation is the transformation of human products into supra- or non-human facticities. The humanly made world is explained in terms that deny its human production" (89). Berger believed there were consequences to this: "Choices become destiny. Men [sic] live in the world they themselves have made as if they were fated to do so by powers that are quite independent of their own world-constructing enterprises" (95). Berger and Luckmann believe the reason people do this falls back to one of the major premises of the social construction of reality theory: human beings are inherently unstable and thus they have a biological need to create order and meaning out of the world around them. Berger encapsulated it nicely when he wrote, "The religious enterprise of human history profoundly reveals the pressing urgency and intensity of man's quest for meaning. The gigantic projections of religious consciousness, whatever else they may be, constitute the historically most important effort of man to make reality humanly meaningful, at any price" (100).

The knowledge (if any) regarding the power of religion that was gathered from this study can be attributed to the value of the social construction of reality theory—specifically, the value of the theory in its original form. Simply describing what version of reality bin Laden created and what version Bush created would not give us the same insight into the power of their words or into the role religion played in their societies. To apply the original theory, one has to break down a particular reality construction and attempt to explain how it was created. Because the theory can help us get a better understanding of how we know what we know and why we believe what we believe, it lends itself to studies of how a particular ideology—be it religious, political, scientific or economic—is used to maintain and/or reinforce a symbolic universe. Because of its focus on language, the theory also lends itself to communication studies.

Future research possibilities using the social construction of reality theory and Bush and bin Laden's speeches might be to examine the way the news media covered the speeches. It would be interesting to see if news organizations reinforced Bush's version of reality and/or if they helped nihilate bin Laden's version. It would also be interesting to compare the ways in which news organizations in different countries covered the speeches.

Other studies not necessarily using the social construction of reality theory might involve an examination of Bush and bin Laden's use of religious discourse in other speeches. At this point, discussions of Bush's religious rhetoric have occurred primarily in the news media; but it is an issue that merits scholarly attention. As Jackson Lears wrote in the New York Times, "the belief that one is carrying out divine purpose" can "promote dangerous simplifications" (par. 4). He went on to warn, "the providentialist

outlook,” and its accompanying rhetoric, “promotes tunnel vision, discourages debate and reduces diplomacy to arm twisting. Worst of all, it sanitizes the messy actualities of war and its aftermath” (par. 13-14).

There is power in religious rhetoric. Because of this power, it is important for us to understand how religious rhetoric is constructed and how it functions in given societies. I believe this thesis adds to our understanding by illustrating how religious meanings are communicated and how they are manipulated to create different versions of reality. It also illustrates an aspect of the relationship between language and religion and/or the relationship between language and culture (since religion is a major component of Bush and bin Laden’s individual cultures). Lastly, this thesis adds to the communication literature examining speeches given by people of power, perhaps offering a different approach—both in terms of the method of study and in terms of what type of content is analyzed.

While this thesis can contribute to our knowledge of communication and religion, it does have some limitations—the primary one being language. Because a translation of bin Laden’s speech had to be used, certain linguistic and cultural subtleties were lost. Additionally, because I do not speak Arabic and because I am not a member of bin Laden’s culture, it was impossible for me to have the same understanding of his speech and of his symbolic universe that I had for Bush’s speech and symbolic universe. Perhaps this study would have been better conducted in conjunction with an Islamic scholar who is fluent in both Arabic and English. Such a perspective could have changed the content of this thesis significantly because, as Nimmo and Combs wrote, “there is no single reality, no one objective truth, but multiple, subjectively derived realities” (4).

Because reality is created through communication (Nimmo and Combs 3) and this thesis is a communicative act, it too is a construction of reality.

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