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American Civil Religion and the Presidential Rhetoric of Jimmy Carter.

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Abstract

Scholars have long speculated about the role of American civil religion and political discourse. Of particular interest to rhetorical scholars is the function of a civil religion idiom within presidential discourse. The cornerstone of this study is founded upon Rod Hart's ideas in *The Political Pulpit* (1977) wherein the nature of American civil religion is described through the metaphor of a legal contract. A rhetorical approach to civil religion provides the framework for this study. Nine major public speeches by Carter as candidate and president, from 1974 to 1979, are examined in order to locate and identify the symbolic breaches of the historic separation of church and state. Carter's rhetorical choices clearly indicate a unique and creative use of American civil religion. This usage is unconventional inasmuch as he extends the boundaries that characterize the norms of civil-religious discourse. This unconventional usage can be understood as nominal, doctrinal, and structural violations of the American civil-religious code. It seems that Carter renegotiates the boundaries between the sacred and the secular, church and state. This study presents evidence that civil religion is a tradition in flux. The examination of Carter's use of the civil-religious idiom, one of the supposed catalysts for the emergence of the 'religious right,' is the focus of this study. Their mobilization for Carter in 1976 and their defection to Ronald Reagan in 1980 and 1984 is partly explained by Carter's separation of his administration from the religious right's agenda. Through the application of the notion of a rhetorical contract, this study provides cogent explanation for Carter's darkhorse yet successful campaign in 1976, and the overwhelming defeat by Reagan in 1980.

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