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Anointing the nation: how Joe Biden's Catholic faith permeated his inaugural address

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During Joe Biden's inauguration ceremony on January 20, 2021 in Washington. AFP

According to Valerie Biden Owens – sister, best friend, and former political consultant to Joe Biden – her brother will “restore the soul of America”. In an interview reported by the *Washington Post*, she develops this idea:

“In America we often get the person that we need for the moment. We had Lincoln during the Civil War and FDR after the Depression. My brother is right for these challenges we face today. He knows how to heal. And Joe's life is about healing and recovery – and that's what we need as a country.”

This remark draws out a truth concerning the unwritten but essential role of the president of the United States: his person embodies the American nation and his word serves to maintain it or to restore it to its destiny.

As Robert Bellah demonstrated in his now classic article on the civil religion of the United States, the president literally expresses the sense of national identity. In line with this tradition, Joe Biden, through his victory and then inauguration addresses, immediately assumed his role as the national high priest. However, Biden has added his own personal touch – his Catholic spirituality – to this tradition, a surprising touch given the rather Protestant fabric of the American narrative.

American civil religion, biblical narrative and presidential words

The Christian and biblical inflection of the American national narrative runs deep throughout its successive chapters.

American scholarship on this subject is of course bountiful. But it is also a topic which has fascinated French writers since Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont's tour of the young nation in 1831-32. Today, Sébastien Fath has studied the concomitant rise of evangelicalism and the advance of secularisation in American society.

Denis Lacorne offers a masterful synthesis of 300 years of church-state relations in his *De la religion en Amérique* (2007). Camille Froidevaux-Metterie, in *Politique et Religion aux Etats-Unis* (2009) also reminds us that American civil religion emerged from the strong ideals of British republicanism. Before this, the historian Elise Marienstras published two edifying books, *Les Mythes fondateurs de la Nation américaine* (1976) and *Nous le Peuple: les origines du nationalisme américain* (1988). Most recently, political scientists such as Mark Bennett McNaught and legal scholars such as Maxence Guillemin have continued to trace the defining characteristics of religion in American civic life, analyzing its enduring influence on jurisprudence and Constitutional interpretation.

In fact, the sacredness of the federal institutions of state, of the Union's electoral calendar, its unwritten but immutable customs including that of presidential nomination, are based on a common reverence for the Constitution and the rights therein identified and guaranteed. But the mythology of this "holy" text exceeds its literal meaning. To focus on it, we must again read the Declaration of Independence and... presidential addresses.

In this powerful symbolic interlacing, the US president is not so much the chief executive of a union organized for pragmatic reasons or by necessity since 1787. He is the rector of the American civil religion, which subsumes the office-holder within its national legend. Within this framework, the inaugural oath and address are then central. On the western steps of the Capitol, under witness of the legislative and judicial offices of state, the president is elevated before the people. And through the ritualistic invocation of the mythical tradition in which he serves, he becomes the voice and the body of the nation.

Through him (and, one day, through her), the national legend takes on flesh and expression, becoming incarnate. George Washington, widely portrayed in his time as a liberating Moses figure, established the tenor for his successors in his inaugural address, supplicating “the Almighty Being [that] his benediction may consecrate to the liberties and happiness of the People of the United States” and asking his fellow-citizens to recognise that

“Every step, by which they have advanced to the character of an independent nation, seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency.”

Seventy-two years later, as civil war loomed, Abraham Lincoln closed his own first inaugural address by invoking the

“mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land”.

Unable to prevent the secession of the Southern states, Lincoln made the preservation of the Union his sacred goal, transforming the fratricidal conflict into a sacrifice for the Nation’s rebirth in the Gettysburg Address (November 1863). In his second inaugural address (March 1865), Lincoln cited Mathew 18:7 in interpreting the Civil War as the “the woe due to those by whom the offence [of slavery] came”. Lincoln implored his fellow citizens to practice reciprocal charity and reconciliation.

Mark Noll has written that this address was one of those rare half-sacred texts by which Americans conceive of their place in the world. Through the sacrifice of his own body, Lincoln further atoned for the cumulative sins of this American fratricide. Both scapegoat and paschal lamb, Lincoln’s assassination, five days after General Lee’s surrender at Appomattox, transfigured him into the second shepherd of the nation.

“I put my whole soul into this act”: Joe Biden’s spirituality to the rescue of national narrative

There would still be much to say about presidential addresses in times of crisis and war. With the exception of Obama’s first address, which Robert Bellah described as perfectly congruous with the religious dimension of the presidency, since the 1970s no address has been as powerful as that that Biden gave on January 20, 2021. After four years of symbolic errancy in the desert, Biden delivered a staunchly faithful invocation of the eternal resilience of the Constitution, the strength of the Nation, and the sacred character of the ground on which he stood.

Yet these words also gave way to the portrait of a fragile democracy in a winter of peril and possibility, in need of restoration and healing. So inflected, the theological orientation of Joe Biden's address was not in the expression of atonement or redemption, nor in the reflection of a vigilant pastor shepherding his lost sheep back into the fold. Rather, the aged high priest of the nation dwelt upon the Catholic themes of suffering and affliction, experienced and overcome in healing, a narration he drew from his own experience of pain.

Echoing King David's prayer in Psalm 30, "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning", the new president offered to his fellow citizens a civic unction of healing, mirroring the Catholic sacrament that offers relief and remission to those who are sick in body and soul. He also called his constituents to pray for the dead of the pandemic, torn from their human family and from the great American family. Biden also expressed a Thomistic insistence on the necessity of unity and the reconciliation of faith and reason, vowing to continue an "American story of decency and dignity, of love and healing".

The healer-in-chief

With this address, Biden inaugurated a new chapter in the national narrative and the history of the presidency, centered on the idea of remission (of both disease and sin). Meditative upon the wounded body and tormented soul of America, and expressive of his faith in the nation's healing and redemption, Biden's chapter is an assuredly Catholic one. That of a man who carries a rosary in his pocket, swears on a Douay Bible which has been in his family for 130 years, and places a framed picture of Pope Francis in the Oval Office, alongside the bust of Cesar Chavez.

La version originale de cet article a été publiée en français.