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**So Help Me God: American Presidents, Christianity,
and the American Nation**

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**So Help Me God: American Presidents, Christianity,
and the American Nation**

by Kenneth Millen-Penn

In August 2004, on CBS's long running *60 Minutes*, reporter Bob Woodward asked President George W. Bush, "Before declaring war on Iraq, did you consult with your father [ex-President George Herbert Walker Bush]?" George W. Bush replied, "No. I consulted with a higher Father."¹ For many Americans this statement was alarming, especially since Bush's war declaration implied that his higher Father had given the president the green light for war. Yet for others, Bush's appeal to his higher Father was simply part of a long unbroken American presidential tradition of seeking Divine guidance. After all, two hundred and fifteen years earlier, America's first president, George Washington, after having recited the oath of office added the words, "I swear, so help me God." In fact, from Washington to Bush, every United States president has not only made reference to God in at least one public speech during his years in the White House, but also evinced a desire for God's aid in governing this nation.

Such appeals are clear proof, for millions of Americans, that the United States is not merely a religious nation, but a Christian nation, founded upon Christian values and notions of an intervening, loving, and personal God. For example, about twenty-five years ago, the Reverend Jerry Falwell wrote, "It is time for Americans to come back to the faith of our fathers, to the Bible of our fathers, and to the biblical principles that our fathers used as a premise for this nation's establishment."² Other Americans disagree, seeing such appeals to God as merely part of what Robert Bellah labeled America's "civil religion," a weaving of American values and ideals into a secular state religion. Brooke Allen, for example, in a 2005 article in *The Nation*, wrote, "Our nation was founded not on Christian principles but on Enlightenment ones. God only entered the picture as a very

1 Bob Woodward quoted in John McCollister, *God and the Oval Office* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2005), 236.

2 Jerry Falwell, *Listen America* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 50.

minor player and Jesus Christ was conspicuously absent.”³ Which of these Americans are correct? Or, are they both wrong? Or, are they both correct?

For various reasons, including the fact that religion, especially the Christian religion, is a very powerful political reality in America today, Americans are extremely interested in discovering whether the roots of the Republic were planted in spiritual or secular soil, and whether the flowering of this nation has been the result of religion or reason. In exploring this ground, this paper will use the divining rod of presidential religious statements and beliefs, not because the president is the sole purveyor of our daily bread or high priest of the Republic, or because by examining their words and faiths we can get a conclusive answer to the question. Rather, historically, these men have set the tone and tenor for American values during their tenure in office, and their religious statements, beliefs, and actions have, thus, been indelibly imprinted on the fabric of this nation’s political and spiritual past and remain visible today.

First and foremost, all available research indicates that not one American president was an atheist. Although some of America’s presidents, such as Warren G. Harding, were immoral, and perhaps one, Richard Nixon, was amoral, all professed belief in God. It seems that atheists live neither in foxholes nor in Oval Offices.

Though all presidents professed belief in God, not all presidents were church members. Presidential church affiliation is not always easy to identify, and it is somewhat eccentric. Not surprisingly, perhaps, there was never a Lutheran, Mormon, Pentecostal, Eastern Orthodox, Jewish, or Muslim president, reflecting in part the small populations these represent. But Roman Catholics, who comprise about 25% of the population, have had only one president (John Kennedy); and Baptists, who make up about 20% of the population, are also statistically under-represented with only four men in the White House (Warren Harding, Harry Truman, Jimmy Carter, and Bill Clinton). On the other hand, some denominations are over-represented, led by four Unitarian presidents (John and John Quincy Adams, Millard Fillmore, and Howard Taft), followed by the Disciples of Christ with three (James Garfield, Lyndon Johnson, and Ronald Reagan), the Dutch Reformed Church with two (Martin Van Buren and Theodore Roosevelt), and the Quakers with two (Herbert Hoover and Richard Nixon). These presidentially-stacked churches make up very small

3 Brooke Allen, “Our Godless Constitution,” *The Nation*, February 6, 2005.

percentages of our population: Unitarians, for example, are currently just less than one-quarter of 1% of the population!⁴

Other religious affiliations represented in the historic White House include six Presbyterians, (Andrew Jackson, James Buchanan, Grover Cleveland, Benjamin Harrison, Woodrow Wilson, and Dwight Eisenhower); four Episcopalians (Franklin Pierce, Franklin Roosevelt, Gerald Ford, and the elder George Bush); three Methodists (James Polk, William McKinley, and George W. Bush), and one Congregationalist (Calvin Coolidge).

That accounts for thirty presidents. What about the other twelve? It can be argued that five presidents were Deists. Deists believed in a non-Biblical God who worked through reason and scientifically discernable natural laws. These five were George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, and John Tyler. The remaining seven were, without doubt, unaffiliated, never joining any church in their adult lives; they were William Henry Harrison, Zachary Taylor, Abraham Lincoln, Andrew Johnson, Ulysses Grant, Rutherford Hayes, and Chester Arthur. Also of interest, perhaps, is that America's other president, the Confederate Jefferson Davis, was an Episcopalian.⁵

Church membership, or lack thereof, is not a complete indication of any of these individuals' spirituality, nor is it proof that any

4 There are numerous on-line and printed sources available listing and detailing the church affiliations of America's presidents. Many of these sources contain errors due to religious bias or lack of serious research. Two generally accurate sources include Edmund Fuller and David E. Green, *God in the White House: The Faiths of American President* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1968) and William A. Degregario, *The Complete Book of U.S. Presidents* (New York: Dembner Books, 1989). Statistical information quoted above was found on-line in "Religious Affiliation of U.S. Presidents," www.adherents.com/adh_presidents.html.

5 My categorizing differs from many in including as Deists Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe and Tyler. All, except Tyler, were raised in the Anglican Church, the established church in colonial Virginia, which made membership a requirement for any political life or career. Washington rarely attended, Jefferson almost never, whereas Madison, Monroe and Tyler did attend services. The latter three were quite reticent about their religious beliefs or church membership. There is no evidence that any of them partook of Communion as adults. As far as having no church affiliation, all those listed above never joined a church and any listing of their religious affiliation relates to parental or spousal religious affiliations. Like Lincoln, Jefferson Davis became very religious during the Civil War, but unlike Lincoln, Davis officially became a church member, joining the Episcopal Church in May 1862. See Felicity Allen, *Unconquerable Heart* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999).

of them were or were not Christians. Yet, Americans by and large see their presidents as Christians. Why is this so?

There are three main reasons. First, Americans are themselves a very religious people, as scientific opinion sampling consistently shows. Polls from the late 1980s showed nine of ten Americans believing in God. A FOX News Poll in September, 2003 found 92% of Americans stating this belief. An August, 2004 Pew Research Center Poll asked Americans if a president ought to have strong religious beliefs. Seventy per cent mostly or completely agreed with this statement: only 11% disagreed—even though the adjective “strong” could have been a warning flag for moderates. In this same poll, 83% described themselves as belonging to some denomination of Christianity and only 10% claimed no religious belief. Last, one poll asked whether Americans would vote for an atheist for president, 87% cent said no. All these polls, stretching over two decades, confirmed that America is one of the most religious nations on earth, and its citizens want their president to reflect their religious commitments.⁶

A second reason relates to the political times we live in. On the day after the December 1999 Republican debate in Iowa, the *Des Moines Register* wrote “Jesus [Christ] and God are [the] unofficial, but often-mentioned, running mates of the Republican candidates for president.” The newspaper was referring to the fact that five candidates in the debate had, combined, made more than twenty direct references to Christ and God.⁷ It seems today that politicians and presidents referencing Christ in public speeches is something to which Americans have become more and more accustomed. Historian Wilfred McClay recently noted, “Ever since the election of Jimmy Carter in 1976...the taboo on the expression of religious sentiments by American political leaders seems to have been steadily eroding, to the extent that the presidential candidates in the [2000] campaign have been invoking...Jesus Christ at a pace not seen since the days of William Jennings Bryan.”⁸ Recent presidents have so openly identified their public personalities and policies with religious values that one might wonder if the Chief Executive were becoming a sort of

6 See Gary Wills, *Under God: Religion and American Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 16-17. Also see www.pollingreport.com/religion.htm.

7 “Candidates Focus on Christian Beliefs,” *Des Moines Register*, December 15, 1999 found at www.archives.cnn.com/1999/ALLPOLITICS/stories/12/15/religion.register.

8 Wilfred McClay, “Two Concepts of Secularism,” *The Journal of Policy History*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 2001, Washington, D.C., 47-72.

Pontifex Maximus Americanus (an American Pope). Small wonder if religious parents wonder why their children cannot pray in public schools. And small wonder if people assume that such postures and policies form an unbroken theme of our national history.

Third, the popular vision of America as a Christian nation with Christian presidents has been zealously cultivated, of late, by evangelical leaders. For instance, televangelist Pat Robertson in his book *The Ten Offenses* wrote, "America was founded as a Christian nation and ... recent efforts to deny or revise that fact are dangerous to our society."⁹ Jerry Falwell stated that he founded the Moral Majority in 1979 in order to "return America to her Judeo-Christian heritage." In the aftermath of 9/11, Falwell, after blaming pagans, abortionists, feminists, and gays and lesbians for bringing on the terrorist attacks, blasted the ACLU and like-minded organizations for having "removed our nation from its relationship with Christ on which it was founded."¹⁰

Just last year "the Republican Party of Texas affirm[ed] the United States of America is a Christian Nation" and stated that "our Founders expected that Christianity — and no other religion — would receive support from the government as long as that support did not violate peoples' ...right to worship." So there are strong reasons why Americans believe as they do and why, when a Pew Poll taken in 2002 asked "Do you consider the United States a Christian nation?," 67% responded, "Yes."¹¹

What does this mean? It means either that America was founded as a Christian nation, as the evangelicals claim, or it became one. Or, it means that 67% of the American people are mistaken.

America actually began as thirteen different colonies. It is an elementary-school myth still perpetuated today that Plymouth, with those intrepid Pilgrims, was the first of these. In fact, Jamestown was established thirteen years before the sailing of the *Mayflower*,

9 See Robertson quote at www.patrobertson.com/PressReleases/tenoffenses.asp.

10 See Falwell quote at www.crosswalk.com/news/1295841.html and <http://archives.cnn.com/2001/US/09/14/Falwell.apology/>. Evangelist Tim LeHaye echoed this sentiment when he wrote, "We must vote in pro-moral leaders who will return our country to the biblical base upon which it is founded," Tim LaHaye, *Battle for the Mind*, (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1980), 36. In 1992, former Republican Governor of Mississippi Kirk Fordice declared, "America is a Christian nation," in *US News & World Report*, Nov. 30, 1992, 21.

11 See Texas State Republican Party Platform at http://www.theocracywatch.org/texas_gop.htm; see also Q 26, <http://pewforum.org/publications/reports/poll2002.pdf>.

and its purpose was commercial not spiritual. As to the presence of religious motivations in our colonial beginnings, the Massachusetts and Connecticut colonies definitely had them—planting and enforcing Puritanism; Dissenting Rhode Island, Catholic Maryland, and Quaker Pennsylvania had religious motivations, too, but their founding resulted from religious persecution and a desire to create religiously tolerant colonies; Georgia also had some religious motivations—Methodist—but mainly as an aspect of General Oglethorpe’s antipoverty experiments, strangely mixed with the military motivation of being a strategic buffer-zone. Although individual colonists founding the other seven American colonies were religious men, the driving motivation behind the founding of each colony was secular in nature. The first colony, Virginia, was a commercial/capitalist enterprise. The remaining six had varied origins, none of them religious in nature: New Hampshire was for farming and fishing, New York nurtured political despotism, the Carolinas were to fulfill an English aristocrat’s social philosophy, New Jersey existed to pay rents to some British courtiers; and Delaware was a peaceful secession from Pennsylvania, which it found too radical.

So America’s colonial origins were mixed—*culturally heterogeneous*. What about the establishment of the nation itself in the 1770s and 1780s? Was uniting the newly independent colonies a Christian enterprise? Not really. The Declaration of Independence, written mainly by Thomas Jefferson, mentions God four times, but only in generalized terms. Jefferson refers to “nature’s God”—a clear sign of Deistic, not Christian influences—and to “the Creator,” “the Supreme Judge of the world,” and “Divine Providence,” all Deist descriptions. Eleven years later, the Constitution was even more distant, mentioning religion only once, negatively, in Article Six, Section 3: “no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office.” Religious historians Edwin Gaustad and Leigh Schmidt describe it as “failing to offer even a token recognition of God’s sovereignty over the people.”¹² Only when the Bill of Rights was added, in 1791, would the First Amendment supply a more specific reference: “Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

Among the nation’s Founding Fathers were its first four presidents. Two of these, Jefferson and Adams, had headed up the

12 Edward Gaustad and Leigh Schmidt, *The Religious History of America* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2004), 49-73, 126.

committee that wrote the Declaration of Independence, while the other two, Washington and Madison, were leading members of the Constitutional Convention. Clearly, if any four men understood the fundamental documents they created, and the type of government they intended, these four did. Did they plan a Christian nation? Clearly they did not. So, why not? The simplest answer, though not sufficient in itself to answer the question fully, is that none of these four was a Christian: Washington, Jefferson, and Madison were all Deists while John Adams was a Unitarian. Deists and Unitarians hold Jesus Christ in great respect and praise his moral philosophy, but deny his divinity.

It is a fairly startling general truth: of our first sixteen presidents, serving between the Constitution's adoption and the national crisis of the Civil War, there were only five sure Christians: Jackson (Presbyterian), Van Buren (Dutch Reformed), Polk (Methodist), Pierce (Episcopalian), and Buchanan (Presbyterian), and none of these were communicants in their churches until they left the White House. One could honestly argue that fully one-half of America's first sixteen presidents were not Christians at all. James Monroe, the last of the founding generation, and John Tyler, the first vice president to replace a deceased president, joined Washington, Jefferson, and Madison as Deists. John Quincy Adams and Millard Fillmore joined the senior John Adams in the Unitarian camp. Aged William Henry Harrison, the first president to die in office, belonged to no church, although he was said to have planned on joining the Episcopalians and was reportedly religious. Zachary Taylor, the Mexican War hero, had almost no interest in religion, though his wife being an Episcopalian led many to consider him as one also.

As for our sixteenth American president, so many have yearned for Abraham Lincoln to embody the Christian virtues that stories have been fabricated to give him that appearance; but throughout most of his life Lincoln was a Deist, and if he became a Christian, it was only in the last year or two of his life. Indeed, the first U.S. president who was a *bona fide* communicant of a church before taking office was James Garfield, inaugurated in 1881! That was ninety-two years after George Washington, who had set the presidency's tone in so many ways.

Any discussion of George Washington involves slicing through encrusted mythology to reach the human dimension. Beginning with a thoroughly fictional biography by Parson Weems in the early

nineteenth century and continuing with the evangelical minister Tim LaHaye in the early twenty-first century, Americans have been set awash in manufactured Washington lore. Weems, famous for inventing Washington and the cherry tree, also gave us Washington at Valley Forge kneeling in deep snow to pray. It sounds admirably pious, but we know Washington never knelt while in church, so why would he kneel in snow? The story became more fantastic when embellished by another author who claimed that while Washington prayed in the snow at Valley Forge, an American officer interrupted him, and Washington, "without rising from his knees," shot the man and then resumed praying.¹³

People who actually knew Washington saw him as a fine eighteenth-century gentleman, not a saint. He played billiards and cards, raced and gambled on horses, danced, and drank wines and liquors (he even made and sold them at Mount Vernon). He never, as far as anyone knows, partook of Holy Communion. Only twice in his writings would he mention Christ, once as a boy of thirteen in a copybook, calling Him "the Savior of mankind" and then in the *Circular to the States* in 1783 when he spoke in conventional terms of the "Divine Author of our blessed religion." Nowhere else did Washington endorse Christ's divinity or the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.¹⁴

Many writers have tried to show Washington as a faithful churchgoer. In the early nineteenth century Reverend Lee Massey, rector where Washington occasionally churched, stated "I never knew so constant an attendant in church as Washington." Massey's statement seems contrived for national mythic purposes. That he was a vestryman in the Anglican Church is indisputable, but as the Church

13 Alf J. Mapp, Jr., *The Faiths of Our Fathers* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 67-68. See also Fuller and Green, 13. The Rev. William White, first Episcopal bishop of Pennsylvania noted that Washington's "behavior in church was always serious and attentive but...on the point of kneeling during service, I owe it to the truth to declare that I never saw him in the said attitude." Parson Weems and Tim LaHaye quoted in Mapp, Jr., 67.

14 Franklin Steiner, *The Religious Beliefs of Our Presidents: From Washington to F.D.R.* (Amherst New York: Prometheus Books, New Edition, 1995), 17-23. This document, the *Circular to the States*, included the so-called Washington Prayer. Steiner argued that there is no proof that Washington wrote this and that it has been doctored to make it appear that Washington in the circular wrote, "we beseech thee, through Jesus Christ our Lord." After examining the original document, Steiner discovered that these words were actually added by others. This remains a controversial issue.

of England was the established church in colonial Virginia, failure to participate would have barred Washington from a political career. Even with his status as vestryman, he rarely attended services. In *The Religious Beliefs of Our Presidents*, Franklin Steiner probed Massey's contention by reading Washington's diary to determine with what frequency Washington attended church. Steiner discovered that Washington went to church: in 1768, 15 times (out of 52 Sundays); in 1771, six times; in 1773, five times; in 1774, eighteen times, the most of any year before the Revolution. After the war, in 1785, though at Mount Vernon most of the time, he went once. By contrast, as president, Washington attended church more than any other time in his life. He considered it as required of him, to set an example and to avoid a public outcry. Washington was not antichurch, but churchgoing was not his source of spiritual strength.¹⁵

Washington's distinctive balance of conscience with duty can be seen during his presidency, while Philadelphia was still the federal capital. The president and first lady often attended St. Peter's Church there. On sacramental Sundays, George would leave before the communion service, while Martha stayed. The pastor, Dr. James Abercrombie, was upset by Washington's behavior, and the next time Washington attended, Abercrombie preached about "the bad example of those in elevated stations, who uniformly turned their backs on the Lord's Supper." Washington thereafter, not wishing to be a hypocrite by partaking in the Eucharist when not believing in it, simply refused to attend St. Peter's on Communion Sunday. The Reverend Abercrombie, moreover, who knew quite well the religious bent of the first president, when asked to identify his religion proclaimed, "Sir, Washington is a Deist."¹⁶

Washington rarely discussed theology, seldom said grace at

15 Washington, as scholars know, religiously maintained his diary, especially while at Mt. Vernon, but he wrote in it most days even while traveling or in the military or while President. In the section "Where and How My Time Is Spent," Washington noted his church attendance. I examined the Washington Diaries, and his notations are not verbose. For example, I examined the year 1768 and found that in the month of August he went once and wrote of that day, August 28, "Went to Nomony Church & returned to my Brother's to Dinner." See Donald Jackson, ed., *The Diaries of George Washington* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1976-1979, Vols. I-V). Quote taken from Vol. II, 83-92; Steiner, 17-37. After leaving the Presidency, during the last three years of his life, he attended seven times. And though church attendance is not the true measure of a man's faith, this record does help us understand Washington stripped of myth.

16 Quoted in Fuller and Green, 13.

the dinner table unless clergymen were present, and hardly ever referred to God except in typically Deist or Masonic terms such as "Providence," "Heaven," "Director of Human Events," "Great Ruler of Events," "Author of the Universe," or "Grand Architect." He seldom if ever quoted from the New Testament, and his favorite biblical verse was the blandly comforting description in I Kings 4:25, "Judah and Israel dwelt safely, every man under his vine and under his fig tree." Whether Washington believed in an after-life remains a subject of debate. We know that he asked for no clergyman while on his deathbed, seeking neither comfort nor absolution.¹⁷

Washington's most distinctive religious ideas revolved around religious toleration, the centrality of religion in maintaining the Republic, and providential intercession in human affairs. The latter placed Washington far from mainstream Deism, where God appeared as the distant creator of natural laws that allowed the cosmos to run unattended. We may even speculate that Washington was temperamentally more a Unitarian than a Deist, so that if he had lived in New England, where Unitarianism was strongest, he might have gravitated toward it, as Jefferson would. Washington's God, "whose decrees are always just and wise," could be prayed to, even if divine actions were sometimes inscrutable, requiring humanity to "submit with patience and resignation."¹⁸

In the French and Indian War, Washington had two horses shot out from under him and four bullets whistle through his coat, leaving him unharmed. He wrote, "See the wondrous works of Providence...that protected me beyond all human expectation." After the Battle of Monmouth, during the Revolutionary War, he stated that the Americans would have lost but for "that bountiful Providence which has never failed us in the hour of distress."¹⁹ Did Washington come to see himself as a specially protected leader, part of a divine plan for a new Chosen People? It seems quite likely. And he was not alone: presidents from Polk to Lincoln, Wilson, and Bush have

17 See Frank E. Grizzard, Jr., *George Washington: A Biographical Companion* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2002), 271; Richard Brookhiser, *Founding Father: Rediscovering George Washington* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 145-47; and Mapp, Jr., 68-69.

18 Mapp, Jr., 70.

19 Brookhiser, 146; Grizzard, Jr., 270. In a letter to Samuel Cooper, September 24, 1782, about the Revolutionary War, Washington wrote: "We have so often, and conspicuously experienced, the Smiles of Heaven," in John C. Fitzpatrick, ed. *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishers, 1970), Vol. 25, 200.

stated such.

Washington's second major religious belief, held as well by nearly all American presidents, revolved around the absolute necessity for religious freedom, toleration, and the separation of church and state. The Founding Fathers were especially sensitive about this issue. Apart from liberal Rhode Island and Pennsylvania, and to a lesser degree Maryland, the original thirteen colonies were not bastions of religious freedom or toleration. Both colonial Virginia and Massachusetts, home of America's first six chief executives, had established churches. Virginians viewed the established Anglican Church as tyrannical and a bane upon the blessings of liberty. Madison, for example, so disliked the established Church that he refused to attend college at the Anglican-run William and Mary and instead enrolled at the College of New Jersey, which was under Presbyterian influence. When Madison returned to Virginia he worked tirelessly to disestablish the Anglican Church there and to protect religious liberty in the colony. He and Thomas Jefferson successfully promoted and protected religious freedom and the separation of church and state in the new state of Virginia, and later did so for the whole of the United States in the First Amendment to the Constitution.²⁰ That Washington agreed with them can be seen in his letter to the ministers and leaders of the Dutch Reformed Church, written Nov. 16, 1782. Washington wrote that he was "convinced that our Religious Liberties were...essential..., [and] my endeavors have never been wanting to encourage and promote [them].... That you may be enabled to hand down your Religion pure and undefiled...is...[my] fervent prayer." Three years later in a letter to George Mason, dated October 3, 1785, Washington declared, "No man's sentiments are more opposed to *any kind* of restraint upon religious principles than mine are."²¹ To the Quakers he wrote, "The liberty enjoyed by the people of these States, of worshipping Almighty God agreeably to their own conscience, is not only among the choicest of their blessings, but also of their rights."²²

Massachusetts-born John Adams, who also chafed under the yoke of a colonial established church, the Congregational, agreed with Washington that church and state must be separated. In his draft of the Massachusetts State Constitution written in the late 1770s

20 See Mapp, Jr., 41-53 for Madison's religious beliefs.

21 Fitzpatrick, ed., Vol.28, 285.

22 Steiner, 17-37.

Adams wrote, “[N]o one was to be hurt, molested, or restrained in his person, liberty, or estate for worshipping God in the manner most agreeable to the dictates of his own conscience.”²³

Third, Washington, as with the other Founding presidents, believed that a direct correlation existed between religious freedom and republican government. As historian Grizzard writes, “For Washington, toleration and liberty of conscience coincided with the civil and social roles of religion. In roles of authority and leadership...Washington invariably appealed to the twin pillars of ‘human happiness’—religion and morality—to buttress the civil authority and uphold the social underpinnings.” Washington stated it best himself in his Farwell Address when he wrote: “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports.” Later in the speech he averred, “And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion....[R]eason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.”²⁴ Though much of this speech was written by the more conventionally Christian Alexander Hamilton, it nonetheless expressed Washington’s sentiments. A virtuous republic depended on a virtuous citizenry, which could only come about through religious morality.

John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, America’s second and third presidents, agreed with Washington about the centrality of religion in preserving a republic and its institutions. Adams wrote of his own family, “What has preserved this race of Adamses in all their ramifications in such numbers, health, peace, comfort...? I believe it is religion, without which they would have been rakes, fops, sots, gamblers, starved with hunger, or from with cold, scalped by Indians, etc., etc., etc., been melted away and disappeared.” Adams rejected the sanctimonious sermonizing of Calvinist preachers, and in 1817 he wrote to Jefferson, “Twenty times in the course of my late readings, have I been on the point of breaking out, ‘this would be the best of all worlds if there were no religion in it!’ But in this exclamation I have been...fanatical.... Without religion, this world would be something not fit to be mentioned in polite company—I mean hell.”²⁵

By “religion” did Adams mean Christianity? According to biographer William DeGregorio, Adams “believed that although Christ was

23 David McCulloch, *John Adams* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2001), 221-22.

24 Grizzard, Jr., 271.

25 Mapp, Jr., 58-60.

a great and a good man whose example of piety, love, and universal brotherhood was the ideal that all people and nations should emulate, he was, after all still a human being, not the Son of God, not the Word made flesh." Yet paraphrasing Christ's Great Commandments, Adams stated, "My religion is founded on the love of God and my neighbor." And he also wrote, "The Christian religion is...the religion of virtue, equity, and humanity.... It is resignation to God, it is goodness itself in man."²⁶

Jefferson, accused of being an infidel and atheist, though neither, shared Adams's belief in the greatness of the Christian religion, even while rejecting Christ's divinity. In 1787 Jefferson wrote rather caustically, "Instead of being the son of God, Jesus was only `a man of illegitimate birth, of a benevolent heart, enthusiastic mind, who set out without pretensions to divinity, ended in believing them, and was punished capitally for sedition...according to Roman law.'"²⁷ Jefferson did not believe the Bible was the revealed word of God; it was mere human history. Nor did he believe in any of the miracles mentioned in either the Old or New Testaments, as miracles went against the laws of nature. Yet Jefferson believed in God. As historian Eugene Sheridan wrote, "For Jefferson, human reason, not supernatural revelation or ecclesiastical authority, henceforth became the sole arbiter of religious truth. Thus, through rational investigation he came to believe in a supreme being who created the universe and continued to sustain it by means of fixed, mathematically precise laws." God, for Jefferson, was "the creator and benevolent governor of the world." It was illogical, Jefferson reasoned, for God to create this beautiful, perfect, machine and then tamper with it by performing miracles, which circumvented the mathematically precise laws upon which it was based. Jefferson saw in the universe an intelligent design: in it he saw the hand of God.²⁸

26 DeGregorio, 22.

27 Jefferson to Peter Carr, 10 August 1787, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Julian P. Boyd et al. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950-), 12:14-18. See also Eugene R. Sheridan, *Jefferson and Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 17-18.

28 Sheridan, 17-18. It is somewhat ironic but the Founding Fathers would agree with the proponents of intelligent design today in that God is manifest in the creation. But they would not agree with the Christian right, who having lost the battle against Darwin in high schools, are seeking to sneak God into biology class through intelligent design. Neither Jefferson nor any of the Founding Fathers would see intelligent design as a subject relevant to a biology class for it is not a science, but rather an important question that ought to be discussed in a philosophy class.

One of Jefferson's most famous statements on religious freedom and God's existence is, "It does me no injury for my neighbor to say that there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg."²⁹ But here, Jefferson is being too clever by half. For Jefferson does not believe that atheism does not injure his pocketbook or his leg. Though Jefferson, like Washington, Adams, and Madison, would not force religion on anyone, he nevertheless saw social utility in religion, specifically in the Christian religion. According to Jefferson's biographer Eugene Sheridan, the third president "did decide that Christian morality could serve as one of the basic foundations of the country's republican experiments by promoting social harmony among the citizenry that he considered essential for the survival of the republic." Jefferson himself wrote the "Christian religion when divested of the rages in which [the clergy] have enveloped it, is a religion of all others most friendly to liberty..."³⁰ James Madison agreed with his friend Jefferson concerning the social utility of religion for maintaining the Republic. Madison "never attacked religion or religious men and he always saw 'good religion' as a useful support of republican government." Madison stated, "Belief in a God All Powerful wise and good...is essential to the moral order of the World and to happiness of man..."³¹

Both Jefferson and Madison valued Christian morality in maintaining political peace; they also saw how it could be used as a political weapon. Jefferson was America's first presidential candidate, but certainly not the last, to have his religious beliefs questioned and used as a tool to defeat him. In the late 1790s, Federalists leaders and their clerical supporters began a campaign to discredit Jefferson using allegations that he was an infidel. These Federalists, wrote Sheridan, "arraigned Jefferson before the bar of public opinion as an unbeliever who was unworthy to serve as chief magistrate of...[this] nation." In the election of 1800, Jefferson's opponents charged that he "was atheist, an infidel, or at best a Deist...who was hostile to Christianity and therefore unworthy to serve.... Elect Jefferson.... they warned, and dire consequences would ensue.... His victory would," the Federalists charged, "arouse the wrath of God" against

29 DeGregorio, 40.

30 Sheridan, 31.

31 Ralph Ketcham, *James Madison: A Biography* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1992), 57 and 667.

the United States.³²

Jefferson stung by these charges responded, writing to Benjamin Rush, “To the corruptions of Christianity, I am indeed opposed, (by this he meant the mystification of the religion carried out by the early Church Fathers), but not “to the genuine precepts of Jesus himself.” Jefferson declared, “I am a Christian...in the only sense in which he wished any one to be one; sincerely attached to his doctrines.” The true Christian precepts within the New Testament, he said, were “as easily distinguishable as diamonds in a dunghill.” Jefferson, after acquiring numerous Bibles, Greek, Latin, French, and English, decided to write his own bible. He cut and pasted the Gospels, removing everything supernatural—the virgin birth, the miracles—and wrote what he entitled “The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth,” known now as the “Jefferson Bible.” This was Christ as moral philosopher and teacher. Jefferson stated that Christ’s “system of morality...was far superior” to any other ever created. No other American president has ever gone this far in explaining his religious convictions.³³

It seems clear then, that the founding presidents all believed deeply and sincerely in God, in the separation of church and state, and religion’s crucial role in securing the future of the Republic. They were not, as Brooke Allen claimed, merely Enlightenment men who added God into the national equation as an afterthought. Nor were they Christians. Though they valued Christ’s moral philosophy, they did not intend to, nor did they, create a Christian nation.

By the time the founding generation had passed, the Enlightenment-era rationalism of their generation’s philosophizing was already being replaced by new enthusiasms. Especially after the War of 1812, America experienced a nationwide religious revival called the Second Great Awakening, cascading through American society and flooding the country with religious exaltation. In this excitement, was America being (so to speak) “born anew” as a Christian nation? Unfortunately, the second and third generations of America’s presidents, from John Quincy Adams to James Buchanan, do not shed much light on this question. They echoed the founding presidents’ standard beliefs about religious liberty, separation of church and state, the importance of religion for political and social well-being, and sometimes America’s Providential destiny. As a group they were decidedly more Christian than the founding presidents: five of them were confessed Christians,

32 Sheridan, 21-22.

33 Ibid.

but the others were not.

Despite the era's religious fervor, presidents were not called to account over their beliefs, and no one came near to facing the attacks Jefferson had faced. Still, in this age of religious renewal, why were presidents not more vocally Christian? Second- and third-generation presidents shared fifth president James Monroe's sentiment that "religion is a matter between our Maker and ourselves."³⁴ Second, belief in separation of church and state remained strong. Immigration and the rising tide of anti-Catholicism made toleration a living issue, with presidents condemning religious bigotry as violations to the First Amendment. The much-despised John Tyler wrote quite eloquently about it in a letter of 1843:

The United States have adventured upon a great and noble experiment ... that of total separation of Church and State.... No tithes are levied to support an established Hierarchy.... The Mahommedan, if he will to come among us[,] would have the privilege guaranteed to him by the constitution to worship according to the Koran.... The Hebrew ... takes up his abode among us with none to make him afraid....³⁵

His successor, the pious James K. Polk, echoed this position in his 1845 Inaugural Address, declaring that the U.S. Government "is a common protector...of every religious sect, in their worship of the Almighty according to the dictates of their own conscience."³⁶ The one major exception to this tolerant attitude was found in the thirteenth president of the United States, Millard Fillmore, who blamed his 1844 defeat for governor of New York on "foreign Catholics" and in 1856 ran for president as the Know-Nothing candidate, the violently anti-Catholic and hate-filled anti-immigration party.³⁷

And the third reason presidents were not overtly Christian in this

34 McCollister, 29. Monroe was born, raised, married, and buried within the Episcopal's Church. Some consider this evidence of his Christian faith. We have zero references, however, of his expressing any Christian faith, nor do we have any mention of him ever partaking of the Lord's Supper. Monroe's statement concerning religious privacy was taken from Jefferson.

35 Tyler, like Monroe, was raised in the Episcopal Church. Also like Monroe, he never gave any profession of faith. Tyler quote found at www.geocities.com/peterroberts.geo/Relig-Politics/JTyler.html.

36 Polk Inaugural Address in J. Michael Sharman, *Faith of the Fathers* (Culpepper, VA: Victory Publishing, 1995), 47.

37 Fuller and Green, 90. Apart the 1856 and the Know-Nothings, Catholicism was a major issue in the 1884, 1928 and 1960 elections to name three.

era is because brooding over it was the slavery issue. The nation's Christians were divided—willingly and chillingly citing Biblical authority to attack or defend slavery—and presidents generally took cover. Not one American president from George Washington to James Buchanan publicly condemned slavery in the years leading up to the Civil War, though John Quincy Adams after leaving the White House and becoming a member of Congress did become a vocal Abolitionist. Slavery and the drift toward Civil War crucified presidents Pierce and Buchanan on a cross of sectionalism, and neither one's Christian faith was strong enough to give him any guidance—both men were spiritually lost.³⁸

But then came Lincoln. Ironically, one of America's least religious men in the decades leading up to the Civil War did more to blur the lines separating church and state and did more to inject religion into the body politic than any earlier president. Lincoln biographer Elton Trueblood noted correctly that before Lincoln, "Presidents...were reticent in expressing their hopes and fears in unapologetically religious terms." Many were both religious and spiritual, "but they hesitated to use the language of devotion when representing the nation." Lincoln was the first to express publicly the "the language of devotion."³⁹

That Lincoln's parents were Baptist and that a Bible was one of the few books he read in youth are beyond dispute. Also agreed is that he became either an atheist or an agnostic as a young man. Even Christian apologists such as Dr. John McCollister agreed that Lincoln was then "an outspoken non-believer." Later on, but before the late 1850s, Lincoln's religious inclinations could be summed up as Deist. In his run for Congress in 1846, his opponent accused him of being "an atheist and an enemy of the organized church." Lincoln responded, "That I am not a member of any Christian church is true, but I have never denied the truth of the Scriptures...."⁴⁰

As president, however, there is no doubt that Lincoln had some form of religious transformation. Ronald C. White's *Lincoln's Greatest Speech: the Second Inaugural* highlighted Lincoln's use of the "language of devotion" in public pronouncements. Comparing Lincoln's

38 Fuller and Green, 92-100. Both Pierce and Buchanan fought personal demons. Pierce was by most accounts an alcoholic; Buchanan suffered from guilt over the possible suicide of his fiancée, and later questions arose concerning his sexual orientation.

39 Elton Trueblood, *Abraham Lincoln: A Spiritual Biography* (New York: Walker and Co., 1986, Large Print Edition), 6-7.

40 McCollister, 76-77.

Second Inaugural with the eighteen inaugural addresses before his, White noted that though all eighteen speeches referenced God, it was almost always made in the last paragraph as Presidents called on God's guidance or support. Also, the God referred to in the addresses was not necessarily the Christian God, rather God was: "Parent of the Human Race" (Washington); "Patron of Order" (J. Adams); "Infinite Power" (Jefferson), etc. Before Lincoln only Monroe, Jackson, and Pierce actually used the word *God*. Moreover, only one President quoted from the Bible before Lincoln, John Quincy Adams, a voracious Bible reader.⁴¹

Lincoln was the first ever to mention the Bible by name in an Inaugural and was one of only four to mention Christ or Christianity in an Inaugural address.⁴² He was one of only two presidents to include more than one biblical quote in an Inaugural Address (Lincoln used four while John Kennedy used two), and he was the first to cite from the New Testament: quoting from the Sermon on the Mount, "Judge not, that ye may not be judged," and Matthew 18:7, "Woe unto the world because of offenses! For it must needs be that offenses come; but woe to the man by whom the offense cometh!"⁴³ Drawn from Jesus' teachings about the treatment of children, Lincoln loosely used Matthew 18:7 to mean slaves. Lincoln explained, "If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offenses

41 Ronald C. White, *Lincoln's Greatest Speech: the Second Inaugural* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), 101. Adams quoted from the Psalm 127: "Except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain."

42 References to Christ, Christian, or Christianity included: the Unitarian John Adams who said, "A decent respect for Christianity [was] among the best recommendations for the public service"; William H. Harrison who mentioned, "the fallen Christ whose coming was foretold by the Savior" and later in the speech acknowledged "a profound reverence for the Christian religion"; James Buchanan who spoke about "a spirit of Christian benevolence toward our fellow-men"; and Lincoln who in his First Inaugural stated, "Intelligence, patriotism, Christianity, and a firm reliance on Him who has never forsaken this favored land are still competent to adjust in the best way to our present difficulty." No president since Lincoln has used Christ, Christian, or Christianity in an inaugural address.

43 These biblical quotations are from the King James Version (KJV). One should note that the word *offences* quoted in the KJV translated the Greek word *skandalon* to mean offences, while the New Revised Standard Version translate it as *stumbling block*, and the Jerusalem Bible translates the Greek word as *obstacle*. Whether Lincoln, who read mostly from the KJV, the Protestant Bible of the day, knew of other translations of this passage, is open to debate. But clearly, turning children into slaves for the purpose of condemning the South and the nation is somewhat of a loose application of Scripture.

which ... must needs come, but which ... He now wills to remove [through] this terrible war,...shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him?"⁴⁴

Two crucial points can be made about Lincoln's second inaugural. First, it dramatically and crucially departs from historic presidential use of religion and Christianity for reasons of state. As White asserts, "In using...the Gospel of Matthew, Lincoln employed the sanction of Scripture to initiate his indictment of slavery, and ultimately his formal charge against the American people."⁴⁵ Lincoln told the nation that Jesus was telling the nation that slavery must go! This is not only erasing any line separating Church and State, but it is also poor theology since nowhere in the New Testament does Jesus ever condemn slavery. Second, Lincoln, much more so than any president before, saw this nation as under God's direct control and by inference, Lincoln himself in communication with God and acting out God's will.

In an 1862 essay "Meditations on the Divine Will," Lincoln wrote, "The will of God prevails.... I am almost ready to say this is probably true—that God wills this contest.... He could have either SAVED or DESTROYED the Union without a human contest. Yet the contest began. And having begun He could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds." Lincoln argued that God—not Lincoln or any other American politician—caused the Civil War, and that God, for his reasons, allowed it to continue. Historian Nicholas Parrillo quite accurately noted that during the war Lincoln experienced a dramatic Calvinist transformation; whereas before the Civil War Lincoln's God was remote and uninvolved, by the early 1860s Lincoln's God intervened directly to influence history's unfolding, and in this case, God was intervening directly to rid the nation of the "sin" of slavery. Take, for example, Lincoln's decision to announce the Emancipation Proclamation. After agonizing for months about this action, Lincoln finally decided on emancipation if the North won at the Battle of Antietam. According to Navy Secretary Gideon Wells, Lincoln defined the battle in religious terms: "[Lincoln] had made a vow, a covenant, that if God gave us a victory in the approaching battle, he would consider it an indication of Divine will...." Lincoln believed, Wells tells us, that "God had decided this question in favor

44 White, 144-45.

45 White, 145.

of the slaves."⁴⁶

A Calvinistic tinge in his newfound faith also brought a deeper awareness of national sin. In March of 1863 Lincoln called for a day of fasting, asking, "May we not justly fear that the awful calamity...which now desolates the land, may be but a punishment, inflicted upon us, for our...sins?" He added, "We have become...too proud to pray to the God that made us!"⁴⁷ Lincoln ultimately came to see slavery as America's Original Sin. The punishment of war was like expulsion from the Garden of Eden, or like the Israelites sent into slavery in Egypt. America, the new Israel, the new chosen people, was being chastised for turning its back on God. But just as Moses led the Jews to the Promised Land, America's Moses would create a "new birth of freedom" and a new covenant by acknowledging God's will and ending slavery.

After the Civil War, Lincoln's overt religiosity faded from the presidency immediately. Neither of the Reconstruction presidents, Andrew Johnson or Ulysses S. Grant, ever joined a church, though Johnson purportedly was a closet Catholic, nor did they seem to have much use for religion in their lives. The "Gilded Age" presidents (from Rutherford B. Hayes to Grover Cleveland) were religiously a mixed bag: Hayes and Chester A. Arthur never joined a church, with the latter demonstrating almost no interest in religion. Arthur was the first president who was the son of a preacher, and some speculate that this turned him away from religion; his father had been a Baptist minister. A champion of political morality, Hayes became devout, and in 1893, long after leaving the White House and near death, wrote for his diary, "I am a Christian according to my conscience, in belief, not, or course, in character or conduct, but in purpose and wish."⁴⁸

James Garfield, known mainly for his 1881 assassination, was the only American president to have been a lay minister—a Disciple of Christ. Grover Cleveland, a reform-minded Democrat, and

46 See Nicholas Parrillo "Lincoln's Calvinist Transformation: Emancipation and War," *Civil War History*, 46:3 (September 2000): 227ff.

47 Ibid.

48 Fuller and Green, 125-56. Gilded Age presidents have been much maligned by American historians as second-and third-rate men and weak chief executives. Though this certainly seems the case on the surface, research into their spiritual lives reveals them to be of stronger moral fiber than the mainstream of American politicians in the last third of the nineteenth century. See Fuller and Green, 132-61.

Benjamin Harrison, a machine-made Republican, were both devout Presbyterians; yet Christianity rarely entered their public discourse. Their lack of overt religiosity may relate to the deep and painful divisions still plaguing America's Protestant churches, which had been torn asunder by the slave question and the Civil War, and also by the growing diversity brought by a massive immigration of Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox Christians, and Jews—even sprinklings of Buddhists, Hindus, and Confucians—in the late nineteenth century's "New Immigration."⁴⁹

At the century's end, with President McKinley, overt presidential Christianity reemerged. Since McKinley, there has been only one non-Christian president, the Unitarian William Howard Taft, and every president since Cleveland (1885) has been a member of a church. The shift correlated with three historic changes: America's emergence as a military, imperialist, and economic power; the post-World War II atomic age and Cold War against "godless" Communism; and a reaction against a secular liberalism beginning in the 1960s, which has brought into being the "Moral Majority" and "Christian Coalition" movements, and which has a strong hold on the Republican party today.

In 1896 an ideologically polarized presidential election gave the conservative Republican William McKinley a sweeping victory over the "Progressive" Democrat, William Jennings Bryan—who had taunted millionaires, banks, and corporations that they could not "crucify mankind on a Cross of Gold." Bryan's rhetoric was actually no more religious than McKinley's personal faith; and McKinley's was the administration that launched America's first colonial empire, partly justified by Protestant missionary zeal, during the Spanish-American War of 1898. In taking the Philippine Islands at the end of the war, McKinley, like George W. Bush, claimed to have asked God, in prayer, on the correct course of action. McKinley wrote: "I walked the floor of the White House night after night until midnight; and I am not ashamed to tell you, gentlemen, that I went down on my knees and prayed Almighty God for light and guidance more than one night. And one night late it came to me...." McKinley, like Lincoln, saw God's hand in American empire. He said, "Providence had made us guardians of the group of islands."⁵⁰ In 1901, McKinley

49 Ibid.

50 Lewis L. Gould, *The Presidency of William McKinley* (Lawrence KS: University of Kansas Press, 1981), 140-41.

was assassinated by one of organized religion's bitterest enemies, an anarchist.

Spanish-American War hero Theodore Roosevelt (TR) took office and began imposing morality on the world, with his "Big Stick" foreign policy, and fair play on American business at home, with his "Square Deal," thus launching what historians call the Progressive Era. The Progressive presidents—TR (Dutch Reformed), Taft (Unitarian) and Wilson (Presbyterian)—followed the "Social Gospel," an application of Christ's teachings to social problems. TR advocated a gospel of works, quoting often from the Epistle of James: "Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only." His Dutch Reformed background stressed humankind's stewardship of the world, helping make TR our first environmentalist president. Oddly, he got in trouble for backing a plan to remove "In God We Trust" from coins. He thought it sacrilegious. His critics joked that TR wanted to replace "In God We Trust" with "In Theodore We Trust," while replacing the eagle symbol with a teddy bear!⁵¹

Unitarian President Taft plainly stated, "I do not believe in the Divinity of Jesus Christ, and there are many other of the postulates of the Orthodox creed to which I cannot subscribe." He was the last American president to date to acknowledge such a view. Like Jefferson and Lincoln, Taft was accused of being an infidel while at the same time being tallied as a tool of the Pope. In the end, however, he was, as he said, "no scoffer at religion."⁵²

The third and last progressive president, Wilson, a Presbyterian minister's son from Virginia by way of New Jersey, talked, so his enemies said, as if he had God's ear, and while at the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919 after World War I, European leaders privately remarked that Wilson thought himself the new messiah. As French leader Clemenceau stated, Wilson "thinks he is another Jesus Christ come upon the earth to reform men." Wilson, a staunch Calvinist, saw himself much as George W. Bush sees himself: as God's anointed leader of America. Wilson once told William F. McCombs, head of the Democratic National Committee, after McCombs reminded Wilson of all he had done to get him elected president: "Whether you did little or much, remember that God ordained that I should be the next President of the United States. Neither you nor any other mortal or mortals could have prevented it." Wilson, like Lin-

51 McCollister, 120-40.

52 Fuller and Green, 169-73.

coln before and Bush after, saw himself as God's agent, chosen to redeem a fallen world.⁵³

In the 1920s three Republican chief executives—Warren Harding (Methodist), Calvin Coolidge (Congregational) and Herbert Hoover (Quaker)—all claimed to be Christians, but were comfortable with new materialistic values. Harding, perhaps the most immoral man to serve in the White House, intoned, “American business is not a monster, but an expression of a God-given impulse to create, and the savior of our happiness.” Coolidge further chimed, “The man who builds a factory builds a temple; the man who works there worships there.” After the First World War, many traditional ideas seemed “outworn”; Darwinist and Freudian conceptions of human nature spread. Christian Fundamentalism tried to block the new attitudes with state-level legislation, but the Scopes “Monkey” Trial in 1925 showed how futile this was in a “roaring” America of high prosperity, popular culture, and modernism. Interestingly, unlike President Bush weighing in on the Intelligent Design debate in public schools today, Coolidge refused to comment on evolution and the Scopes trial, keeping church and state separate. Also interesting, Coolidge became the first of only two presidents (Eisenhower was the second) to become a member of a church while in the White House: Coolidge joined the Congregationalists.⁵⁴ In 1929 Wall Street crashed—yet without causing a history-making Depression-era turn toward traditional faith, whether in the country or the Franklin Roosevelt White House.

The Second World War (1939 -1945) was culturally shocking: first, through the barbarous behavior of Nazi and totalitarian enemies (especially in the Holocaust); second, through the deaths of tens of millions of combatants and civilians with the routine destruction of cities by conventional and nuclear bombs; and third, and not least, through the necessity of making common cause with the “godless” Communist USSR. Interest in older ideas revived, often under the title “Christian Democracy”—constructed as an ideological alternative to both Fascism/Nazism and to Communism. Accordingly on January 6, 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt, an Episcopalian, made faith the second of his Four Freedoms, for which the war was being fought: “The...freedom of every person to worship God in his own

53 Fuller and Green, 174-83.

54 Fuller and Green, 184-200; John Sutherland Bonnell, *Presidential Profiles* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), 188-205.

way—everywhere in the world.”⁵⁵

The World War promptly morphed into Cold War, and given the prospect of apocalypse via nuclear weaponry, we look back in some wonder that the nuclear-escalation doomsday machines of the 1960s, '70s, and '80s were never released to end the world. Little wonder that America's Cold War presidents turned with greater intensity toward faith, prayer, and God. Cold War presidents from Harry Truman (Baptist) to Ronald Reagan (Disciple of Christ) invoked God's aid for American capitalism and democracy, in its global contest against what Reagan called the "evil empire." Truman, who carried a personal prayer in his pocket, found hope, as he said, in the "fatal flaw in...[communist] society. Theirs is a godless system...." His successor Dwight Eisenhower, was baptized, confirmed, and became a communicant in the Presbyterian Church in 1953, at the beginning of his administration, and he was instrumental in having the words "under God" added to the Pledge of Allegiance, and the words "In God We Trust" printed on paper currency. Ike's vice president, Richard Nixon (Quaker), attained the presidency in the late 1960s, accelerated the Cold War in Vietnam, and continued its religious sanctification, saying that the only way to combat "the netherworld of deceit, subversion, and espionage which is the Communist conspiracy" was Christian religious faith – "a faith based not on materialism but on a recognition of God." Nixon asserted that Western-style freedom was impossible without biblical Christianity. This is very interesting, seeing that of all of America's Chief Executives, Nixon was the only one who truly seemed to be completely amoral.⁵⁶

The 1960s had begun with John F. Kennedy, also known as a "hawk" in the Cold War. Believers in that old religious prejudice, the "Vatican Conspiracy" to control America, may see JFK's support of the Catholic South Vietnamese leader Ngo Dinh Diem as a case in point. To historians, this demonstrates the tension surrounding the election of America's first Roman Catholic president. It also

55 Fuller and Green, 201-06. FDR was not overtly religious and spoke or wrote little about his religious views, though he did read the Bible, quoted from it, and did pray. He did catch flak over sending an envoy to the Vatican. He did this to smooth over any ruffled Catholic feathers resulting from his recognition of the atheistic U.S.S.R.

56 McCollister, 163-218. Truman's quote on communism came from a January 15, 1953 broadcast and can be found at the www.trumanlibrary.org/calendar/viewpapers.php; Nixon's quote about Christianity and communism is from www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/spring_2005/aiello.htm.

helps explain JFK's commitment to separation of church and state, highlighted in his Houston speech of 1960: "I believe in an America where separation of church and state are absolute, where no Catholic prelate would tell the president how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote."⁵⁷

After JFK's assassination, President Lyndon Johnson (Disciples of Christ) surrounded himself with religious advisors including Bill Moyers, an ordained Baptist minister, and evangelist Billy Graham. Graham, who was labeled a "member of the cabinet, *ex officio*," has had every president's ear (excluding the Catholic John F. Kennedy and the very Christian Jimmy Carter) from Eisenhower to George W. Bush. Johnson's language demonstrated his religiousness: "We need to remember that the separation of church and state must never mean the separation of religious values from the lives of public servants." Accordingly, in supporting his policies of enormously expanding the Vietnam War, he warned, "Let no one mistake the American purpose. Our nation is dedicated to Christ's quest for peace...."⁵⁸

Another Cold War Democrat, Jimmy Carter (Baptist) continued the overt Christianizing of the presidency when he declared, the first president to do so, that he was a born-again Christian. Carter, a Sunday school teacher to this day, author of inspirational Christian books, co-founder of Habitat for Humanity and the Carter Center for Peace, ushered in the Reagan era rise of the religious right. Carter's administration was so associated with Christianity that the comedian Bob Hope once joked that "Washington D.C. is now the only city in the world where someone can call 'Dial-a-Prayer' and get the White House."⁵⁹

In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan also proclaimed himself a born-again Christian and became the poster child for the "religious right" that has, in the main, taken over the Republican Party. Reagan skillfully articulated the idea of an America that had become too liberal, forsaking God for sex, drugs, abortion rights, women's liberation, gay rights, and secular life-styles. At a 1984 prayer breakfast in Dallas, he turned attention to the federal courts: "In 1962 the Supreme Court in the New York prayer case banned the compulsory saying of prayers. In 1963 the Court banned the reading of the Bible in our public schools. From that point on, the courts pushed the meaning

57 Fuller and Green, 219-23.

58 McCollister, 184-88.

59 *Ibid.*, 203-09.

of the ruling ever outward...."⁶⁰ With the Reagan presidency, the Christian Right came to power and has since sought to blur the separation of church and state and create America as a Christian born-again nation.

For many conservative Christians, Reagan's Vice-President and successor in the White House, George H.W. Bush, was seen more as an apostate than as an apostle of the Christian right's attempts to consecrate the body politic with the holy water of right-wing causes. Bush and his wife Barbara chafed at the public proclamations of the evangelical ministers, preferring their piety to be of a private and personal variety, indicative of their Episcopalian ways. Attacks by Pat Robertson in 1988 Republican primary as well as the public scandals surrounding televangelists Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggert may have also caused Bush to move away from the religious right.⁶¹

But with the Clinton presidency and continuing with George W. Bush, Christ-talk blossomed in America political parlance. Bush biographer Paul Kengor pointed out just how commonplace Jesus-speak has been since 1993. After discussing Carter's and Reagan's occasional mentioning of Jesus in public speeches, Kengor tells us that Clinton referred to Jesus Christ forty-one times during his eight years in office and George W. Bush fourteen times from 2001-2003.⁶²

Clinton may have tried to capture the religious right with his Jesus-speak, but his checkered past which included questions about drug use and adulterous affairs, topped off by the Monica Lewinsky scandal, left him an outcast in the eyes of many in the Christian community. Yet, the 2000 presidential campaign made it clear that religion was still wagging the tail of the political dog, as the Iowa Republican primary debates mentioned at the beginning of this article makes clear. In the Iowa debates, George W. Bush was the least bashful in bringing Christ into the political arena. When asked, "What political philosopher or thinker do you identify with and why?" Bush responded: "Jesus Christ, because he changed my heart." When pressed in a follow-up question to explain why he chose Christ, Bush replied "When you turn your heart and your life over to Christ, when you accept Christ as the Savior, it changes your heart. It changes your

60 *Ibid.*, 210-18. Find Reagan speech at [www.burtandkurt.com/Reagan prayer breakfast speech.htm](http://www.burtandkurt.com/Reagan%20prayer%20breakfast%20speech.htm)

61 Stephan Mansfield, *The Faith of George W. Bush* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2003), 18-24.

62 Paul Kengor, *God and George W. Bush* (New York, NY: Regan Books, 2004), 182-84.

life.”⁶³ Bush’s Christ-talk was quickly challenged. Maureen Dowd, in a *New York Times* op-ed piece entitled “Playing the Jesus Card,” wrote that Bush’s use of Christ in the debate was blatant political opportunism. Dowd said, “W. is checking Jesus’ numbers and Jesus is polling well in Iowa,” so he brought up Christ’s name, and as a result, Bush “finally scored some debating points.” Dowd concluded by asking whether Bush wanted Christ as his “personal or political savior.” The British were also somewhat taken aback by Bush’s response. Michael Gove in the *Times* noted, “When Bush declared Christ his philosopher, the scorn on this side of the Atlantic could not have been greater if he’d said Homer Simpson.”⁶⁴

Bush’s Jesus-talk as Governor of Texas and as President, places him in a class by himself. Bush also stated, “I feel like God wants me to run for president. I can’t explain it, but I sense my country is going to need me.... I know it won’t be easy on my family, but God wants me to do it.” According to John McCollister, “Not since...Lincoln has a sitting president talked so much about God as has...Bush. No president since...Wilson has adopted the mantle of someone who has been elected by Almighty God to do his will here on earth, as has George W. Bush.” Though he grew up an Episcopalian, Bush adopted his wife’s Methodist faith. Bush credits his new found religiosity to conversations with Billy Graham who planted a seed in his soul. After talks with Graham, Bush said he decided to “commit my heart to Jesus Christ.” In April 2000, as Governor of Texas, Bush proclaimed June 10, 2000 as Jesus Day, “urging Texans to follow Christ’s example by performing good works....”⁶⁵

Also, like Washington, Lincoln, Wilson, and Reagan, Bush believes that God has a special calling for America and that Bush is his special agent. In 2004, Bush told a group of Amish in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, “I trust God speaks through me. Without that, I couldn’t do my job.” Bush said when he prays the petition in the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy will be done,” he silently adds “through me.” Bush also references God in major speeches more than any president in American history. Studies of Bush’s major speeches in his first term indicated that he mentions God on an average of six times; Reagan was closest to this averaging 4.5 times. Carter, by contrast, mentioned God only twice in four major speeches. And what’s different is that

63 Kengor, 63-67.

64 *Ibid.*

65 McCollister, 232-38.

these earlier presidents have spoken as petitioners, seeking God's guidance or blessing. Bush speaks as a prophet, telling us what God told him is America's mission. For example, Bush stated in 2004 "I believe God wants everybody to be free. That's what I believe. And that's one part of my foreign policy. In Afghanistan I believe that the freedom there is a gift from the Almighty."⁶⁶

We can easily understand how Americans today view this nation as Christian from its origins and its presidents as dedicated followers of the Christian faith. That the vast majority America's presidents were spiritual men with a strong faith in God is beyond questioning. Brooke Allen and the secularists are incorrect in seeing America's founding as "godless." But the Christian conservative right-wing is also incorrect in seeing America as a Christian-founded nation. The Founding Fathers believed in God and Providence, but not necessarily a Christian God. They saw religion as vital to the Republic's success, but in a general way. That several recent American presidents, with George W. Bush the most vocal, have changed American ideas relating to the separation of church and state is obvious; they have also revised history, suggesting that they follow in the footsteps of the Founders. Such revision is a disservice to the nation and to an understanding of who Americans are as a people and a nation. Even as the world becomes more intensely interactive, Christianity, as opposed to earlier, more generalized ideas of religious faith, as elaborated in Robert Bellah's "civil religion," has thus become an unseen hand guiding America's words and deeds.

Historically this is a recent transition, but undeniably there are roots that run deeper. Washington's, Lincoln's, McKinley's and Woodrow Wilson's intuitions of America as a special agent of divine Providence, and of themselves as its protected and chosen agents, certainly provided a slippery slope along which a Ronald Reagan or a George W. Bush could slide into battles against "evil empires" and "axes of evil"—with no greater effort, say, than it takes to ignore the great preponderance of the historical evidence, or with an invocation of "so help me, God."

66 *Ibid.*

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