

**Faith and the Presidency:
From George Washington
to George W. Bush**

Gary Scott Smith

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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P R E F A C E

Separation of church and state is one thing. Separation of religion and politics is another thing altogether. Religion and politics flow back and forth in American civil society all the time—always have, always will. How could it be otherwise?

Jean Bethke Elshtain

TODAY A DEBATE rages over the place of religion in American public life. What role did Christianity play in the founding of the United States? Should the government aid this religious tradition or refuse to support it in any way? Does the concept of church-state separation mean that religion must be totally divorced from government at the local, state, or federal level? In the past five years, hundreds of editorials, op-ed pieces, newspaper and magazine articles, television talk shows and news programs, dozens of books, and numerous academic conferences have examined these questions. Controversy has erupted over the inscriptions on coins, Bible reading and prayer in public schools, the Pledge of Allegiance, the display of the Ten Commandments in public buildings, and a host of other issues. George W. Bush's faith-based initiatives and foreign policy have raised concerns about the separation of church and state, the use of religious language, and God's relationship with the United States.

Numerous indicators (recent elections, polls, levels of church attendance and charitable giving, and the numbers and impact of parachurch organizations) suggest that religious faith continues to be very important in the United States. Almost all Americans profess belief in God. Sixty-three percent of them belong to a church, synagogue, or mosque, and about 40 percent of them attend religious services on an average weekend. Only 7 percent of Americans consider themselves atheists or agnostics or have no religious preference. Recent polls also indicate that the majority of Americans want religion to have a greater influence in the nation's life.¹ Many protest that the secularization of the media, public education, and the business world has gone too far and call for a rejuvenation of religious values in the public

square. Meanwhile, America's religious communities are deeply divided over many political and social issues.

Recent years have witnessed a spirited debate between those who argue that the United States' founding and history until the 1960s was infused with Christian principles and directed by godly leaders and those who see its creation and development as guided by more secular ideologies and statesmen.² Many proponents of the first position contend that the United States is obligated to follow biblical norms in its public life. They complain that "today's politicians are more apt to talk about the vague 'faith' aspects of religion rather than about religion as a standard of right public action."³ Others counter that biblical teachings and denominational doctrines are potentially divisive, are irrelevant to the public arena, and should be confined to private life. Policy making should be based on objective, scientific, pragmatic, prudential, "neutral" factors, not religious presuppositions or values. They insist that the intrusion of religious commitments into policy making "is disturbing, if not downright dangerous."⁴

Wilfred McClay argues that the United States' elite culture, especially its media and universities, "is now almost entirely committed to a standard of antiseptically secular discourse." Supreme Court decisions have significantly reduced the opportunity to publicly display "traditional religious symbols and sentiments" and helped to produce a "naked public square." Religion has been "confined to a sort of cultural red light district." People can believe what they want in private, as long as they do not try to use their beliefs as a basis for public action. Others see "secularism's seeming hold over the moment" as "illusory, unpopular, elitist and doomed to fail." They contend that people of faith have vigorously defended religion's "appropriate role as an essential player in public life."⁵ As a result, questions about whether and how government officials can express their religious convictions have become increasingly contentious, as the 2004 presidential election underscored.

The religious views and values of presidents are very important to many Americans today. In a 2004 poll conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 72 percent of respondents said they want the president to have strong religious beliefs.⁶ Although the Constitution prohibits religious tests for holding political office, it cannot prevent Americans from imposing a religious litmus test on candidates. "One day, a truly secular candidate might be able to run for president without suffering at the polls," writes Franklin Foer in the *New Republic*. "But that day won't be soon."⁷

Nevertheless, as former Minnesota Senator Eugene McCarthy once observed, in Washington "only two kinds of religion are tolerated: vague beliefs strongly affirmed and strong beliefs vaguely expressed." "His witticism," argue Kenneth L. Woodward and Martha Brant, "bespoke the genial religiosity of presidents like Eisenhower (vague expression) and Reagan (vague beliefs) . . . The lesson for candidates seems to be: if you want to be president of all the

people, invoke a generic deity everyone can salute.” “When you get down to specifics,” they conclude, “history offers little evidence of direct interplay between faith and presidential leadership.”⁸ Similarly, one religious conservative laments that professing Christians “may still hold office, provided they either aren’t sincere about their faith or they keep it” locked in the closet.⁹ Moreover, it is difficult to delineate precisely how the faith of various presidents affected their actions and policies because many factors play a role.

This study of eleven presidents demonstrates, however, that faith affected how numerous occupants of the Oval Office performed their duties. Their faith influenced their philosophy of governing, relationship with religious constituents, electoral strategies, and approach to public policies. Moreover, it helped shape their convictions and character, as well as their views of the separation of church and state, civil religion, and American chosenness. “Despite our much-vaunted separation of church and state, America has always had a quasi-religious understanding of itself, [as] reflected in the messianism of Puritan founder John Winthrop”; the providentialism of George Washington; the biblically based optimism of Thomas Jefferson; Abraham Lincoln’s emphasis on redemptive suffering; the focus on civic righteousness and biblical morality by Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Jimmy Carter; and the belief of Franklin Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush that Nazism, Communism, or terrorism must be opposed on a global scale because these ideologies embodied evil.¹⁰

Despite the vast evidence that presidents’ faith deeply affected their lives and their administrations, many scholars have ignored this fascinating and fertile subject. They have also disregarded the fact that religion matters enormously to many Americans and that “such concepts as Original Sin, the Atonement, and the Resurrection . . . actually have serious and enduring meanings” to them.¹¹ Secularism, lack of interest in religion, or overreactions to popular portrayals of Washington and Lincoln as pious, devout, orthodox Christians have all contributed to this neglect.

This book explores the “profound, troubled, and inescapable interaction” between religious faith and politics in the United States.¹² It argues that religion has played a major role in the lives and administrations of numerous presidents. As the federal government has grown larger and more powerful and as its policies have had a greater impact, the influence of a president’s faith on his performance of his duties and the role of religion in shaping policies have become even more important. This study analyzes both the personal beliefs and the public policies of presidents. While it examines the specific content of their religious convictions (what they believed about God, Christ, human nature, the Bible, prayer, providence, salvation, life after death, and other topics), it does not try to measure “how religious” they were. It takes their religious beliefs seriously and seeks to assess how these

beliefs affected their presidencies. I have investigated and reported what scholars, friends, associates, and critics have said about the religious beliefs of presidents, but I have especially scrutinized presidents' own words in both their public and private statements.

"Because religion is often tightly interwoven with particular cultures and ethnic groups," William Martin maintains, it is very difficult to "disentangle discrete components and label them correctly as secular or religious, sincere or manipulative, beneficial or dangerous." When individuals "profess or appear to be acting from religious motives," it is tempting to ignore them as ignorant, insincere, or insubstantial or to try to discover their "'real'" motives, which must involve money, power, or fame.¹³ Although presidents have used religious rhetoric to justify economic and political policies, bolster social control, and appeal to prospective voters, their religious beliefs have also helped direct their actions and influence their responses to important events. Religious convictions are not simply the product of social, economic, and political forces. They can furnish ideals and inspire actions. While recognizing that numerous factors and varied motives affected presidents' thinking and behavior, I argue that religious beliefs have been a key ingredient in the mix for many of them.

Numerous presidents have chosen, like former Colorado Senator Gary Hart, "not to place my beliefs in the center of my appeal for support because . . . I believe that one's religious beliefs—though they will and should affect one's outlook on public policy and life—are personal."¹⁴ George Washington and Thomas Jefferson best exemplify this approach. Others, by contrast, frequently discussed how important their faith was to them and argued that politicians must bring their faith into the public arena. Woodrow Wilson, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush are notable examples of this approach.

Another 2004 poll found that Americans were evenly divided about whether a president's faith should guide him in making political decisions. Some protest that presidents have promoted certain policies that reflect the priorities of particular religious communities and complain that they have favored some religious groups over others. Others object that overly pious presidents (like George W. Bush) have tried to use their office to demolish the wall of separation between church and state, impose their values on other Americans, and use federal funds to finance religious goals and programs. Still others want presidents to emphasize widely shared religious values and advance policies that embody these convictions. By providing in-depth analysis of the faith of eleven presidents and exploring how their religious commitments influenced their work, I hope to further inform public debate about the contentious relationship between religion and politics in the United States.

I have tried to reproduce all quoted material as it is in the cited sources. All italics in the quoted material represent emphasis in the original text.

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Introduction

The White House is the pulpit of the nation and the president is its chaplain.

James Reston, cited in Thomas Cronin, "The Textbook Presidency and Political Science," *Congressional Record*, Oct. 5, 1970

The president's duties are "essentially pastoral. . . . He is the shepherd of the sheep, nearly 200 million of them."

Frederic Fox quoted in Charles Henderson Jr., *The Nixon Theology*

Americans expect the president "to play a priestly role and even to bring salvation. On the one hand, they want a person of principle, but they are very skeptical about the political process. They are bound to be disappointed because the state is not the agent or place of redemption. Even when a President is devoutly religious a dualism remains between the city of God and the city of man. Religious conviction can strengthen a President's resolve and integrity and help him deal more effectively with inevitable frustrations and defeats."

Charles P. Henderson Jr., "The Politics of Love: Religion or Justice?" *Nation*, May 8, 1976

Whenever a president speaks openly of his religious faith, citizens want to know how that faith affects his political priorities. And we look for clues. But the lines between religious convictions and public policy are seldom clear, even in retrospect.

Kenneth Woodward, "Gospel on the Potomac," *Newsweek*, Mar. 10, 2003

SPEAKING TO 15,000 people at an ecumenical prayer breakfast during the Republican National Convention in Dallas in August 1984, Ronald Reagan declared, “The truth is, politics and morality are inseparable. And as morality’s foundation is religion, religion and politics are necessarily related. We need religion as a guide. We need it because we are imperfect, and our government needs the church because only those humble enough to admit they’re sinners can bring to democracy the tolerance it requires in order to survive.”¹ Reagan’s remarks prompted a firestorm of protest. Many accused the Republican of violating the “traditional separation of church and state.”² Charles Krauthammer contended in *Time* that Reagan had crossed “the line that in a pluralist society divides civil discourse from demagoguery.” Claire Randall, the general secretary of the National Council of Churches, insisted that Reagan’s position fell “far short of the standard of tolerance for the beliefs of others which must undergird religious freedom in a diverse society.”³ This reaction was due in part to the fact that his words were spoken during a political campaign and that many disagreed with Reagan’s support of political policies favored by the religious right (evangelical and fundamentalist Protestants and conservative Catholics), especially a school prayer amendment, tuition tax credits, a strong military defense, and efforts to reduce welfare payments and government regulations on businesses. Some saw Reagan’s campaign to decrease abortions, pornography, drug usage, and sex outside marriage (actions also favored by the religious right) as either beyond the role of government or interfering with personal freedoms.

Reagan was not the first president to make this argument. George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower, and numerous other presidents also maintained that politics and morality were indivisible and that religion was the principal foundation of morality. Nor was he the first chief executive whose religious rhetoric provoked controversy. Scholars today uniformly praise Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address as one of the greatest American political documents, as a “charter of Christian statesmanship,” and the “most far-reaching” reflection on Providence by “a major figure in American public life.”⁴ However, the *Washington Daily National Intelligencer* predicted the day after Lincoln delivered the address that it was likely to irritate those who advocated strict separation of church and state. And it did. The *New York World*, for example, complained that the president’s theology strongly smacked of “the dark ages” and accused him of “abandoning all pretense of statesmanship” and taking “refuge in piety.”⁵

The objections of many pundits, politicians, and even some religious leaders to Reagan’s and Lincoln’s speeches raise a larger issue: What is the proper relationship between religion and politics? Is it appropriate for a president’s religious convictions to direct him in performing his duties and devising and implementing his policies? Does the concept of the separation of

church and state require presidents to confine their religious values to their private lives and operate from a secular perspective in fulfilling their responsibilities? George W. Bush's frequent testimony to his Christian faith; support for faith-based initiatives; opposition to gay marriage, abortion, and the use of new embryonic stem cells in research; and claims of critics that Bush believes God led him to invade Iraq evoke much debate today. This book examines these questions by exploring the faith of eleven American presidents. It focuses on those chief executives for whom religion was an important issue because of their own beliefs, the issues they confronted, the elections they participated in, and/or the times in which they lived.

Religion and politics have been deeply intertwined throughout American history. Interaction between them, James Wolfe contends, "has been a staple of American life."⁶ From the Pilgrims on, many Americans have considered themselves chosen by God for special blessings and responsibilities. Its leaders have repeatedly asserted that the United States has a divine mission to promote freedom, peace, and justice in the world and serve as a haven for the persecuted and oppressed and a land of opportunity for the ambitious and devout.⁷ Politicians have continually sought to link their policies to the nation's historic ideals, which are largely religiously based. In the oft-quoted words of G. K. Chesterton, the United States has been a "nation with the soul of a church."⁸ All forty-three presidents "have been friendly toward organized religion." Thirty-two have been church members, and all of them attended church at least occasionally and "considered themselves in some sense to be Christians." Every inaugural address, except George Washington's very brief second one, acknowledged God and invoked his blessing on the nation. Presidents have employed religious language and images to express heart-felt convictions, unify and inspire citizens, woo voters, and help legitimate their policies.⁹

There is a long and rich tradition of both scholarly and popular analysis of American presidents. Many of our nation's best and brightest historians, political scientists, and biographers have produced perceptive, provocative assessments of the lives and contributions of our presidents. They have examined their backgrounds, ideological commitments, campaigns, improprieties, and legacies. Few scholars, however, have analyzed the specific nature of presidents' religious convictions or the impact of these beliefs on their thinking and actions. This neglect has persisted despite the fact that during the last twenty-five years other scholars have produced important books assessing the relationship of religion and politics in the United States. These studies have focused primarily on church-state issues; civil religion; the connections between religious beliefs, practice, and affiliation and partisanship and voting behavior; and the rise and impact of the new religious right. Most students of the presidency have paid little attention to the religious convictions of presidents and the relationship of their administrations with

religious constituencies. They have also largely ignored the role religion has played in formulating and implementing their policies or in the elections that sent them to the White House (except for those of 1928, 1960, 1976, 1980, 1984, and 2004). Only a handful of the plethora of books written about the presidency as an institution, comparative studies of chief executives, and biographies of individual presidents have focused on these topics. Specialists in religion and theology have not corrected this deficiency.

Although numerous books explore the presidents' personal piety and use of civil religion rhetoric, few books or articles examine, or even suggest, that their religious convictions influenced their policies and performance as our nation's chief executives. From Parson Weems's *Life of George Washington* in the early nineteenth century until the present, authors have discussed the faith of an individual president or all the presidents. Most of these authors have been committed Christians who portrayed their subjects as virtuous, pious, and theologically astute. A few have been enemies of organized religion who sought to prove that the presidents were not very devout or orthodox. Usually simplistic, superficial (especially ones that discuss all the presidents), and unsophisticated, these popular works have either exaggerated or depreciated the faith of the nation's chief executives, either lionizing or demonizing their subjects.¹⁰ There are only three major scholarly treatments of selected occupants of the White House: Robert Alley's *So Help Me God: Religion and the Presidency, Wilson to Nixon* (1972), Richard G. Hutcheson Jr.'s *God in the White House: How Religion Has Changed the Modern Presidency* (1988), and Richard V. Pierard and Robert D. Linder's *Civil Religion and the Presidency* (1988). There are a few solidly researched, insightful monographs on the religious commitments of the founding fathers and the faith of individual presidents, especially Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, Jimmy Carter, and George W. Bush.¹¹ Scholars have also produced valuable articles on various aspects of religion and the presidency.¹²

In the last two decades, the publication of hundreds of informative, instructive analyses of the nation's religious past has contributed to a growing recognition of the importance of religion in American history. Despite this literature and the significant role religion has played in the lives of many presidents, recent biographers have given very little attention to presidents' faith. Perhaps because of their own ideological perspectives, these authors have largely ignored the religious commitments of their subjects. "Religion," argues Garry Wills, "embarrasses the commentators. It is offbounds" for many journalists and scholars.¹³ Religious perspectives have been treated with "stereotyping, condescension, dismissal, ignorance, [and] neglect." Religion has been "caricatured in history books, left out of TV documentaries on public issues," portrayed "in stock negative images by columnists and editorialists, treated as a curiosity, or welcomed when it is 'our kind,' i.e., 'progressive.'"¹⁴ Most members of the academy and the media, James Wall, a former editor of

Christian Century, contends, have “either personally rejected a religious worldview, or, if they still” retain “any religious belief,” know that it is “not acceptable to admit such a belief in polite society.” The rational, logical, modern worldview prevails. It says, “if you do have religious faith, for God’s sake keep quiet about it.”¹⁵ To many scholars and pundits, the religious views and values of the presidents are either avocations with no more relevance to their public lives than stamp collecting or bird watching or pious cant, spoken to satisfy public expectations, which does not express deep conviction or have major formative influence. Whether or not it was genuine, their faith was a private matter that had little impact on their presidencies.¹⁶ When scholars have analyzed presidents’ religious convictions, most have treated them as derivative, as epiphenomenal, as the result of social, political, or economic factors. For a variety of reasons—high levels of public interest, concerns about culture wars, the debate over how George W. Bush’s faith affects his presidency, the entrance of more individuals with strong religious commitments into academia—historians and political scientists have recently begun to pay more attention to the relationship between religion and the presidency.

Nonetheless, scholarly treatment of Ronald Reagan illustrates my general point. After his death in June 2004, numerous religious leaders, politicians, associates, and family members accentuated the importance of Reagan’s faith.¹⁷ Editorials, television and radio talk shows and news programs, newspaper and magazine articles, and sermons all discussed his faith in God. Speaking for many, his son Ron Jr. declared at Reagan’s funeral that his father was “a deeply, unabashedly religious man.”¹⁸ His wife, Nancy, praised his “strong, unshakable religious beliefs.”¹⁹ As president, Reagan claimed that his relationship to God was vital to him and strongly influenced his perspective on life. He spoke frequently to religious groups, repeatedly discussed spiritual and moral issues in his public addresses, wrote about his personal faith in hundreds of letters, and spent a significant amount of time with Protestant and Catholic religious leaders. Nevertheless, biographers, historians, and political scientists have paid scant attention to Reagan’s religious background, convictions, or rhetoric.²⁰ They have overlooked his considerable knowledge of Scripture, commitment to prayer, and friendships with pastors and priests. While discussing specific issues such as Reagan’s lack of church attendance, interest in the biblical battle of Armageddon, superstitious habits, and mystical experiences and his wife’s fascination with astrology, other journalists and scholars have also largely ignored the nature and importance of his faith. Moreover, much of the analysis of Reagan’s religious commitments has been negative. Wilbur Edel and Haynes Johnson, for example, accuse Reagan of disingenuously constructing his message and rhetoric to appeal to religious conservatives.²¹ Like any politician, Reagan wanted to win elections and was sensitive to the potential impact of his proposals and policies. Nonetheless, during his presidency, he remained remarkably true to his core principles and

values, which were significantly shaped by his religious commitments. Few scholars, however, have examined the nature of Reagan's faith or how it affected his performance and policies as president.

Americans have long been fascinated with the public and private lives of presidents. Their personalities and performance have been intensely scrutinized. Presidents have been thought to embody, represent, and speak for the American people, and religious elements have helped shape how they played this role.²² In a sense, the president has been both the nation's pastor and prophet, called on at times to comfort and assure Americans and at others to challenge and inspire them. In the United States, Ronald Isetti points out, the president not only directs the government "but also symbolizes and speaks for the nation in his roles as king, prophet, and priest."²³ Although the Constitution forbids a religious test for the presidency, most Americans have been interested in the religious convictions of their presidents. They have wanted their chief executives to possess and display a substantial religious faith, especially on important public occasions and in times of crisis. Although not required to say the words, every president has ended his oath of office with "So help me God." Most Americans have wanted their presidents to affirm transcendent principles and promote traditional morality while avoiding a sectarian religious agenda and religious fanaticism. Many have also desired presidents to be moral exemplars, to set high standards for ethics and excellence.²⁴ "The President is expected to personify our betterness in an inspiring way," wrote James David Barber, "to express in what he does and is (not just in what he says) a moral idealism."²⁵ Franklin Roosevelt maintained that the "president sets the moral tone for our nation. He is a mirror in which we see what kind of people we are."²⁶ "When there is a moral issue involved," Harry Truman proclaimed, "the President has to be the moral leader of the country."²⁷ Presidents have affirmed and furthered the American democratic faith. Many have regarded themselves as divinely appointed leaders called to help the United States both to model true religion, individual liberty, and political democracy and to export it to other nations. Fulfilling these diverse expectations has been a great challenge. It has led most presidential candidates to present themselves as "deeply reverent but never sanctimonious," as orthodox Christians who were not narrowly sectarian, and above all as firm believers in religious freedom.²⁸ At the same time, however, many presidents have also been guided, in some cases in large part, by their personal religious commitments in performing their duties. They have often commingled their public and private faiths.

A New Approach to Religion and the Presidency

Even though thousands of volumes have been written about America's presidents, we do not know much about the precise nature of their faith or how

it affected their performance and policies. This book aims to fill this void by providing an in-depth analysis of the religious convictions and practices of eleven presidents who lived in different historical eras and had different denominational backgrounds: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush. The religious affiliation (defined by either membership or church attendance) of this group is three Presbyterians, three Episcopalians, one Dutch Reformed, one Roman Catholic, one Baptist, one Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and one Methodist. These individuals have been selected because either they were the most deeply religious American presidents (Lincoln, Wilson, Carter, Reagan, and Bush), because their perspectives on religion significantly influenced key public policies (Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, Eisenhower, Reagan, and Bush), because their religious faith differed substantially from mainstream Protestantism (Jefferson and Kennedy), and/or because their elections or administrations involved major controversies about religious issues (Jefferson, Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Kennedy, Reagan, and Bush).²⁹ Each chapter examines the religious beliefs, commitments, affiliation, and practices (church attendance, prayer, Bible reading, and personal morality) of one of these presidents, discusses the influences upon and nature of his faith, and assesses how it contributed to his understanding of political ideology and practice. Each chapter also analyzes how a president's religious views and values helped shape the way he formulated and promoted several specific policies. In addition, chapters examine how presidents dealt with religious constituencies, interest groups, and leaders; evaluated religious issues (such as religious liberty, the relationship between church and the state, government support for religion, the proper place of religion in public life, and the connection between religion, public morality, and civic duty); and appraised key public policy matters (such as combating the Great Depression, ensuring civil rights, promoting peace, and resolving international conflicts). Although chapters explore social and cultural factors that influenced these presidents, they focus primarily on the intellectual and moral presuppositions that helped guide their understanding of political and religious issues and their actions while in office.

Scholars have devised several schemes to classify the theological convictions or religious perspectives of the presidents. In *So Help Me God*, Alley divides the presidents into three categories. The first is goal-oriented presidents, most of whom had Congregationalist or Unitarian backgrounds and leaned toward deism. This group, which includes Jefferson and Lincoln, tended to equate religion with morality. The second group, "legalist" presidents, had fairly close ties to more theologically and/or socially conservative Christian bodies (Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, and Quaker): Theodore

Roosevelt, Wilson, and Eisenhower. (Reagan and Bush could be added to this category.) Influenced by Calvinism, they interpreted national endeavors as righteous crusades. A third type, “situational ethics” presidents, grew up in Episcopal churches or elite families, found in tradition a middle ground between rationalism and revealed religion, and were more flexible and pragmatic in their approach to both religion and the presidency (Washington, Franklin Roosevelt, and Kennedy).³⁰

More interested in the ideological and theological components of presidential leadership, political scientist Charles Dunn devised a paradigm that compares liberal and conservative tendencies of belief on twenty-four issues, including the ultimate source of knowledge, moral standards, conception of God and human nature, the basis of salvation, the locus of government power, the role of government, how justice is achieved, economic perspective, and preferred rate and type of change. Dunn uses this paradigm to classify American presidents on ideological and theological continuums from conservative to liberal. Although he argues that some presidents are hard to categorize because their theological and ideological convictions conflicted (he lists Jefferson and Carter as examples), he concludes that “ideological and theological components tend to reinforce each other.”³¹ Those who are conservative in both theology and political ideology have tended to be Republicans (McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, Hoover, Reagan, and George H. W. Bush), and those who are liberal in both categories have usually been Democrats (Jefferson, Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Kennedy). Dunn labels Lincoln as conservative in theology and liberal in political ideology and Eisenhower as liberal in theology and conservative in political ideology.³²

Another way to classify American presidents is to describe the nature or focus of their faith, while recognizing that many of them can be placed in more than one category. The faith of some presidents such as Jefferson and Theodore Roosevelt focused primarily on the cognitive and moral aspects of Christianity. A strong devotional component is evident in the faith of other presidents, most notably Carter and George W. Bush. The faith of these presidents and Wilson strongly shaped their views of the world and their policies as president. The faith of Ronald Reagan was deeply personal, but it powerfully influenced his understanding of the world and his actions as chief executive. Kennedy’s faith was traditional or formal and appeared to have little impact on his thinking or performance as president. The faith of Franklin D. Roosevelt and Eisenhower is enigmatic. Their religious convictions appear to have deeply affected some aspects of their lives and policies but to have had little influence on other facets.

Although these categorizations are helpful, in some ways these labels confuse more than they clarify. All the presidents confronted the issues of how to best deal with religious constituencies and how to effectively relate their religious beliefs to leading the nation, organizing their administrations,

speaking to the public, and devising policies without violating cherished American ideals of religious diversity and the separation of church and state. Despite similarities in how they approached these matters, the presidents' personalities and religious backgrounds, the changing nature of American society, and the particular domestic and foreign problems they faced led to many significant differences. Where appropriate in this book, I discuss common denominational backgrounds and theological commitments and similar styles of making decisions, ways of relating to religious groups, and use of religious rhetoric. Each administration, however, is unique because of the specific political, economic, social, and religious issues it confronted, the political composition of Congress, the nation's economic and social conditions, the relative strength of religious constituencies, the general ideological climate, and different global contexts.

Five Central Themes

In evaluating the faith of these eleven presidents and the role of religion in their administrations, I paid special attention to five themes: the nature of their convictions, the separation of church and state, civil religion, America as a chosen nation, and the issue of character. One major theme this book explores is the ideological convictions or worldview of its subjects. "A worldview is a conceptual scheme" by which individuals "consciously or unconsciously place or fit everything" they believe and by which they "interpret and judge reality."³³ The worldview of many people does not explicitly function as "a systematic conception of life," a philosophy, or a creed. Nevertheless, this "integrative and interpretative framework" provides a blueprint for understanding, explaining, and managing reality and a foundation for everyday thinking and acting.³⁴ Worldviews determine which ideas individuals consider important and color their perceptions of all aspects of life. Worldviews, argues philosopher Phil Washburn, provide answers to the most "fundamental aspects of human experience": human nature, "moral values and actions," "society and one's place in it," "knowledge and understanding," and transcendence.³⁵ They determine what people believe about God, humanity, society, and ethics; stipulate how the world should be; offer a vision for the future; and strongly influence people's actions.³⁶

Although the perspective and positions of their party and their own political ideologies shaped the thinking and actions of most presidents more than their particular religious traditions, their religious convictions played a significant role in certain decisions and policies of all the chief executives examined in this study. "It is difficult to find an instance in which a President's formal religious attachment," Robert Michaelsen wrote in *Christian Century*, "was of decisive importance in determining the outcome of a major

policy decision.” For the most part, the influence of a president’s faith “has been a subtle . . . part of the total fabric” of his personality and character. The role of religion in the life of any president is best seen in “his total outlook on life” and the way he executed his duties. Did he rely “on a power greater than himself? What issues were of pre-eminent importance to him? What did he value?”³⁷ Although varied beliefs, ideals, and life experiences helped shape the worldviews of these presidents, their religious socialization, involvement, and study played a substantial part. Because of their training, interests, or lack of access to relevant sources, scholars have rarely recognized any relationship between the religious backgrounds or commitments of presidents and their particular behaviors, actions, or policies. Direct correlations are difficult to establish, but many presidents’ religious convictions have significantly influenced their philosophy of governing and some specific programs and policies they promoted.

I explored several factors to explain the worldviews of these eleven presidents: their stated beliefs in letters, interviews, and speeches; testimony by those who knew them well; their actions, most notably their participation in religious activities such as church services, prayer, and reading of the Bible and devotional and theological books; and their personal relationships with religious leaders. Cynics argue that neither the church attendance nor the addresses of presidents, especially ones since Hoover who depended on speechwriters, are accurate barometers of their religious convictions. Their attendance at religious services, use of pious language, invocation of God, and discussion of religious themes allegedly do not reflect their genuine convictions but are usually done to please the public and provide a moral gloss for their positions and policies. Nevertheless, examining presidents’ involvement in religious activities and religious beliefs throughout their lives and the amount and nature of their religious rhetoric does provide clues about what they actually believed.

The Separation of Church and State

Since Christianity began, Western societies have struggled with how the church and the state should be related.³⁸ The American colonies rejected the idea of clerical rule and, following the example of Protestant reformers, separated the offices and responsibilities of ministers and magistrates. Nevertheless, some colonies established churches and enforced various religious regulations on all citizens. After the founding of the United States, Americans continued to grapple with the relationship between the church and the state. Neither the Declaration of Independence nor the Constitution affirms specific Christian convictions. Although the First Amendment prohibited Congress from establishing a national church and guaranteed freedom

of worship to individuals, it did not resolve the issue of how organized religion and the government should interact. Because this nation has many churches (denominations) and three levels of government—federal, state, and local—the relationship between institutional religion and the state has been complicated.

The perceived ideal relationship between church and state has varied in different periods of American history, depending on the prevailing religious and ideological climate.³⁹ During the nation's first century, Protestant Christianity was its semiofficial faith, as evident in countless statements by presidents, Supreme Court justices, and Congressmen and in numerous government practices. In the early national years, Americans, including Washington and Jefferson, were strongly influenced by both Enlightenment deism and traditional Protestantism.⁴⁰ During the 1820s and 1830s, the Second Great Awakening stamped the values, ethos, and practices of Protestant evangelicalism deeply into American culture and significantly influenced American politics.⁴¹ Religious groups solicited the aid of the federal government, worked to incorporate Christian values into its operation, and strove to shape its policies.⁴² This pattern continued after the Civil War. Despite the vehement objections of a few secularists, the vast majority of Americans, whether Protestant or Catholic, saw their nation as essentially Christian. In a unanimous 1892 decision, *Church of the Holy Trinity v. United States*, Supreme Court justices declared: "Our laws and institutions necessarily are based upon and embody the teachings of the Redeemer of mankind. . . . [I]n this sense and to this extent our civilization and our institutions are emphatically Christian. . . . [T]his is a Christian nation."⁴³ During the Progressive era, most Protestants and Catholics accentuated the Bible's teaching on justice and urged Christians to advance the Kingdom of God by promoting social reform at home and missions abroad.⁴⁴ Before 1925, few challenged the notion that the United States was a Christian country, protested government aid of religion, or argued that the state and church worked too closely together. Escalating ethnic, religious, and ideological diversity led to the "disestablishment" of Protestantism in the years between 1900 and World War II and the acceptance of three major religious traditions—Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism—as furnishing the foundation for national life. While elite culture became increasingly secular after 1925, the Protestant establishment and its Catholic and Jewish allies continued to defend traditional religious standards of morality and the value of religion.⁴⁵

Since 1947, a series of Supreme Court decisions significantly affected the place of organized religion in the public arena, especially schools, public buildings, and government practices, and produced heated debate about the relationship between church and state. Because of these rulings, even greater religious pluralism, the growing secularization of American society, presidents'

own education and experiences, and the rise of organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union and Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, which demand rigid separation between religious organizations, rituals, and symbols, and public life, presidents have been more careful in their use of religious rhetoric and more evenhanded in their treatment of religious communities. Although the relationship between church and state has traditionally been one of “friendly separation,” Supreme Court decisions in the early 1960s ruled prayer and Bible reading in the public schools unconstitutional, and more recent verdicts have prohibited the display of religious symbols in public places.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, during U.S. history, the concept of church-state separation has not prevented Congress from opening its sessions with prayer, the military from appointing chaplains, or the government from minting coins stating “In God We Trust.” Nor has it inhibited presidents from proclaiming days of prayer and thanksgiving. Moreover, some chief executives held prayer breakfasts, worship services, or hymn sings at the White House. Eisenhower and all his successors regularly participated in presidential prayer breakfasts. Many chief executives have insisted that religious faith is crucial to the well-being of the republic. No president has totally segregated religion and politics.⁴⁷

The debate over what role religious bodies should play in the political arena has also been heated. Religious groups have participated extensively in public policy debates over slavery, civil rights, poverty, abortion, and national defense, often striving to pass legislation as well as to transform individual attitudes, mores, and social institutions. Many religious denominations and parachurch organizations have worked diligently to influence governmental policies in ways that accord with their members’ understanding of Scripture.⁴⁸ Generally speaking, those groups deemed most supportive or most powerful have gained direct access to the nation’s chief executive, while those regarded as less loyal or important have dealt only with White House staff. Although presidents usually tried not to favor specific religious organizations, they inevitably had closer relationships with some than with others. Many religious groups insist that the separation of church and state does not mean that religion must (or should) be divorced from the government. Most Americans have agreed with the Founding Fathers that the nation’s churches should help maintain order, further the common good, and promote essential religious beliefs such as God’s providential direction of the world and reward of virtue and punishment of evil.⁴⁹

American Civil Religion

A third issue that has significantly affected American politics and presidents is the nature, use, and consequences of civil religion. In his seminal

1967 essay, sociologist Robert Bellah argued that the United States had “an elaborate and well-instituted civil religion,” which was “alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from the churches.”⁵⁰ Also known as civic piety, religious nationalism, public religion, the common faith, and theistic humanism, civil religion provides a religious sanction for the political order and a divine justification of and support for civic society and a nation’s practices. This generalized form of faith combines “religious metaphors with nationalistic aspirations.” It is the “state’s use of consensus religious sentiments, concepts, and symbols for its own purposes.” Transcending specific denominations, it “mixes piety with patriotism and traditional religion with national life until it is impossible to distinguish between them.”⁵¹ “As a system of established rituals, symbols, values, norms, allegiances, all of which function in a practical way in the ongoing life of the community, it serves as the social glue which binds a people together and gives them an overarching sense of spiritual unity.”⁵²

While this civil religion incorporates many biblical archetypes—“Exodus, Chosen People, Promised Land, New Jerusalem, Sacrificial Death and Rebirth”—it also includes convictions, sacred events and places, prophets and martyrs, and solemn rituals and symbols that are peculiarly American. Supported and perpetuated by mores and folkways rather than by law, it involves beliefs (but no formal creed), revelatory events (most notably the American Revolution and the Civil War), prophets (especially Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln), sacred places (Washington, D.C., with its shrines to Washington, Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt; Bunker Hill; the Alamo; and Gettysburg), sacred texts (the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, and key inaugural addresses), ceremonies (Memorial Day, Independence Day, and Veterans’ Day celebrations and the pageantry of presidential inaugurals, all of which fuse piety and patriotism), hymns (“God Bless America” and “My Country Tis of Thee”), and rituals (prayers at public events such as inaugurals and the beginnings of sessions of Congress, deferential behavior toward the flag, and national days of prayer).⁵³ From the earliest days of the American republic, this religion, while sharing “much in common with Christianity,” Bellah maintains, was not in “any specific sense Christian”; “never anticlerical or militantly secular, on the contrary, it borrowed selectively from the [Judeo-Christian] religious tradition in such a way that the average American saw no conflict between the two.”⁵⁴ As Conrad Cherry explains, this civil religion asserts that God has chosen America, God is the source of human rights, and sacrifice is required to achieve the nation’s destiny.⁵⁵

By presiding over the nation’s rituals and reaffirming its creeds, presidents have served as the prophets and priests of this civil religion. They have employed civil religion to unite Americans and to frame and win support for specific policies. These national magistrates, whatever their private religious

beliefs, have been guided by America's civil religion in performing their official duties, and their religious commitments have helped shape the civil religion of particular periods.⁵⁶ Regularly invoking God in inaugural addresses and on other solemn occasions, the president has functioned as the nation's "principal prophet, high priest, first preacher, and chief pastor."⁵⁷ American chief executives, argues Michael Novak, "conduct high public liturgies, constantly reinterpret the nation's fundamental documents and traditions, [and] furnish the central terms of public discourse." They venerate the nation's "holy calendar, its sacred cities and monuments and pilgrimages, its consecrated mounds and fields."⁵⁸ From 1776 to the present, increasing religious and cultural pluralism has broadened the basis of civil religion from "evangelical consensus to Protestantism-in-general, to Christianity-in-general, to the Judeo-Christian tradition, and finally to deism-in-general." Throughout American history, however, the nation's religious pluralism has prompted presidents to use generic and sometimes vague religious language and imagery.⁵⁹ All of them have struggled to find "in the midst of a startling diversity of faiths, a common ordering faith on which national life can be based."⁶⁰ In their inaugural addresses and other speeches and proclamations, especially ones declaring national thanksgiving and days of prayer, presidents have portrayed God as a benevolent father who blesses America much more than as celestial judge who holds the nation accountable to his standards.⁶¹ They have also frequently quoted biblical passages and alluded to scriptural narratives, parables, and stories. The Bible has given them "a rich store of rhetorical devices to illustrate and dramatize the points" in their speeches.⁶²

This book examines the ways its eleven subjects conceptualized and used civil religion and, in the case of Washington and Lincoln, became part of the nation's civic faith, in light of scholarly assessment of this concept and its historical effects.

America as God's Chosen Nation

Closely connected with American civil religion has been the widespread conviction that America has a unique calling from God. This theme is evident in the nation's sacred ceremonies, quasi-sacred scriptures, and presidents' inaugural addresses. All nations have seen themselves as chosen people, Russel Nye contends; "the idea of special destiny is as old as nationalism itself." Nevertheless, he argues, "No nation in modern history has been quite so consistently dominated as the United States by the belief that it has a particular mission in the world."⁶³ Strongly identifying with ancient Israel, many Americans have concluded that God chose them to play a principal role in bringing his kingdom on earth. The Puritans insisted that they had a "divinely appointed errand in the wilderness." John Winthrop, the first

governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony; Jonathan Edwards, America's greatest theologian; Timothy Dwight, an early president of Yale; and countless lesser known citizens have trumpeted this theme. As Winthrop put it in his 1630 sermon, "A Model of Christian Charity," "For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us." Edwards expected a "great work of God" to soon begin in America.⁶⁴ His grandson Dwight claimed that the new nation was "by Heaven designed, th' example bright to renovate mankind."⁶⁵ Americans pushed relentlessly westward "under the banner of Manifest Destiny" and endowed their wars with "apocalyptic meaning."⁶⁶

While ministers, theologians, businessmen, educators, reformers, governors, and senators have all maintained that God assigned America a special mission, presidents have also strongly promoted this conviction. They have repeatedly asserted that America must both embody and export democracy, civility, freedom, and morality. Washington contended in his first inaugural address that "the preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government" depended on America's success. Jefferson labeled the American experiment "the last best hope of mankind," and Lincoln called the Union "the last best hope of earth." "Upon the success of our experiment," alleged Theodore Roosevelt, "much depends, not only with regard to our own welfare, but as regards the welfare of mankind."⁶⁷ "Our nation is chosen by God and commissioned by history," declared George W. Bush, "to be a model to the world of justice."⁶⁸ This conviction has helped motivate and vindicate America's actions at home and abroad.⁶⁹ Positively, it has helped inspire the United States to engage in acts of self-sacrifice, generosity, and charity. Negatively, this belief has contributed to imperialism, concepts of racial superiority, cultural insensitivity, and unwarranted interference in the internal affairs of other nations. The idea that God has chosen America to fulfill his purposes has promoted self-righteousness and hubris on the one hand and self-criticism and humility on the other. It has also fueled Americans' sense of identity and purpose.

Presidential Character

Finally, this book examines the character of these eleven presidents. Biblical writers and Greek philosophers stressed that the character of rulers is closely associated with the welfare of their subjects.⁷⁰ The Old Testament is replete with examples of how Israel prospered under kings with godly character and foundered under ones with despicable character. In Plato's *Republic*, character is the most important qualification of the ruling class. The Founding Fathers argued that the success of America's democratic experiment depended on the character of both its leaders and its people. "The destiny of the

republican model of government,” Washington declared in his First Inaugural Address, hinged on Americans practicing a high level of both private and public morality.⁷¹ “To suppose that any form of Government will secure liberty or happiness without any form of virtue in the people,” asserted James Madison in 1788, “is a chimerical idea.”⁷² Although all the subjects of this study appealed to the concepts of character, duty, and honor, these concepts were especially important to Theodore Roosevelt. The American republic, he maintained, rested “on the moral character and educated judgment of the individual.”⁷³

In *The Character Factor: How We Judge America’s Presidents* (2004), James P. Pfiffner contends that most students of American politics agree that character is as significant to presidents as intelligence, leadership abilities, or public speaking skills. He maintains that a chief executive’s character strongly influences his actions. Moreover, we judge our presidents both by how well they perform their duties and by how effectively they serve as role models. We expect our chief executives to promote the public good and to be moral exemplars. Pfiffner asserts that the traits of trustworthiness, integrity, loyalty, sincerity, candor, self-restraint, compassion, consistency, and prudence are especially valuable in evaluating presidents’ performance and character.⁷⁴ This study examines the character of these eleven presidents, especially the role that religious training, biblical study, and spiritual piety played in shaping their characters. It also analyzes how their characters influenced their work as president, the importance they attributed to this concept, and their character flaws and alleged moral indiscretions.⁷⁵ As William James put it, an individual’s philosophy and actions express his “intimate character.”⁷⁶

A Final Observation

Several factors make the study of faith and the presidency very challenging. As Martin Fausold notes, scholars who assess American presidents often reach different conclusions “depending on their sources of information, their times, and their values.”⁷⁷ Presidential biographer Joseph Ellis argues that “the past is a foreign country with its own distinctive mores and language.” Therefore, all efforts to evaluate chief executives in light of present knowledge and ideals “invariably compromise the integrity of the historical context” that made them who they were.⁷⁸ Moreover, it is difficult to determine whether presidents’ speeches, proclamations, and interviews represent their true convictions or simply express what they think the public wants to hear and what will advance their personal popularity and policies. Because Franklin Roosevelt and his successors have all employed speechwriters, it has become even tougher to determine the actual convictions of more recent presidents. Examining presidents’ personal correspondence is therefore essential, but

most of them wrote with posterity in mind at least part of the time. Finally, many presidents considered their faith to be a private matter and were reticent to discuss it even with intimate friends. Although these issues are significant, scholars have begun to more closely scrutinize the faith of presidents and other politicians.

Although numerous factors influenced the thinking and actions of these eleven presidents, their religious convictions affected the rhetoric they used, the policies they pursued, and the ways they promoted them. These chief executives drew effectively on elements of their own personal faith and the nation's civil religion to gain support for many of their policies. The impact of presidents' religious commitments on their actions is constrained by a variety of other factors, including the goals of their supporters, the federal bureaucracy, Congress, and public expectations. However, the religious beliefs of all of the presidents examined in this book, except Kennedy, played a significant part in shaping key aspects of their administrations. Understanding "the dynamic relationship that exists between a president's religious faith and the public policies he pursues and the political actions he takes," writes Jeff Walz, requires much more work.⁷⁹ This book aims to illuminate important dimensions of this understudied subject that is often shrouded in myth and misconception. By carefully examining the religious convictions of eleven key presidents and how these convictions affected these presidents' work, I seek to help both scholars and ordinary Americans better understand and participate more fruitfully in the frequently heated, always interesting, and vitally important dialogue about the relationship between religion, politics, and public policy in contemporary America.

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CHAPTER ONE

George Washington and Providential Agency

The disadvantageous circumstances . . . under which the war was undertaken can never be forgotten. The singular interpositions of Providence in our feeble condition were such, as could scarcely escape the attention of the most unobserving; while the unparalleled perseverance of the armies of the United States . . . was little short of a standing miracle. . . .

Farewell Orders to the Armies of the United States, Nov. 2, 1783

When I contemplate the interpositions of Providence, as it was visibly manifested, in guiding us through the Revolution, in preparing us for the reception of a general government, and in conciliating the good will of the People of America toward one another after it's [sic] adoption, I feel myself . . . almost overwhelmed with a sense of divine munificence.

To the . . . Common Council of the City of Philadelphia, April 1789

No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the invisible hand which conducts the affairs of men, more than the people of the United States. 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.

First Inaugural Address, April 30, 1789

ON JULY 9, 1755, the “most catastrophic” day in Anglo-American history, Colonel George Washington was traveling with General Edward Braddock’s army toward Fort Duquesne when they were ambushed by Indians and

French hiding in the woods. In the ensuing massacre, hundreds of British soldiers, including Braddock, were killed or seriously wounded. Perched on their horses, officers were perfect targets. One after another, they were hit. Bullets ripped through Washington's coat, knocked his hat off, and killed two of the horses he rode. Before dying, Braddock ordered Washington to ride forty miles through the pitch-dark night to summon reinforcements. The remainder of the British army eventually staggered back to Philadelphia.¹ Rumors circulated that Washington had been killed. On July 18, he wrote his brother from Fort Cumberland, "As I have heard since my arriv'l at this place, a circumstantial acct. of my death and dying Speech, I take this early oppertunity [*sic*] of contradicting both, and of assuring you that I now exist and appear in the land of the living by the miraculous care of Providence, that protected me beyond all human expectation."² The colonel wrote to Robert Jackson two weeks later, "See the wondrous works of Providence! The uncertainty of Human things!"³ Preaching to a volunteer company of militia, Presbyterian minister Samuel Davies declared, "As a remarkable instance" of military ardor, "I . . . point . . . to . . . that heroic youth, Colonel Washington, whom I cannot but hope Providence has hitherto preserved in so signal a manner for some important service to his country."⁴ And so began the stories about Washington's faith in God and divine selection to lead the American people.

Although the religious convictions and practices of many presidents have been ignored, Washington's have been closely scrutinized and endlessly debated. Some authors have portrayed the Virginian as the epitome of piety, and others have depicted him as the patron saint of skepticism. The fact that Washington said almost nothing publicly or privately about the precise nature of his beliefs has evoked competing claims that he was a devout Christian, a Unitarian, a "warm deist," and a "theistic rationalist." One point, however, is not debatable: Washington strongly believed that Providence played a major role in creating and sustaining the United States. In public pronouncements as commander in chief and president, he repeatedly thanked God for directing and protecting Americans in their struggle to obtain independence and create a successful republic. Arguably, no president has stressed the role of Providence in the nation's history more than Washington.

The Virginian planter was a giant even among the remarkable generation of America's founders. At six feet two inches, he physically towered over almost all of them. His powerful physique, athletic prowess, quick reflexes, stately bearing, personal magnetism, and incredible stamina impressed his contemporaries. More significantly, because of his exceptional character and extraordinary contributions, he has been deemed indispensable to the success of the patriot cause and the new republic. Risking his reputation, wealth, and life, he commanded an undermanned and poorly supplied army to an improbable

victory over the world's leading economic and military power. He presided over the convention that produced the United States' venerable Constitution. For nearly a quarter of a century (1775–99), Washington was the most important person in America.⁵ Indeed, some call these years the “Age of Washington.”⁶ As president, he kept the new nation from crashing on the shoals of anarchy, monarchy, or revolution. His impressive appearance, stately demeanor, sterling character, monumental contributions to American independence, and leadership as president combined to produce an aura that gave added weight to his public statements on all subjects, including religion.⁷

To a certain extent during his life and even more after his death, Washington was elevated to sainthood. An American civil religion arose that revered him as God's instrument and a larger-than-life mythological hero.⁸ In life and death, he has been seen as “the deliverer of America,” the savior of his people, the American Moses, and even a demigod.⁹ In the oft-quoted words of future Supreme Court Chief Justice John Marshall, as spoken by Henry Lee, Washington was “First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen. . . . Pious, just, humane, temperate, and sincere . . . his example was as edifying . . . as were the effects of his lasting example.”¹⁰ Both the mythmakers and the debunkers have so distorted the historical Washington that it is very difficult, if not impossible, for his biographers to separate the man from “the myths and images surrounding him.”¹¹

Because the Virginian wrote little about his religious convictions, analyzing their influence on his presidential policies is more challenging than it is for most other chief executives examined in this book. One place where they are clearly evident is in his pivotal role in helping establish religious liberty and toleration as key principles of the new nation.

The Faith of George Washington

Among American presidents, only Abraham Lincoln's religious convictions and practices have been so painstakingly examined as those of Washington. Of all the varied aspects of the Virginian's life, few have caused as much contention as his religious beliefs and habits. Moreover, no other chief executive has had his religious life so distorted by folklore. As Paul Boller Jr. puts it, Washington's religious outlook has been “thoroughly clouded by myth, legend, misunderstanding, and misrepresentation.”¹² Many of the hundreds of books, articles, sermons, and essays published about his faith since 1800 have advanced ideological agendas and told pious fables about Washington that have little basis in historical fact. Other authors have been so preoccupied with refuting these myths that they have paid scant attention to his actual religious beliefs and practices.¹³ The fact that Washington, unlike some other founders, never expounded his convictions in a systematic way makes

unearthing and analyzing his religious perspective very challenging. Although he frequently used the “language of faith,” it was not that “of any particular, readily identifiable faith.”¹⁴

Scores of books and articles have extolled the first president as “a Christian hero and statesman,” “the founder of a Christian republic,” “Christ’s faithful soldier and servant,” “the great high priest of the nation,” and a “man of abiding faith.”¹⁵ Celebrating Washington’s piety, they feature stories of the general arranging Communion services before battles and inspiring parishioners in small country churches where he worshiped with religious zeal. Mason Locke “Parson” Weems and other enthusiasts insisted that he regularly attended church services, said grace before all meals, actively participated in church work, filled his public and private statements with religious exhortations, and prayed almost constantly wherever he was—“in his library, in his army tent, at the homes of friends and strangers, and in the woods, thickets, groves and bushes.” If Washington were truly as devout as these effusive testimonies portray him, Boller contends, he would have “had time for little else but the ritual of piety.” Boller demonstrates that most of these claims, which are based on hearsay and legends, are implausible.¹⁶

The most famous fable about Washington’s piety pictures him kneeling in prayer in the snow at Valley Forge during the winter of 1777–78, when the American cause seemed desperate. According to the story as first told by Weems, Washington had established his headquarters in the home of Isaac Potts, a Quaker pacifist. “One day, when the prospects, morale, and physical state of the Continental Army were at their lowest,” Potts saw Washington on his knees in prayer in the woods.¹⁷ Eventually the general arose and returned to his headquarters “with a countenance of angelic serenity.”¹⁸ Although this story is “utterly without foundation in fact,” it has been memorialized in poetry, inscribed on a plaque at the base of Washington’s statue in New York City, commemorated on a postage stamp, and etched in stained glass at both the Washington Memorial Chapel at Valley Forge and a private chapel in Washington, D.C., used by members of Congress.¹⁹

To these authors, “abundant evidence” demonstrates Washington “was a true Christian in every sense that the word implies.”²⁰ They point to the piety of his parents, who instructed him in the Anglican catechism, faithfully took him to church, and read him Matthew Hale’s *Contemplations*. Moreover, Washington received much of his early education in Fredericksburg at a school run by the rector of St. George’s Church. Arguing that he served diligently as a vestryman, contributed liberally to churches, attended church consistently, had private devotions regularly, followed biblical moral principles devotedly, and relied repeatedly on God’s providence, they conclude that his “every word and act showed clearly” that he was a Christian.²¹ Numerous evangelical authors have recently contended that Washington (and many other founders) was an orthodox Christian.²²

Rejecting these perspectives, many scholars maintain that Washington's faith was not very deep or meaningful. They argue that his "interest in religion" was "perfunctory," that he "lacked a personal religious faith," and that his practice of Christianity "was limited and superficial because he himself was not a Christian." His refusal to take Communion after the Revolutionary War indicated he "was no longer a faithful Episcopalian." The Virginian was ambivalent toward orthodox Christianity and organized religion in general, attended church sporadically, and participated "little in the life of the local church."²³ David Holmes asserts that "with only a few exceptions . . . Washington's speeches, orders, official letters, and other public communications on religion . . . seem clearly to display the outlook of a Deist." He regularly substituted deist terms such as "the Supreme Being," "the Grand Architect," and the "Great Ruler of Events" for "God," "Father," "Lord," and "Savior."²⁴ In his public addresses, Washington seldom referred to Jesus or even to Christianity specifically. In itself, this is not remarkable. As other chapters will demonstrate, in an effort to be as inclusive as possible, presidents frequently alluded to God, often using generic titles, but rarely to Christ. What is more significant is that in his private correspondence Washington mentions Christ or Christianity only a handful of times.

Although Washington stressed that God directed the development of the world, Holmes avers, he considered him "somewhat distant and impersonal."²⁵ Pierard and Linder argue that Washington's faith centered around a "genuine but generalized faith in God as the Creator and Ruler of the universe." Like other "Unitarian-deists," he regarded God as above the world, "not communicating directly with humanity," but somehow providentially guiding affairs on earth.²⁶ In the late eighteenth century, some of them "were privately skeptical, others belligerently argumentative, and still others simply philosophically curious about theology . . . but at least in America, they believed in God and generally in life after death." They revered Jesus as a great moral teacher and role model but did not consider him divine. Although they valued the Bible as a source for virtuous conduct, they denied its miracles and accepted only its teachings that accorded with reason. Peter Henriques labels Washington a "warm deist" because he rejected the belief of most eighteenth-century deists that God was a watchmaker who did not intervene in human affairs and held instead that he regularly shaped and molded history.²⁷ Others use the term "enlightened deist" to describe Washington and some of the other founders.²⁸

Perhaps a better label for what Washington and other like-minded founders believed is theistic rationalism. This "hybrid belief system" mixes "elements of natural religion, Christianity, and rationalism," with rationalism serving "as the predominant element." Although maintaining that these three components were generally in harmony, they used reason to resolve any conflict among them. To theistic rationalists, God was active in human affairs,

and prayer therefore was effectual. They contended that religion's primary role was to promote morality, which was indispensable to society. Theistic rationalists asserted that "revelation was designed to complement reason" and had a higher view of the person of Jesus than deists.²⁹ Because most deists denied God's active involvement in the world, the deity of Christ, and the Bible as God's revelation, the concept of theistic rationalism seems preferable to that of "Unitarian-deist," "warm deist," and "enlightened deist" in describing Washington and other founders such as John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, James Wilson, and Thomas Jefferson.³⁰

In 1795, Washington wrote to James Anderson that "in politics, as in religion[,] my tenets are few and simple."³¹ A very private individual, the first president seldom confided his deepest thoughts or emotions on any subject in his diary or in letters to friends. Presbyterian pastor Samuel Miller asserted that he displayed an "unusual, but uniform, and apparently deliberate, reticence on the subject of personal religion."³² Moreover, as Garry Wills explains, "By inclination and principle, he shied away from demonstrations of piety."³³ These factors make it very difficult to determine what Washington actually believed.

Washington's religious views were shaped by parents, his half-brother Lawrence, the teachings and practices of the Episcopal Church, the ideas of the Enlightenment, the tenets of Freemasonry, his wife, Martha, and his military and political experiences. The future president was raised to revere God, respect biblical teaching, and participate in the rituals of the Church of England. Like his role model, Lawrence, Washington "practiced the Anglican faith without bigotry, pious ostentation, or notable fervor." Like many other upper-class Virginians, he was baptized, married, and buried according to Anglican (or Episcopal, as the denomination was called after 1783) rites.³⁴ In the years before the Revolution, Washington read such prominent Enlightenment authors as Alexander Pope, Voltaire, and Thomas Paine. He became a Freemason in his early twenties and remained one throughout his life. Members of this fraternal order expressed belief in God but disliked traditional Christian forms. In 1759, Washington married Martha Dandridge Custis, a wealthy widow with two young children, with whom he enjoyed a satisfying marriage for the next forty years. Martha was a devout Episcopalian who faithfully adhered to the eighteenth-century concept of duty to God and family. She attended church every Sunday and spent an hour each day reading the Bible and sermons and praying.³⁵ She regularly received Communion and discussed the consolation her faith had afforded her through her many trials and her hope of a "blessed immortality."³⁶

Judged by the standards of the second half of the eighteenth century, Washington was fairly religious. His support for chaplains and religious services, pattern of church attendance, attitude toward worship and the sacraments, and views of the Bible, prayer, God, Christ, salvation, human nature,

and life after death all help substantiate this claim. During his military service prior to the Revolution, Washington read services for his troops on Sundays when no chaplains were available. He observed all the fast days the Church of England prescribed for army members.³⁷ As a commander in chief of the Continental Army, he recruited chaplains for his troops, required his soldiers to attend Sunday worship, and held thanksgiving services after victories.

While residing at Mount Vernon, he periodically attended two churches—Pohick Church in Fairfax County and Christ Church in Alexandria. The lack of rectors to conduct services, the distance he had to travel, and occasionally poor weather limited his attendance.³⁸ On many occasions, however, Washington skipped church to visit with relatives and friends, go foxhunting, or spend a quiet morning alone at Mount Vernon. Prior to the Revolution, he attended church about once a month, but he worshiped more frequently during times of political crisis.³⁹ After the war ended, Washington resumed attending either Pohick or Christ Church about once a month.⁴⁰ During his presidency, however, perhaps because of the burden of his office or because he wanted to set a positive example, Washington attended church almost every Sunday. Although he usually worshiped in Episcopal churches, he sometimes attended Congregational, Lutheran, Dutch Reformed, German Reformed, and Roman Catholic services (and occasionally contributed to their building funds).⁴¹ While New York was the nation's capital, the president worshiped primarily at St. Paul's Chapel of Trinity Parish. When the capital was moved to Philadelphia, he most often attended Christ Episcopal Church.

Eleanor Parke “Nelly” Custis, Martha Washington's granddaughter, claimed that the general worshiped with “reverent respect,” and William White, the bishop of Pennsylvania and senior rector of three Episcopal churches in Philadelphia during the 1790s, insisted he was “always serious and attentive” in church.⁴² Nevertheless, Washington did not participate in two vital Episcopal rites. Like many other Episcopalian founders, he was never confirmed. In this rite, individuals publicly professed their faith in Christ. However, only bishops had the power to confirm, and there were no American bishops until the mid-1780s, making confirmation both extremely difficult and very rare.⁴³ More significantly, he apparently did not take Holy Communion. During the eighteenth century, most Episcopal churches celebrated this sacrament four times a year. Only a small percentage of churchgoers stayed for Communion following the regular service, except at Easter. Although some claimed that Washington did receive the Lord's Supper after the Revolutionary War, Custis and White testified that he did not. Custis reported that she and the general always left after the regular service, while Martha stayed. White admitted in 1835 that “General Washington never received the communion, in the churches of which I am parochial minister.”⁴⁴ Moreover, James Abercrombie, the rector who oversaw Christ Church, was so upset that the president and

others left the service before Communion that he preached a sermon protesting the “unhappy tendency of . . . those in elevated stations who invariably turned their back upon the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.” Considering this “a very just reproof” aimed especially at him and concluding that he was setting a bad example, Washington never again worshiped at Christ Church when Communion was celebrated.⁴⁵ Three factors may have deterred Washington from taking Communion. He may not have felt worthy to do so, he may not have believed in the Episcopal view of what the sacrament symbolized, or he may have been reluctant to publicly declare faith in Jesus Christ. His refusal to take Communion has led some historians to conclude that to him religion was principally a social obligation, not a heartfelt conviction.

Although some claim that Washington avidly read and “supremely prized” the Bible, the evidence suggests that he did not. Unlike most other presidents examined in this study, Washington rarely quoted or alluded to Scripture in his addresses.⁴⁶ Moreover, he said very little specifically about the Bible. In his circular letter to state governors in June 1783, Washington asserted that “the pure and benign light of Revelation” had “had a meliorating influence on mankind and increased the blessings of Society.” The general applauded a proposal in late May 1783 to give Bibles to his soldiers but noted that most of them had been discharged and it was too late.⁴⁷ His name headed a list of subscribers when Scottish Presbyterian John Brown’s “Self-Interpreting Bible” was published in New York in 1792, but no Bible is included in the list of books at Mount Vernon compiled in 1783. The 1799 inventory of Washington’s estate lists three Bibles, but one is in Latin and the other two appeared to be gifts.⁴⁸ The only definitive reference in Washington’s voluminous correspondence to his reading the Bible is in a letter to Charles Thomson in 1795. Washington wrote that he had read the “first part” of Thomson’s translation of the Septuagint and the New Testament. Although it is unlikely that Washington “diligently searched the Holy Volume,”⁴⁹ his fairly frequent citation of biblical passages in his letters to friends and acquaintances indicates that he was familiar with many scriptural themes and verses.⁵⁰

Washington professed belief in the power of prayer. After his first inaugural, he attended a prayer service at St. Paul’s. He frequently asked religious bodies to pray for him, especially in his work as president, thanked groups for praying for him, and told individuals he was praying for them.⁵¹ He thanked Methodist bishops in May 1789 for their promise to present prayers “at the Throne of Grace for me” and pledged to pray for them as well.⁵² “Let us unite our fervent prayer to the great ruler of the Universe,” Washington wrote to the residents of Richmond in August 1793, that Americans might “continue in the uninterrupted enjoyment” of the blessings of peace.⁵³ “I shall not cease to supplicate the Divine Author of Life and felicity,” he told the Philadelphia clergy in 1797, “that your Labours for the good of Mankind may be crowned with success.”⁵⁴

Washington firmly believed that God controlled human events. In both his public and private writings, he repeatedly discussed how God providentially helped the United States win its independence against incredible odds, create a unified country out of diverse and competing interests, establish a remarkable constitution, and avoid war with European powers that still had territorial ambitions in North America. Because God created and actively ruled the universe, Washington insisted, people must revere, worship, and obey him. Although members of his staff wrote most of Washington's public statements, including his military orders, he oversaw the process and approved them, and therefore they expressed what he wanted to convey.⁵⁵ Furthermore, Washington routinely used similar language in private letters he wrote. On the other hand, Washington's constant use of religious rhetoric in his orders, addresses, and official letters should not be overemphasized because during the late nineteenth century, state legislatures, town councils, and other civic bodies regularly employed similar phrases.

Throughout his life, Washington appealed to "an all-powerful Providence" to protect and guide him and the nation, especially in times of crisis.⁵⁶ Throughout the War for Independence, he asked for and acknowledged God's providential guidance and assistance hundreds of times.⁵⁷ He told Reverend William Gordon in 1776 that no one had "a more perfect Reliance on the alwise, and powerful dispensations of the Supreme Being than I have nor thinks his aid more necessary."⁵⁸ "The hand of Providence has been so conspicuous" in the war, the general asserted in 1778, that anyone who did not thank God and "acknowledge his obligations" to him was "worse than an infidel that lacks faith, and more than wicked."⁵⁹ After the war ended, Washington declared, "I attribute all glory to that Supreme Being," who had caused the several forces that contributed to America's triumph to harmonize perfectly together.⁶⁰ No people "had more reason to acknowledge a divine interposition in their affairs than those of the United States," he wrote in 1792.⁶¹

Washington also rejoiced that God was infinitely wise, just, and benevolent. His faith in an "All Wise Creator" who "orders the Affairs of Men" helped him deal with personal and national problems.⁶² Washington saw God's gracious hand in General John Burgoyne's surrender at Saratoga in 1778, the United States' alliance with France, the arrival of the French fleet, the rescue of West Point "from Arnold[']s villainous perfidy," and the victory at Yorktown.⁶³ The decrees of Providence, Washington told a friend, were "always just and wise."⁶⁴ Because their cause was just, the general contended, Americans had "every reason to hope the divine Providence" would enable them to win their independence from Britain.⁶⁵ The planter asserted that God was "beneficent" [*sic*] and the "supreme Dispenser of every Good."⁶⁶ Using a phrase that utilitarians would later popularize, Washington declared that God's ultimate goal was to provide "the greatest degree of happiness to the

greatest number of his people.”⁶⁷ He repeatedly argued that the course of events justified his belief in “the blessings of a benign Providence.”⁶⁸

Although God directed all events, Washington insisted, his plans were ultimately inscrutable. Because God was wise, good, and just, people must trust him, even when their finite minds could not fully understand his purposes.⁶⁹ That the United States was able against tremendous odds to defeat Britain, establish a stable government, and frame such a promising constitution convinced Washington that God was working for good in the world. That his poorly trained, clothed, fed, and equipped army could defeat the world’s premier military seemed nothing short of miraculous.⁷⁰ Reflecting on these developments, he wrote to a friend in August 1788, “I can never trace the concatenation of causes, which led to these events, without acknowledging the mystery and admiring the goodness of Providence.” Because God’s decrees were always for the best, Americans must accept them without protest.⁷¹ “I will not lament or repine at any act of Providence,” he added.⁷²

Washington’s confidence that God determined the course of events helped inspire his prodigious efforts and keep him humble. He firmly believed that God, not fate or random chance, governed the universe and that God used humans to accomplish his purposes. Washington’s conviction that God was perfect helped make him more conscious of his own flaws and failures and prompted him to usually downplay his achievements when showered with effusive tributes. His conviction that he was simply an “instrument of Providence” typically led him to attribute America’s successes to God, not himself. “To the Great ruler of events, not to any exertions of mine,” the president declared in 1795, “is to be ascribed the favourable terminations of our late contest for liberty.”⁷³ Although God was sovereign, Washington maintained, he worked through people. If they wanted to experience “the smiles of Providence,” Americans must put forth “Vigorous Exertions.”⁷⁴ “Providence has done much for us,” the general told a Maryland congressman in 1782, soon after the United States and Britain had agreed to a preliminary peace treaty, “but we must do something for ourselves, if we expect to go triumphantly through with it.”⁷⁵ Moreover, his confidence in divine Providence helped fuel his courage, resoluteness, and calm in the face of adversity and keep him from discouragement and despair when he suffered defeat.

Although Washington repeatedly stressed God’s providence, he said very little about Christianity or Christ in public or private writings. As John G. West Jr. puts it, the “evidence on the subject” of what Washington believed about these matters “is partial, contradictory, and in the end, unsatisfactory.”⁷⁶ His general orders on July 9, 1776, declared his hope “that every officer and man, will endeavour so to live . . . as becomes a Christian Soldier.”⁷⁷ Washington’s order of May 2, 1778, states, “To the distinguished Character of Patriot, it should be our highest glory to add the more distinguished

Character of Christian.”⁷⁸ In his 1783 circular letter to the governors, he asked God to give all Americans qualities that characterized “the Divine Author of our blessed Religion,” a clear reference to Jesus. Although some have used this phrase to argue that Washington believed Christ was divine, Boller points out that he did not make any similar references to Christ in any of his public addresses or private letters. Moreover, unlike most deists and Unitarians, he never asserted that Jesus was a great ethical teacher.⁷⁹

Washington did refer to Christianity in a few of his private letters. After Major General Israel Putnam’s wife died, the Virginian urged him to “bear the misfortune with that fortitude and complacency of mind, that becomes a Man and a Christian.”⁸⁰ On several occasions, Washington applauded efforts to “civilize and christianize the Savages of the Wilderness.”⁸¹ In his many letters to religious bodies, he usually spoke of religion in general terms, mentioning Christianity only three times. Boller argues that given the Christian commitment of some of Washington’s speechwriters, such scant use of Christian terminology demonstrates his reserve on the subject.⁸²

While convinced that his countrymen were more virtuous than the residents of the Old World, Washington, like most other founders, placed little faith in human goodness. Like other Whig-Republicans, he insisted that all people were “actuated by selfish interests.”⁸³ Without reading John Calvin or Thomas Hobbes, he concluded that individuals and nations “were driven by interest not ideals.”⁸⁴ “We must take human nature as we find it,” he declared. His experiences in the Revolutionary War taught Washington that although patriotism could “push Men to Action . . . , to bear much,” and to tolerate difficulties, it would not endure unless it was assisted by self-interest.⁸⁵ On other occasions, the planter expressed even greater pessimism about human nature. He complained to John Jay in 1786 that virtue had “in a great degree, taken its departure from us.” “We have probably had too good an opinion of human nature in forming our confederation,” he wrote about the same time.⁸⁶ The word of God proved “that the best Institutions may be abused by human depravity . . . and . . . may even, in some instances be made subservient to the vilest of purposes.” For reasons unknown to mortal man, Washington wrote, God had allowed “the restless and malignant passions of man, the ambitious and sordid views of those who direct them, to keep the affairs of this world in a continual state of disquietude.” Thus the “prospects of peace” and the “promised millenium” [*sic*] were “at an awful distance from our day.” In his Farewell Address, Washington insisted that people were motivated by a “love of power, and [a] proneness to abuse it.”⁸⁷

Whether Washington believed in life after death has also been the subject of considerable debate. As with many other issues, the Virginian never systematically discussed the topic, so his perspective must be gleaned from his correspondence. Washington typically took a stoic attitude toward death and seemed to be skeptical about seeing loved ones after death. While urging the

bereaved to seek consolation in religion, he never assured them that they would spend eternity with God or be reunited with their family members in heaven.⁸⁸ He viewed death—of others and himself—with resignation, fortitude, and calmness, and as a part of the divine order. People must submit to “the will of the Creator whether it be to prolong, or to shorten the number of our days.”⁸⁹ His letters contain no “Christian images of judgment, redemption through the sacrifice of Christ, and eternal life for the faithful.”⁹⁰ On the other hand, Washington rejected the concept of annihilation and did believe in a type of life after death. He referred to going to “the world of Spirits,” “the land of Spirits,” and “a happier clime.”⁹¹ Strikingly, however, these references to immortality are vaguer and more impersonal than those of John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and even Thomas Paine.⁹²

After his last surviving brother died in 1799, Washington told a friend that when “the giver of life” summoned him to follow, “I shall endeavor to obey it with a good grace.”⁹³ The general strove to deal with the deaths of relatives and friends by following the eighteenth-century ideal: submitting to God’s authority and displaying little grief in public. Privately, however, he mourned deeply when those close to him died.⁹⁴ Approaching the subject philosophically, he urged the grieving to accept God’s decrees “with as little repining, as the sensibilities of our natures” permitted and provided little emotional comfort.⁹⁵

For much of his adult life, Washington was an actor playing various roles: “the classical republican general, the patriot king, [and] the father of his country.” He planned to face his own death with “good grace” in order to maintain his sterling reputation.⁹⁶ Throughout his long military career, Washington “displayed a stoic’s contempt for death . . . that awed his contemporaries,” and he often put his life at risk (especially during the French and Indian War) by venturing onto the battlefield.⁹⁷ His final struggle with what he once called “the grim King” tested his fortitude and resolve one last time.⁹⁸ Making his rounds at Mount Vernon on December 12, 1799, he was stricken with a virulent infection that claimed his life two days later. While on his deathbed, he did not pray, request God’s forgiveness, express fear of divine judgment or hope of an afterlife, or call for an Episcopal rector. According to his personal secretary Tobias Lear and attending physicians, Washington, after uttering “Tis well,” died peacefully and was buried following Episcopal and Masonic funeral services.⁹⁹

Lear wrote that he hoped to be reunited with Washington in heaven, but he resisted putting such words in the planter’s mouth.¹⁰⁰ Others, most notably Parson Weems, did not. In his fabricated account, Washington asked everyone to leave his room so he could pray alone, and his last words were “‘*Father of mercies, take me to thyself.*’”¹⁰¹ While rejecting Weems’s version, other nineteenth-century biographers portrayed Washington as emulating Socrates: accepting the inevitable, the general fearlessly prepared to die.¹⁰²

Many of his contemporaries emphasized Washington's composure and stoicism as he lay dying.¹⁰³ Every major newspaper published his doctors' account of his last moments, and eulogists embellished it. Dying in a rational, self-controlled, dignified manner, the general evinced no pain. Peter Henriques argues that Washington lived and died as if he were more interested in attaining secular than spiritual immortality. In consoling others who lost loved ones and in contemplating his own death, he often stressed the importance of being revered in life, lamented in death, and "remembered with honor in history."¹⁰⁴

Washington also never clearly expressed his views on the Christian concept of salvation. He apparently thought that conduct, more than belief, made individuals acceptable to God. He told a friend that he constantly strove to walk "a straight line" and endeavored to properly discharge his "duties to his Maker and fellow-men."¹⁰⁵ No person "who is profligate in his morals," Washington maintained, "can possibly be a true Christian."¹⁰⁶

Although Washington did not publicly profess Christian faith, and his views of life after death and salvation did not accord with traditional doctrines, many clergy and early biographers considered him an orthodox believer. When the president's second term ended in March 1797, twenty-four pastors from the Philadelphia area proclaimed that "we . . . acknowledge the countenance you have uniformly given to his holy religion."¹⁰⁷ Many of his first biographers—such as John Marshall, Jared Sparks, and novelist Washington Irving—argued that Washington was a faithful Christian.¹⁰⁸ In Marshall's words, while Washington made no "ostentatious professions of religion, he was a sincere believer in the Christian faith, and a truly devout man."¹⁰⁹

On the other hand, several individuals either urged Washington to affirm his faith in Christianity publicly or expressed regret that he had not. Shortly after the Virginian became president, Congregationalist Samuel Langdon sent Washington a sermon praising his character and contributions. They had spent time together during the Revolutionary War when Langdon was president of Harvard and the general was commanding troops in Boston. Langdon rejoiced that in his public addresses Washington had frequently acknowledged "the supreme Lord of heaven & earth for the great things he hath done for us." He challenged the president, however, to openly declare that he was "a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ" who sought "the honors of that kingdom which he has prepared for his faithful Servants."¹¹⁰ Characteristically, Washington replied that anyone who could "look on the events of the American Revolution without feeling the warmest gratitude towards the great Author of the Universe whose divine interposition was so frequently manifested in our behalf" "must be bad indeed," but he said nothing about Christ to either Langdon or the American people.¹¹¹ Shortly after Washington died, Benjamin Tallmadge, who had served as his chief of intelligence during the Revolutionary War, lamented

that the deceased president had never explicitly professed his “faith in, and dependence on the finished Atonement of our glorious Redeemer.”¹¹²

When the subject was being publicly debated in the 1830s, William White admitted that he could not recall “any fact which would prove” that Washington believed “in the Christian revelation” except that he constantly attended church.¹¹³ Another Episcopal bishop, James Madison, asserted that Washington paid little attention to the creeds of various denominations and stressed that he regularly worshiped “according to the received forms of the Episcopal Church in which he was brought up.”¹¹⁴ Boller concludes that if belonging to a Christian church, fairly regularly attending services, believing that God directed human affairs, and emphasizing the social benefits of religion is enough to be a Christian, then Washington was one. If, on the other hand, to be a Christian, one must publicly affirm the divinity and resurrection of Christ and his atonement for humanity’s sin and participate in the Lord’s Supper, then Washington cannot be considered a Christian.¹¹⁵

Washington and Character

What made Washington the most remarkable man of an extraordinary generation? He was not an intellectual giant like Franklin, Adams, Jefferson, or Madison. Compared with most other founders, he was not well educated (he attended school for only about five years), and, unlike many of them, he disliked abstract philosophical discussions.¹¹⁶ Some of his contemporaries criticized his lack of education. John Adams insisted, for example, “That Washington . . . was too illiterate, unlearned, unread for his station and reputation is . . . past dispute.”¹¹⁷ Despite this negative assessment, Washington was intelligent, well informed, and astute, but he was neither a polished writer nor a spellbinding speaker. Moreover, he was not particularly warm or affectionate, said little in public meetings, and lacked the charisma of many of his successors. Defeating the British with his ragtag army was an impressive feat, but he certainly was not a traditional military hero. He won no spectacular victories during the Revolutionary War. Although he is admired as an outstanding president, few of his policies were stupendous successes.

While praising his military and political record, many scholars contend that Washington’s genius lies principally in his character. The only other American president who has been so highly extolled for his exemplary character is Lincoln. Since Washington, all presidents have been ultimately measured “not by the size of their electoral victories,” not by the success of their legislative programs, “but by their moral character.”¹¹⁸ His character helped sustain his troops throughout the travails of the Revolutionary War, convince delegates to the Constitutional Convention to assign significant

powers to the presidency, secure the ratification of the Constitution, and enable the new republic to survive in a hostile world.¹¹⁹

Washington's moral character, especially his refusal to yield to temptation, set him apart from others. He took the standards of his age very seriously and diligently strove to be virtuous. To many, the crowning achievement of Washington's character was his simultaneous resignation in 1783 as the commander in chief of the American army and his retirement from the world of politics. Throughout the Western world, his unprecedented relinquishing of power was widely heralded. Unlike other victorious generals, he did not expect a political or financial reward for his military exploits.¹²⁰ Washington's character, Jefferson argued, probably prevented the American Revolution from subverting the liberty it sought to establish.¹²¹ The Virginian had a sterling reputation for integrity and honor, dedication to duty and his country, and remaining above the political fray.¹²²

The most important sources in shaping Washington's highly lauded character were *Seneca's Morals*; Joseph Addison's 1713 play, *Cato*; the *Rules of Civility*; various handbooks on civility, courtesy, and politeness he read as an adult; and Christianity. Like many other founders, Washington was fascinated with the Romans. He read *Seneca's Morals* as a teenager and practiced many of its precepts throughout his life. He saw productions of *Cato* many times, frequently quoted lines from it, and sought to emulate its liberal, virtuous classical hero. As a youth, Washington copied all 110 of *The Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation*, formulated by French Jesuits in 1595.¹²³ His Christian nurture, understanding of Scripture, participation in worship, and respect for biblical morality also helped form and sustain his character.

Eulogists and early biographers imputed many virtues to Washington. They praised his wisdom, judgment, astounding courage on the battlefield, and dignified authority. Congress elected him the first chief executive, they insisted, principally because its members trusted his moral character. Portraits and assessments of Washington celebrated his military zeal and political passion on the one hand and his "self-restraint and civil moderation" on the other. Blending Stoic and Christian traditions, eulogists extolled Washington's "rational, calculated, and systematic" perseverance in the midst of setbacks. Many admirers considered Washington's self-control the "keystone of his character."¹²⁴ He could master events because he had mastered himself. Despite being surrounded by fear, despair, indecisiveness, treason, and the threat of mutiny, he remained confident and steadfast. Eulogists also heralded his self-sacrifice, devotion to the common good, compassion, generosity, and benevolence.¹²⁵ American literary great Washington Irving praised the Virginian's prudence, sagacity, "immovable justice," unflinching courage, unflagging patience, truthfulness, and magnanimity.¹²⁶ No one else in history, argued naval official James Paulding, equaled "the virtues he exhibited."

America's first Catholic bishop, John Carroll, praised Washington's "pure and enlightened" morality.¹²⁷

To many Americans, the most important facet of the planter's character was his piety. During the late eighteenth century, most Americans revered God, highly valued biblical teachings and morality, and wanted their president to be a pious man.¹²⁸ Edwin Gaustad points out that even though Washington's religious views were similar to those of Jefferson, the public reaction to their convictions differed sharply. Unlike Jefferson, Washington was never censured as a "howling atheist" or condemned as an enemy of institutional religion. Americans continually pressed Jefferson, as well as Adams and Franklin, for more details about their religious principles, but not Washington. The fact that the first president believed in a God who watched over and protected America seemed to be enough for most citizens.¹²⁹

Often projecting their values onto him, many ministers in their funeral sermons and other public statements transformed the president's somewhat vague beliefs into Christian orthodoxy.¹³⁰ They repeatedly affirmed that Washington "was not ashamed" of his faith and acknowledged and adored "a GREATER SAVIOR whom Infidels and deists" slighted and despised.¹³¹ The Virginian strove to follow Christian moral standards and attributed his accomplishments to God's power. An Episcopal rector described Washington's faith as very well balanced, "rational and consistent," and "sincere and ardent."¹³² Yale College president Timothy Dwight argued that if the general were not actually a Christian, he acted "more like one than any man of the same description, whose life had been hitherto recorded."¹³³

As president, Washington strove to establish public confidence in the new government and to demonstrate that political leaders could act virtuously. He believed his character was much more important to the success of the republic than his policies, and he spent much of his adult life "creating and maintaining a public image of integrity and public virtue."¹³⁴ In August 1788, the planter wrote to his trusted confidant Alexander Hamilton, "I hope I shall always possess firmness and virtue enough to maintain (what I consider the most enviable of all titles) the character of *an honest man*."¹³⁵ His character helped hold the other founders together in the midst of tremendous trials and reassured them that they could construct a workable republic. His example of "self-sacrifice, discipline, moral rectitude, and virtue" helped elevate the status of the presidency.¹³⁶

Both as commander in chief of the Continental Army and president, Washington worked to form "an independent, national American character." Throughout the War for Independence, he expected both his officers and soldiers to act morally and "display the character of republicans" appropriate to "Christian Soldier[s]" who were defending their country's "dearest Rights and Liberties."¹³⁷ Speaking to the nation's governors in 1783, Washington argued that Americans could "establish or ruin their national Character

forever.” As John Winthrop had done in his 1630 sermon “A Model of Christian Charity,” Washington reminded his countrymen that “the eyes of the whole World” were “turned upon them.” Guided by the complementary principles of revelation and reason, Americans must fulfill their civic duties because they were “Actors on a most conspicuous Theatre . . . peculiarly designated by Providence for the display of human greatness and felicity.”¹³⁸

In 1783, Washington urged Americans to build their new nation on four pillars: a permanent union of the states, lasting peace, public justice, and the proper dispositions of its citizens. In underscoring this fourth prop, the general exhorted his countrymen to “forget their local prejudices and policies,” “to make those mutual concessions which are requisite to the general prosperity,” and to be willing “to sacrifice their individual advantages to the interest of the Community.” “I now make it my earnest prayer,” Washington concluded, “that God . . . incline the hearts of Citizens” to obey the government, to practice “brotherly affection and love for one another . . . to do Justice, to love mercy,” and to exercise “Charity, humility and pacific temper of mind.”¹³⁹ In 1789, Washington exchanged his “peaceful abode for an Ocean of difficulties” in large part because he believed that as president he could further delineate and develop the national character.¹⁴⁰ To succeed, the American republic required good laws and moral citizens, both of which the first chief executive aimed to help produce. By defining, personifying, and promoting what he deemed the principal “habits and dispositions of this national character,” Washington strove to found “a new order of the ages.”¹⁴¹ He urged the nation’s elected officials to provide a positive example and devise laws that promoted private virtue, public justice, social accord, and human happiness.¹⁴² In his first inaugural address, the president asserted that “the foundation of our national policy” must rest upon “the pure and immutable principles of private morality.” God had established “eternal rules of order and right” that must be followed to preserve the “sacred fire of liberty.” “The destiny of the Republican model of Government” depended on Americans practicing a high level of both private and public morality.¹⁴³

Despite his reputation for exemplary character, Washington’s personal ethics, sexual behavior, vanity, and ownership of slaves have been criticized. He engaged in three practices many Christians of his era detested: swearing, drinking, and gambling. When he was frustrated, the Virginian frequently used insulting or vulgar language. He “drank heavily by today’s standards” (as his requisitions as both commander in chief and president reveal) but not by the standards of his time.¹⁴⁴ As president, Washington spent 7 percent of his \$25,000 salary on wine and liquor to entertain guests.¹⁴⁵ The general enjoyed gambling, especially while playing cards.¹⁴⁶

More significantly, Washington promoted several governmental policies that enlarged his own wealth. He gave himself the best government western land bounties assigned to soldiers who fought in the French and Indian War.

He urged the federal government to build a canal connecting the Potomac to Ohio, where he owned nearly 60,000 acres, which would have greatly increased the value of his property. Washington received no pay during his eight years as commander in chief of the Continental Army, but he insisted that all his expenses be paid. His supposedly selfless act further enhanced his reputation, but members of Congress considered some of his expenditures exorbitant.¹⁴⁷

In an era when womanizing was generally not considered a matter of public concern, Washington struggled with sexual passions, but there is no creditable evidence that he was ever unfaithful to his wife.¹⁴⁸ In September 1758, about four months before he married Martha Custis, the colonel wrote a letter to Sally Fairfax, the wife of George William Fairfax, one of Washington's in-laws who owned a plantation near Mount Vernon, which seemed to discreetly express his affection. Washington was very attracted to his witty, bright, and charming neighbor, but Fairfax pretended not to comprehend his fondness for her. Recognizing that his feelings would not be reciprocated, Washington married the affluent and affable Custis in January 1759, and thereafter the two families were amicable neighbors. No evidence indicates that George Fairfax ever had any inkling that Washington was in love with his wife, and the men remained good friends.¹⁴⁹ In 1798, Washington wrote Fairfax, then a widow, in England that the happiest moments of his life had been spent in her company.¹⁵⁰ Although "Fairfax always retained a special place in his heart," almost all scholars conclude that their friendship never involved sexual intimacy.¹⁵¹ Recognizing that appearances mattered tremendously, Washington carefully constructed "his public persona to deny his very real passions."¹⁵²

There is also some debate over whether Washington fathered a child by a mulatto household slave named Venus Ford, who belonged to his brother John Augustine Washington. The Washington family accorded both her son West, born in either 1784 or 1785, and Venus's parents preferential treatment, suggesting that the future president or someone else in his family was West's father. One Ford family oral tradition has Venus declaring that "the old general" fathered her child. No scientific proof has established Washington's paternity, and if he were indeed sterile, as some scholars conclude, then he could not have been West's father, although this would not prove he never had sexual relations with her.¹⁵³

To a few critics in the 1790s and many today, Washington's biggest character flaw was owning slaves. Prominent English abolitionist Edward Rushton denounced the president in 1796 for holding "hundreds of his fellow beings in a state of abject bondage." "[Y]ou who conquered under the banners of freedom—you who are now the first magistrate of a free people are . . . a slave holder. . . . Shame! Shame! . . . Ages to come will read with Astonishment that the man who was foremost to wrench the rights of America from the tyrannical

grasp of Britain was among the last to relinquish his own oppressive hold of poor unoffending negroes.”¹⁵⁴ Agreeing with this assessment, many historians have faulted Washington for owning slaves and refusing to publicly condemn the institution. Why, one asks, did he never use “his enormous prestige and public veneration” to openly deplore a system that he expressed distaste for and apprehension about in his private letters and hoped would “either wither naturally or be abolished by legislative action”?¹⁵⁵ Many regard his silence about the most important moral issue of his era as reprehensible.¹⁵⁶

Before the Revolution, Washington shared the perspective of other Virginia planters and seemed to have no qualms about owning slaves. Like his father, many other relatives, and many other wealthy Southerners, he was not morally troubled by owning slaves.¹⁵⁷ Washington initially resisted efforts to allow free blacks to fight in the Continental Army, but the British offer of freedom to slaves who enlisted in their army, coupled with the continual need for more troops, changed American policy. The general came to admire the courage and skill of black soldiers, which undoubtedly influenced his attitude toward slavery.¹⁵⁸

His Revolutionary War colleague, the Marquis de Lafayette, urged him twice during the 1780s to join him in emancipation schemes. He suggested that they free some of their slaves and make them tenant farmers on Washington’s western lands to inspire other slaveholders to follow their example. The Frenchman also proposed freeing slaves and sending them to a French Guiana farm to show what they could accomplish.¹⁵⁹ Because of Washington’s lack of interest, neither plan came to fruition. Privately, he called liberating slaves an exercise of “humanity,” but publicly he refused to support either gradual or immediate abolition, arguing the latter would produce “much inconvenience and mischief.”¹⁶⁰ Nevertheless, after the war, Washington was deeply troubled by the institution. In 1786, he asserted that no one “wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a plan adopted for the abolition of it.”¹⁶¹

Scholars concur that Washington, partly because of self-interest, provided adequate food, clothing, and shelter and competent medical care for his slaves at Mount Vernon. Tobias Lear, Washington’s personal secretary and an avowed abolitionist, admitted that the planter’s slaves were clothed and fed as well as paid laborers.¹⁶² Washington expected his slaves to work hard from daybreak until dusk, and unremitting labor, close supervision, and coercion characterized Mount Vernon.¹⁶³ While stereotyping blacks as ignorant, dim-witted, malingering, irresponsible, and deceitful, Washington admitted that they had little incentive to work hard. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he did not separate family members by sale. By his death in 1799, Washington and his wife owned 316 slaves, almost 50 percent more than they did in 1783. Although his hatred of slavery grew, Washington continued to let his economic interests trump his moral principles.¹⁶⁴

While still privately lamenting the evils of slavery, Washington never condemned slavery publicly during his presidency, even in his farewell address to the nation or his last address to Congress.¹⁶⁵ Doing so, he feared, would discredit him with Southerners and fracture the Union. When Quakers and the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery petitioned Congress in 1790 to end the foreign slave trade immediately, some Southern states threatened to secede if Congress did. Washington denounced the campaign as “an ill-judged piece of business” and expressed pleasure at its defeat.¹⁶⁶ As president, he signed the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, which allowed Southerners to cross state lines to retrieve runaway slaves.¹⁶⁷

Critics fault Washington for not leading a crusade to end slavery during the 1790s. His defenders counter that the United States was very fragile. During the Constitutional Convention, Northerners were not willing to “sink their ship” by confronting the Southern states about slavery. Although some Northern states abolished slavery in the 1780s, none of them introduced an amendment condemning slavery at their conventions to ratify the Constitution. Among Washington’s peers, only Franklin publicly deplored slavery in the 1780s. By the 1790s, hostility toward the antislavery activities of Quakers and Methodists had increased in the South. Even in the North, only a small minority opposed slavery. To accomplish the rest of their agenda, Washington and other founders sacrificed the abolition on slavery on the altar of national unity. The first president was not willing to risk his vital role in holding the infant nation together by supporting a controversial and, from his perspective, “quixotic attempt to challenge the South’s peculiar institution.” Moreover, like many of his peers, he feared the potentially disruptive behaviors of the poor of any color. Regarding social stability and the sanctity of private property as key bulwarks of the new republic, he rejected immediate abolition but, like many other Americans, thought that slavery would die a natural death, especially after the slave trade ended (presumably in 1808).¹⁶⁸

In his will, Washington freed all 123 of the slaves he personally owned, the only founder who did so. He provided funds to help them buy property and gain an education, and he also attempted, but failed, to raise enough money to free the slaves Martha controlled as a result of her first marriage.¹⁶⁹ Undoubtedly speaking for many abolitionists, Richard Allen, pastor of a black congregation in Philadelphia, applauded Washington’s action. He “let the oppressed go free, he undid every burden—he provided lands and comfortable accomodations [*sic*] for them” so that they could “rejoice in the day of their deliverance.”¹⁷⁰ Henry Wiencek lauds Washington for providing for his former slaves’ education in his will and insisting on their right to live in America. “Of all the great Virginia patriots, only Washington ultimately had the moral courage and the farsightedness to free his slaves.” Nevertheless, it was a “tragedy for the nation” that Washington did not free his slaves while

he was president and set a precedent that the chief executive could not hold slaves.¹⁷¹

Washington and American Civil Religion

As president, Washington was the first major spokesperson and practitioner of American civil religion, and after his death he became a principal figure in its development. In his first inaugural address, the president thanked God for his past guidance and sought his favor for the nation's future. He offered his "fervent supplication to that Almighty Being who rules over the universe, who presides in the council of nations, and whose providential aids can supply every human defect, that His benediction may consecrate to the liberties and happiness of the people of the United States." "In tendering this homage to the Great Author of every public and private good," he continued, "I assure myself that it expresses your sentiments not less than my own. . . . No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the Invisible Hand which conducts the affairs of men more than those of the United States." Every step in establishing the republic demonstrated God's "providential agency." The president asked that "his divine blessing" would be "equally conspicuous in the enlarged views, the temperate consultations, and the wise measures on which the success of this Government must depend."¹⁷²

Throughout his presidency, Washington continued to link "piety and patriotism, God and country, and divine benevolence with the well-being of the nation" in his public pronouncements.¹⁷³ In his annual message to Congress in 1794, he asserted, "Let us unite . . . in imploring the supreme Ruler of nations" to protect the United States.¹⁷⁴ Moving from priestly to prophetic civil religion, the president urged Americans to confess their corporate sins in order to procure God's aid. Washington began the custom of setting aside special days for national thanksgiving. In proclaiming the last Thursday of November 1789 such a day, he exhorted all citizens to humbly offer "prayers and supplications to the great Lord and Ruler of Nations, and beseech him to pardon our national and other transgressions."¹⁷⁵

Washington also helped shape America's civic faith by repeatedly emphasizing that religion provided an essential foundation for "public morality, republican institutions, and national happiness."¹⁷⁶ He frequently asserted that religion helped promote virtue, order, and social stability and praised the efforts of churches to make people "sober, honest, and good Citizens, and the obedient subjects of a lawful government."¹⁷⁷ In his farewell address, the nation's civil pastor called religion and morality "indispensable supports" of "political prosperity" and human happiness. Despite the positive influence of "refined education," "reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle. It is

substantially true that, virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government.” Therefore, he urged all Americans “to respect and to cherish them.”¹⁷⁸

Catherine Albanese explains that the “creed, code and cultus (system of worship)” of American civil religion were already set by the time Washington delivered his first inaugural address.¹⁷⁹ The creed asserted that God had chosen the United States to incarnate and promote republican government throughout the world. The code demanded that all Americans, especially their political leaders, act virtuously to help accomplish this mission. The cultus of this civic faith created national saints and shrines, sacred objects, ritual practices, and patriotic holy days to reinforce belief in the creed and code.

Not only did Washington help mold and popularize the nation’s civil religion but also he became a significant part of its cultus. Because of the disagreements and dissension of the Revolutionary era, Americans needed a collective faith and symbols to express their shared commitments and strengthen their unity. Having no established church, the new nation required “a religious ground of being, a transcendent locus,” a civic faith that transcended political and religious differences, to direct its public life.¹⁸⁰ Because of his colossal contributions to American independence and his exalted reputation, Washington provided a unifying center and symbol for the new nation. Given the nation’s history, it was fitting that its “collective symbol” was “a man—a farmer, a soldier, and, at least metaphorically, a father.”¹⁸¹

To many Americans, Washington was a titan who embodied the best of classical antiquity.¹⁸² He represented “the ideals of character and consciousness” patriots understood as expressing the most excellent way of life. Almost overnight, Washington became a “blessed object,” “a sacramental center” who pointed to and personified the spiritual power of the fledgling country and exemplified its moral values.¹⁸³ Even before he died, people treasured locks of his hair, named their babies for him, and circulated stories about his miraculous feats. After the British surrendered at Yorktown in 1781, Washington was saluted as a demigod and the nation’s savior.¹⁸⁴ Worship services, community bonfires, songs, addresses, and cannon fire commemorated his exploits. Orators lavished effusive praise on him, and his birthday was elaborately celebrated. A typical example of these panegyrics was Ezra Stiles’s 1783 election sermon: “O Washington! . . . How have I often adored and blessed thy God for creating and forming thee the great ornament of human kind!”¹⁸⁵

Contemporaries frequently compared the general to both biblical and Roman heroes. Like Moses, he liberated his people from bondage; like Joshua, he led them into the Promised Land.¹⁸⁶ They hailed the Virginian as “god-like,” “our savior and guide,” “immortal,” and “next unto the trinity.”¹⁸⁷ A few even dared to compare Washington with Jesus. Washington “was destined by Heaven,” declared a Baptist minister, “to be the instrumental Saviour of his

country.”¹⁸⁸ A Georgian jurist predicted that future generations would remember Mount Vernon as fondly as Mount Calvary.¹⁸⁹ Other admirers stressed that like the Roman general Cincinnatus, Washington had left his farm to fight for his country and after achieving victory relinquished power and returned home. Washington’s journey to New York in April 1789 to be inaugurated as the nation’s first president resembled the victory procession of a Greek emperor. In Philadelphia and New York, large crowds paid him homage by erecting arches and singing lyrics to Handel’s “See the Conquering Hero Come.”¹⁹⁰ Such deification led physician Benjamin Rush to protest that “we ascribe all the attributes of the Deity to the name of General Washington. . . . God would cease to be who HE is if he did not” punish Americans for their blasphemy.¹⁹¹

After his death on December 14, 1799, Washington continued to help hold the nation together. Pastors and politicians in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, as well as in London, Paris, and Amsterdam, delivered stirring eulogies. Washington’s eulogists were a diverse group: ministers, lawyers, and politicians; Northerners and Southerners; Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Baptists, Quakers, deists, and Masonic grandmasters; Federalists and Republicans. Their encomiums, however, were remarkably similar.¹⁹² James Smylie argues that American clergymen clothed “Washington in republican prestige” and “cast over him a religious, historical, and moral aura” that has been “associated with him and the office ever since.”¹⁹³ Appealing to the biblical archetypes of Moses and David, they pictured him “as a model republican prophet and king.”¹⁹⁴ They made the general an ideal type, “a standard of republican leadership” by which his successors could be judged.¹⁹⁵ Funeral sermons and addresses depicted the Southern planter as both God’s instrument and “a servant of the people.”¹⁹⁶

The Moses analogy was especially important in giving Washington an exalted place in the nation’s civil religion.¹⁹⁷ Throughout the war, the general’s tactics were sometimes compared with those of Moses. Ministers typically viewed the Continental Army’s retreats “not as defeats but as acts of deliverance.”¹⁹⁸ After the war, some ministers and editors declared that “God [had] raised up a Washington just as He earlier” had “raised up Moses.”¹⁹⁹ Scores of eulogies, especially those by New England clergy, compared the first president with Israel’s lawgiver. As a Massachusetts minister put it, God pitied “the abject and servile condition of our American Israel [so] he gave us a second Moses” to free us “from the bondage and tyranny of haughty Britain.”²⁰⁰ Ministers stressed the parallels between the lives and deeds of the two deliverers, noting that both were trained in the wilderness and reluctantly answered God’s summons to serve their people.²⁰¹ Confronting the major powers of their day, neither hero initially had much hope of victory. Both had to defeat their people’s oppressor and quell the protests of their domestic detractors.²⁰²

Moreover, like Moses, Washington was depicted as a great lawgiver, an outstanding civil leader, and a virtuous man. By leading Americans through the wilderness of the Articles of Confederation, presiding at the Constitutional Convention, and serving as the first president, Washington had shaped thirteen independent states into one unified nation.²⁰³ Like the Jewish prophet, Washington excelled as a civil chief and a military commander.²⁰⁴ Having served so effectively in both capacities, the two heroes left their people with wise counsel in their farewell addresses.²⁰⁵ Both deliverers devotedly loved their people and served them zealously and faithfully.²⁰⁶ Both men had leadership thrust upon them, fought against tremendous odds to achieve a glorious goal, displayed great courage, and trusted God.²⁰⁷

New Englanders with Federalist political commitments most fully developed the American Moses concept. To them, Washington's life and death helped verify that Americans were still God's chosen people who must faithfully follow his laws and serve as an example of true religion and liberty for the world.²⁰⁸ Biographies written before the Civil War uniformly portrayed Washington as "a demigod who descended to earth (his character already fully developed and flawless even in childhood), freed his people from oppression, steered their government for a few years, and then returned to heaven."²⁰⁹ In nineteenth-century textbooks, Washington more closely resembled Jesus Christ than any other person.²¹⁰ Throughout the century, Americans often reasserted these themes to reassure themselves that God reigned over and directed their nation.

Washington's Philosophy of Government

Three ideologies especially influenced Washington's political thought: American political theory, Christianity, and Freemasonry. Washington read many American political essays and treatises, discussed political issues with numerous contemporaries, and received much counsel from James Madison and Alexander Hamilton.²¹¹ He insisted that God ruled the universe and established laws to direct private and public life. The Virginian argued that government should promote justice and virtue and that by inculcating morality, religion played a crucial role in ensuring order and stability. Washington enjoyed the pageantry of the Freemasonry and its symbolic and ceremonial support for the ideas and goals he espoused.²¹²

Rejecting relativism, Washington asserted that people were responsible to transcendent standards. Washington contended that the United States would be successful only if its people adhered to biblical principles. "It is to be hoped, that if our cause is just, as I do most religiously believe it to be," he wrote his brother John in May 1776, "the same Providence which has in many Instances appear'd for us, will still go on to afford its aid."²¹³ America's triumph over

Britain, he wrote in 1782, was “due to the *Grand Architect* of the Universe,” who refused to allow “his Superstructures” or “justice to be subjected to the princes of this World, or to the rod of oppression.”²¹⁴ On several occasions, he warned his fellow countrymen that God would stop showering his blessings upon them if they acted unjustly or selfishly.²¹⁵ The United States, he declared in 1783, could achieve happiness only if its citizens imitated Christ and practiced justice, loved mercy, and exuded humility and charity.²¹⁶ Any nation that disregarded “the eternal rules of order and right, which Heaven itself has ordained,” he proclaimed in his first inaugural address, could not expect God’s favor. He maintained that the same transcendent norms should direct both individual conduct and government practices. “The foundations of our national policy,” he promised in 1789, “will be laid in the pure and immutable principles of private morality.”²¹⁷ Only a government that formulated and enforced “wise, just, and constitutional laws,” promoted peace, and protected its citizens could be assured of God’s approval.²¹⁸

Like many other founders, Washington insisted that religion had a central role to play in producing the virtuous citizens necessary to a republic’s success. Providence, he averred, had “connected the permanent felicity of a Nation with its virtue.”²¹⁹ The Virginian maintained that “general prevalence of piety, philanthropy, honesty, industry and oeconomy [*sic*]” were necessary to advance America’s happiness.²²⁰ Religion and morality, he asserted, “are the essential pillars of Civil society.”²²¹ As both commander in chief and president, Washington contended that virtuous conduct was essential to the nation’s success.²²² Considering religion to be indispensable to the discipline, morale, and proper behavior of his troops, Washington provided chaplains, required his soldiers to attend Sunday services, and tried to set a good example. He also ordered his men to obey the special days of “Fasting, Humiliation, and Prayer” prescribed by the Continental Congress. “By their unfeigned and pious observance of their religious duties,” the troops could “incline the Lord and Giver of Victory, to prosper our arms.”²²³ When Congress called for days of thanksgiving, Washington directed chaplains to hold services to “express our grateful acknowledgement to God for the manifold blessings he has granted us.”²²⁴ Moreover, after the American victory at Saratoga in 1777, the conclusion of an alliance with France in 1778, and the British surrender at Yorktown, Washington ordered chaplains to hold thanksgiving services without any directive from Congress.²²⁵ The general repeatedly reminded his troops that they had little hope of God’s blessing if they insulted him by their impiety, profanity, and folly.²²⁶

Like almost all the founders, Washington contended that both reason and revelation furnished moral precepts that should direct private and public life. Evangelicals like John Witherspoon, Patrick Henry, Samuel Adams, and John Jay and theistic rationalists like John Adams, James Madison, and Thomas Jefferson all concurred that “reason and revelation spoke with one voice”

about morality.²²⁷ Similarly, Washington appealed to the authority of “Reason, religion, and Philosophy” and “Prudence, Policy, and a true Christian Spirit.”²²⁸ God had so designed the universe, he argued, that there was “an indissoluble union between virtue and happiness; between duty and advantage; between the genuine maxim of an honest and magnanimous policy, and the solid rewards of public prosperity and felicity.”²²⁹

“We now have a National character to establish,” Washington declared in 1783, “and it is of the utmost importance to stamp favorable impressions upon it.”²³⁰ Contemplating the future expansion of the United States, the Virginian rejoiced that new areas would someday sing “the praises of the Most High.” The whole continent would eventually provide “glorious displays of Divine Munificence.”²³¹ As president, he strove to enhance the new nation’s reputation by paying its Revolutionary War debts, putting its finances on a sound foundation, protecting American trade, maintaining domestic tranquility, and avoiding foreign entanglements and war. In his foreign policy, Washington pursued both America’s interest and international justice. In his farewell address, he urged his countrymen to “observe good faith and justice toward all nations.” “Religion and morality enjoin this conduct, and can it be that good policy does not equally enjoin it?” The president sought to promote harmony and positive exchanges with all nations, which “policy, humanity and interest” all recommended.²³²

Washington and Religious Liberty

Washington used his enormous prestige and influence as both commander in chief and president to promote freedom of worship and religious tolerance and to cultivate positive relations among America’s various religious bodies. By his words and actions—along with Jefferson and Madison, who led efforts to establish religious liberty in Virginia and frame the First Amendment—he helped ensure that religious freedom and liberty of conscience prevailed in the United States. Washington played a leading role in America’s shift from state-established religion to the prohibition of a national church and the guarantee of freedom of worship. Washington spoke out forcibly for religious freedom while many states, including his native Virginia until 1786, continued to have religious restrictions and while many of his compatriots opposed complete religious liberty.²³³ Historians argue that the separation of church and state, the absence of religious tests for holding office, and freedom for worship were the most radical aspects of the American Revolution. Some Western nations had no king and had invested political authority in elected bodies, but none had separated church and state and allowed full religious liberty.

Like Jefferson and Madison, Washington supported freedom of conscience and religious practice for both ideological and practical reasons. He

wrote that “the mind is so formed in different persons as to contemplate the same objects in different points of view,” leading to differences “on questions of the greatest import, human and divine.”²³⁴ Writing to Lafayette in 1787, Washington declared that he was inclined to allow Christians to take “that road to heaven which to them shall seem the most direct[,] plainest[,] easiest and least liable to exception.”²³⁵ Religion had historically fostered division, discord, and even war. Therefore, he argued, as the most denominationally diverse and ethnically eclectic nation in world history, the United States could flourish only if its citizens enjoyed a religious freedom that helped produce social harmony.

As commander in chief, Washington refused to tolerate religious prejudice among his soldiers. As American troops prepared to attack Canada in September 1775, Washington instructed them to avoid ridiculing their northern neighbor’s religious ceremonies and to protect the country’s “free Exercise of the Religion” and “the Rights of Conscience in religious matters.”²³⁶ “While we are contending for our own Liberty,” the general added, “we should be very cautious of violating the Rights of Conscience in others,” because “God alone is the Judge of the Hearts of Men.”²³⁷ Although Washington was clearly, in this case, trying to gain Canadian Catholic support for the American cause, his statements and actions over a twenty-five-year period testify to his genuine commitment to religious tolerance. Inspired by the same combination of principle and practicality, Washington prohibited his troops from celebrating “Pope’s Day”—the “ridiculous and childish custom of burning the Effigy of the pope,” as his orders put it.²³⁸ The general also upheld the right of John Murray, the founder of Universalism in America, to serve as a chaplain in the army. Other chaplains petitioned Washington to remove Murray, arguing that his teachings undermined morality and promoted atheism. Eager to avoid religious controversy among his troops, the general instructed each brigade to choose its own chaplain without applying any theological tests.²³⁹

Quaker pacifism presented Washington with a much more difficult problem during the Revolutionary War. He initially defended draft exemptions for the “conscientiously scrupulous,” but in May 1777, when the war shifted to Pennsylvania, like many other patriots he protested that Quaker neutrality was essentially pro-British.²⁴⁰ Nevertheless, he usually treated Quakers warmly.²⁴¹

Only once during the war did Washington publicly declare religious liberty to be an objective for which Americans fought. In November 1782, he told a group of Dutch Reformed ministers and laymen that because he was convinced “that our Religious Liberties were as essential as our Civil,” he had always promoted them both.²⁴² Nevertheless, the commander in chief clearly assumed that religious and civil liberties were intertwined in the American struggle for independence. Shortly after the peace treaty was signed, he told

another religious body that “the establishment of Civil and religious Liberty was the Motive which induced me into the Field.”²⁴³

Washington’s denomination had long enjoyed a preferential position in Virginia. When legislators devised plans to disestablish the Episcopal Church, the planter initially supported a proposal to tax residents to provide support for all religious bodies in the state. Although no one was “more opposed to any kind of restraint upon religious principles” than he was, Washington wrote to George Mason, he agreed with “making people pay toward the support of that which they profess,” whether they were Christians, Jews, or Muslims. However, after learning that “a respectable minority” rejected the assessment plan and fearing that its adoption would produce conflict, he hoped the bill would “die an easy death.”²⁴⁴ This experience helped convince him that all state aid of religion was potentially divisive and therefore detrimental.²⁴⁵

After becoming president, Washington continued to promote religious liberty. He promised Methodists that he would do all he could to preserve “the civil and religious liberties of the American People” and to be “a faithful and impartial Patron of genuine, vital religion.”²⁴⁶ Of all human animosities, Washington wrote to a friend in 1792, those caused by differences in religion were “the most inveterate and distressing.” He hoped that the present age’s “enlightened and liberal policy” would enable Christians to never carry their religious disputes “to such a pitch as to endanger the peace of Society.”²⁴⁷ Many of the exchanges between Washington and denominational leaders who wrote to congratulate him on becoming president directly discuss religious liberty, especially their hope that he would protect the freedom of religious minorities.²⁴⁸ In his replies, Washington insisted that freedom of conscience was a right, not a privilege. The chief executive rejoiced “to see Christians of different denominations dwell[ing] together in more charity, and conduct[ing] themselves in respect to each other with a more christian-like spirit than ever they have done . . . in any other nation.”²⁴⁹ When Virginia Baptists complained that the new Constitution did not sufficiently protect liberty of conscience, Washington assured them that if he had “the slightest apprehension” that the document “might possibly endanger the religious rights of any ecclesiastical Society,” he would never have signed it.²⁵⁰ The liberty Americans enjoyed to worship “Almighty God agreeable to their Consciences,” Washington wrote to Quakers, “is not only among the choicest of their *Blessings*, but also of their *Rights*.”²⁵¹

Given the predominantly Protestant heritage of the new United States, Catholics and Jews were especially concerned about safeguarding their religious liberty. Before the adoption of the Constitution, numerous states restricted office holding to Protestants. When a leading New York newspaper argued in 1789 that the federal government should give Protestants special consideration because of their role in founding the republic, Bishop John

Carroll responded that many Catholics had fought in the Continental Army, strongly supported the work of the Constitutional Convention, and worked to build a republic that promoted “justice and equal liberty.”²⁵² The next year, Washington urged citizens not to “forget the patriotic part” Catholics had played in winning the Revolutionary War and in establishing the new government, or the “important assistance” the United States had received from Catholic France. He rejoiced that American Catholics were “animated alone by the pure spirit of Christianity” and “faithful subjects of our free Government.”²⁵³

As part of a historically beleaguered minority, members of the nation’s tiny Jewish community (numbering about 3,000) were eager to protect the civil and religious rights they had gradually won during the colonial years. Jewish leaders sent Washington several letters expressing their gratitude that their rights far surpassed those of their coreligionists in any other country. Savannah Jews praised his role in dispelling the “cloud of bigotry and superstition” that long had plagued them and in giving them “all the privileges and immunities of free citizens.” “May the same wonder-working Deity” who had delivered “the Hebrews from their Egyptian Oppressors,” the president replied, “make the inhabitants of every denomination participate in the temporal and spiritual blessings of that people whose God is Jehovah.”²⁵⁴ Washington assured the Jews in Newport, Rhode Island, that in the United States all citizens possessed “liberty of conscience” and the same rights.²⁵⁵

While Baptists, Quakers, Catholics, and Jews wanted to ensure freedom of worship, other religious groups protested that the Constitution did not acknowledge God’s ultimate authority. Presbyterians were thankful that it did not contain a religious test for office, “that grand engine of persecution in every tyrant’s hand.” They praised the president for not elevating one denomination over others and for guaranteeing that all Americans had the same liberties. Nevertheless, they complained that “the Magna Charta of our country” had no “Explicit acknowledgement of the *only true God and Jesus Christ, whom he hath sent.*”²⁵⁶ Without directly responding to their objection, Washington insisted that “the path of true piety” was so plain that it required “little political direction.” As ministers “instruct[ed] the ignorant” and “reclaim[ed] the devious” and the government promoted morality, Americans could “confidently expect the advancement of true religion, and the completion of our happiness.”²⁵⁷

Convinced that religious tolerance was essential to national unity and abhorring sectarian quarrels that threatened to disrupt the social order, Washington exulted in 1792 that America’s “civil & religious liberty” was “perhaps unrivalled by any civilized nation.” The next year he added, “We have abundant reason to rejoice that in this Land the light of truth & reason has triumphed over the power of bigotry and superstion [*sic*], and that every person may here worship God according to the dictates of his own heart.” In

America, an individual's religious tenets would "not forfeit the protection of the Laws, nor deprive him of the right of attaining & holding the highest office."²⁵⁸ Although his contributions were not as significant as those of Jefferson and Madison, Washington played an important role in reducing denominational privileges and firmly establishing religious freedom in the new United States. As one eulogist concluded, "The oppressed corners of every land have felt some alleviation by his priceless labours" for religious liberty.²⁵⁹

A Final Assessment

Although Washington faced less criticism than any of his successors, the Republican press subjected the president to a "litany of vitriolic comments," attacking his character, "questioning his statesmanship, [and] mocking his leadership style."²⁶⁰ A few Republican editors denounced him as a gambler, a cheapskate, a dictator, and "a most horrid swearer and blasphemer."²⁶¹ Detractors castigated him as "the American Caesar" who did not deal effectively with revolutionary developments at home or abroad.²⁶² Claiming that Washington had arrogated the powers of a king, some sneeringly called him George IV. Bitter that Washington had refused to help procure his release from a French jail cell, Thomas Paine denounced the president as "treacherous in private friendship . . . and a hypocrite in public life." He predicted that "the world will be puzzled to decide whether you are an apostate or an imposter, whether you have abandoned good principles or ever had any."²⁶³

Despite Washington's reputation for exemplary character, he was far from flawless. Throughout his life, he battled a quick temper. As a young man, Washington was very concerned about accumulating wealth, frequently harangued his military superiors, and disobeyed orders to engage the French, leading to the surrender of Fort Mifflin. As commander in chief, he sometimes hesitated to act, unwisely deferred to subordinates, and utilized poor strategies. Washington abhorred criticism and disloyalty and had trouble accepting responsibility for his mistakes.²⁶⁴

None of this seemed, however, to matter to most Americans. John Adams, Benjamin Rush, and others resented Washington's exalted reputation and protested that one person should not be given credit for results that required the sacrifice of thousands. As early as 1777, Adams denounced in Congress the "superstitious veneration sometimes paid to General Washington."²⁶⁵ "The History of our Revolution will be one continued Lie from one end to the other," he later complained to Benjamin Rush. "The essence of the whole will be that Dr. Franklin's electrical Rod smote the earth and out sprung General Washington." Thereafter, the two of them "conducted all the Policy, Negotiations, Legislatures and War."²⁶⁶

Almost all historians rate Washington as one of the nation's greatest presidents. Inspired in part by his faith in God's providential direction of events, he successfully shaped an office unknown in world history, effectively governed a fragile republic that aspired to set an example for other nations, pursued policies that strengthened the nation and ensured its survival in the midst of a hostile environment, and left citizens with an inspiring farewell discourse.²⁶⁷ Admirers insisted that Washington had helped restore the nation's credit, ensure that justice, peace, and liberty prevailed, and gain the world's respect for the new republic.²⁶⁸ Without Washington, the United States would not have defeated Britain, ratified the Constitution, functioned successfully as a republic, or prevented Britain, France, or Spain from controlling most of North America. To John Marshall, Washington was "the founder of our federate republic—our bulwark in war, our guide in peace."²⁶⁹ Because of his leadership, civilians controlled the military, and the United States did not experience a dictatorship, military coup, or political oppression, as did other countries that obtained independence from colonial rulers.²⁷⁰ Repudiating portrayals of Washington as "a popular figurehead" and a passive political leader, Stuart Leibiger argues that "he was the central politician of his age." Although the Virginian typically acted behind the scenes, his impact was tremendous.²⁷¹

Washington's faith contributed to his pursuit of peace as president. In 1788, he wrote a Frenchman that he hoped agriculture and commerce "would supersede the waste of war . . . that the swords might be turned into ploughshares, the spears into pruning hooks, and . . . 'the nations learn war no more.'" "Certainly it is more consonant to all the principles of reason and religion (natural and revealed) to replenish the earth with inhabitants, rather than to depopulate it by killing those already in existence," he added. He rejoiced that "the Philosophers, Patriots, and virtuous men in all nations" viewed "our rising Republics" "as a kind of Asylum for mankind. God grant that we may not disappoint their honest expectations, by our folly or perverseness."²⁷² Although Washington spent much of his life in the military, as president he avoided war, which required skillful diplomacy during his second term. He kept the United States out of the European war, convinced the British to leave the Northwest Territory, and satisfactorily resolved America's major differences with Spain.²⁷³

Widely lauded as one of America's greatest documents, Washington's 1796 Farewell Address has had a powerful influence.²⁷⁴ It warned Americans against the dangers of factions and entangling alliances and helped shape subsequent American political attitudes and practices. Washington urged Americans to develop a strong, self-determined, and independent foreign policy and expressed his hope that America's principles and practices would inspire change around the world.²⁷⁵ The address reiterated his staunch belief that religion and morality were essential to upright conduct, social tranquility, and national

success. "It will be worthy of a free, enlightened and, at no distant period, a great Nation, to give mankind the magnanimous and too novel example of a People always guided by an exalted justice and benevolence."²⁷⁶

Although Washington had no biological children, he has rightly been called the father of his country. Without him, the United States may never have been created or survived its infancy. Although many factors helped inspire Washington's monumental contributions, his faith played a major role. Scholars and ordinary Americans will continue to debate the precise nature of his faith, but clearly it became deeper as a result of his trying and sometimes traumatic experiences as commander in chief of the Continental Army and the nation's first president, and it significantly affected his understanding of and his actions in both positions.

CHAPTER TWO

Thomas Jefferson and the Separation of Church and State

Can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of people that these liberties are a gift of God?

Notes on the State of Virginia, 1785

For I have sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.

Jefferson to Benjamin Rush, Sept. 23, 1800

And may that Infinite Power, which rules the destinies of the universe, lead our councils to what is best.

First Inaugural Address, Mar. 4, 1801

ALTHOUGH MANY OF George Washington's contemporaries portrayed him as a devout Christian and even a saint, Thomas Jefferson's foes depicted him as an infidel and an atheist.¹ During the 1800 campaign, a Massachusetts Federalist insisted that God would not "permit a howling atheist to sit at the head of this nation."² During Jefferson's first term as president, a Federalist cartoon pictured him, aided by the devil, pulling down a column on which the names of Washington and Adams were inscribed.³ Shortly after her husband's defeat in the election of 1800, Abigail Adams complained that Jefferson did not believe in "an all wise and supreme Governour [*sic*] of the World" and therefore was not a Christian.⁴ Her son and the future president, John Quincy Adams, lamented later the negative impact "free-thinking and irreligion" had on Jefferson's life. "If not an absolute atheist, he had no belief in a future

existence. All his ideas of obligation or retribution were bounded by the present life.”⁵ Given how similar their religious views and practices were, these radically different appraisals of Washington and Jefferson are ironic.

Like Washington’s, Jefferson’s life and legacy have remained of great interest to both the scholarly world and the general public. Academic analysis of Jefferson’s life, career, and contributions is growing at a geometric rate.⁶ Scholarly studies, popular books, films, and musicals examine his accomplishments. Controversy rages over whether he fathered the children of his slave Sally Hemings. Principal author of the Declaration of Independence; a Southern planter; governor of Virginia; minister to France; the nation’s first secretary of state, second vice president, and third president; and founder of the University of Virginia, the sage of Monticello has loomed large in America’s history. As a young man, Jefferson could “calculate an eclipse, survey an estate, tie an artery, plan an edifice, try a cause, break a horse, dance a minuet, and play a violin.”⁷ Often labeled a “Renaissance man,” the Virginian’s intellectual appetite had few limits. He feasted on archaeology, architecture, classical languages and literature, politics, law, history, rhetoric, music, and science, and he contributed significantly to many of these fields. He mastered Greek and Latin and spoke French and Italian. Although Jefferson wrote only one book, his addresses and more than 20,000 letters testify to his broad erudition and insightful mind. From 1796 to 1815, he served as president of the American Philosophical Society, the nation’s first learned association.⁸

Jefferson informed John Adams that he tried to “say nothing of my religion. It is known to my God and myself alone. Its evidence before the world is to be sought in my life; if that has been honest and dutiful to society, the religion which has regulated it cannot be a bad one.”⁹ He told his former minister that “I not only write nothing on religion, but rarely permit myself to speak on it.”¹⁰ Despite such statements, few presidents have displayed as much interest in religious matters. As Edwin Gaustad argues, religion mesmerized, tantalized, alarmed, and sometimes inspired Jefferson, and he discussed religious issues, movements, and leaders often in his conversation and correspondence and occasionally in his addresses and published writings.¹¹ His personality, political prominence, and life experience made Jefferson very reluctant to reveal his own religious convictions. He did not share his private faith with either his nation or his children, grandchildren, and nephews. He wanted his family members to investigate religious matters and develop their own convictions.¹² Thus his personal faith can be gleaned only from his letters to friends.

Religious issues played a major role in Jefferson’s life and presidency. He wrote the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom (1786) that disestablished the Episcopal Church, enshrined the principle of freedom of conscience, and helped prepare the way for the First Amendment.¹³ For almost sixty years, his metaphor of a “wall of separation” between church and state has dominated

Constitutional debate over the proper place of religion in public life and policy. Although he repudiated much of orthodox Christianity and his alleged lack of faith was a major issue in the hotly contested election of 1800, the Virginian was a deeply religious man.¹⁴ He read widely in religious literature and wrote much about biblical, theological, and ethical issues in his private letters.¹⁵ Like other enlightened thinkers, he denounced metaphysical and theological speculation as worthless, relished the Renaissance's rediscovery of classical culture, evaluated religion by whether it accorded with reason and benefited society, and emphasized the moral aspects of Christianity.¹⁶ Rejecting all the "mythic, mysterious, and miraculous" aspects of Christianity, he stressed the worship of one God who created and sustained the universe and revealed himself through nature.¹⁷ In an effort to discover the historical Jesus, he devised two different editions of the Gospels for his own use that eliminated all miraculous elements and focused on Christ's ethical teachings. America's "most self-consciously theological" president criticized the church for corrupting Jesus' pure and sublime teachings and strove to reform Christianity by shifting its focus from theology to ethics. In discussing religious issues, succeeding generations have frequently appealed to Jefferson's views and have paid almost as much attention to his personal beliefs as they have to those of Washington and Lincoln.¹⁸ Although his supporters, his opponents, and academicians have, for the past two centuries, debated the character of his faith and whether he should be labeled an Episcopalian, a deist, or a Unitarian, many scholars do not recognize how important Jefferson's religious convictions were to his political philosophy and career.¹⁹

Jefferson's Faith

Examining Jefferson's religious socialization, pattern of church attendance, approach toward worship and prayer, the thinkers who shaped his worldview, and his views of God, Jesus, human nature, morality, education, life after death, and the Bible provides insight into his life and his presidency. The future president's father, Peter, served as a vestryman in the Anglican parish in Fredericksville, Virginia. As a youth, Jefferson was immersed in the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer, and the Anglican liturgy. He studied many subjects, including the Bible, under the tutelage of two Anglican rectors, William Douglas and James Maury. From 1760 to 1762, Jefferson attended America's second oldest college, William and Mary, whose seven faculty members included six Anglican clergymen.²⁰ Nevertheless, during these years Jefferson began to question many aspects of Anglicanism. Although remaining a nominal Episcopalian the rest of his life, he rejected many of the denomination's doctrines.