RELIGION AND THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY

Edited By
Mark J. Rozell and Gleaves Whitney

The Evolving American Presidency

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This series is stimulated by the clash between the presidency as invented and the presidency as it has developed. Over time, the presidency has evolved and grown in power, expectations, responsibilities, and authority. Adding to the power of the presidency have been wars, crises, depressions, industrialization. The importance and power of the modern presidency makes understanding it so vital. How presidents resolve challenges and paradoxes of high expectations with limited constitutional resources is the central issue in modern governance and the central theme of this book series.

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Religion and the American Presidency

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Series Foreword

The American presidency touches virtually every aspect of American and world politics. And the presidency has become, for better or worse, the vital center of the American and global political systems. The framers of the American government would be dismayed at such a result. As invented at the Philadelphia Constitutional Convention in 1787, the presidency was to have been a part of the government with shared and overlapping powers, embedded within a separation-of-powers system. If there was a vital center, it was the Congress; the presidency was to be a part, but by no means, the centerpiece of that system.

Over time, the presidency has evolved and grown in power, expectations, responsibilities, and authority. Wars, crises, depressions, industrialization, all served to add to the power of the presidency. And as the USA grew into a world power, presidential power also grew. As the USA became the world's leading superpower, the presidency rose in prominence and power, not only in the USA, but also on the world stage as well.

It is the clash between the presidency as created and the presidency as it has developed that inspired this series. And it is the importance and power of the modern American presidency that makes understanding the office so vital. Like it or not, the American presidency stands at the vortex of power both within the USA and across the globe.

This Palgrave series recognizes that the presidency is and has been an evolving institution, going from the original constitutional design as a chief clerk, to today where the president is the center of the American political constellation. This has caused several key dilemmas in our

political system, not the least of which is that presidents face high expectations with limited constitutional resources. This causes presidents to find extraconstitutional means of governing. Thus, presidents must find ways to bridge the expectations/power gap while operating within the confines of a separation-of-powers system designed to limit presidential authority. How presidents resolve these challenges and paradoxes is the central issue in modern governance. It is also the central theme of this book series.

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Acknowledgements

The first edition of this book (2007) appeared during the second term of the George W. Bush presidency. At the time, there was enormous interest in the intersection of religion and US national policy. Many political observers attributed the rise in interest in the subject uniquely to the faith of President Bush. Through a collection of scholarly papers covering religion and the presidency all the way back to the George Washington administration, we set out to show that religion has been an enduring influence on the decisions and policies of many of the chief executives of the USA. We continued that work with an updated second edition (2012) during the second term of the Barack Obama presidency.

This new edition has an updated chapter on religion and the Obama presidency as well as a new chapter on the role of religion in the 2016 presidential election of Donald J. Trump and the first months of his presidency.

The origin of this book was a conference sponsored by the Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies at Grand Valley State University. We acknowledge a number of Grand Rapidians who worked behind the scenes to make the gathering a success. First and foremost, the late Ralph Hauenstein, founding benefactor of the center, was enthusiastically supportive from the start. Others at Grand Valley who deserve mention are Former President Mark Murray, Vice President Patricia Oldt, Vice President Maribeth Wardrop, Vice President Matt McLogan, Assistant Vice President Mary Eilleen Lyon, photographer Bernadine

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: The Importance of Religion To Understanding the Presidency

Harold F. Bass, Mark J. Rozell and Gleaves Whitney

Religion is a key, but largely underappreciated factor in the actions of many US presidents. Most of the writings about religion and the presidency focus on the religious beliefs and practices of certain chief executives widely known to have been men of deep faith. There are substantial works, for example, on the role of religion in the lives and administrations of such modern era presidents as Jimmy Carter, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama. Each of these three men openly expressed his strong faith commitment as a presidential candidate and as a result attracted support from coreligionists as well as attention and commentary from political observers who took note. Once in the White House, each of them continued to integrate his faith and religious-oriented themes in

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ways that may have seemed for many Americans to be distinctive among presidents.

The role of faith to numerous other presidents has not attracted much interest. Leading analyses of many presidents of sincere religious commitment have either ignored religion or inaccurately characterized these leaders as nonreligious men who merely used appeals to faith for politically calculated reasons. According to Gary Scott Smith, one of the leading scholars doing serious in-depth analysis of the role of religion in the presidency and the contributor of Chap. 2 in this volume: "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."[1]

Consider that there are major biographies of such presidents as Harry S. Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, and Ronald Reagan that make only a passing reference or none at all to religion in the lives of these leaders who were religious and guided by faith in many of their major policy decisions. The chapters presented here on Truman, Eisenhower, and Reagan offer an important addition to the historical record of these presidencies.

Much of the leading literature on earlier presidents such as Washington, Jefferson, and Madison repeats common and inaccurate descriptions of the role of religion in their lives. The authors of the first three chapters of this volume, Gary Scott Smith (Washington), Thomas J. Buckley, S.J., (Jefferson), and Vincent Phillip Muñoz (Madison), make compelling cases that neglecting the role of religion in the lives and presidencies of these leaders leaves a very incomplete historical record. Furthermore, many studies emphasize the utility of religion for presidents to attract and maintain political support or to justify their actions in office. Lucas Morel's chapter on Lincoln especially addresses this issue and concludes that the president's commitment to religion was much deeper than a vehicle of political appeal or policy rationalization.

Neglecting or misunderstanding the religion factor contributes to an incomplete understanding of presidents and the presidency. As the following chapters show, there are serious works on religion and the American founding period in particular, on the religious beliefs and practices of some of the nation's leading founders and early presidents (Chaps. 2–4 here), on the faith of Abraham Lincoln (Chap. 5), and also on the religious beliefs and practices of certain modern presidents such as Carter (Chap. 9), Reagan (Chap. 10), George W. Bush (Chap. 12),

and Obama (Chap. 13). But regarding the modern presidency, there are also a number of highly polemical and better-known works on the importance of faith to certain presidents. During the George W. Bush era in particular, there was a near explosion of books and essays on the president's religiosity, with some lavishing praises on him as a man of genuine faith commitment and others characterizing him as a captive of the conservative evangelical-led religious right movement. Thus, much of what most Americans read about religion and the US presidency these days is highly polemical and agenda-driven.

A Wall of Separation?

A part of the widespread discomfort with writing about religion and the presidency is the belief that the US constitutional system supports what Thomas Jefferson called a "wall of separation between church and state." Large bodies of scholarship and judicial opinions have taken Jefferson's famous phrase to advocate the strict separationist view. However, religion scholar Thomas J. Buckley, S.J., (Chap. 3) shows that this statement from Jefferson's 1802 letter to the Danbury Baptist Association has often been taken out of context to mean that the third president had advocated a separation that was absolute. Buckley's examinations of Jefferson's presidency tell a different story, one in which religion played an important role in many arenas. Jefferson's presidential addresses, private correspondences, and the public papers of his administration reveal that the third president contributed significantly to the development of American civil religion, more so than any of his contemporaries.

Furthermore, and most fascinating from a contemporary standpoint, Jefferson directed government funds to support the work of Christian missionary groups to "civilize" and to convert Native American Indians. As one example, Buckley reports in Chap. 3 here, "with his approval, the federal government encouraged a Presbyterian Minister's work among the Cherokees by appropriating several hundred dollars to found what was designed as a Christian school to teach religion along with other subjects."

Scholars have erroneously placed a number of presidents of the modern era in the nonreligious category. For example, many perceived a publicly concealed religiosity as a lack of serious faith commitment on Harry S Truman's part. Elizabeth Edwards Spalding (Chap. 6) has studied the importance of faith to Truman's foreign policy and concludes

that although widely regarded as one who cared little about religion, Truman, the second Baptist to serve in the White House, was a believer and someone who saw the Cold War as a moral clash against atheistic communism. Spalding reveals that Truman was deeply religious, but that he was often uncomfortable with overt displays of faith and he was skeptical of those who claimed that their own religion gave them a favored relationship with God.

Truman reached out to religious groups to aid the West in the Cold War. Spalding explains that the president believed that because the battle of the Cold War was a moral as well as strategic one, he needed to enlist the support of different religions to defeat communism. He gave a policy address at a Catholic college to showcase his desire to enlist the support of the Church in combating communism, and he made efforts to establish formal relations between the USA and the Vatican to further this effort. Also, Truman wrote to the president of the Baptist World Alliance: "To succeed in our quest for righteousness we must, in St. Paul's luminous phrase, put on the armor of God."[2]

Many scholars have characterized Dwight D. Eisenhower as perhaps the least religious of any of the modern presidents. Jack Holl (Chap. 7) studied Eisenhower's religious faith commitment and concluded that the president's biographers have mostly gotten the story wrong. An overriding theme in Eisenhower studies is that although the man had had a strong religious upbringing, he all but abandoned religious faith after entering West Point. As Holl points out in this volume, "no one emphasizes the influence of Eisenhower's deeply ingrained religious beliefs on his public life and work." This finding is almost astonishing when placed against the backdrop of a close examination of Eisenhower's words and his actions as president. To illustrate perhaps most tellingly, Eisenhower said a mere 4 years prior to being elected president that "I am the most intensely religious man I know."[3]

A part of the Eisenhower image as nonreligious derives from rhetoric that he employed that struck many observers as superficial. Frequently quoted was the president-elect's comment in a December 1952 address to the Freedom Foundation: "Our form of government has no sense, unless it is grounded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don't care what it is."[4] Furthermore, Eisenhower was open about his aversion to organized religion. But Eisenhower was the first president to write his own inaugural prayer; he was baptized in the White House; he approved "one nation, under God" being added to the Pledge of Allegiance and "In

God We Trust" to the US currency; and he also appointed a new office of special assistant for religion in his administration.

Like Eisenhower, Ronald Reagan did not attend church services while president and he also seemed to harbor an aversion to organized religion. Reagan biographers characterized the man as mostly indifferent to religion, except to the extent that he could attract the political support of religiously motivated voters who liked his conservative social issue positions. This conventional view of Reagan has held for years, although the one scholar to fully examine Reagan's religious faith and commitment has arrived at a completely opposite conclusion.

Paul Kengor (Chap. 10) reviewed Reagan's private papers and letters and interviewed many of the people who were closest to the former president. He finds that Reagan was a deeply religious man. The neglect and misunderstanding of Reagan's religiosity, Kengor writes here, "leaves an unbridgeable gap in our own understanding of Reagan and what made him tick, especially in the great calling of his political life: his cold war crusade against the Soviet Union." Like Truman, Reagan perceived the battle of the Cold War as not merely a strategic one, but a moral one. Reagan avoided church attendance as president largely out of security concerns. He had regularly attended services prior to his presidency and resumed the practice after he left office. Thus, Kengor argues that those who only observed what appeared to be Reagan's outward indifference to religion while in office misunderstood the true sentiments of the former president.

Interest in the role of religion in the presidency nonetheless took off during the George W. Bush presidency due in large part to his exceptional openness about his faith and a perception among many that his policy agenda was driven significantly by his religiosity. Robinson and Wilcox note in Chap. 12 of this text that President Bush did not give as much emphasis to the social issues agenda as many critics had expected from him. Indeed, Bush demonstrated more enthusiasm for tax cuts and reforming social security than for pushing against abortion rights and gay rights. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent wars in the Middle East also had a profound effect on Bush's policy emphasis and surely pushed his concerns with domestic social issues to the back of his agenda priorities.

Although it is true that Bush was much less constrained about expressing his religiosity publicly than many past presidents, it is an exaggeration to claim that he stands unique in this regard among America's

chief executives. In the modern era, for example, such presidents as Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama—all Democrats—have been at least as open about their faith as Bush, and by some measures perhaps even more so. The exception is John F. Kennedy who, as Thomas J. Carty explains in Chap. 8, was from a generation in which it was uncommon to make outward expressions of religious faith. That did not mean Kennedy was irreligious necessarily, but that he conformed to public expectations that there is a clear line between private religion and political leadership.

In Chap. 9 of this volume, Jeff Walz examines the role of faith in the presidency of Jimmy Carter, who is widely regarded as perhaps the most deeply religious chief executive of the modern era and who made no effort to publicly conceal his faith commitment. Yet many conservative evangelicals derided Carter's faith commitment because of their disdain for his policies on issues such as school prayer, abortion, and family issues.

One study shows that Bill Clinton invoked Christ in presidential speeches more often than Bush per number of years in office.[5] For Chap. 11 of this volume, James Penning examined how Clinton often infused religion and religious values into his rhetoric and public policies. Clinton's conservative evangelical critics questioned the authenticity of his religious-based rhetoric. Penning finds instead that the evidence weighs in favor of the conclusion that Clinton's religious appeals were a sincere expression of a faith deeply rooted in the former president's childhood experiences.

President Barack Obama's religion and its impact on his policies and perceptions of his administration is the topic of Chap. 13. Like Carter and Clinton before him, many conservative evangelicals questioned the authenticity of Obama's faith and use of religious-based rhetoric. Perhaps most stunning, a significant percentage of conservative evangelicals and some other Americans do not accept the president's Christian identity, and many claim that he actually is a Muslim. Although Obama's Christian faith is not questionable—and even though, as Colin Powell said in 2008, it should not matter in America whether someone is Muslim, Christian, or any other religious identity[6]—the misperception of Obama's religion has political implications, as a sizeable minority of Americans expressed in surveys that they held negative views of Islam.

The completion of this volume in its third edition is occurring in the first four months of the Donald J. Trump Administration. Chapter 14

thus takes an early look at the role of religion in his presidency, but it mostly focuses on the key role of religious-motivated voters to Trump's Electoral College victory in the 2016 presidential campaign. A well-known real estate tycoon and reality television star, Trump had never made religion a centerpiece of his celebrity. It thus surprised observers when he built much of his Republican presidential nomination campaign around seeking support from evangelical conservatives. Even more surprising perhaps was the substantial support he received from those voters, both in the nomination campaign that featured several authentic religious conservative opponents and in the general election.

Religion and Presidential Campaigns

One of the challenges in studying the religion—presidency intersection is that all presidents find it useful politically to connect religious themes at times to policy goals or to sustain political support. However, it is not always clear whether presidents evoking certain symbols or using certain rhetoric do so because they believe that they have to, or because it comes naturally to them. In the electoral context at least, presidential aspirants find it advantageous to evoke religious identity and themes.

Article VI of The Constitution stipulates that "no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the United States." Nevertheless, the presidential selection process has evidenced some norms with regard to religion. The most compelling is the clear expectation that the president be a person of faith. A 2012 Pew Research Center survey indicated that 67% of registered voters expressed the opinion that it is important that the president be a person of strong religious beliefs.[7]

Well into the twentieth century, that faith was presumed to be Protestant Christianity. Governor Al Smith of New York, a Democrat, became the first Roman Catholic to receive serious consideration for a major party's presidential nomination. After falling short in 1920 and 1924, he finally prevailed in 1928, but the fall campaign featured considerable anti-Catholicism, and Smith suffered a decisive general election defeat.

Three decades later, Sen. John F. Kennedy's presidential prospects turned on whether his Catholicism would prove to be an insurmountable obstacle. Kennedy delivered a key speech to an assembly of Protestant ministers in Houston, Texas, in which he assured them that his faith

would not compromise his exercise of the powers and duties of the office of president.[8] This commitment to separate his private faith from his public responsibilities resonated well with mid-century American culture and society. In contrast, the contemporary climate embraces the expectation that faith will and should inform public policy positions.

Kennedy won the nomination and the election amid abiding concerns among Protestants. He remains the only Roman Catholic president to date, although the Democrats have subsequently nominated Catholics for vice president (Edmund Muskie in 1968; Sargent Shriver in 1972; Geraldine Ferraro in 1984; Joseph Biden, in 2008 and 2012; Tim Kaine in 2016) and president (John Kerry in 2004). Following Kennedy's election in 1960, the Republican Party nominated William E. Miller, a Roman Catholic, for vice president in 1964.

No person of Jewish faith has received a major party presidential nomination. Sen. Barry Goldwater (AZ), the 1964 Republican nominee, was of Jewish descent on his father's side, but he identified himself as an Episcopalian. Sen. Joseph Lieberman (CT), an Orthodox Jew, received the Democratic vice presidential nomination in 2000. The effect on public opinion and electoral behavior was negligible.

In 1968 and 2008, Mormons figured prominently in the Republican presidential nominating contests. Governor George Romney (MI) was a leading contender in 1968 for the nomination that went to Quaker Richard Nixon. Four decades later, Romney's son, Mitt, was a top-tier candidate in 2008 and GOP nominee in 2017. The elder Romney's faith was commonly noted, but it did not prove especially controversial in his pursuit of the party nomination. In contrast, his son's religious identity was much more noteworthy and problematical, reflecting both the rising salience of religion in American politics and significant changes in the nomination process that provide avenues to express religious sensitivities.

Another recent development with regard to the religious backgrounds of presidential aspirants is the presence of former clergy in the nominating contests of the parties: Jesse Jackson in 1984 and 1988 for the Democrats; Pat Robertson in 1988 and Mike Huckabee in 2008 and 2016 for the Republicans. The emergence of Robertson and Huckabee as credible candidates is related to the rise of evangelical interests in the body politic in general and the Republican Party in particular.

One way that presidential selection embraces religion is with regard to the efforts by candidates to assemble coalitions of interests at both the nomination and general election stages. Contests for the presidency have long featured the mobilization of voters based on religious affiliations.

Traditionally identifying with the Democratic Party, Catholics and Jews provided stable electoral foundations for Democratic presidential nominees, while mainline Protestants did likewise for the Republicans. These identifications generally coincided with parallel socioeconomic ones, with the Republicans capturing the support of the more established elements of society and the Democrats the more marginal. Similarly, religious identities often correlated with regional and residential ones. For example, Democratic strongholds in the urban Northeast housed substantial numbers of Catholics and Jews. In turn, White Protestants in what used to be called the Solid South were part and parcel of the Democratic presidential coalition, based on long-standing regional foundations.

More recent developments have modified these traditional patterns, as parties, candidates, and campaigns have sought to attract support from religiously rooted voters based on issues and ideologies. Democrats have claimed the enthusiastic support of African American Protestants with pro-civil rights commitments. Republicans have appealed to some Jewish voters on the foreign policy front by advocating a strong pro-Israel stance. In addition, they have made inroads with some Catholic voters with their pro-life position on abortion. Moreover, upward class mobility has generally made the GOP more attractive to middle-class Catholics.

However, the most important development in recent decades has been the mobilization of evangelicals who were traditionally disengaged from the electoral process. Alternative factors, notably class and region, better explained their political preferences. For example, the traditional inclination of Southern Baptists to vote Democratic reflected a regional norm, reinforced by their lower-middle-class location in Southern society.

The 1970s saw dramatic changes in this pattern due to several factors. One was economic development, which moved evangelicals upward within the middle class. Another was the emergence of issues on the political agenda that enraged and engaged the evangelical community, especially the controversial Supreme Court decisions proscribing public prayer in public schools and restricting antiabortion legislation. More generally, cultural changes threatened the traditional values of evangelicals.

The Republicans have benefited from an emerging religiosity gap. Those who frequently attend religious services, regardless of affiliation, are more likely to vote Republican than those who rarely attend. This electoral shift has proven generally significant in the post-New Deal era resurgence in Republican presidential fortunes, and particularly in explaining narrow GOP victories in the presidential contests in 2000, 2004, and 2016.

Presidential Policy Agendas and Religion

Nineteenth-century presidents rarely advanced ambitious policy agendas. There were some conspicuous exceptions, and religion occasionally loomed large as a foundation for them. Certainly, emancipation can be considered as such.

The Progressive Era coincided with and contributed to an expansion of presidential power. In turn, the reform agenda of the Progressive Movement was infused with social justice concerns advanced by Protestants and Catholics alike. For Protestants, it was the social gospel articulated by Walter Rauschenbusch in *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907). For Catholics, Leo XIII's papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891) heightened sensitivities to the plight of the working class in industrializing society and led to calls for responsive public policies.

Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson associated themselves with these causes in their Square Deal and New Freedom agendas. Franklin Roosevelt did so as well with the New Deal. Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, with its commitment to civil rights and the expansion of the welfare state, reflected these emphases as well. Bill Clinton's New Covenant also was an effort to advance these themes.

Their efforts to influence the public policy agenda involved mobilization and counter-mobilization. Successes by one group encouraged others to emulate them. After liberal reforms, the Christian Right emerged around 1980 as a major counter-force in politics.

A pro-life stance on abortion has been at the forefront of the Christian Right agenda. Freedom of religious expression, against claims that it fosters religious establishment, has been another priority. President Reagan and his Republican successors have rhetorically embraced this agenda. It has certainly figured into their judicial nominations.

On the foreign policy front, in the post-World War II era, religious interests and convictions have undergirded several presidential policies. During the Cold War, US presidents led the struggle against "godless" communism on behalf of religious believers. Consistent US foreign policy support for Israel is rooted in the Judeo—Christian heritage of the West. President Carter's commitment to human rights as a foundation for his foreign policy was an expression of his deeply held religious beliefs, as was President George W. Bush's "freedom agenda." Thus, religious interests clearly occupy a seat at the table of presidential politics and policy.

Collectively, the chapters in this volume showcase that presidential analysis benefits from examining the role of religion in the lives, electoral campaigns, and policies of our chief executives. Religion certainly is not the prime explanatory factor for most of the decisions of our presidents, but it is often an important one and is deserving of significant attention.

Notes

1. Smith, Gary Scott. *Faith and the Presidency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 6.
2. Elizabeth Edwards Spalding, *The First Cold Warrior: Harry Truman, Containment, and the Remaking of Liberal Internationalism* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 212–213.
3. Dwight D. Eisenhower comment at press conference at Columbia University, New York. Cited in *New York Times*, May 4, 1948, 43.
4. Dwight D. Eisenhower, quoted in *New York Times*, December 23, 1952, 16.
5. Kengor, Paul. *God and Ronald Reagan: A Spiritual Life* (New York: Regan Books, 2004).
6. Transcript of Powell endorsement of Obama on "Meet the Press," 19 October 2008, http://www.opednews.com/articles/Transcript-of-Colin-Powell-by-GeoBear-081019-915.html (Accessed by author on April 16, 2017).
7. Russell Heimlich, "Most Want a President of Strong Religious Beliefs," Pew Research Center Forum on religion and Public Life, July 31, 2012, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2012/07/31/most-want-a-president-with-strong-religious-beliefs/ (Accessed by author April 16, 2017).
8. White, Theodore H. *The Making of the President, 1960* (New York: Atheneum, 1961), 391–393.

CHAPTER 2

The Faith of George Washington

Gary Scott Smith

Even before he died in 1799, a battle began over the nature and significance of George Washington's faith. While more heated at some times than others, this conflict has now been waged for more than 200 years. Among American presidents, only the religious convictions and practices of Abraham Lincoln have been as closely scrutinized 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."[1] Many of the hundreds of books, articles, sermons, and essays published about his faith and practices since 1800 have advanced ideological agendas, rather than providing dispassionate analysis. On one side are ministers and primarily Protestant evangelical authors who claim that Washington had a deep, rich, orthodox Christian faith. On the other side are freethinkers and numerous contemporary scholars who

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argue that Washington was a deist or Unitarian whose faith was not very meaningful to him.

Given Washington's immense contributions to the American republic, demigod status, and importance to American civil religion, this intense debate is not surprising. Many scholars argue that he was indispensable to the success of the patriot cause and the new nation. Risking his reputation, wealth, and life, he led 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 USA's venerable Constitution. As the country's first president, he established positive precedents for the office and adopted policies that ensured the stability and success of the nascent nation.[2] For nearly a quarter of a century (1775–1799), Washington was the most important person in America, a record unrivaled in the nation's history.[3] He kept his hand on America's political pulse, personified the American Revolution, promoted the ratification of the Constitution, and held the nation together so effectively that some call these years the "Age of Washington."[4] After piloting America safely through the hazardous waters of war, as president he kept it from crashing on the shoals of anarchy, monarchism, or revolution. After his death in 1799, eulogists lavished praise upon his character and accomplishments that are unmatched in American history. Many scholars argue that the nation's first president set a standard that few, if any, of his successors have attained.[5] His sterling character, impressive physique, stately demeanor, and monumental contributions to American independence combined to produce an aura that gave weight to his public statements on all subjects including religion.[6]

This chapter summarizes the debate over Washington's faith and takes a middle position that portrays the first president as a theistic rationalist who believed strongly that God ruled and directed the universe. Although he apparently did not accept several key orthodox Christian doctrines, Washington's belief in God's Providence had a powerful impact on his work as both commander-in-chief and president.

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 the great founder as God's instrument and a larger-than-life mythological hero.[7] Moreover, Washington helped create this American civil religion and occupies a unique place in its development. 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.[8] In 1778, Henry

Muhlenberg, the chief developer of Lutheranism in America, wrote in his journal, "From all appearances" Washington "respects God's Word [and] believes in the atonement through Christ." Therefore, God had "preserved him from harm in the midst of countless perils and graciously held him in his hand as a chosen vessel."[9] Nearly 20 years later, when Washington's second term as president ended, 24 pastors from the Philadelphia area commended his work and proclaimed that "in our special character as ministers of the gospel of Christ, we acknowledge the countenance you have uniformly given to his holy religion."[10] One of these clergymen, Ashbel Green, a pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, a chaplain in the House of Representatives during Washington's tenure in office, and later president of the College of New Jersey, declared that he had no doubt about Washington's orthodoxy.[11]

Similarly, in their funeral sermons and other public statements after the general died, many ministers maintained that he was a devout Christian.[12] They repeatedly affirmed that Washington "was not ashamed" of his faith and that he acknowledged and adored "a GREATER SAVIOR whom Infidels and deists" slighted and despised.[13] 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 "sincere and ardent."[14] Another minister insisted that the general's virtues "were crowned with piety." No one more fully expressed "his sense of the Providence of God" than this "habitually devout" man.[15] Although professing some concerns about the statesman's religious beliefs, Congregationalist Timothy Dwight, president of Yale College, argued that if the general was not actually a Christian, then he was "more like one than any man of the same description, whose life had been hitherto recorded."[16] "At all times" Washington "acknowledged the providence of God, and never was he ashamed of his redeemer," America's first Methodist bishop Francis Asbury confidently declared: "we believe he died, not fearing death." The nation's first Catholic bishop, John Carroll, praised Washington's "Christian piety" and his affirmation that a "superintending providence" prepared, regulated, and governed all human events to accomplish its eternal purposes.[17]

Many of his first biographers such as Episcopal rector Mason Locke "Parson" Weems, Supreme Court Chief Justice John Marshall, Jared Sparks, the editor of the first set of his papers, and novelist Washington